

“Mark Roberts has produced what has long been needed: a highly readable and compelling account of why Christians can indeed trust the Gospels. Dr. Roberts is a formidable scholar whose reputation is very high among academics. He is a skilled writer and teacher. He is also an innovative force in the world of Christian apologetics, among the very first to see the potential for blogging as a formidable means of pursuing the Great Commission.

“I have had Dr. Roberts on my radio show more than any other theologian or pastor, for several reasons. First, he has been a very good friend for a long time. But much more important is his ability to communicate and the knowledge he has accumulated through his three decades of serious and thorough study of the Gospels and the scholarship around them. Whenever a major controversy erupts that touches on the Christian faith, I call on Dr. Roberts.

“*Can We Trust the Gospels?* is quite simply the best effort I have ever read by a serious scholar to communicate what scholars know about the Gospels and why that should indeed encourage us to trust them and thus to trust Jesus Christ.”

—Hugh Hewitt, radio talk show host, author, blogger,  
and Professor of Law at Chapman University School of Law

“There is a crisis of confidence about the Gospels, fueled by sensational claims about supposedly new Gnostic Gospels with a ‘revised standard’ view of Jesus. With a pastor’s insight but a scholar’s critical acumen, Mark Roberts provides a readable guide to answering the question, Can we trust the Gospels? As Mark makes clear, the earliest and best evidence we have for the real Jesus is the canonical Gospels, not the much later Gnostic ones.”

—Ben Witherington III, Professor of New Testament,  
Asbury Theological Seminary, author of  
*What Have They Done with Jesus?*

“What F. F. Bruce did for my generation of students, Mark Roberts has done for the current generation. Any student who asks me if our Gospels are reliable will be given this book, and then I’ll buy another copy for the next student!”

—Scot McKnight, Karl A. Olsson Professor in Religious Studies,  
North Park University

“*Can We Trust The Gospels?* caught me completely by surprise. While I knew a scholar of Mark Roberts’s caliber could convince skeptics the Gospels are reliable, I never expected to have my own preconceptions uprooted and

replaced with a more solid trust in these biblical texts. This book not only makes a compelling case for trusting the Gospels, it illuminates the creative ways in which God worked to bring us His Word. Roberts's brilliant little book deserves to be widely read by both skeptics and believers.”

—Joe Carter, blogger ([evangelicaloutpost.com](http://evangelicaloutpost.com)) and Director of Communications for the Family Research Council

# Can We Trust the Gospels?

Investigating the Reliability of  
Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John

Mark D. Roberts

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## Chapter 1

# A Bio and a Blook

**In this book** I seek to answer a simple question: *Can we trust the Gospels?*

I'm thinking of two different but related dimensions of trust. On the one hand, I'm asking if the Gospels provide *reliable historical information* about Jesus of Nazareth. On the other hand, I'm wondering if they offer a *trustworthy basis for faith* in Jesus. In this book I will focus almost exclusively on the historical dimension of trusting the Gospels.

When I speak of “the Gospels,” I'm referring to the first four books of the Christian New Testament. There are other so-called “Gospels” among extrabiblical collections of ancient writings, most famously in the Nag Hammadi Library of Gnostic writings. Though these documents rarely focus on the life and ministry of the human Jesus, they may occasionally contain tidbits of historical data about him. I'll refer to the noncanonical Gospels when appropriate in this book, but they are not my primary concern.

I should come clean at this point and admit that I do indeed believe that the Gospels are trustworthy. But I have not always

been so confident about their reliability. There was a time when I would have answered the “Can we trust the Gospels?” question with, “Well, maybe, at least somewhat. But I have my doubts.” How I got to a place of confidence from this earlier point of uncertainty is a story that will help you grasp “where I’m coming from,” as we would say in California.

## Doubting the Gospels

I grew up in a solid evangelical church. The Gospels were assumed to be not only historically accurate but also inspired by God. In my teenage years I wondered about the trustworthiness of the Gospels. But my youth leaders reassured me. I was encouraged to learn that the inspiration of the Gospels was proved by the similarities between Matthew, Mark, and Luke. Who else, besides the Holy Spirit, could inspire the evangelists<sup>1</sup> to compose such amazingly parallel accounts of Jesus?

I went to college at Harvard. Though founded as a Christian school, and though the university seal continues to proclaim *veritas christo et ecclesiae*, “Truth for Christ and the Church,” Harvard in the 1970s wasn’t exactly a bastion of Christian faith. Plus, I was planning to major in philosophy, a discipline notorious for its atheistic bias. Many of my friends back home worried that I would lose my faith at “godless Harvard.”

During my freshman year, it wasn’t my philosophy courses that threw my faith for a loop, however. It was a New Testament class. Religion 140, “Introduction to Early Christian Literature,” was taught by Professor George MacRae, a top-notch New Testament scholar. As the semester began, I had my guard up, expecting Professor MacRae to be a Dr. Frankenstein who would create a monster to devour my faith. In fact, however, Professor MacRae was no mad scientist. One of the best lecturers I ever had at Harvard, he seasoned his reasonable pre-

1. In biblical studies, “evangelists” refers to the writers of the Gospels. “Gospel” in Greek is *euangelion*. From this we get the word “evangelist,” meaning “preacher of good news.”

sentations with humorous quips among hundreds of valuable insights. His first lecture on the challenges of studying early Christianity was so impressive to me that I still remember his main points and use them when I teach seminary courses on the New Testament.

Professor MacRae followed this lecture with a fascinating exploration of the world of early Christianity. Next he turned to the letters of Paul. Though he investigated them as a critical scholar,<sup>2</sup> his insights fit more or less with what I had learned in church. My guard began to come down.

But then we came to the Gospels. Professor MacRae did not deny their usefulness as historical sources. But he did argue that these documents, though containing some historical remembrances, were chock-full of legendary elements, including miracle stories, exorcisms, and prophecies. These were not to be taken as part of the historical record, he said. Rather, they were best understood as fictional elements added by the early Christians to increase the attractiveness of Jesus in the Greco-Roman world. The Gospels were not so much historical or biographical documents as they were theological tractates weaving together powerful fictions with a few factual data.

Perhaps what most shook my faith in the trustworthiness of the Gospels was Professor MacRae's treatment of the similarities among Matthew, Mark, and Luke. He explained persuasively that Mark was the first of the Gospels to be written, and that Matthew and Luke used Mark in their writing. In the process, he also demonstrated how Matthew and Luke changed Mark, interjecting "contradictions" into the Gospel record.

Listening to this explanation of why the Synoptic<sup>3</sup> Gospels were so similar, I felt the rug being pulled out from under my

2. Critical scholarship involves historical, literary, linguistic, and sociological analysis of the New Testament. It is not necessarily critical in the sense of being negative. In fact hundreds of critical New Testament scholars also affirm the reliability of the Gospels. But many academics, especially in secular institutions, blend critical scholarship with pessimistic appraisals of the New Testament, and often with their own personal denigration of Christianity in general.

3. "Synoptic" means "capable of being read side by side, or synoptically." Matthew, Mark, and Luke are synoptic because they are so similar in form and content.

confidence in these writings. Where I had once been taught that these similarities were evidence of divine inspiration, I discovered that a straightforward historical explanation provided a simpler account of the data. *How many other things have I been taught about the Gospels that aren't true?* I wondered.

### Uncertain about My Uncertainty

After finishing Religion 140, I could not trust the Gospels to provide historically accurate knowledge of Jesus. Yet, as much as I found this skeptical perspective compelling, it didn't fully satisfy me. Ironically, my studies of philosophy contributed to my uncertainty about my Gospel uncertainty. As a "phil concentrator" I was learning to scrutinize the theoretical underpinnings of all beliefs. It seemed only right to subject what I had learned about the New Testament to this sort of investigation. When I did, I began to wonder if my new perspective on the Gospels was too simplistic.

For example, one of the things that bothered me about Professor MacRae's position was how quickly he concluded that there were *contradictions* among the Gospels. In my philosophy classes I was being trained to assume that a document was consistent unless every effort to discern consistency failed. Though the Gospels were not written by one author, it seemed that Professor MacRae had rushed to judgment about the contradictory nature of the Gospels without considering how varying Gospel accounts might have been complementary.

In my undergraduate years I began to think critically, not only about the New Testament but also about the methodologies and presuppositions of New Testament scholarship. Sometimes, I discovered, academic consensus was built on the shifting sand of weak philosophy, peculiar methodology,<sup>4</sup> and

4. For example, ever since I first learned about the "criterion of dissimilarity," a scholarly tool for establishing the validity of historical claims about Jesus, it seemed to me that this was obviously and woefully inadequate, even though it was accepted without hesitation by many critical scholars. For a brief critique of the criterion of

atheistic theology. Perhaps other approaches were possible, ones that involved rigorous New Testament scholarship and led to a more positive appraisal of the Gospels' reliability.

## A Strange Twist in the Road

My road to confidence in the Gospels took a strange twist during my junior year. I enrolled in a seminar with Professor MacRae called "Christians, Jews, and Gnostics." Among the documents we studied in this course were several Gnostic writings that had just been published in English. Some of these documents, written in Coptic, had been translated by Professor MacRae for *The Nag Hammadi Library in English*.<sup>5</sup> This meant I had the chance to study these Gnostic texts with one of the world's foremost authorities on them. It never dawned on me, by the way, that someday people outside of academia would care about the contents of the Gnostic Gospels.

In "Christians, Jews, and Gnostics" I learned to dig deeply into the meaning of the ancient texts and to ask all sorts of questions about them. Professor MacRae was willing to engage any serious question, including challenges to his own perspectives. During this second class with him I began to see the Gospels as more reliable than I had once thought, in part, as I compared them to the wildly fictional portraits of Jesus in the Gnostic Gospels.

By the end of this seminar, Professor MacRae encouraged me to pursue graduate work in New Testament. His openness to my questions was one of the reasons I decided to remain at Harvard for my doctoral work. Ironically, the one who was most responsible for my loss of confidence in the Gospels became a primary reason for my growing trust in them.<sup>6</sup>

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dissimilarity, see <http://www.markdroberts.com/htmlfiles/resources/unmaskingthejesus.htm#sep1405>.

5. James M. Robinson, ed., *The Nag Hammadi Library in English* (New York: Harper & Row, 1977).

6. Professor MacRae would have been my dissertation advisor, had it not been for his untimely death in 1985.

## Critical New Testament Scholarship: Up Close and Personal

Without exception, my grad school teachers echoed Professor MacRae's conclusions about the historical limitations of the New Testament Gospels. In fact, several faculty members made him look rather conservative. I did learn a great deal from these scholars, however. Their knowledge of the world of early Christianity was encyclopedic, and their ability to interpret ancient texts critically was superlative. Yet I began to see how often their interpretations were saturated by unquestioned philosophical presuppositions. If, for example, a passage from the Gospels included a prophecy of Jesus concerning his death, it was assumed without argument that this had been added later by the church because prophecy didn't fit within the naturalistic worldview of my profs.<sup>7</sup>

The more I spent time with some of the leading New Testament scholars in the world, the more I came to respect their brilliance and, at the same time, to recognize the limitations of their scholarly perspectives. I saw how often conclusions based on unsophisticated assumptions were accepted without question by the reigning scholarly community, and taught uncritically as if they were, well, the Gospel truth.

I also discovered how rarely my professors entertained perspectives by scholars who didn't share their naturalistic worldview. Evangelical scholars<sup>8</sup> were usually ignored simply because they were conservative. This fact was driven home once when I was on winter break in Southern California. I needed to read a few books for one of my courses, so I went to the Fuller Seminary library because it was close to my home. What I found at Fuller stunned me. Fuller students were required to

7. "Naturalism" is the philosophical position that assumes there is nothing beyond nature, or physical existence. A naturalistic worldview makes no room for supernatural events or a supernatural God.

8. Evangelical scholars are those who believe that the Bible is, in some strong sense, God's inspired Word. Some refer to Scripture as inerrant; others prefer the term infallible. Many evangelical scholars are also critical scholars in that they investigate biblical documents with the tools of academia and engage in dialogue with critical scholars across the theological spectrum.

read many of the same books I was assigned, and also books written from an evangelical perspective. Whereas I was getting one party line, Fuller students were challenged to think more broadly and, dare I admit it, more critically. This put an arrogant Harvard student in his place, let me tell you. It also helped me see how much my own education was lopsided. Only once in my entire graduate school experience was I assigned a book by an evangelical scholar.<sup>9</sup>

### Critical Scholarship and Confidence in the Gospels

Beginning with my days at Harvard and continuing throughout the last three decades, I have worked away on the question of the trustworthiness of the Gospels. I have come to believe that there are solid reasons for accepting them as reliable both for history and for faith.

You may be surprised to learn that I agree with about three-quarters of what I learned from Professor MacRae in Religion 140. We affirm the same basic facts: the raw data of ancient documents and archeological discoveries. The differences between our views have to do with how we evaluate the data, and here the gap between what Professor MacRae taught and what I believe today is often wide and deep.

You may also be surprised to discover that my arguments in this book are often friendlier to critical scholarship than you might expect. For example, many defenses of the historical reliability of the Gospel of John depend on an early date of composition (pre–A.D. 70). I will not base my own conclusions upon this early date, though I think there are persuasive arguments in its favor.

While reading this book, an evangelical who is well acquainted with New Testament scholarship might periodically

9. Professor Krister Stendahl assigned a commentary on Matthew by Robert H. Gundry (*Matthew: A Commentary on His Literary and Theological Art* [Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1982]). Ironically, this book was roundly criticized by many evangelicals as buying too much into non-evangelical approaches to the Gospels.

object, “But there are even stronger arguments than the ones you’re making.” So be it! I’m open to these positions and glad for those who articulate them. But I have chosen to base my case, for the most part, on that which most even-handed critical scholars, including non-evangelicals, would affirm. I’ve done this for two reasons.

First, I want to encourage the person who is troubled by negative views of the Gospels, perhaps in a college New Testament course or in a popular “Gospels-debunking” book. In a sense, I’m writing for the Mark Roberts who once felt perplexed in Religion 140. To the “old me” and others like him I want to say, “Look, even if you believe most of ‘assured results of scholarship’ concerning the Gospels, you can still trust them.”

Second, I believe this book will have broader impact if I don’t fill it with theories that, however plausible, are popular only among conservative scholars. For example, it may well be that the disciples of Jesus had been trained to memorize sayings of their religious mentors, much like later rabbinic students.<sup>10</sup> If this is true, it would greatly increase the likelihood that the sayings of Jesus in the Gospels closely reflect what Jesus himself had once said. But since the jury is still out on the question of whether or not the disciples were trained in technical memorization, I won’t base my conclusions upon this possibility.

My basic point in this book is that if you look squarely at the facts as they are widely understood, and if you do not color them with pejorative bias or atheistic presuppositions, then you’ll find that it’s reasonable to trust the Gospels.

For those not familiar with the Bible, I should explain that there are four Gospels in the New Testament, a collection of twenty-seven early Christian writings. The New Testament is the second part of the Christian Bible, which also contains a collection of thirty-nine Jewish writings which Christians call

10. This view is ably defended by Birger Gerhardsson in *The Reliability of the Gospel Tradition* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 2001).

the Old Testament. Jews refer to these thirty-nine writings as the Bible or the *Tanakh* (from the Hebrew words for law, prophecy, and writings).

The Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John are the first four books of the New Testament, though they are not the earliest of the New Testament writings. They focus on certain aspects of the life and ministry of Jesus of Nazareth, and especially on his death and resurrection. There are other early Christian writings called Gospels, perhaps two or three dozen depending on what counts as a Gospel. For reasons that I'll explain in this book, the extrabiblical Gospels are not as reliable as historical sources for Jesus, though they sometimes describe Jesus' sayings or actions accurately.

## The Birth of a “Blok”

This book is a direct result of my engagement with many attempts to undermine confidence in the Gospels. In the last two years I have publicly defended the Gospels against assaults from a *Newsweek* cover story,<sup>11</sup> the Jesus Seminar,<sup>12</sup> the book *Misquoting Jesus*, by Bart Ehrman,<sup>13</sup> the claims made about the *Gospel of Judas* by some scholars,<sup>14</sup> and, most of all, Dan Brown's best-selling novel, *The Da Vinci Code*.<sup>15</sup> My apologetic<sup>16</sup> writings have appeared on my web site, *www.markdroberts*.

11. Mark D. Roberts, *The Birth of Jesus: Hype or History?* <http://www.markdroberts.com/htmlfiles/resources/jesusbirth.htm>.

12. Mark D. Roberts, *Unmasking the Jesus Seminar*, <http://www.markdroberts.com/htmlfiles/resources/unmaskingthejesus.htm>.

13. Mark D. Roberts, *The Bible, the Qur'an, Bart Ehrman, and the Words of God*, <http://www.markdroberts.com/htmlfiles/resources/biblequran.htm>. See Bart D. Ehrman, *Misquoting Jesus: The Story behind Who Changed the Bible and Why* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 2005).

14. Mark D. Roberts, *The Gospel of Judas: A Special Report*, <http://www.markdroberts.com/htmlfiles/resources/davinciopportunity3.htm#apr906>.

15. Mark D. Roberts, *The Da Vinci Opportunity*, <http://www.markdroberts.com/htmlfiles/resources/davinciopportunity.htm>.

16. “Apologetic” writings offer a reasonable defense of some belief. The word “apologetic” comes from the Greek term *apologia*, which means “defense (written or spoken).” It has no connection at all with the concept of “apologizing” for something.

com, and in other online or print media. As I endeavored to fend off attacks upon the Gospels, it occurred to me that I ought to write a short, popular, positive case for trusting these embattled portraits of Jesus. So in the fall of 2005 I wrote an extended blog series entitled *Are the New Testament Gospels Reliable?*<sup>17</sup>

Since the release of that series I have received hundreds of gratifying e-mails from people who have thanked me. Some notes have included questions or points of correction. Of course I've also received correspondence from people who disagree with my positions. These have helped me clarify and refine my arguments.

Perhaps the most surprising positive response to my blog series came from the publishers at Crossway Books. They said they were interested in turning my series into a book. At first I hesitated, realizing that there are other fine books on the reliability of the Gospels. I fondly remember the classic volume by F. F. Bruce, *The New Testament Documents: Are They Reliable?*<sup>18</sup> which helped me survive my collegiate doubts about the Gospels. I also thought of the more detailed and up-to-date book by Craig Blomberg, *The Historical Reliability of the Gospels*.<sup>19</sup> And I knew that a solid defense of the Gospels called *Reinventing Jesus* was soon to be published.<sup>20</sup> Moreover, I have seen how effective Lee Strobel's *The Case for Christ* has been as a popular apologetic introduction to Jesus and the Gospels.<sup>21</sup> But the more I received communication from people who had been helped by my blog series, the more I realized that I could

17. Mark D. Roberts, *Are the New Testament Gospels Reliable?* <http://www.markdroberts.com/htmfiles/resources/gospelsreliable.htm>.

18. F. F. Bruce, *The New Testament Documents: Are They Reliable?* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1960).

19. Craig L. Blomberg, *The Historical Reliability of the Gospels* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1987). Blomberg's book is excellent, and I recommend it highly. It is more detailed than this book and is suitable for readers with knowledge of New Testament studies.

20. J. Ed Komoszewski, M. James Sawyer, and Daniel B. Wallace, *Reinventing Jesus: What the Da Vinci Code and Other Novel Speculations Don't Tell You* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Kregel, 2006).

21. Lee Strobel, *The Case for Christ: A Journalist's Personal Investigation of the Evidence for Jesus* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1998).

offer something unique to book readers. The result, *Can We Trust the Gospels?* is an expanded and, I hope, improved version of my original blog series. It is, according to the new lingo, a blook—a *book* based on a *blog*.

Many of the basic facts and arguments in this book can be found elsewhere, though numerous points and illustrations are new. What makes this book distinctive is its availability to nonspecialists, including non-Christian readers. I realize this will be frustrating for a few readers who are familiar with New Testament scholarship and who will want more extensive discussion and documentation. But *Can We Trust the Gospels?* is meant to be a shorter book that can be easily grasped by people who don't have specialized academic knowledge and who don't want to wade through a much longer tome. This volume could easily have been 500 pages with 5,000 footnotes. But then I'd completely miss my intended audience . . . the ordinary person who wonders, *Can I trust the Gospels?*

Though no longer linked electronically to my web site, this "blook" will continue to be supported through online conversation, clarification, and revision. At [www.markdroberts.com](http://www.markdroberts.com) there will be a place for you to log your comments, ask your questions, or listen in on an ongoing conversation. My web site will also allow me to relate *Can We Trust the Gospels?* to new assaults on their historical reliability. No doubt there will be many of these in the years to come.<sup>22</sup>

## F.A.Q. Format

Influence of the Internet can also be seen in the basic format of this book. Millions of web sites use a F.A.Q. page—Frequently Asked Questions—to respond to the most common inquiries from visitors. *Can We Trust the Gospels?* is an extended F.A.Q. It is structured by a series of basic questions about the Gospels:

22. For example, as I'm editing this manuscript, a television documentary claims that the bones of Jesus have been found, thus invalidating the Gospel accounts of his death and resurrection.

- Can we know what the original Gospel manuscripts really said?
- Did the evangelists know Jesus personally?
- When were the Gospels written?
- What sources did the Gospel writers use?
- Did early Christian oral tradition reliably pass down the truth about Jesus?
- What are the New Testament Gospels?
- What difference does it make that there are four Gospels?
- Are there contradictions in the Gospels?
- If the Gospels are theology, can they be history?
- Do miracles undermine the reliability of the Gospels?
- Do historical sources from the era of the Gospels support their reliability?
- Does archeology support the reliability of the Gospels?
- Did the political agenda of the early church influence the content of the Gospels?
- Why do we have only four Gospels in the Bible?
- Can we trust the Gospels after all?

The pages ahead contain answers that are the result of more than three decades of investigation, involving hundreds of hours of seminary teaching, thousands of hours of thinking, and myriads of pages of reading. For the sake of my intended audience, I have condensed all of this into relatively few pages. You won't find complex arguments with elaborate footnotes in this book, even though many of my conclusions grow out of such complexity and elaboration. If you're looking for more data than I can provide here, I'll try to point you in helpful directions through the footnotes.

My hope is that, as you read this book, you will come to believe that you can trust the biblical Gospels. Even as Luke wrote the third Gospel so that his readers might "know the truth" concerning Jesus (Luke 1:4), so have I written this book.

## Chapter 2

# Can We Know What the Original Gospel Manuscripts Really Said?

If you open a Bible and look for the Gospels, you'll find them in English translation, neatly collected at the beginning of the New Testament. You'll see book names, chapter and verse numbers, punctuation, and paragraphs. None of these items were present in the original manuscripts of the writings we call Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. Most manuscripts didn't even have spaces between the words! Aren't you glad things have changed? What you read in your Bible is the result of centuries of preservation, translation, and publication. Thus you might sensibly wonder, *Do the Gospels bear any resemblance to what the original writers actually penned almost 2,000 years ago?*

It is common these days for people to answer no to this question. Critics of Christianity often allege that the Gospels as we know them don't resemble the originals. This criticism appears, for example, on the lips of Sir Leigh Teabing, a fic-

tional historian in Dan Brown's wildly popular novel *The Da Vinci Code*. Teabing "reveals" the true nature of the Bible in this way:

"The Bible is a product of *man*. . . . Not of God. The Bible did not fall magically from the clouds. Man created it as a historical record of tumultuous times, and it has evolved through countless translations, additions, and revisions. History has never had a definitive version of the book."<sup>1</sup>

There is a measure of truth here. The Bible is indeed a human product, though this in no way requires that it could not also be "of God." For centuries, Christians have affirmed that the Bible was written by human authors who were inspired by God.

It's true that the Bible "did not fall magically from the clouds." It was in fact written by human beings who lived in "tumultuous times." Yet the biblical documents were not created *primarily* as a "historical record" of these times. Though there is plenty of history in Scripture, the biblical writers weren't telling merely a human story. Rather, they focused primarily on the actions of God in history, especially on the story of God's salvation of the world.

Teabing exaggerates in saying that the Bible has "evolved through countless translations." It has indeed been translated into more languages than any other book, by far. At last count, the New Testament has been translated into 1,541 languages.<sup>2</sup> But the Bible has not "evolved through countless translations," as if our English versions stand at the end of a long chain of multilingual transformations. Every modern translation of Scripture is based on manuscripts written in the same languages as those used by the original writers. The Old Testament in English comes directly from Hebrew and Aramaic manuscripts. Our New Testament is translated from Greek manuscripts.

1. Dan Brown, *The Da Vinci Code* (New York: Doubleday, 2003), 231.

2. [http://www.wycliffe.org.uk/aboutus\\_whatwedo.html](http://www.wycliffe.org.uk/aboutus_whatwedo.html).

## The Relationship between Existing Manuscripts and the Original Compositions

The documents we know as Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John were written sometime in the second half of the first century A.D. (I'll say more about the dating of the Gospels in chapter 4.) They were written on scrolls of papyrus (a rough, paper-like substance). Papyrus was popular because it was readily available and relatively inexpensive. But, unfortunately, it wasn't especially durable. Thus it is highly unlikely that any of the original Gospel manuscripts, called by the technical term *autographs*, exist today. Probably, the biblical autographs were worn out through use, though they could also have been misplaced by absentminded church leaders, destroyed by persecutors of the early Christians, or even eaten by critters.<sup>3</sup>

Because ancient documents tended to have a relatively short shelf life, people who valued them had a way of preserving their contents: copying. Professional copyists, called scribes, would copy the words of one text into a fresh papyrus or parchment (a longer lasting material made from animal skins). Their training taught the scribes to minimize errors and maximize accuracy.

Yet copying manuscripts was not a slavish task, with scribal accuracy matching modern photocopy technology. At times scribes would make intentional changes as they copied. For example, they would correct what they believed to be a spelling error in their source text. And even the best of scribes also sometimes made unintended errors. Thus the best extant<sup>4</sup> manuscripts of the Gospels are likely to differ in some measure from the autographs.

3. A fine discussion of how books were written in the time of early Christianity can be found in Bruce M. Metzger and Bart D. Ehrman, *The Text of the New Testament: Its Transmission, Corruption, and Restoration*, 4th ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005). See pages 3–51, “The Making of Ancient Books.”

4. “Extant” means “in existence today” and is frequently used by scholars to describe manuscripts that have not been lost or destroyed.

Moreover, it is probable that many of the first copies of the Gospels were made, not by professional scribes, but by literate lay copyists. As the early church rapidly expanded throughout the Roman world in the first centuries A.D., there was a pressing need for multiple copies of authoritative Christian documents, including Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. Nonprofessional copyists must have stepped in to meet this need.

The fact that the original Gospel manuscripts have not survived to this day, combined with the fact that for centuries the text was passed on through a careful but imperfect process of copying, makes us wonder whether we can trust that the Greek text we have today looks anything like what the authors originally wrote down. Can we know what the original Gospel manuscripts actually said?

### Standards for Evaluating the Reliability of Gospel Manuscripts

Before we examine the data, let's think for a moment about what might allow us to put confidence in the manuscripts of the Gospels.

First, we would look for *antiquity*. We'd want the manuscripts in existence to be old, the closer to the autographs the better. Less time between the original and an existing copy decreases the possibility of changes being introduced through many acts of copying.

Second, we would prefer *multiplicity*. Clearly, it would be better to have many manuscripts at our disposal rather than just a few. An abundance of manuscripts would put us in a much better position to determine the original wording.

Third, we would want *trustworthy scholarly methodology*. If the academics who study the biblical manuscripts, known as textual critics, utilize reliable methods, ones that maximize objectivity, then we would have greater confidence in their conclusions.

Fourth, we would look at the *quantity and quality of textually ambiguous passages* (made up of differences, called *variants*, among the manuscripts). If the existing copies of the Gospels contain a high proportion of textual variants, then we would question our ability to know what was originally written. If, on the contrary, the differences among extant manuscripts are relatively insignificant, then we would rightly place confidence in the critical Greek texts<sup>5</sup> upon which our translations are based.

So how does reality measure up to these standards?

### The Antiquity of the Gospel Manuscripts

The oldest manuscript of the Gospels is a papyrus fragment of the Gospel of John. It is called P<sup>52</sup>, text-critical shorthand for “Papyrus 52.” This fragment, which contains part of Jesus’ conversation with Pilate prior to the crucifixion (John 18:31–33, 37–38), has been dated to around A.D. 125. This means the copy of John of which P<sup>52</sup> is a tiny part was made within a couple of generations of the original writing of John’s Gospel.<sup>6</sup> The next oldest manuscripts of the Gospels come from the latter part of the second century and the early part of the third century. P<sup>4</sup>, P<sup>45</sup>, P<sup>64</sup>, P<sup>66</sup>, P<sup>67</sup>, and P<sup>75</sup> include significant portions of all four Gospels.

As we move further into the third century and beyond, we find many more extant manuscripts, including one of the most important parchment copies of the entire Bible, known as Codex Sinaiticus. This book was found in the mid-nineteenth century in a monastery near Mt. Sinai, from which it derives

5. “Critical Greek texts” are texts produced by teams of scholars working from the extant manuscripts of the New Testament. These scholars are called “text critics,” and their discipline is called “text criticism.” Critical Greek texts try to represent the original writing as closely as possible. Critical editions of the Greek New Testament also contain extensive footnotes to help scholars weigh differences among the various manuscripts.

6. For more detail about P<sup>52</sup> and the rest of the papyri, see Metzger and Ehrman, *Text of the New Testament*, 53–61.

its name. It has been dated to the fourth century A.D., and it contains the whole New Testament along with major sections of the Old Testament in Greek.<sup>7</sup>

How should we evaluate the antiquity of the Gospel manuscripts? The smallest time gap, the one between P<sup>52</sup> and the autograph of John's Gospel, is two generations. The more complete manuscripts are about a century later than the original writings, with extant copies of the whole New Testament more than two centuries later than the time of composition. From our point of view, the period between the extant manuscripts of the Gospels and the autographs may seem awfully long, and may raise doubts about the reliability of the Gospel manuscripts.

But if we compare the antiquity of the Gospel manuscripts with similar ancient writings, the case for trusting the Gospels gains considerable strength. Consider, for example, the writings of three historians more or less contemporaneous with the evangelists: the Jewish historian Josephus and the Roman historians Tacitus and Suetonius. The oldest extant manuscripts of Tacitus and Suetonius come from the ninth century.<sup>8</sup> Those of Josephus date back only to the eleventh century.<sup>9</sup> We're talking about a time gap of 800 to 1,000 years between the autographs and the extant manuscripts, yet historians accept the manuscripts as basically reliable representations of what was originally written. Lest it seem that I've chosen examples that are unusual, the oldest manuscripts of the classical historians Herodotus and Thucydides are separated from their autographs by about 500 years.<sup>10</sup>

If someone were to claim that we can't have confidence in the original content of the Gospels because the existing manuscripts

7. For the fascinating story of the discovery of Codex Sinaiticus, see *ibid.*, 62–67.

8. J. Ed Komoszewski, M. James Sawyer, and Daniel B. Wallace, *Reinventing Jesus: What the Da Vinci Code and Other Novel Speculations Don't Tell You* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Kregel, 2006), 71.

9. "Josephus," in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, David Noel Freedman, ed. (New York: Doubleday, 1992).

10. Komoszewski, Sawyer, and Wallace, *Reinventing Jesus*, 71.

are too far removed from the autographs, then that person would also have to cast doubt upon our knowledge of almost all ancient history and literature. Such skepticism, which is not found among classical scholars and historians, would be extreme and unwarranted.

Therefore, on the antiquity scale, the New Testament Gospels receive a top score.

### The Multiplicity of the Gospel Manuscripts

Currently, scholars are aware of more than 5,700 manuscripts that contain some portion of the New Testament, and the total is growing slowly as additional manuscripts are discovered. Among these manuscripts, a couple thousand contain all or portions of the biblical Gospels.

Once again we should evaluate this total in light of comparable writings from the same period. What do we find if we look again at Tacitus, Suetonius, and Josephus? The histories of Tacitus exist today in three manuscripts, none of which contain all of his writings.<sup>11</sup> We're better off in the case of Suetonius, whose writings are found in more than 200 extant manuscripts. For Josephus we have 133 manuscripts.<sup>12</sup> Once again, if it seems like I'm stacking the deck in my own favor, there are 75 manuscripts of Herodotus, and only 20 of Thucydides.

The number of Gospel manuscripts in existence is about 20 times larger than the average number of extant manuscripts of comparable writings. I have not even considered the tens of thousands of manuscripts of Gospel translations into languages such as Latin and Syriac, many of which were made in the earliest centuries A.D. I have also not taken into account the hundreds of thousands of quotations of the Gospels found in the writings of early church leaders. Here's what Bruce Metzger and Bart Ehrman have to say about these citations:

11. Metzger and Ehrman, *Text of the New Testament*, 50–51.

12. Komoszewski, Sawyer, and Wallace, *Reinventing Jesus*, 71.

Besides textual evidence derived from the New Testament Greek manuscripts and from early versions, the textual critic has available the numerous scriptural quotations included in the commentaries, sermons, and other treatises written by early Church fathers. Indeed, so extensive are these citations that if all other sources for our knowledge of the text of the New Testament were destroyed, they would be sufficient alone for the reconstruction of practically the entire New Testament.<sup>13</sup>

After comparing the manuscripts of the New Testament with those for other ancient literature, Metzger and Ehrman conclude that “the textual critic of the New Testament is embarrassed by the wealth of material.”<sup>14</sup>

### The Reliability of Text-Critical Methodology

Yet this “wealth of material” also complicates the work of textual criticism. What methods do text critics use to determine the earliest form of the Gospel text?

First, they collect all of the known manuscripts, including ancient translations and writings of the early church fathers. The individual text critic doesn’t actually do this alone, of course, but relies on the work of hundreds of other scholars, both present and past.

Second, text critics evaluate the manuscripts, looking for variants and seeking to determine which readings are the most likely to be original. They examine what is called *external evidence* and *internal evidence*. External evidence has to do with the number, antiquity, and relationships among the manuscripts. For example, if a variant is found in many, old manuscripts, then it is more reliable than one found in few, later manuscripts. Internal evidence concerns the actual content of the writing.

Though there is certainly a measure of subjectivity in text criticism, it is by far the most objective discipline in New Tes-

13. Metzger and Ehrman, *Text of the New Testament*, 126.

14. *Ibid.*, 51.

tament studies. If you were to take two different teams of text critics and ask them to work independently on a critical edition of the Greek New Testament, they would agree more than 99 percent of the time. In fact, for the vast majority of words in the Gospels, text critics have come to an extremely high level of confidence concerning what was written in the autographs.

### The Quantity and Quality of Textual Variants

Skeptics who try to cast doubt upon the reliability of the New Testament manuscripts point to the apparently large number of variants they contain. Bart Ehrman, for example, in *Misquoting Jesus*, suggests that there are 200,000 to 400,000 variants among the New Testament manuscripts. He adds, dramatically, “There are more variations among our manuscripts than there are words in the New Testament.”<sup>15</sup> That sounds ominous, doesn’t it? But, in fact, the data give us no reason to doubt the reliability of the manuscripts. Let me explain why.

We have such a large number of variants because there are so many extant manuscripts. Considering that the four Gospels contain a total of 64,000 words, and we have about 2,000 manuscripts of the Gospels, that’s a lot of potential variants. But as I’ve already shown, having many manuscripts actually increases the likelihood of our getting back to the original text. It also adds to the number of variants, however, which can sound negative to one who isn’t familiar with text-critical issues.

Let me suggest a more hypothetical example that might make clear what I’m saying. This book contains almost 50,000 words. Suppose I asked two people to make copies of this book by hand. Suppose, further, that they made one mistake every 1,000 words (99.9 percent accuracy). When they finished, each of their manuscripts would have 50 mistakes, for a total of 100. This doesn’t sound too bad, does it? But suppose I asked

15. Bart D. Ehrman, *Misquoting Jesus: The Story behind Who Changed the Bible and Why* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 2005), 90.

2,000 people to make copies of my book. And suppose they also made a mistake every 1,000 words. When they finished, the total of mistakes in their manuscripts would be 100,000. This sounds like a lot of variants—more variants than words in my book, Bart Ehrman would say. But in fact the large number of variants is a simple product of the large number of manuscripts. Moreover, if text critics, lacking access to the original version (the autograph) of my book, were going to try and determine what my original version said, they'd be in a much stronger position if they had 2,000 copies to work from, even though they would be dealing with 100,000 variants. With 2,000 manuscripts, the text critics would be able to evaluate the variants more astutely and come up with something very close to what I originally wrote. If they had only two manuscripts, however, even though these included only 100 variants, they would find it harder to determine what the original manuscript said.

So, the fact “there are more variations among our manuscripts than there are words in the New Testament” isn't surprising. Nor is it bad news. It is a reflection of the wealth of the manuscript evidence available to us. The *actual number of variants* represents a tiny percentage of the variants that *could have occurred* among the manuscripts.

Moreover, the vast majority of variants in the New Testament manuscripts are insignificant, either because they appear so rarely that they are obviously not original, or because they don't appear in the older manuscripts, or because they don't impact the meaning of the text. In fact, the majority of variants that show up in enough older manuscripts to impact our reading of the text are spelling variations or errors.<sup>16</sup> Text critic Daniel Wallace concludes that “only about 1% of the textual variants” make any substantive difference.<sup>17</sup> And few, if any, of these have any bearing on theologically important matters. If you actually took out of the Gospels every word that was

16. Komoszewski, Sawyer, and Wallace, *Reinventing Jesus*, 56.

17. [http://www.bible.org/page.asp?page\\_id=4000#P174\\_80529](http://www.bible.org/page.asp?page_id=4000#P174_80529).

text-critically uncertain, the impact on your understanding of Jesus would be negligible.

Consider, for example, the two most obvious and significant textual variants in the Gospels. One of these appears in John 7:53–8:11, the story of the woman caught in adultery. Virtually all modern translations put this story in brackets, adding a note that says something like, “The earliest manuscripts do not include this passage.” It’s likely that this story is true, but that it was added to John well after the evangelist finished his task. Similarly, the ending of Mark includes a bracketed passage because the old manuscripts do not include anything after Mark 16:8. These two disputed passages, though significant in some ways, do not substantially alter our understanding of Jesus.

### Do the Gospel Manuscripts Misquote Jesus?

At this point I should say a few words about Bart Ehrman’s currently popular book *Misquoting Jesus*. Even when this book has fallen from the best-seller lists, its ideas will still be floating around in the cultural stream like bits of post-hurricane flotsam in the sea. (If you’re looking for a more extensive critique of *Misquoting Jesus*, check what I’ve written on my web site,<sup>18</sup> as well as several excellent scholarly reviews.<sup>19</sup>)

Ehrman’s book is a popular introduction to textual criticism. When he sticks to objective descriptions, Ehrman’s insights are both helpful and readable. For a scholar, he’s an unusually effective popular communicator. Unfortunately, however, this book was not written merely to introduce people to textual criticism but also to undermine their confidence in the New Testament itself. I’m not reading between the

18. <http://www.markdroberts.com/htmlfiles/resources/biblequran.htm>.

19. Daniel Wallace, “The Gospel according to Bart,” [http://www.bible.org/page.asp?page\\_id=4000#P174\\_80529](http://www.bible.org/page.asp?page_id=4000#P174_80529); P. J. Williams, “Review of *Misquoting Jesus*,” [http://evangelicaltextualcriticism.blogspot.com/2005/12/review-of-bart-ehrman-misquoting-jesus\\_31.html](http://evangelicaltextualcriticism.blogspot.com/2005/12/review-of-bart-ehrman-misquoting-jesus_31.html); Craig L. Blomberg, “Review of *Misquoting Jesus*,” <http://www.denverseminary.edu/dj/articles2006/0200/0206.php>.

lines here. Ehrman is very clear about his intentions from the beginning.<sup>20</sup>

One of the ironies of Ehrman's book is the title, *Misquoting Jesus*. You would expect to find a book full of instances in which the sayings of Jesus found in the Gospels were corrupted by the scribes. In fact, however, very little of the book is actually about misquoting Jesus. As Craig L. Blomberg says in his trenchant review, "the title appears designed to attract attention and sell copies of the book rather than to represent its contents accurately."<sup>21</sup>

Another irony comes when Ehrman talks about the number of variants among the New Testament manuscripts. As just noted, he says, "there are more variations among our manuscripts than there are words in the New Testament."<sup>22</sup> This startling sound bite appears to undermine the reliability of the manuscripts. But Ehrman also qualifies this observation. He writes:

To be sure, of all the hundreds of thousands of textual changes found among our manuscripts, most of them are completely insignificant, immaterial, and of no real importance for anything other than showing that scribes could not spell or keep focused any better than the rest of us.<sup>23</sup>

The changes [the scribes] made—at least the intentional ones—were no doubt seen as improvements of the text, possibly made because the scribes were convinced that the copyists before them had themselves mistakenly altered the words of the text. For the most part, their intention was to conserve the tradition, not to change it.<sup>24</sup>

One would expect to find these claims in a book touting the reliability of the New Testament manuscripts. Ehrman, in spite of his bias, is too good a scholar not to tell the truth here.

20. Ehrman, *Misquoting Jesus*, 10–15.

21. Blomberg, "Review of *Misquoting Jesus*."

22. Ehrman, *Misquoting Jesus*, 90, see also 11.

23. *Ibid.*, 207.

24. *Ibid.*, 215.

The greatest irony in *Misquoting Jesus* lies at the heart of Ehrman's argument against the trustworthiness of the manuscripts. The main point of his book is to undermine confidence in the New Testament on the ground that copyists changed the manuscripts, both intentionally and accidentally. One would expect Ehrman to put forth dozens of examples where we simply don't have any idea what the autographs actually said. Such repeated uncertainty would lead to the conclusion that we can't know with assurance what the New Testament writers, including the Gospel authors, actually wrote.

But, in fact, Ehrman's book is filled with examples that prove the opposite point. He does indeed offer many cases of textual variants. In virtually every case, Ehrman confidently explains what the change was, what the earlier manuscript actually said, and what motivated the copyist. In other words, Ehrman's book, though intending to weaken our certainty about the New Testament text, actually demonstrates how the abundance of manuscripts and the antiquity of manuscripts, when run through the mill of text-critical methodology, allow us to know with a very high level of probability what the evangelists and other New Testament authors wrote. This might explain why there are many textual critics who are committed Christians with an evangelical view of Scripture.<sup>25</sup>

## Conclusion

Can we know what the original Gospel manuscripts really said? Yes, we can. We can have confidence that the critical Greek texts of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John represent, with a very high degree of probability, what the autographs of the Gospels actually contained.

25. See, for example, the text critics associated with the Evangelical Textual Criticism web site: <http://evangelicaltextualcriticism.blogspot.com/>.