

Can We Trust the Gospels?

Ratzinger on the Catechism and the Real Jesus

The Catechism trusts the biblical word. It holds *the Christ of the Gospels to be the real Jesus*. It is also convinced that all the Gospels tell us about this same Jesus and that all of them together help us, each in its own way, to know *the true Jesus of history, who is no other than the Christ of faith*.

This basic position has earned the Catechism vehement attacks. The Catechism, it is alleged, has slept through an entire century of exegesis, is utterly ignorant of literary genres, form and redactional history, and the like, and has not progressed beyond a “fundamentalistic” biblical exegesis.

It suffices to reread the chapter on the Bible and interpretation to see that this assertion is groundless. (Ratzinger, *Gospel, Catechesis, Catechism* [Ignatius Press, 1997] pp. 64-65)

Benedict XVI and The Problem of “the Historical Jesus”

When I was growing up—in the 1930s and 1940s—there was a series of inspiring books about Jesus: Karl Adam, Romano Guardini, Franz Michel Wilhelm, Giovanni Papini, and Henri Daniel-Rops were just some of the authors one could name. *All of these books based their portrayal of Jesus Christ on the Gospels*. They presented him as a man living on earth who, fully human though he was at the same time brought God to men, the God with whom as Son he was one. Through the man Jesus, then, God was made visible, and hence our eyes were able to behold the perfect man.

But the situation started to change in the 1950s. The gap between *the “historical Jesus”* and the “*Christ of faith*” grew wider and the two visibly fell apart. *But what can faith in Jesus as the Christ possibly mean, in Jesus as the Son of the living God, if the man Jesus was so completely different from the picture that the Evangelists painted of him and that the Church, on the evidence of the Gospels, takes as the basis of her preaching?*

As historical-critical scholarship advanced, it led to finer and finer distinctions between layers of tradition in the Gospels, beneath which the real object of faith—the figure of Jesus—became increasingly obscured and blurred... All these attempts have produced a common result: the impression that we have very little certain knowledge of Jesus and that only at a later stage did faith in his divinity shape the image we have of him. This impression has by now penetrated deeply into the minds of the Christian people at large. *This is a dramatic situation for faith, because its point of reference is being placed in doubt: Intimate friendship with Jesus on which everything depends, is in danger of clutching at thin air.* (Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth*, [New York: Doubleday, 2007] xi-xii, emphasis added)

Four Questions

1. Apostolic Origin: Who Wrote the Gospels?
2. Purpose of the Gospels: What is their Genre? Do they intend to relate history?
3. The Inspiration of the Gospels: What does it mean to call them inspired?
4. The Historicity of the Gospels: Are they reliable? What does the Church teach?

1. Who Wrote the Gospels? (Apostolic Origin)

The Myth of the Anonymous Gospels (cf. Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*, 2006)

1. Most NT Intros: students are disabused of “naive” belief in apostolic authorship
2. Instead: the Gospels were originally published as *anonymous* documents.
 - a. The titles (*inscriptio*) were added almost a century after publication.
 - b. The Church did this to ascribe authority to them.
3. Most NT Intros: give *no evidence* for this theory (e.g., R. Brown, *Introduction*, 109)
4. Once this theory is in place, *the Synoptic problem* becomes very important:
 - a. If anonymous, we must determine order and dependence, for historical reasons
 - b. Separate earliest from latest; redactional additions called into question
 - c. Separate historical “wheat” from unhistorical “chaff”
5. Modern quest for the historical Jesus:
 - a. Scholars begin with a hermeneutic of skepticism
 - b. Presupposition that the Gospels are *not* eyewitness testimony.
 - c. SP Solution adopted — usually the Two-Source hypothesis (Mark and Q)
 - d. Development of “criteria of authenticity” for each saying
 - e. Quest to find the “real Jesus” *behind* the Gospels
6. What does the historical *evidence* say about who wrote the Gospels?

Internal Evidence: The Titles (cf. Martin Hengel, *The Four Gospels*, 2000, pp. 48-56)

1. The Problem for the Anonymous Theory:
 - a. *No anonymous copy* of any canonical Gospel has been found
 - b. Scholars never give any manuscript *evidence* to back up the claim
2. *Unanimous* Internal Evidence: Gospel Manuscripts and Titles
 - a. Authored by Matthew: all manuscripts
(Codex Sinaiticus; Vaticanus, Bezae, Freerianus, etc.)
 - b. Authored by Mark: all manuscripts
(Codex Sinaiticus, Vaticanus, Alexandrinus, Bezae, etc.)
 - c. Authored by Luke: all manuscripts
(Codex Sinaiticus, Vaticanus, Alexandrinus, Bezae, etc.)
 - d. Ascription to John
(Papyrus 66, 75; Codex Sinaiticus, Vaticanus, etc.)
4. Historical Method and Textual Criticism: cannot *a priori* exclude manuscript evidence!

External Evidence: The Apostolic Fathers (cf. Hilarin Felder, *Christ and the Critics*, pp. 1-124)

1. Papias, Bishop of Hierapolis, Disciple of the Apostle John (Asia Minor, 110 A.D.)
“*Mark, having become the interpreter of Peter, wrote down accurately, though not indeed in order, whatsoever he remembered of the things said or done by Christ. For he neither heard the Lord nor followed him, but afterward, as I said, he followed Peter, who adapted his teaching to the needs of his hearers, but with no intention of giving a connected account of the Lord’s discourses, so that Mark committed no error while he thus wrote some things as he remembered them. For he was careful of one thing, not to omit any of the things which he had heard and not to state any falsely.*”
“So then *Matthew wrote the oracles in the Hebrew language, and every one interpreted them as he was able.*” (Cited in Eusebius, *Church History*, 3.39; NPNF)

External Evidence: the Church Fathers

2. Irenaeus, Bishop of Lyons, Disciple of Polycarp, disciple of John (France, 180A.D.) After our Lord rose from the dead, [the apostles] were invested with power from on high when the Holy Spirit came down, were filled from all [His gifts], and had perfect knowledge; they departed to the ends of the earth, preaching the glad tidings of the good things [sent] from God to us, and proclaiming the peace of heaven to men, who indeed do all equally and individually possess the Gospel of God. *Matthew also issued a written Gospel among the Hebrews in their own dialect, while Peter and Paul were preaching in Rome, and laying the foundations of the Church* (ca. 60 A.D.). *After their departure* (ca. 62 A.D.), *Mark, the disciple and interpreter of Peter, did also hand down to us in writing what had been preached by Peter. Luke also, the companion of Paul, recorded in a book the Gospel preached by him. Afterwards, John, the disciple of the Lord, who also had leaned upon His breast* (cf. John 19), *did himself publish a Gospel during his residence at Ephesus in Asia.*” (Ireneaus, *Against Heresies* 3.1.1. ANF)

3. Justin Martyr, philosopher and convert (Rome, 150 A.D.)

“For in the *memoirs, which I place to have been written by his apostles and their disciples*, it is stated that sweat like drops of blood flowed from him, while he prayed and said, “If it be possible, let this chalice pass...” (*Dialogue with Trypho* 103).

4. Eusebius, Bishop of Caesarea, greatest Church historian (Israel, 325 A.D.)

“Nevertheless, of all the disciples of the Lord, only Matthew and John have left us written memorials, and they, tradition says, were led to write only under the pressure of necessity. *For Matthew, who had at first preached to the Hebrews, when he was about to go to the other peoples, committed his Gospel to writing in his native tongue, and thus compensated for those whom he was obliged to leave for the loss of his presence.* And when Mark and Luke had already published their Gospels, they say that John, who had employed all his time in proclaiming the Gospel orally, finally proceeded to write for the following reason. The three Gospels already mentioned having come into the hands of all and into his own too, they say that he accepted them and bore witness to their truthfulness; but that there was lacking in them an account of the deeds done by Christ at the beginning of his ministry. And this indeed is true... [Gives examples] They say, therefore, that the apostle John, being asked to do it for this reason, gave in his Gospel an account of the period which had been omitted by the earlier evangelists, and of the deeds done by the Savior during that period; that is, of those which were done before the imprisonment of the Baptist... [Gives Examples]. John accordingly, in his Gospel, records the deeds of Christ which were performed before the Baptist was cast into prison, but the other three evangelists mention the events which happened after that time. One who understands this can no longer think that the Gospels are at variance with one another, inasmuch as the Gospel according to John contains the first acts of Christ, while the others give an account of the latter part of his life. And the genealogy of our Saviour according to the flesh John quite naturally omitted, because it had already been given by Matthew and Luke, and began with the doctrine of his divinity, which had, as it were, been reserved for him, as their superior, by the divine Spirit.” (*Church History*, 3.24)

Anonymous Gospels?

1. If anonymous, how were they *all, independently of one another*, ascribed to the same authors?
2. If anonymous, why were two Gospels not ascribed to apostles (Mark and Luke)?
3. If pseudonymous, why not ascribe them to Peter, James or John?

2. Are the Gospels Biography?

The Theory of the ‘Non-Biographical’ Gospels

1. Most NT Intros: the Gospels are not “biographies” (cf. W. G. Kümmel, *Introduction*, 37)
2. Form Criticism: denied the authorship and biographical character of Gospels

Karl Ludwig Schmidt: “[The Gospels] are *not the product of an individual author*, but a folk-book, *not biography*, but *cult-legend*.” (Bauckham, *Gospels for all Christians*, 116).

Norman Perrin: “The nature of a Gospel is *not the ministry of the historical Jesus*, but the reality of Christian experience.” (Perrin, *What is Redaction Criticism?* 75)

3. Problem: for 19 centuries, the Gospels were regarded as “biographies” or “lives” (Gk *bios*) of Jesus. Only in the modern age did this change. Why? (Answer: Rationalism)

The Genre of the Gospels: Ancient Biography (cf. Richard Burridge, *What are the Gospels?* 2006)

1. Burridge: shows that literary Genre of Gospels is ancient Greco-Roman Biography (Gk *bios*)
 - a. Tacitus’ *Agricola*
 - b. Plutarch’s *Cato Minor*
 - c. Suetonius’ *Lives of the Caesars*
 - d. Philo’s *Life of Moses*
2. Earliest Sub-Genre Designation: “Memoirs” of the Apostles

Justin Martyr: For the apostles in their memoirs (Gk *apomnemonemata*) which are called Gospels, declare that Jesus thus commanded them; that he took bread, and having given thanks, said: “Do this in remembrance of me...” (*First Apology* 1.66)

The Historical Purpose of the Gospels

1. The Gospels themselves *explicitly state* that their purpose is to relate historical truth:
2. Luke’s “Historical Prologue” (cf. Herodotus, Josephus, Thucydides)

Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile a narrative of the things which have been accomplished among us, just as they were delivered to us by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word, it seemed good to me also, having followed all things closely for some time past, to write an accurate (Gk *akribos*) account for you, most excellent Theophilus, 4 that you may know the truth/facts (Gk *asphaleian*) concerning the things of which you have been informed (Luke 1:1-4)

3. John’s Insistence that his Gospel is *Reliable Eyewitness Testimony*:

He who *saw it* has borne witness—his testimony is true, and he knows that *he tells the truth*, that you may also believe. For these things took place (Gk *egeneto*) that the Scripture might be fulfilled (John 19:35-36).

[After Jesus’ word to Beloved Disciple] *This is the disciple* who is bearing witness to these things, and *who has written these things*; and we know that his testimony is true (John 21:24).

3. Are the Gospels Inspired?

The Nature and Extent of Inspiration

1. Vatican II on Inspiration and Inerrancy:

Since, therefore, *all that the inspired authors, or sacred writers, affirm should be regarded as affirmed by the Holy Spirit*, we must acknowledge that the books of Scripture firmly, faithfully, and *without error*, teach that truth which God, for the sake of our salvation, wished to see confided to the Sacred Scriptures. (Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, *Dei Verbum* 11 [trans. Flannery]).

2. The Effects of Inspiration on the Gospels: Inerrancy

[The Catholic exegete] should never forget that the apostles were filled with the Holy Spirit when they preached the good news; *that the Gospels were written under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, who preserved their authors from every error*. (Pontifical Biblical Commission, On the Historicity of the Gospels, *Sancta Mater Ecclesia*, 1964 [Boston: Pauline Books, 1964], p. 8-9)

4. Can We Trust the Gospels?

Vatican II on the Historicity of the Gospels

The Church has always and everywhere maintained, and continues to maintain, the apostolic origin of the four Gospels. The apostles preached, as Christ had charged them to do, and then, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, they and others of the apostolic age handed on to us in writing the same message they had preached, the foundation of our faith: the fourfold Gospel, according to Matthew, Mark, Luke and John.

*Holy Mother Church has firmly and with absolute constancy maintained and continues to maintain, that the four Gospels just named, whose historicity (Lat *historicitatem*) she unhesitatingly affirms, faithfully hand on what Jesus, the Son of God, while he lived among men, really did and taught for their eternal salvation, until the day when he was taken up. (cf. Acts 1:1-2). For, after the ascension of the Lord, the apostles handed on to their hearers what he had said and done, but with that fuller understanding which they, instructed by the glorious events of Christ and enlightened by the Spirit of truth, now enjoyed. The sacred authors, in writing the four Gospels, selected certain of the many elements which had been handed on, either orally or already in written form, others they synthesized or explained with an eye to the situation of the churches, the while sustaining the form of preaching, but *always in such a fashion that they have told us the honest truth about Jesus*. Whether they relied on their own memory and recollections or on the testimony of those who “from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the Word,” their purpose in writing was that we might know the “truth” concerning the things of which we have been informed (cf. Lk. 1:2-4). (Vatican II, Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, *Dei Verbum* 18-19)*

Conclusion: A Hermeneutic of Trust

“The main implication of this for my portrayal of Jesus is that *I trust the Gospels...* I wanted to portray *the Jesus of the Gospels as the real, “historical” Jesus in the strict sense of the word*. I am convinced, and I hope the reader will be too, that this figure is much more logical and, historically speaking, much more intelligible than the reconstructions we have been presented with in the last decades. I believe that this Jesus—*the Jesus of the Gospels*—is a historically plausible and convincing figure. (Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth*, xxii, emphasis added).