

# Is the Gospel a Myth?: A Literary Argument for the Historicity and Uniqueness of the Gospels (Part I)

The four canonical Gospels are our main sources for the life of Jesus. These four short documents, more or less from the First Century, constitute most of what we know of the most famous, influential and still controversial man in history – the approved views, some would add. Why these four? Why not some other documents that also talk about Jesus, and claim to be early records? Scholars of the Jesus Seminar have put forward the so-called *Gospel of Thomas*, some claiming it to be as early as the canonical Gospels, or even claiming earlier. John Crossan promotes a section from the “*Gospel of Peter*” as a “very early” account. Is there more information about Jesus out there, maybe more reliable than Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John?

Second, some assert the canonical Gospels were chosen for theological, or even political, reasons. Man is a political animal, and communities chose their “founding myths” based on collective needs or dominant paradigms politically expressed. However, documents are often rejected for non-political reasons, as anyone who has tried to get something published knows. These can even include acts of nature, such as a pet dog that chews on manuscript, etc. But if non-theological and non-political qualities can be found in the Gospels that make them inherently more relevant to the needs of the early church for information about Jesus, then the claim that they were chosen for theological or political reasons becomes unnecessary.

How do we decide if there are any other Gospels? First, we know what a Gospel is. The term is usually applied to the four canonical Gospels, so we must take them as the basis for definition. Also we should note that “Gospel” means “good news.” So any document that is not primarily narrative, or does not include some positive piece of new information, cannot be a Gospel. A. N. Wilson asserts that the Gospels are a “unique literary form” in the ancient Near East. We will see.

It is reasonable to consider whether there are other members of a class first by listing the characteristics of acknowledged members of the class, and then seeing if any other potential members share it. We must avoid drawing conclusions that are too far-reaching, however. It would be circular to use this by itself as an argument that the Gospels constitute the only reliable witness for the life of Jesus. If we conclude that terriers, poodles, and St. Bernards are all dogs,

that would not mean they can all survive in the wild. The same here: proving the Gospels constitute a clear category of First century literature, distinct from such works as Thomas, will not by itself prove that they are viable accounts. But it may answer the question of why other works were excluded from the canon.

Third, a closer and more systematic evaluation of the Gospels is a good way to begin considering the question, “Is the historical evidence for the truth of Christianity strong or weak?” Since the Gospels are our primary sources about the life of Jesus, a description of the characteristics they share in common should help us decide if Christianity is credible or not. If, among common characteristics of “dogs,” you find that all dogs have 1) “poor hearing,” 2) “pea-sized brains” and 3) “a complete inability to run down wild game,” then that will affect not only your definition of dogs, but also whether dogs can survive in the wild. If, on the other hand, you find all dogs 1) “have excellent hearing,” 2) “possess Mensa level IQs,” and 3) “are attack machines, capable of rendering T rex into Kiddles N Bits in minutes”, then that will also affect their viability.

I will give forty-five elements that the Gospels share in common, dividing them into two parts. The first group (1-35) will be characteristics that are not even religious in character. If the canonical Gospels show important identifying characteristics that have little ideological nature, that other documents do not have, that will tend to disprove the idea that those documents were excluded because of some theological or political agenda on the part of the Church. (As opposed to simple good judgement.)

The second group (36-45) are “theological” in nature, at least in an extended sense. (I include miracles, for example.) It might be reasonably argued that the Gospels share the second group of characteristics because of the theological beliefs of the early Christians.

To define a class, it is helpful not only to give common characteristics of that class, but also describe the relationship of that class to members of other classes. (“All mammals have fur, while reptiles and fish have scales, and birds have feathers.”) In describing the Gospels, we need control subjects among non-Gospel literature as well.

I won't try to deal with all the literature of the ancient world in two articles, of course. I'll begin with six that represent both fiction and biography, works that are contemporary with the Gospels and also written in Greek, and books that are much more remote. Naturally, I will examine *Thomas*. We will also consider the *Analects* of Confucius, the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, *Agricola*, a biography by Roman historian Tacitus of the emperor Domitian, *Apollonius of Tyana*, and the

Chinese allegory, *Journey to the West*, as initial “control specimens.” The first article will describe the characteristics that define the Gospels. The second article will run the comparisons, and see what we can learn about the historical or mythological nature of the Gospels.

My approach will be “naïve” in terms of New Testament criticism, for several reasons.

(1) I am not an NT scholar, in the academic sense. I know practically no Greek, and have only read 20 or 30 of the hundreds of books on NT criticism, plus articles. I am a beginner. (2) As a beginner, one of the peculiar things – or not so peculiar – one of the exasperating things I find is the patronizing attitude of some scholars. They blow trumpets and throw out party balloons, then announce some breath-taking “discovery” that everyone’s Pentacostal grandmother (like mine) knew eighty years ago, or could have refuted fifty years ago. This is true of scholars on all sides of the spectrum, though of the Jesus Seminar has blown their trumpets the loudest, to the least effect. (3) While scholars in this field undoubtedly have some valuable insights to add, I think, both for theological and imperial reasons, that the most important truths about the Gospels are assessable to anyone who reads them carefully. Theologically, why would God hide the candle of truth under the (often very narrow) bushel basket of academic scholarship? And in practice, because it seems to me scholars often miss important and obvious truths that people coming from a literary or pietist background catch.

It is my conviction that the Gospels are an intellectual problem unlike, “How is cell division accomplished in Moroccan flatworms?” or “What was the distribution of maize in pre-historic Peru?” that require specialized knowledge. The Gospels are not a problem to be solved on the model of science. Rather they confront us with a question like, “Is Susan the right person for me to marry?” or “Can I trust this ex-cop offering to sell me his mother’s old Buick?” The choice the Gospels challenge us with are open to all sensible human beings, and as likely to be botched by unreasonable persons, not matter how brilliant they may be in an academic sense. The Gospels are first and foremost human documents, though they may also be divine: they allow us to meet people like ourselves, and evaluate their credibility on a human level that may be quite inaccessible to pretension and “scientific expertise,” if such a term can really apply to human nature.

I think a “naïve” approach is therefore useful for getting an overview of the Gospels and other literature. Forget about form or redactive criticism. (Easy for me, since I never paid much attention to it in the first place.) Forget about dependence on oral sources or on “Q.” (Which is French for “What the quell?”) All that I take as irrelevant to the questions I want to answer: (1) Which documents, in their final forms, look enough like what we call a “Gospel” that they belong in the canon alongside these four? (2) How do the Gospels compare to non-Christian literature? (3)

Are “Gospels” produced by natural evolutionary processes (if we can use such a term about human ideas) of mytho-genesis? Was Jesus an ordinary man who “got kicked upstairs” to deity, like so many others? (Confucius and Mao, Ram, Krishna, Mithras perhaps) If comparable works exist elsewhere, perhaps of Jesus without “Christian theology” (points 36-45) tacked on, you might have a case for that. If alleged examples are different enough from the canonical Gospels, and differ even in non-theological ways, then it will be very hard to claim with any confidence that this is what happened with Jesus.

The four Gospels seem to share the following non-theological characteristics:

- (1) The Gospels seem to have been completed from three to seven decades after the events they describe. (This is relevant because the early Christians wanted testimonies to the life of Jesus that were close in time to the source. A first-century origin distinguishes the Gospels from the apocrypha and most other literature in world history, but not from Pliny, Philo, or Josephus. While some scholars think Thomas falls within this time period, others do not. It seems to me the arguments for a mid 2<sup>nd</sup> Century date are more convincing than those for the late 2<sup>nd</sup> Century. The other apocrypha are generally agreed to be from the 2<sup>nd</sup> Century or later.
- (2) The Gospels are primarily narrative in nature.
- (3) The Gospel narrative is mostly understated, (“Just the facts, Ma’am”) in a style that contrasts sharply with the words of Christ. The words of disciples and other figures in the Gospels are also relatively subdued and straightforward in style. “Master, master, we are perishing!” “Are you the one, or should we look for someone else?” The Gospels present everyone but Jesus as straight men. (This contrast distinguishes them from the *Journey to the West*, *Bhagavad Gita*, *Candide*, etc, where the animating genius appears not to be one figure within the text, but the creator of the text itself.)
- (4) The Gospels tell about an allegedly historical person named Jesus.
- (5) Twelve disciples are introduced, along with a number of other ordinary persons, who play consistent roles in the Gospels. The personalities of a few of the teacher’s followers are developed in a consistent and recognizable way. (Peter, Thomas, the Apostle John, John the Baptist, Mary.)
- (6) Other characters come and go, exit stage left, and disappear. No unexpected coincidences are introduced to tidy up the plot or reintroduce popular old characters (as in Homer, Voltaire, Dickens, Dumas, Hugo). In fact the “plot” is rather untidy. Where was Jesus between the ages of 12 and 30? What was Jesus scribbling in the sand? What did he look like? There are gaping holes in the narrative, from a biographical or novelistic perspective. In this they resemble the most trustworthy accounts of the lives of Confucius or Dr. Johnson.

- (7) The leading disciples are mostly fishermen.
- (8) A fair amount of the action takes place around a familiar natural location – on or near the Sea of Galilee.
- (9) Some of it also takes place in and around a familiar urban location – the Jewish temple.
- (10) Otherwise familiar political figures (Herod, Pilate, Caiaphas, Agrippa, John the Baptist) also play cameo roles, consistent with their known personalities.
- (11) The teacher is ethnically distinctive (Jewish), and carries on a dialogue with his own traditions that contains both radical affirmation and radical tension.
- (12) The main character of the Gospels gains a guru-like following of dedicated individual students. (As in the *Upanishads*, *Analects*.) He also teaches the masses, in the style of a Jewish prophet.
- (13) The teacher does not wander far, like Apollonius, Socrates, or Confucius, either geographically or in words. He travels a bit, but moves towards a specific geographical goal at the end of all the Gospels: Jerusalem.
- (14) Jesus praises sometimes, (often the most unlikely person – a poor widow who gives a small offering, the foreigner who says thanks, the woman who wastes valuable perfume on anointing him) but never flatters.
- (15) He calls people to repent and assume responsibility. He never appeals to base motives, like a propagandist. He repeatedly tells his followers, in fact, to “take up your crosses.”
- (16) He accepts authority: the “Father,” but also his parents.
- (17) Yet at the same time, he tends to speak his hardest words to the powerful.
- (18) He takes an interest in simple people. While he confronts the powerful, he tends to speak respectfully (but bracingly) to the weak. (The opposite of the normal human – or canine – tendency, which is to suck up to the powerful, and take it out on the weak.)
- (19) The central figure in the Gospels often sees individuals (woman caught in adultery, blind man on side of road, sick woman in crowd who touched him, Zacharius the Short), where those around him see members of a class (tax collector, beggar, Gentile).
- (20) He acts and speaks as if self-aware.
- (21) He teaches in parables, especially to the crowds. Sometimes he explains his meaning more clearly to his disciples in private.
- (22) Much of his teaching comes in response to questions. (Like the *Analects*. Less structured and deliberately didactic than the *Republic*.)
- (23) He does not attempt to directly influence the political rulers of his society, though his claims have a political dimension. (Crossan was right about that, I think.) He is not a political advisor, as Confucius sought to be, nor does he create a religious community completely separate from the secular world, like Hindu, early Buddhist, or classical Taoist gurus.
- (24) Jesus expresses a variety of emotions in a natural and unapologetic manner: anger, frustration,

delight, joy.

- (25) The *Gospels* are full of realistic details. (Unlike *Gilgamesh*, *Iliad*.) This is true even when miracles are involved. In the Luke 8 account of the resurrection of the little girl, for example, the reaction of the crowd, Jesus' "Do not fear," the Aramaic "Talitha Kum," ("Little girl, arise!") the detail about the food, the girl's age, and his instructions, all display intense realism.
- (26) Crowd reaction (the Luke 8 account is one example of many) are depicted extremely realistically and with variety (anger, joy, bafflement, fear), and are usually given without theological defense of Jesus by the narrator.
- (27) Jesus offers moral teachings. (This distinguishes the Gospels from adventure stories, *Iliad*, *Odyssey*, *Gilgamesh* . . . Parallels: OT prophets, *Analects*, *Dharmapada*.)
- (28) The teachings of Jesus are never platitudinous. G. K. Chesterton: "A man reading the Gospel sayings would not find platitudes. If he had read even in the most respectful spirit the majority of ancient philosophers and of modern moralists, he would appreciate the unique importance of saying that he did not find platitudes. It is more than can be said of Plato. It is much more than can be said of Epictetus or Seneca or Marcus Aurelius or Apollonius of Tyana. And it is immeasurably more than can be said of most of the agnostic moralists ancient and preachers of the ethical societies; with their songs of service and their religion of brotherhood. The morality of most moralists ancient and modern, has been one solid and polished cataract of platitudes flowing for ever and ever. That would certainly not be the impression of the imaginary independent outsider studying the NT . . . He would find a number of strange claims that might sound like the claim to be the brother of the sun and moon; a number of very startling pieces of advice; a number of stunning rebukes; a number of strangely beautiful stories. He would see some very gigantesque figures of speech about the impossibility of threading a needle with a camel or the possibility of throwing a mountain into the sea. He would see a number of very daring simplifications of the difficulties of life; like the advice to shine upon everybody indifferently as does the sunshine or not to worry about the future any more than the birds. He would find on the other hand some passages of almost impenetrable darkness, so far as he is concerned, such as the moral of the parable of the Unjust Servant. Some of these things might strike him as fables and some as truths; but none as truisms." (*Everlasting Man*, p. 190-191)

(I think from this alone, it follows that this stuff was not written by a committee. But better not get ahead of myself.)

- (29) The teacher often uses poetic hyperboli to get his point across, as Chesterton also pointed out, and as Chesterton (and Zhuang Zi) were also fond of using.
- (30) As Chesterton further hinted, Jesus' teachings transcend their environment. They were

shocking and unreasonable then: they are shocking and unreasonable now. They are equally impossible for people of all times and cultures to keep. For example, don't lust. Love your enemies. If someone slaps you on the cheek, turn to him the other. Sell everything you have, and come, follow me. Be perfect, like your Father in Heaven.

(31) But they are also often surprisingly mild. Is it lawful to do good or harm on the Sabbath? Anyone who gives a cup of water in the name of the Lord will not lose his reward. No need to fast while the bridegroom is with you. Drink wine and eat bread in remembrance of me. (The two come together in Jesus' comment about selling bread to purchase swords; Peter points out that the twelve are armed with a grand total of two swords (against the Roman legions and Jewish authorities), and Jesus replies, ironically, "It is enough." This comment reminds me of Confucius' occasional tongue-in-cheek reply to an expression of Dudley Dorightish zeal on the part of a disciple. The difference is, Confucius used irony, but not hyperbole.)

(32) While some of it is puzzling or even off-putting, overall, the quality of teachings given in the four Gospels is unmatched. "No one has ever taught like this man." Look at what he said, and this reaction seems understated, in keeping with the general tone of the narrative portion of the Gospels.

Modern giants of literature and scholarship, surveying a far greater range of human thought than was available to the crowds in First Century Palestine, say that same thing as the early crowds. As the editors of the *National Review*, in incredulous report of a Jesus Seminar claim that the Gospels were in effect created by committee, put it, the words of Jesus are "inimitable." Dickens described the parable of the Prodigal Son as the best story in literature. (Granted, he was romantic.) Chesterton wrote something similar about the parable of the lilies of the field. Tolstoy spent a lifetime trying to live up to the Sermon on the Mount. Chinese philosopher Wang Ce quotes Goethe, the giant of German literature: "Goethe said that there has never been another human in the past, or the present, nor will there be in the future who has reached the moral heights of Jesus Christ." Obviously that implies a special respect for his moral teachings.

Lin Yutang is one of China's greatest modern scholars. He read widely, and wrote dozens of books on Chinese, Indian, and Western literature. He considered Zhuang Zi the greatest writer in Chinese culture. But he wrote, "No one has taught as Jesus Christ." (*Xinyang Zhi Lu*, p. 246; my translation)

The Gospels are part of the background Muzak of the Western World, and it is hard to really see them for the first time. Lin grew up in the Church, left, studied Buddhism, Taoism, Western and

Indian thought, and materialism, before coming back to Jesus, and writing the above words. Perhaps it takes a lifetime to be properly shaken by what they say.

(33) They are also often very hard to get to the bottom of. Attempts to patronize them generally wind up making even smart people (Bertrand Russell, Michael Martin) appear a bit ridiculous.

One aspect of that complexity is what Chesterton calls “degrees of perspective:”

“There is perhaps nothing so perfect in all language or literature as the use of these three degrees in the parable of the lilies of the field . . . (cut Chesterton’s explanation) . . . Merely in a literary sense it would be more of a masterpiece than most of the masterpieces in the libraries; yet it seems to have been uttered almost at random while a man might pull a flower. But merely in a literary sense also, this use of the comparative in several degrees has about it a quality which seems to me to hint of much higher things than . . . the simple teaching of pastoral or communal ethics. There is nothing that really indicates a subtle and in the true sense a superior mind so much as this power of comparing a lower thing with a higher and yet that higher with a higher still; of thinking on three planes at once . . . It is not by any means a faculty that commonly belongs to these simplifiers of the Gospel.” (EM, p 210)

(34) The Gospels are full of confrontations. They are dramatic.

(35) The Jesus of the Gospels consistently treats women without fear, condescension, or male superiority, and with special compassion. Walter Wink: “Through the lens of feminist exegesis, we can see that in every single encounter with women in the four Gospels, Jesus violated the mores of his time . . . his behavior towards women . . . is . . . astonishing, and was without parallel in ‘civilized’ societies since the rise of patriarchy roughly three thousand years before his birth.”



The following characteristics are, unlike those above, specifically related to Christianity:

(36) Jesus grounds his teachings deeply in the Old Testament. While they are universal in effect, they grow from Jewish culture.

(37) The authority of Jesus is one of the most prominent characteristics of the Gospels. He talks as if he has a right to rewrite the laws of the Jewish nation. “You have heard it said . . . But I say to you . . .” He speaks as if he had a right to forgive sins. He accepts worship. In a word, he acts like God. (This is true of all four Gospels, including Mark. It sharply distinguishes them from all the characters in the Torah – Adam, Abraham, Job, Moses, Joseph, Samuel, Saul, David – from all the prophets and anything in Jewish literature I have ever heard of. It also



- distinguishes Jesus from all other positive figures in the New Testament. It also distinguishes them just as sharply from the *Koran*, *Dhammapada*, *Analects*, *Dao Dejing*, *Zhuang Zi*, etc . . . )
- (38)The Jesus of the Gospels acts like he has a mission. He speaks of death as part of that mission. (Chesterton, again: “Most even of the great philosophers give us a vague impression of having very little to do except to walk and talk. The great conversations which give us our glimpses of the great minds of Socrates or Buddha or even Confucius often seem to be parts of a never-ending picnic . . . to have neither beginning nor end. . . . Compared to these wanderers the life of Jesus went as swift and straight as a thunderbolt. It was above all things dramatic; it did above all things consist in doing something that had to be done.” (EM, p. 206-7)
- (39)Jesus heals people neither by praying for them (like Honi the circle drawer, Augustine, the Muslim Jesus), nor by incantations, occult and magic. Rather, he acts like he had the same right to press the “refresh” button on the physical laws as he did with the moral laws passed down in Scripture.
- (40)Except for the withering of the fig tree, all the miracles help rather than harm. (By contrast, some of those of Yogananda, Phadmasambhava, and the Apocryphal Jesus were either frivolous or harmful.)
- (41)The Gospels are eschatological. They see Jesus as coming to bring some dramatic change between Heaven and Earth.
- (42)Jesus sees himself as (in some sense) one with God.
- (43)The “good news” the Gospels bring revolves around the death of Jesus for the sins of the world.
- (44)They climax with his rising from the dead.
- (45)They see Jesus as fulfilling OT prophecy and prophetic archetypes.

As best as I recall, the four Gospels share pretty much all forty five characteristics in common. I haven’t gone over each point in each Gospel with a fine-toothed comb, but I think there might only be one or two exceptions.

The first important point to notice is that this is amazing consistency among any four books –especially considering how the Synoptics (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) diverse from John, and differences in material within those three. However you reconstruct development of the Gospels, the first thing that follows is that as they presently exist, they certainly belong in a single class. (Though they are clearly not the product of a single writer.)

Furthermore, it is already clear that by any measure, the characteristics that define the Gospels are extraordinary.

A third point that follows is, given the presence of these highly idiosyncratic texts, the early Christians had a lot of good reasons to ax such relatively ordinary bits of writing as the Gospel of Thomas. (But more of this in Part II.) This is true even if in a mood of completely arbitrary and self-serving skepticism we choose to focus just on the first characteristics, the characteristics that theologians with an agenda would have no particular skill at inventing, or reason to do so. The hypothesis that the early church nixed Thomas for political reasons, not only is thus completely lacking in evidence, but is completely unnecessary. One does not need to ask if, in a watercolor masterpiece, one finds no childish chalk scrawls.

If we can find any other document within apostolic range that shares with the canonical Gospels the first 35 of these characteristics, but not the last ten, then we might be able to build the case that the Gospels were selected for doctrinal reasons. But as we will see, not only do these characteristics set the Gospels apart from the likes of Thomas, they also set them apart from ALL of world literature.

As is, there are dozens of possible reasons why, if the early Christians merely wanted the best available records about Jesus, they would have selected what they did in fact select, over Thomas or any other alleged Gospel. They might have read another potential inclusion and said, “That doesn’t sound like Jesus” or even, “That doesn’t sound like Peter!” They might have asked, “Why don’t the guys in this ‘Gospel’ ever go fishing?” or “Jesus doesn’t make clay pigeons come to life just to destroy them!” or “What’s this nonsense about the cross talking?” and conclude, in the immortal words of the diminutive prophet, Jimminy Cricket, “There’s something ph-ph-phoney about all of this!”

The fourth point that seems to follow simply from describing the Gospels in this way, has to do with Occam’s razor. Given 3, 4, 6, 12, 15, 17, 18, 19, 25, 28, 29, 30, 31, 32, 33, and 35, by far the simplest explanation of the majority of Gospel material, is that it is faithful reflection of the career and teachings of a single person, Jesus of Nazareth. The hypothesis that the bulk of the material was invented out of thin air by anonymous scribes, or by ambitious apostles, seems to me absurd.

Finally, and related to number four, if the Gospels came together by a natural process and Jesus were the kind of normal religious figure skeptics have been trying to uncover for two hundred years, world literature ought to be littered with works that resemble the final products. It is not.

It will take a further step, and a closer look at the “control manuscripts” I mentioned earlier, to

prove this in detail. But I think it is pretty obvious that world literature is not loaded down with works that significantly resemble the Gospels, on both the natural (points 1-35) and supernatural (36-45) plains.

Part II will compare the Gospels to five texts in particular. Two will be historical, including a foundational religious document (*Analects* of Confucius) and a secular biography (*Agricola*, the biography of a Roman emperor). Three will be mythological (Epic of Gilgamesh), epic (*Iliad*, *Journey to the West*) or (to temporarily beg the question) a pseudo-Gospel. (*Thomas*)