

ADVENT FRIDAYS

Chapter Two - Are the Gospels Reliable?

Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile a narrative of the things that have been accomplished among us, just as those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses
Luke 1:1-4

After demonstrating that Jesus was a historical person, McLaughlin inquires, “Are the four gospels reliable witnesses to the life and work of Jesus Christ?”

Richard Dawkins, one of four leaders known for the New Atheism, probes deeper by asking: Can an intelligent, scientifically-aware person believe in Jesus as presented in the gospels? His question oozes with incredulity. Questions like, “Are the gospels on par with other historical documents like those reporting Julius Caesar crossing the Rubicon in 49 B.C.?” should not unnerve those who follow Jesus Christ.

Luke informs the reader at the outset of his gospel that he investigated “eyewitnesses” of things seen and heard concerning Jesus. According to the gospels, this is no myth; it’s history.

Interestingly, some scholars are satisfied with the veracity of ancient documents reporting events about Julius Caesar but are skeptical about the gospels. That’s intriguing considering the well-established fact that the manuscript evidence for the historical reliability of the gospels far exceeds any other historical records.

No other historical documents have come under more scrutiny than the four gospels. Why? The short answer is this—the stakes are immeasurably high. If Caesar didn’t cross the Rubicon on those dates, no one’s life is the poorer. However, if Jesus is who he said he was, then disregarding him has temporal and eternal consequences.

Eyewitness accounts matter, especially when you have over five hundred eyewitnesses who corroborate the same story (1 Cor. 15: 1-11). Furthermore, Paul is writing within twenty-five years of the actual events. Three of the gospels are within roughly thirty years of Jesus’ life.

One argument against the reliability of the gospels is the alleged memory loss over time by the original authors. This fails to consider the well-attested fact that in Jewish culture, enormous swaths of material were memorized. Not to mention the promise Jesus made to his disciples that the Holy Spirit would bring to their remembrance all he had taught (John 14:26).

In addition, we have no more than ten manuscripts (or copies) for any secular history. With the gospels, we have over five thousand five hundred Greek manuscripts.

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Chapter Two - Are the Gospels Reliable? (Continued)

Consider the following analogy. You and others witness a hole-in-one. Your eyewitness account matches what three other foursomes observed. Someone who wasn't there might dispute it, but their arguments are easily dismissed. Similarly, the gospels are reporting hundreds and hundreds of eyewitness accounts verifying the life and events of Jesus Christ.

Dawkins argues that the gospels are like the telephone game where one child whispers into the ear of the next kid until the last kid shouts out what he heard. Everybody laughs because the original message has been grossly distorted. This commits the fallacy of false analogy. Hundreds and hundreds of people simultaneously witnessed the same things. And since the gospels were written in the lifetime of many eyewitnesses, they could have been easily falsified if the evidence was lacking.

Opening Questions

1. Do the eyewitness accounts of Jesus' life and work matter? What would happen if the gospels failed the historical test?

2. Do we have more manuscript evidence for Jesus' life, death, burial, and resurrection than the events surrounding Julius Caesar crossing the Rubicon?

3. Are the stakes higher for the veracity of the former than the latter? If so, why?
