

Dr. Craig Keener, Matthew, Lecture 1, The Reliability of the Gospels

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This is Dr. Craig Keener on the book of Matthew, session 1, The Reliability of the Gospels.

My name is Craig Keener and I'm married to Médine Moussunga Keener from Congo. I have written a couple commentaries on the Gospel of Matthew, which is why I've been asked to do this teaching series on Matthew.

But I also should let you know that in Matthew 23, it says to call no person rabbi because you have one teacher, even Jesus. And that's the teacher that we're going to be learning about in particular in the Gospel of Matthew. But before we start the Gospel of Matthew itself, we have to introduce the Gospels, which are literally, the meaning of gospel is good news, and that's what the Gospels are about.

And that phrase, good news, comes from Isaiah 52:7, as well as a number of other passages, but it especially is Isaiah 52.7 that's alluded to in the New Testament. How beautiful in the mountains are the feet of the messengers who bring news, who announce peace, who bring good news, who announces salvation, who say to Zion, your God reigns. In this context, it's about the restoration of God's people and the fulfillment of all of God's promises, ultimately including a new heaven and a new earth.

And in the ministry of Jesus, this restoration began to be fulfilled. And we'll also see that as we look at Matthew's gospel. That's a very heavy emphasis because Jesus is the one who brings restoration, the one who will save his people, according to Matthew 1:1. Now, the meaning is mainly in Matthew's narrative, but first, we need to survey some historical questions.

If you ask how important are historical questions, well, we know that they're important for ministers. Since overseers are entrusted with God's work, they need to be blameless and must hold firmly to the trustworthy message as it has been taught so that they can encourage others by sound teaching and refute those who oppose it. And so, in other words, we need to be ready to articulate the faith and be able to defend the faith when people raise challenges against it.

There are a number of these that we're going to look at before we actually start into the gospel of Matthew as an introduction to the gospels and the historical reliability of the gospels. One of the objections that has been raised often in the West, but is sometimes being cited beyond the West, is something called the Jesus Seminar, which voted with marbles on which sayings of Jesus were authentic. Now, actually,

from what I understand, they only voted with marbles when the media was present because it was a way of getting the media's attention.

But in any case, they thought that the majority of Jesus' sayings weren't authentic, and many Western media outlets cited them because they seemed to be newsworthy. And that has been true on a number of TV productions and so on that may have been cited in other parts of the world. Now, in terms of the majority of New Testament scholars, that's not where the majority of New Testament scholars stand.

But if somebody in your congregation were to ask you about the program, what would you respond? You could say, well, you shouldn't have a television. Actually, you would have more time to study if you didn't, maybe. Or just believe whatever you want.

That's a common Western response. Or, well, if the scholars say it, it must be true because they went to school for a long time and I didn't pay attention. Or you can say, I quit.

I'm going to find a different career. Or you could try to come up with some reasonable answers. There have been a number of attempts to offer reasonable answers, and actually mainstream scholarship offers reasonable answers.

But also, those who are particularly right in defending the accuracy of the Gospels. You have Craig Evans, Darrell Bach, Ben Witherington, myself, Craig Blomberg, and others. From what we would call more centrist scholarship, scholars who may not, they're starting from what they can demonstrate historically.

And so, you know, things that are in history, you can't prove everything in history because it happened a long time ago and some of the evidence isn't still around. But there's enough evidence around that mainstream scholars who are working only with historical evidence still come up with a substantial amount that we know about Jesus from the Gospels, quite a substantial amount. Some scholars are skeptics and they come from a skeptical premise because since the Enlightenment, academia in the West has harbored a prejudice against the Bible, largely because it's harbored a prejudice against miracles.

That was how it started out. So, we'll talk about miracles in a little while. But when you meet people who are influenced by these kinds of ideas, they may be people who are trained in this way.

They may be people who are just looking for excuses, sometimes not to believe. And so, they cite some of the popular things on the Internet. Where do we start? How do we answer it? Well, first of all, we look at the issue of genre.

Genre is the kind of writing that something is. Now, that doesn't solve all the issues, but it's a good place to start. It's like when you have a hammer, what can a hammer be used for? Well, you can use it as a weapon.

You can use it as a doorstop. But basically, the way a hammer is designed, and the purpose of its design is evident in its design. It's designed to pound nails, or at least the usual kind of hammer that we talk about.

So, what is the genre of the Gospels? What were they designed to do? Some people say, well, the Gospels are unique. Well, there's a sense in which the Gospels are unique because they talk about a unique person. But while Jesus was unique, we have to ask the broader kind of question.

Well, when you have a work like this about a particular historical person, what was this called? And in ancient times, as well as in modern times, this was called biography. Now, most scholars today, in contrast to maybe 30 years ago, are in agreement with the majority of you through history, which is that the Gospels are biographies. That's been argued by a number of scholars, most fully by Richard Burridge in a dissertation that was published by Cambridge.

Well, when we ask whether they're biographies, through most of history, people assume that the Gospels were lives. In Greek, bio, biographies of Jesus. But in 1915, some scholars noticed that the Gospels were not like modern Western biographies and therefore claimed that they weren't biographies.

However, by now, most scholars have decided that the church was right all along after all and that they were biographies. Sometimes you have to be careful because for like a generation or two, you had students who were being taught that they're not biographies and they're going out thinking this and then the scholars change their minds. But going back to the evidence for it, the Gospels are biographies, but they're ancient biographies, not modern biographies.

And that was the reason for the confusion. Modern biographies are usually in chronological order. That was not necessary in ancient biographies.

In fact, the majority of them were arranged topically. So, when you have events sometimes in a different sequence in Matthew and Luke, it's not a problem. In fact, Matthew in particular, the Gospel that we are going to be looking at in detail, arranges things topically.

Matthew very much likes to arrange things topically so it's easier for preaching. Usually, modern biographies will start with the person's birth or very early. Ancient biographies didn't have to.

Matthew and Luke start with Jesus' birth. But Mark, after the preaching of John the Baptist, basically opens with Jesus' public ministry. Well, many ancient biographies started with the person's adult career.

So again, this is not surprising. The Gospels fit the genre of ancient biographies. A biography was almost the only kind of work focused on a single character.

Biographies fell within a very particular range of length, which is also the range of length we have in the Gospels. And a biography wasn't just meant to praise the person. Sometimes biographies praised a person.

Sometimes they criticized a person. Usually, they did some of each. Obviously, if you're writing about God in the flesh, it's going to be positive.

But biographers weren't required to say only positive things. And you read through Suetonius, you can see that usually there's a mixture in ancient biographies. Biographies were mainly sort of historical writing, contrary to what one of my professors said.

Actually, during my first doctoral course in the Gospels, the professor said that the Gospel of Mark is an ancient biography, ancient biographies were fictitious, and therefore the Gospel of Mark was fictitious. Now, the problem wasn't with the logic of his argument. It was with his information.

He claimed that biographies were fictitious. And I raised this issue with him afterward. I said, well, most ancient biographies actually, were historical kind of writing.

And I went into some detail explaining this, which has also been noted by various classicists and so on. And at the end of my explanation, he said, well, I don't know. I don't know anything about ancient biography.

That's not to tell you don't ever listen to your professors. Since I am a professor, I happen to like professors. But it is to say, don't always believe everything everyone tells you.

You have to go back and check the information. But I'm trying to give you the best information here that I have available. And I've actually read through ancient biographies.

I've read through all of Plutarch's, Suetonius's, and other ancient biographies. So, I'm not acting like that professor was. Genre doesn't settle all the historical questions, but it does shift the burden of proof.

Because if something was an ancient biography, that means that it was about a historical character and it was dealing with historical information. You don't have novels written about somebody in recent history. Novels usually are about entirely fictitious characters.

But when novels are about real characters on occasion, once in a while in ancient history, and when they weren't romances, which also was rare, they were about somebody who lived long ago, not somebody who lived in the recent past. What we have in the Gospels could not be a novel. It only could be an ancient biography.

Novels lacked clear sources. They didn't have historical prologues or prefaces like Luke does. And in terms of teaching moral lessons, which the Gospels do, in antiquity, novelists weren't usually trying to teach moral lessons.

Historians and biographers regularly tried to teach moral, political, and sometimes theological lessons through their works. And that's what we find again in the Gospels. Now you may say, well, the Gospels are fun to read.

And some people have said, well, look, novels are exciting, they're adventuresome. But that's true of ancient biographies as well. They were meant to be fun to read.

The difference between novels and historiography and biography was that historiography and biography were meant to be not just entertaining, but also informative. They were meant to teach based on real information. Well, granted that good biographers were substantially accurate, that is, they were dealing with events.

How accurate were they in detail? Well, here's where genre doesn't solve the issue because it depends on the particular biographer. Particular biographers could have considerable freedom on details, even though they weren't allowed to invent events. So how do we evaluate particular cases? Well, one question is, were they writing about the recent past or the distant past? And the other question is, how closely did they stick to their sources? So, we can look at both of those questions.

Well, what kind of sources did biographers often use? When writing about the distant past, they often admitted that they used legends. Yet they often cited large numbers of varying sources by name when possible, and many critically evaluated their sources. Now, sometimes even when writing about the distant past, they could be very accurate.

We can tell this again by comparing the different sources, the later sources, the earlier sources, and so on. But when writing about the recent past, they didn't give any apologies for, well, we don't have any way to verify this information. When

writing about the recent past, they often consulted eyewitnesses or they consulted those who had consulted eyewitnesses.

They depended on those who had already written about these things before them. So, when they were writing about the recent past, the previous generation or two, normally they're very accurate. And this can be tested, and I've worked through it and tested it in a number of cases.

Now, how were these works composed? Well, normally a writer who wasn't an eyewitness himself would start with one main source. Sometimes even an eyewitness could use another source. So, some people say, well, how could Matthew use Mark if Matthew was an eyewitness? You know, there's a debate as to whether Matthew was what we call Matthew.

But even if Matthew was the eyewitness, he could still use Mark, just like Xenophon a few centuries earlier writing an account of something that he himself experienced. He was one of the leaders in this expedition, but he also uses an earlier source because that person had published before him and everybody expected that you would use that source. They would weave other sources around their main source, and the work would then be read publicly in small circles of friends or sometimes at banquets or in public readings.

And then based on feedback that they would get from the people who were listening, they would, especially about, well, you could have worded this better and so on, they would revise it. Now, in terms of the publication methods, size meant expense. So, publishing long documents required funding.

When you think, for example, of the letter of Romans, Paul's letter to the Romans, 16 chapters, few ancient letters were that long. That was an expensive letter. One scholar, Randy Richards, calculates that in U.S. currency it would have been about \$2,000 just to have the papyrus and normally to have somebody writing that document.

Well, Matthew's gospel is twice as long as that. So, this was a major undertaking. This wasn't something somebody wrote off the top of his head.

This is something that he thought about. He practiced in front of groups of people. And then finally, the final version of this is written down and begins to be circulated.

And it was a major undertaking. Gospels are what are called foundation documents. They're major literary works, not something written off the top of one's head.

Each was a book in ancient terms. We think of the Bible as a book. It's a collection of books.

In antiquity, books could only be so long or, you know, the scroll wouldn't hold them very well or you'd have a very awkward-sized scroll. Matthew is the size of a very large scroll. In terms of the means of publication, again, works would be circulated at banquets and public readings.

Interested hearers might request and pay for their own copies. Somebody who was literate could copy it by hand if they wanted to. Back then, mass production meant a room full of scribes taking dictation.

If somebody would read a document, they'd all be writing it. That was the closest they could get to mass-producing a work. If a work received a good reputation, it generated more readings and more public demand.

For the early believers, the way this would have taken place presumably is in the early church settings. Many public readings in antiquity were at banquets. Well, the banquet setting of the early church was the Lord's Supper as part of their church service.

There was a range of historical reliability in history and biography, as I pointed out to that professor and he acknowledged it afterward. Plutarch and Livy could spice things up a little bit, especially as they were writing about people of the distant past. But Tacitus and Suetonius were historians and biographers who wrote about the more recent past.

They stuck very closely to their facts. Sometimes, and particularly when they were writing about somebody they didn't like, they would give you every bit of dirt that everybody said about these people. But they stuck very closely to their sources.

And then you have Josephus. Josephus was a... These were Roman historians. Josephus was a first-century Jewish historian and he was somewhere in between, say, Plutarch and Livy on the one hand and Suetonius and Tacitus on the other.

In his autobiography, Josephus makes himself look suspiciously good. He summarizes the Judean-Roman wars as if it were almost an accident. And yet, when he's dealing with details, archaeology often confirms him, confirms him down to the details of the structures in the harbor of Caesarea Maritima.

It confirms him down to particular structures in Jerusalem. It confirms him down to the color of the paint on Herod's bedroom wall. I do not know how Josephus had access to Herod's bedroom, but in any case, he had good sources for all this.

And in his details, he could be quite accurate. In terms of historical standards, what was expected? Ancients demanded that historians deal with facts. They were,

especially the elite historians, which the New Testament writers are not, but the elite historians were very much interested in rhetoric.

They were very much interested in shaping things in a way that would communicate well to their audience. In terms of the lower class, they were very interested in shaping things in a way that fit good storytelling techniques. But the events had to be real.

The question was just how you were going to present them. And you can do that with any true story today. I've done it and others have done it as well in writing their own biographies or biographies of others.

To make it interesting just choose the most interesting information. You recount it in certain ways that highlight suspense. There is a storytelling technique.

You may break off at a certain point and pick up at another point. Just the way you arrange the material draws in the reader. Well, rhetoric was allowed, but too much invited criticism.

And the same would be true of storytelling. Biographies allowed a bit more of that than history per se, but they had to be based on accurate information. Again, the difference between novels and history.

Lukian was an orator in the second century and a satirist. He wrote a lot of satires. But he said that good biographers must avoid flattery that falsifies events and only bad historians make up data.

Pliny the Younger, was a statesman, a politician in the early second century. And he said that what's distinctive about history is its concern for accurate facts. So it's not just historians bragging about their own trade.

It's other people who recognized it as well. Now, Polybius was a historian writing before the time of the New Testament. And he says that history must assign praise and blame according to one's actions.

In other words, if you're going to say something nice about somebody or bad about somebody, it better be true. Again, Pliny the Younger emphasizes that you can use rhetoric provided that your basis is facts. Also, Aristotle, was a philosopher writing a few centuries before the New Testament.

The difference between poetry and history is not their form. You could write history in verse, but their content. History must deal with what happened, not just with what might happen.

In terms of biographies of recent characters, they stayed close to their sources. Their objective was not to invent things. It's quite different from novels.

And I can give you here a concrete example, which is from Suetonius. He's a Roman historian writing in the early second century. He's writing about the Roman emperor, Otho.

I compared him with accounts by the Roman historian Tacitus and the Greek biographer Plutarch, who also wrote about Otho. Now, you may not have heard of Otho. You may have heard of Augustus Caesar.

Augustus lived a lot longer and had a better propaganda machine. But Otho was a very short-lived emperor. So, this was a short biography.

It was easy for me to go and compare. And just like people will compare Matthew, Mark, and Luke, I compared these different writers on what they said about Otho. And what I found was kind of what you find in the Gospels.

You find a lot of overlap. Each is distinctive. But you find considerable overlap, even though this writer wanted to emphasize this point, this writer wanted to emphasize that point.

I found roughly 50 points of correspondence between Suetonius and each of the other two authors, and a number of other points of correspondence as well. But keep in mind, that Suetonius's biography of Otho is only 28 paragraphs long. It's only about 2,000 words.

It's about one-fifth the length of Mark's Gospel. So, if Mark was using the same kind of historical method as Suetonius was using as a biographer, we could expect that if we had the same kinds of sources, we could find maybe 250 points of correspondence just in Mark's very short Gospel. Mark is one-half the length of Matthew.

So, what I'm saying about all this is when we go back and actually test ancient biography with the other sources available from its time, all these biographies were written about the same length of time as Mark was writing after the time of Jesus. When you compare these, it shows you that ancient biographers were interested in historical information. They weren't making things up off the top of their head.

And we should be able to trust the Gospels as giving us considerable historical information, even if we were not starting from a Christian starting point. We were just starting as a historian, examining the data, looking at the data, and saying, well, what can we know about Jesus? And I believe that should lead us to believe in Jesus. But in any case, granted that biographers were substantially accurate, how accurate

were they in all their details? Well, that's where scholars began to explore what we call historical-critical methodologies.

And I will not spend a lot of time on these because they're often covered elsewhere. But you'll find them if you have access to commentaries, you'll run across these. These are issues like source criticism, resource history, form history, and redaction history.

Source history. Historians in the 19th century began examining the Gospels for their sources. Now, some people say, well, the Bible is God's word.

It would never be a source. It would never use sources. But if you actually look at biblical texts all over the place, it says that they use sources.

I mean, you have the book of the Wars of the Lord. It's written in the book of Jasher. And First and Second Chronicles refers the reader to a work of Kings, which is not our First and Second Kings, but refers to that about 10 times.

And First and Second Kings refers to a book of Chronicles, not our book of Chronicles, but more than 30 times. Well, do the Gospels ever use sources? Luke says that many sources were known to him. Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us.

Many don't mean just one person. It doesn't mean just two people. Many means that by the time Luke is writing, many people have already written about these things.

Well, that's good news for us. It means that the gospel writers weren't simply making things up. They were doing what good biographers should do.

They were depending on sources that were available to them. Now, they couldn't copy things the way we do today. They didn't have copy machines.

They didn't have, certainly, the Internet. They didn't have scanners. They didn't have all these things that we have today.

They didn't have publishing houses. But almost everyone acknowledges that Matthew, Mark, and Luke are closely related. You can see this when you see how much about 90 percent of Mark's gospel appears in some form in Matthew as well.

Ninety percent of his accounts appear in Matthew as well. And that's significant because remember what John says. John says the world itself couldn't contain all the books that would be written about Jesus.

Now, that may be hyperbole, a rhetorical overstatement for grabbing your attention. But the point is, that lots of things could be told about Jesus. And yet, Matthew tells so many of the things that Mark told.

Why? Probably Mark is one of the sources that he uses. Now, not all scholars agree on this. A number of scholars think that Matthew wrote first.

And there are reasons for that. But the majority of scholars think today that Mark is the first of our gospels that have survived, that he got the information from Peter, is what the early tradition says. And that Jesus is obviously the source.

Then you have oral tradition and maybe notes. Mark has it from one of the eyewitnesses. There's also material that some scholars call Q. It's material that's in Matthew and Luke that's not gotten from Mark.

It overlaps. And then other sources that we no longer have available. Matthew has all of these kinds of sources that he can draw on.

And Luke has all these kinds of sources that he can draw on. Now, what's important to remember about this is not all the details, but just that most scholars think that Matthew and Luke both used Mark and also some other shared material which scholars call Q. Scholars debate about exactly what Q looked like. And we won't get into all that.

But that's the vast majority of scholars, both liberal and conservative and everywhere in between. But again, it's not all scholars. Now, I believe that Matthew used Mark for a number of reasons.

One is that Matthew exhibits consistent patterns in the way that he abbreviates Mark. Luke certainly cleans up Mark's grammar for a more sophisticated audience. It's very unlikely that Mark would have changed the grammar for a different kind of audience.

Also, when Matthew quotes the Old Testament, he quotes it by making his own translation or using some other translation than the standard Greek translation, except where he's using material from Mark. Mark always quotes the standard Greek translation. Matthew uses the standard Greek translation wherever he overlaps with Mark.

So again, that's a reason to think that Matthew is using Mark. Now, what I think, this is again not what everybody thinks, but Papias, writing in the early second century, he says that Matthew first, wrote the Logia, which often can mean oracles or sayings of the Lord. And Mark wrote down what he heard from Peter.

I think that Matthew probably wrote down many of Jesus' sayings. It could be some of what we call Q, this material shared by Matthew and Luke. But then Matthew was also able to incorporate some of the narrative material that depended on Peter's authority once Mark's gospel was published on Peter's authority.

Now, Luke and Matthew, even though they overlap, there are certain places where I think they would have written differently if Matthew had Luke's finished gospel or Luke had Matthew's finished gospel. So again, that's another long story. But just to say, we don't need to speculate on all these things, as people sometimes do, what would Matthew look like before he edited Mark and so on.

A lot of these things we don't know, and scholars like to explore things we don't know, and there's nothing wrong with that. But for practical purposes, we know enough to move ahead with our study of the gospels. Some other 19th, and early 20th century scholars, after dealing with source criticism, focused on form criticism.

There are various distinguishable literary forms in the gospels. We have, obviously, parables and a number of different kinds of Jesus' sayings. Woe to you, Capernaum, is more like an oracle.

But the form critics tried to determine something about how this material was used in the preaching of the early church and tried to determine what material we could trace back most reliably to Jesus in its current form. Sometimes they used arguments that were actually not very good, but sometimes they used arguments that historians could use. For example, if we have material or the kind of material that's attested not just in one source, it's attested, say, in the shared material between Matthew and Luke, it's also attested in Mark.

For example, Jesus told parables. Jesus spoke about the kingdom. This is something that historians would say, well, this is very well attested.

Again, the criterion of embarrassment is a fairly good criterion, I think. And something that the early church wouldn't actually want to say, wouldn't want to make up. For example, the church would not have made up Jesus being crucified on the charge of being, claiming to be king of the Jews, because that meant that he was executed for the charge of high treason.

Anybody in the Roman Empire who followed him could be considered treasonous. That's not something you would want to make up. You also wouldn't want to make up for Jesus being baptized by John the Baptist, who was preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

Now, Jesus doesn't do it because he needs to be forgiven, but Jesus does identify with his people in that baptism. And again, you probably wouldn't want to make up

Jesus saying, Father, not my will, but yours be done. Or Jesus saying, no one knows the day nor the hour, not even the sun.

Those are things that the early church probably wouldn't have wanted to make up. There's also the criterion of Palestinian environment or Judean and Galilean environment. That is, there are many characteristics in the Gospels that fit Jesus' environment, but don't fit the environment of a later church.

Well, historians wouldn't say those things were made up. Now, from a standpoint of faith, we accept those things. You know, we trust the Gospel writers.

Sometimes you need to simply trust. Scholars sometimes work with what's called a hermeneutic of suspicion. And when I was working on that for one of my books in historical Jesus scholarship, you know, I was just using the scholarly method to say, OK, here's the critical minimum that historians can say.

It's not to say that's all we actually believe, because everybody acknowledges that the critical minimum of what you know from historical methods is not all that happened. And that if you have a reliable source, you can depend on the reliable source. But I got into this method so much that my wife would say something to me and I would say to her, can you give me evidence for that assertion? Now, I can assure you that, well, I don't know, maybe your culture is different, but I certainly got in trouble for that.

And what I had to come to grips with is if you have a reliable source, you don't always need external evidence. That source itself is evidence. And we need to take that very seriously, especially when we find that source to be reliable in other cases.

There are weaknesses of these traditional form critical approaches. And that was especially when they were used to say, well, you know, if it doesn't fit this criterion, then it's not accurate. For example, they tried to use the criterion of dissimilarity.

If something was often said by other Jewish teachers, they said, well, then if it's attributed to Jesus, we don't know that Jesus actually said it. It might have been borrowed from other people. Or if the later church agreed with it, then they said, well, then Jesus maybe didn't say it because the later church may have made it up for him.

Now, if my students were to go out and agree with some things that I said, should we therefore say that I never said those things because my students agreed with them? That's the danger of that kind of approach. Or if I happen to agree with some things that some other scholars said, would that mean that I didn't really say them, that they were just borrowed from other scholars? So that criterion that was used against

the reliability of the Gospels has actually fallen by the wayside by most scholars. It's not generally used.

And many of the criteria that people used, Rudolf Bultmann used many criteria in the mid-19th century to talk about how traditions were expanded or contracted. But E.P. Sanders in 1969 showed that those were flawed. For example, just take Bultmann who agreed that Matthew used Mark.

But Matthew, he said, you know, the later sources expand the earlier sources. Matthew often condenses Mark's stories. So, it doesn't work even on Bultmann's own criteria.

So, most scholars have moved against that. The popular kinds of things you see on the Internet about motifs about Jesus being borrowed from mystery religions and so on, are not even in the scholarly conversation. Those are, that's just people's imagination.

Most of the parallels people make up for are parallels that they took from Jesus and read into mystery religions and have studied the mystery religions. These things are later, centuries later, when the mystery religions were borrowing from Christianity because it was popular. And some of them are not even from antiquity at all.

In fact, many of them are just made up of modern people on the Internet. In any case, scholars moved on to what was called, in the 1970s, moved on to what was called redaction history, editing history. So, you have these different sources.

What do you do with them? I mean, how does that help you with preaching, for example? If Matthew has something in Mark, if he changes the wording, what does that tell us? How is Matthew preaching from Mark? How is Luke preaching from Mark? And if Matthew consistently makes a particular change, maybe we can learn from it. For example, Matthew speaks of the kingdom of heaven. Mark speaks of the kingdom of God.

Matthew uses the kingdom of God only four or five times. Everywhere else he changes the expression, the kingdom of heaven. Why is that? Does it teach us something theological? Or maybe it's just Matthew is putting it in a way that's more familiar to his audience.

Mark was writing for an audience probably in Rome or somewhere like that. Mark's audience includes many Gentiles who would have no idea what was meant by the kingdom of heaven. So, Mark kind of translates it for his audience.

Matthew may translate it back for a Jewish audience. These are things we can notice the differences. We don't always know why.

But the Gospels clearly and undeniably have differences. Don't let anybody tell you that they don't have differences. In Mark, Jesus curses a fig tree.

He goes in and cleanses the temple. Jesus' disciples find the fig tree withered. And then Jesus gives a lesson of faith.

In Matthew, Jesus cursed a fig tree. The fig tree withered at once. Jesus gives a lesson of faith and then cleanses the temple.

Now, does that mean Jesus cursed two fig trees, and one withered at once and then the other had withered by the time they came back? And Jesus gives the same lesson of faith both times? Sometimes the disciples were slow to get things, but not normally that slow. My thinking here is that Matthew is just doing what he often does. He arranges things in a logical sequence.

Now, Mark tells us something, too. I mean, Jesus curses a fig tree as an acted parable and then goes in and cleanses the temple, which has leaves but no fruit, in a sense. They're not bearing the fruit of repentance.

They're not bearing the fruit of serving God. But in Matthew's case, he likes to arrange things in a very organized way. And again, what we saw earlier, that's normal in ancient biographies.

Ancient biographies did that all the time. It's not a problem. That's just part of the genre.

We could compare parallel passages with the kingdom of God and the kingdom of heaven and so on. Editorial history or redaction history just asks why. Why was a particular change made? The problem was that some of the early critics doing redaction criticism just carried this too far.

They tried to explain everything on the basis of Mark and Q, and they assumed anything that they couldn't have from those sources must have been invented, as if those were the only sources that existed back then, just because those are the only sources we think we have today. Also, they said anything that fits the writer's style must have been just made up by the writer. Writers put things in their own style all the time.

That was standard practice in ancient literature. Luke changes Mark's style when he uses Mark. So, these things were not very accurate on the part of the redaction critics.

Also, by the way, this will get more interesting as we go on. Right now, this is the part of the course that is most tedious, perhaps, if it's not something that you're particularly interested in. The rest of the course will get more exciting.

But I just wanted to deal with these things because these are standard things that are traditionally dealt with, at least in Western classes and so forth. But I'm not going to spend a lot of time on them. Differences don't mean unreliability.

Often, you have differences among ancient historians, and yet modern historians use them for historical information. They don't assume that to be a problem. Luther didn't assume that to be a problem when he was reading the Gospels.

Another problem with reduction criticism is that not all changes are theologically motivated. Luke cleans up Mark's grammar, as we mentioned. Matthew makes Mark's language more precise when he describes Herod Antipas not as a king, but as a tetrarch, or especially describes him that way.

The Kingdom of Heaven is a way of relating it to Matthew's audience. Also, Matthew sometimes abbreviates Mark for space constraints. In Mark, the paralyzed man is let down to the roof, and Jesus forgives his sins and heals him.

In Matthew, Jesus forgives his sins and heals him, but he doesn't mention the roof. Does that mean that theologically Matthew is against the destruction of private property? I think probably Matthew just leaves it out because of space, and he's condensing it and just getting to the main theological point of the narrative. Paraphrase was a standard rhetorical exercise in antiquity.

When you retold accounts, you were supposed to be able to tell them in your own words. So, skeptics and misinformed defenders sometimes make the same mistake, assuming that differences in wording or sequence mean that the substance is inaccurate. That does not fit what we know of the genre of ancient biography or historiography.

But the biggest problem with redaction criticism was this. What a writer includes is just as important as what a writer adapts. So, if I'm telling a story that my wife told me, it's not important just what I change in her story.

It's also important what I keep from her story. I mean, I'm telling her story for a reason. So today, the emphasis has moved beyond just looking at what a writer changes, as if all the readers of Matthew's gospel or the hearers of Matthew's gospel because normally one person would read it and the congregation would hear it.

It's not just important what the hearers would hear changed from Mark as if they have Mark in front of them. But it's important how the whole gospel of Matthew fits

together, how the whole gospel of Mark fits together, and so on. So, tracing the themes through a gospel, and that's the main approach we're going to use.

We're not going to focus mainly on these other kinds of details. We're going to mainly focus on what Matthew has to say to us, and what Matthew has to teach us. Now, in terms of the reliability of the gospels, we're moving to some more relevant points.

How reliable are the gospels? Can you defend their authenticity? Returning to the historical question, here are some points that scholars have come to that have stood the test of time. Genre, the gospels are biographies and, hence have historical intention. The gospels use written sources composed soon after the events that they describe.

The gospels also have sound oral tradition stemming from eyewitnesses. We can see this in particular looking at Luke chapter 1, verses 1 through 4. Because of all the gospels, Luke is the one who actually gives us his methodology, who lays it out for us at the beginning. In verse 1, we find out that he uses written sources.

He has access to at least the written sources. Verse 2, he has access to oral sources from eyewitnesses. He used those.

In verse 3, Luke confirmed this with his own investigations. In verse 4, Luke couldn't get away with making things up because the material was already widely known in the early church. Now, you don't have to worry if you didn't get all that the first time through because that's my outline of what I'm about to cover in somewhat more detail.

The dating of Luke is much in question. The majority of scholars date Luke between 62 and 90. Now, conservative scholars tend to date Luke, well, actually conservative scholars across this range too.

But some conservative scholars date Luke to the 60s. Some date him in the 70s. Some even date him in the 80s.

There are some other scholars that date Luke even later, a minority of scholars, not normally conservative scholars. But in terms of the before 62, scholars usually don't date Luke before 62 because the book of Acts actually ends around the year 62. But in any case, Acts is the second volume of Luke and Acts together.

But by the time Luke writes, I'm just going to take a median date of around 75, which also happens to be about the range that I think is probably correct. But you could go either way. It could be in the 60s.

Some have argued for that as well. It could be later as well. But somewhere in this range, I'm taking a median range of about 75.

By the time that Luke writes, many people have already written about Jesus. We saw that earlier. So within about four and a half decades of the events.

Now, if somebody were to come along and say things that we knew about from four and a half decades ago really couldn't have happened, things that we knew about from our parents. Are the events four and a half decades before us shrouded in amnesia? Some of us, I hate to tell you my age, but some of us were around four and a half decades ago. And those of us who weren't, we know people who were.

So, this is within the living memory of the eyewitnesses. This is something that's within history that can be verified. Luke also speaks of the availability of oral sources in verse two.

He says, just as these sources were handed down to us by those who from the first were eyewitnesses and servants of the word. And in the technical context about oral tradition, peridotomy, the passing down language, has to do with the kind of careful teaching that would be passed down by teachers to students, say in philosophic schools or so on, where they were expected to carry on the teacher's teaching. Now, I have here a picture of Anna Gulick, my neighbor who is now, I believe, 96 years old.

And Anna, even though she's from the United States, even though the United States is not known for having very good memory because we do everything on the computer now, but Anna, is 96 years old. She was born before all that. She was born before television.

She was born before, I think, before radio, certainly before people used radio very much. She was born in an era in the United States when people would sit on their front porch and tell stories. And they would tell family stories.

And she remembers stories from her family that go back to the 1700s. And I've been able to go back and verify some of this information with external sources. So oral tradition in cultures that value oral tradition can be passed on accurately for hundreds of years.

And that has been true even in some cultures that don't value it today but did value it in the past. Now, how accurate it is depends on the culture and depends on the people transmitting it. But how accurate was oral transmission? Well, here's an outline of what I'm going to cover on this subject.

We need to look at memorization in antiquity. We need to look at notes and sayings collections and evidence for Aramaic rhythm in the Gospels and the prominence of

eyewitnesses in the church. I'm mainly going to focus on memorization in antiquity because that's the part where usually my students don't already know about it, don't already have information about it.

It's not usually included in other textbooks and so on. But the exclusively oral period, when information was being passed on just orally before it was written down, can't be any longer than the period between Jesus' public ministry and the writing of Mark. That's the longest it can possibly be.

And on average, scholars usually date that about 40 years. It could be much less than that. We don't know.

But on average, scholars usually date that about 40 years. That doesn't mean that oral tradition wasn't still continuing. Papias in the early second century says it was still continuing in his day.

And he actually liked the oral tradition better than he liked the written Gospels. But be that as it may, the exclusively oral period before things began to be written down can't be more than one generation. In terms of how accurate memories could be, memorization storytellers could tell stories for hours.

I'm going to do these in more detail too. Orators, one of the five basic tasks of oratory was to be able to memorize your speech and be able to repeat it from memory. Sometimes these speeches were a couple of hours in length.

Elementary education emphasizes memorization. Disciples of teachers, that was their primary responsibility. They were supposed to be able to pass on what their teacher told them.

Often these things would be written down within a generation or two generations of this oral tradition, sometimes even earlier. And again, in the case of the Gospels, we don't know what the earliest was. But we know that it can't be any later than Mark, that it was written down.

In terms of storytelling, this wasn't just among educated people who could remember these stories. Many illiterate bards, people who couldn't read or write, could recite the entire Iliad and Odyssey. These are two fairly long books.

I mean, in ancient terms, the Iliad is 24 books long. And these ancient bards who were despised by people as uneducated, despised by the elite as uneducated, could repeat these from memory. And they could sometimes change a little bit in performance, but they'd always go back to the same basic story.

That they had by heart. Now, in terms of carefully trained memories, I'm going to give you an extreme example. This is not meant to be average, but just to show you how important mnemonics or the memorization of things was in antiquity.

Seneca the Elder, said, you know, when I was young, my memory was much better than it is now. When I was young, I could repeat back 2,000 names in exactly the sequence in which I just heard them. I could recite up to 200 verses given to me in reverse.

He said, well, now that I'm old, my memory isn't so good, but I will do my best. And then he proceeds in his book, *The Controversiae*, to recount long sections of over 100 speeches that he heard from his classmates in oratory school a generation earlier. So, decades later, he's repeating back in his old age, these practice speeches that he heard from his colleagues in his youth.

Now, my memory is not that good. I remember in my homiletics class what I preached. I don't remember what anybody else preached.

But Seneca the Elder could do that. He was exceptional, but there are others. We read about a person who listened to an auction all day, and at the end of the day, he could repeat back every item that was sold, the price for which it was sold, and the person to whom it was sold with no notes, just from memory.

Or another person who went to a poetry reading. The person in the front was reading the poem, and the person in the back at the end of the reading jumped up and said, that's plagiarism. I wrote that poem.

You stole my poem. And the person in front was stammering because he didn't know what to do. How could he prove that he wrote the poem? And then the person in the back said, nah, just joking.

I just wanted to show you how good my memory was. I just memorized it while you were reading it. So, he had proved, he said, I can prove that it's mine because he recited it.

But he recited it because he memorized it while he heard it being read. He was just showing off. That's an emphasis on memory that far exceeds emphasis on memory, at least in the West today.

In some cultures, we still have a heavy emphasis on memory. In some places where people can't even understand Arabic and they can recite the entire Koran from memory. That's an emphasis on memory that's missing in the West.

But in many parts of the world, people do emphasize memory more. It's a valuable gift. In terms of speeches, again, one of the five basic tasks of orators was to be able to memorize the speech.

Even speeches that were often several hours in length. And students were trained to be able to do that. Now, in terms of ancient disciples, there were two main forms of advanced education in the ancient world.

One was rhetoric, that was oratory, professional public speaking. The other was philosophy. That was among Gentiles.

Among Jewish people, of course, advanced education focused particularly on the Torah, and on scripture. Ancient disciples, memory, and note-taking. Memory was most effective in the first one to two generations.

Within living memory of the eyewitnesses, those things would be passed on carefully by eyewitnesses. And those who consulted them and could ask them questions. It also was passed on particularly carefully in school settings.

Students rehearsed and passed on their teacher's message. Well, both those factors are relevant to the Gospels. The churches were not a school setting.

This has been an issue of some debate, but the churches were not a school setting. But most of its prominent leaders, and basically everybody agrees on this, most of its prominent leaders were not only eyewitnesses, but they were disciples of a teacher. Jesus was clearly a teacher.

His disciples were clearly disciples. Disciples were supposed to learn their teacher's teachings and be able to pass them on. Again, that doesn't require them to pass them on verbatim.

Paraphrase was common practice. Although, as we'll see, there are a lot of features of Jesus' teaching in the Gospels that use the kind of wording that would have been used in Galilee, not the kind of wording that would have been used later. The most prominent feature of ancient education was memorization.

It's very prominent, and very widespread at the elementary level. At the basic level, they would memorize the sayings of famous teachers. So, again, this was part of the wider culture.

And people who didn't have that education would still be part of a culture where memorization was important. At a more advanced level, at higher education, which would come starting in the mid-teens, Jesus' disciples probably were mostly probably

in their mid-teens. Higher education would include memorizing for orators, memorizing many speeches and passages useful for speeches.

But also, in philosophic schools, you would memorize the teachings of the founder of the school or memorize your teacher's teachings. Sayings attributed to the founders of Greek schools were transmitted by members of each school from one generation to the next. The founders' teachings often became canonical for their communities.

And often, then, the disciples would go out and publish their teachers' teachings. This we see in a number of different philosophic schools. Lukian, writing in the early 2nd century, talking about philosophers, talks about a philosophic student rehearsing the previous day's lectures in his mind.

That was a special emphasis among the Pythagoreans. The Pythagoreans, according to a tradition that they passed on, were not allowed to get out of bed in the morning until they could repeat back everything their teacher had taught them the day before. Now imagine, if your test over what I'm giving you now would be tomorrow morning before you can get out of bed, you have to repeat back everything I taught you.

That would give you a great skill of memorization. Well, of course, I'm not testing you. The point is that people really expected disciples of teachers to be able to repeat their teachers' teachings.

Not everybody went as far as the Pythagoreans, but it was important. And it wasn't just sayings. It was also about deeds.

Teachers would act in certain ways. Disciples would say, well, this must be all right behavior because my teacher did it. So sometimes you had rabbis who would say, well, I know that such a behavior can't be against the Torah, can't be against the law, because Rabbi so-and-so used to do this.

In fact, there's one story told in the Talmud where a rabbi was getting ready to spend some time alone with his wife and found a disciple under his bed. He said, what are you doing under my bed? The disciple replied it is said that we must learn everything from the behavior of our teacher. Needless to say, the disciple got in trouble.

But the point of the story is that disciples believed that they had to really learn from the example of their teachers. And it wasn't just one person's memory. Like I say something to one person, they say it to another person.

It goes around to a thousand people, and when you come back, chances are somebody in that chain is going to have messed it up. This is not a chain transmission. This is what's called net transmission.

That is, it's not just dependent on one person passing it on, but there was a community of disciples. They'd all heard this person's teaching. If somebody published something or somebody said something that the teacher said that actually contradicted the spirit of the teacher's teachings, they would be immediately refuted by a lot of other people.

In the same way, if you're teaching to a classroom or you're teaching to a congregation, there'll be many people there who'll hear you. Some people may get it the wrong way, but hopefully, most of the people there will get a sense of what you said. And so, this is communal memory, which helps it further.

Now in terms of note-taking, we don't know for sure that a disciple took notes while Jesus was teaching. But it's certainly possible. Disciples often publish their teacher's teachings.

That was expected. That had been going on for well over half a millennium by the time that Jesus began teaching. That was true in both advanced disciplines.

It was true in philosophy and in rhetoric. I'll just give you an example from rhetoric. Quintilian was a professor of oratory, a professor of rhetoric.

Quintilian's students, who were boys, took such careful notes on his lectures that then they went out and published a book in the name of his teaching, to which Quintilian replied, actually this was accurate. In fact, it was even too accurate because they caught some of my grammatical mistakes in their notes and I wish they would have let me correct them first. So, if you take notes on what I'm saying now, you are responsible for what you say.

Make sure you put your name on it too. But anyway, they took very accurate notes. Now Jewish disciples tended to not take as many notes because of a heavier emphasis on orality.

But they took some notes, sometimes, as mnemonic devices to help them recall larger blocks of material. Among Jesus' disciples, we don't know about the educational level of the others, although fishermen tended to be better off than peasants, than the majority of people. But certainly, a tax collector would have had the skills to take such notes.

And later Christian tradition, again Papias suggests that in fact, Matthew, a tax collector, did take notes on Jesus' teaching and, at some point published notes on Jesus' teaching. We don't know for sure if he took them at the time or maybe he took them after the resurrection. But in any case, these things were probably being

written down by somebody when their memories were still fresh because that was very common, especially afterward.

But again, in Jewish tradition where they didn't take notes, it wasn't because they said we don't care about what the teacher said. It's because they emphasized memory skills. A generation, two generations later, it might be different.

But by then, in the case of the Gospels, we know things are being written down. Jesus' Jewish disciples, Jewish disciples from what we know from our sources about them, very much emphasized memorization. Josephus tells us that memorizing the scriptures was very important.

So, memorization was a big issue. One rabbi praised a student as being like a good water tank that never loses a single drop of water, remembering everything the teacher taught him. Now, some people say, well, this evidence from Jewish sources is later than the Gospels.

The evidence from Josephus isn't much later. The evidence from the rabbis is much later. But it's consistent with all the other evidence that we have from ancient sources.

Again, this is only one slice of our evidence. But all of our evidence put together points in the same direction. So, if somebody comes along and says, well, you can't accept this evidence, you can't accept that evidence, and explains away all the evidence and says, actually, the accurate information is the exact opposite of what all of our evidence says, I would not give that argument very much credibility.

The evidence is that we should expect that the Gospels are chock full of information about Jesus that was accurately preserved, even on purely historical grounds. What should we expect from Jesus' disciples? Why should we expect Jesus' disciples to prove less reliable than other disciples of teachers, when virtually all scholars agree that he was a teacher with disciples? When the common material shared by Matthew and Luke probably was already circulating, while some of the eyewitnesses were in leadership in the Jerusalem church, probably only a single lifespan separated Jesus from the last New Testament document. What does that suggest to us? It suggests that this is not a Christian bias that makes us believe this.

I was an atheist before I became a Christian. I was converted to Christianity from a completely non-Christian background. And I'm a Christian now.

I start from Christian premises now. But if somebody doesn't start from Christian premises, they're simply looking at historical evidence the way that they would look at other documents. My belief is that if they're doing it objectively, they will come to

the conclusion that we know a whole lot about Jesus, even from a purely historical standpoint.

Now, once you acknowledge Jesus as Lord, then you have even more reason to believe because you know that he commissioned the disciples. You know that these people were full of the Spirit. You know that these are trustworthy witnesses.

But even for a person who is not a Christian, we have a lot of evidence here that should suggest to them that what we know about Jesus is believable. And if that's true, that's a good reason to become a Christian.

This is Dr. Craig Keener on the book of Matthew, session 1, The Reliability of the Gospels.