

Dr. Craig Keener, Matthew, Session 1

Reliability of the Gospels

Resources from NotebookLM

1) Abstract, 2) Audio podcast, 3) Study Guide, 4) Briefing Document, and 5) FAQs

1. Abstract of Keener, Matthew, Session 1, Reliability of the Gospels, Biblicalearning.org, BeL

This lecture by Dr. Craig Keener examines the historical reliability of the Gospels, specifically addressing challenges to their authenticity. He argues that the Gospels are ancient biographies, using established historical methods and sources, including eyewitness accounts and written documents. Keener explores various historical-critical methodologies, such as source, form, and redaction criticism, ultimately asserting that the Gospels offer substantial historical information about Jesus. He emphasizes the importance of genre, oral tradition, and memorization techniques prevalent in antiquity to support the reliability of the Gospels' content. Finally, he contends that even from a purely historical perspective, substantial evidence supports the Gospels' trustworthiness.

2. 13 - minute Audio Podcast Created on the basis of Dr. Keener, Matthews, Session 1 – Double click icon to play in Windows media player or go to the Biblicalearning.org [BeL] Site and click the audio podcast link there (New Testament → Gospels – Acts → Matthew).



**Keener_Matthew_S
ession01.mp3**

3. Briefing Document

Okay, here's a detailed briefing document summarizing the key themes and ideas from Dr. Craig Keener's lecture on the reliability of the Gospels, focusing on Matthew:

Briefing Document: Dr. Craig Keener on the Reliability of the Gospels (Matthew, Lecture 1)

I. Introduction: The Gospel as Good News and the Need for Historical Understanding

- **Gospel Meaning:** The term "gospel" signifies "good news," drawing from Isaiah 52:7, which speaks of messengers bringing news of peace and salvation and God's reign. Dr. Keener notes, "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." This good news is tied to the restoration of God's people and the fulfillment of His promises, which began with the ministry of Jesus.
- **Importance of Historical Questions:** Keener stresses the need for ministers to be equipped to defend the faith by understanding the historical context of the Gospels. He references the qualifications of overseers being "blameless" and holding "firmly to the trustworthy message" to be able to "refute those who oppose it."
- **Addressing Skepticism:** The lecture addresses skepticism surrounding the Gospels, specifically mentioning the Jesus Seminar, whose conclusions that most of Jesus's sayings are not authentic is contrasted with the mainstream view of New Testament scholars. Keener argues for a reasonable approach, pointing out the need to avoid uncritical acceptance of either skeptical or simplistic answers.
- **Mainstream Scholarship:** Keener highlights that mainstream scholars, even those working from a purely historical perspective, arrive at a substantial understanding of Jesus from the Gospels. Skepticism from some scholars stems from a "prejudice against miracles" rooted in the Enlightenment.

II. Genre: The Gospels as Ancient Biographies

- **The Importance of Genre:** Understanding the genre of the Gospels is crucial to interpreting them correctly. Keener uses the analogy of a hammer, noting its purpose informs its function. The purpose of the gospels is found in its genre.

- **Gospels as Biographies:** While unique due to the unique subject matter, the Gospels fit the genre of ancient biographies. This contrasts with a period in recent scholarship (early 20th century) when scholars wrongly argued they were not biographies due to being unlike *modern* Western biographies. Keener notes, "by now, most scholars have decided that the church was right all along after all and that they were biographies."
- **Characteristics of Ancient Biography:**
- **Topical Arrangement:** Ancient biographies were often arranged topically rather than strictly chronologically, explaining the different sequencing in the Gospels. "Matthew very much likes to arrange things topically so it's easier for preaching."
- **Focus on Adult Life:** Ancient biographies did not always begin with a birth narrative; some commenced with the subject's adult career.
- **Mixture of Praise and Criticism:** While generally positive when writing about God in the flesh, biographies could also include critiques.
- **Historical Intent:** Biographies were a type of historical writing, designed to inform as well as entertain.
- **Distinction from Novels:** The Gospels are not novels. Novels were about fictitious characters, lacked clear sources, did not include historical prologues like the Gospels, and were not intended to teach moral lessons like the Gospels were. Keener says, "What we have in the Gospels could not be a novel. It only could be an ancient biography."

III. Accuracy and Sources in Ancient Biography

- **Historical Basis:** Biographies were expected to be based on real events, though biographers had freedom on minor details. They were *not* allowed to invent events. The genre means the burden of proof rests on those who claim they're *not* dealing with historical facts.
- **Sources for Biographers:Distant Past:** Biographers writing about the distant past often used legends, but would cite sources when possible, and often critically evaluated them.

- **Recent Past:** Those writing about the recent past relied on eyewitnesses, people who consulted eyewitnesses, and previous writings. These were expected to be very accurate. Keener notes, “When writing about the recent past, they often consulted eyewitnesses or they consulted those who had consulted eyewitnesses...Normally they’re very accurate.”
- **Composition Methods:** Writers often began with a main source, weaving other sources around it. They would then revise based on public readings and feedback.
- **Publication Methods:** Size meant expense. The Gospels were major literary works, foundation documents. They were circulated through public readings and copies were created by hand by literate people. Mass production meant rooms full of scribes taking dictation.
- **Varying Reliability:** While some writers like Plutarch and Livy might embellish (especially the distant past), others like Tacitus and Suetonius (writing about the recent past) were very fact-oriented. Josephus, while having some biases, is often confirmed by archaeology on specific details, showing his access to good sources.
- **Historical Standards:** Historians were expected to deal with facts and present their information in an engaging way, using rhetorical and storytelling techniques.
- **Testimonies from Antiquity:**
 - **Lukian:** Good biographers must avoid falsifying events.
 - **Pliny the Younger:** History is concerned with accurate facts.
 - **Polybius:** History should assign praise and blame based on actions.
 - **Aristotle:** History deals with what *did* happen, not what *might* happen, unlike poetry.

IV. Historical-Critical Methodologies

- **Introduction:** Keener briefly introduces source criticism, form criticism, and redaction criticism as tools used by scholars to understand the composition of the Gospels. He emphasizes that while these tools can be useful, they also have weaknesses.
- **Source Criticism:** The Gospels used sources (both written and oral). Luke acknowledges this. He cites Luke 1:1-4, showing the Luke utilized written sources, oral sources from eyewitnesses and his own investigations.

- Matthew, Mark, and Luke are closely related. Mark's Gospel is largely included in Matthew (about 90%).
- The majority of scholars believe Mark was the first Gospel. Matthew and Luke drew from Mark as well as other shared material (sometimes called "Q").
- Keener believes Papias's claim that Matthew first wrote down the "Logia," the sayings of Jesus. He also believes that Matthew was able to incorporate narrative material from Peter's authority once Mark's gospel was published.
- **Form Criticism:** Form critics studied the literary forms in the Gospels (parables, sayings etc.) and how they were used in the early church.
- They attempted to identify material that reliably goes back to Jesus (e.g. material attested in multiple sources).
- **Criteria used: Embarrassment:** The early church would not have made up something embarrassing (e.g., Jesus's crucifixion).
- **Palestinian Environment:** Many characteristics of the Gospels fit Jesus' environment, not later church environments.
- **Multiple Attestation:** Material attested in multiple sources.
- **Weaknesses of Form Criticism:** The "criterion of dissimilarity" (if something was similar to Jewish teaching or later church teaching then it could not be attributed to Jesus) was flawed and has largely fallen by the wayside.
- Bultmann's claims about how tradition is expanded and contracted was also shown to be flawed by E.P. Sanders.
- **Redaction Criticism:** This approach examines how Gospel writers edited their sources.
- It asks "why" particular changes were made.
- Example: Matthew's use of "kingdom of heaven" instead of Mark's "kingdom of God."
- Matthew likes to arrange things in a logical sequence.
- Weaknesses: Early critics carried the approach too far and assumed that anything they could not find in Mark or Q must have been made up, ignoring the use of other sources and the writers' styles.

- **Importance of What is Kept:** Keener emphasizes that what the writers *kept* is as important as what they changed. The emphasis today is on tracing themes through the whole Gospel, rather than focusing solely on redaction changes.

V. Reliability of the Gospels

- **Key Points Supporting Reliability:Genre:** The Gospels are ancient biographies and therefore have historical intent.
- **Sources:** The Gospels used written sources soon after the events and reliable oral traditions from eyewitnesses.
- **Luke's Methodology:** Luke 1:1-4 shows his reliance on written sources, eyewitness accounts, his own investigations and the wide knowledge of the material in the early church.
- **Dating of Luke:** Most scholars date Luke between 62 and 90 CE, with a median date of about 75 CE, only about four and half decades after Jesus' life.
- **Oral Tradition:**Oral sources were widely available (Luke 1:2).
- Oral tradition can be preserved accurately, especially when it is carefully transmitted in a culture that values memory. Dr. Keener highlights his 96 year old neighbor Anna Gulick, who can remember family stories from the 1700s which have been verified, as an example.
- The exclusively oral period would have lasted no longer than one generation (the period between Jesus' ministry and the writing of Mark).
- **Memorization in Antiquity:**Memorization was heavily emphasized in education, from elementary level to oratory and philosophical schools.
- Storytellers could memorize lengthy texts, such as the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*.
- Examples of amazing feats of memory (Seneca the Elder recalling long speeches from decades earlier, people memorizing auction lists, etc.) demonstrates the high value placed on memory in ancient culture.
- **Disciples as Teachers:**Disciples were expected to be able to pass on their teacher's teachings, not necessarily verbatim, but by paraphrase. This was not just on sayings, but on deeds and actions, too.
- There was communal memory where teachers' messages were heard by multiple people, allowing for greater accuracy.

- **Note-Taking:** While oral transmission was valued more, there is a possibility that the disciples took notes.
- Tax collectors such as Matthew would have had the skill to do so.
- **Conclusion:** The evidence points to the Gospels being filled with accurate information about Jesus, even when viewed from a purely historical perspective.

VI. Final Thoughts

- Keener emphasizes the historical basis of the Gospels and argues that the evidence is compelling for both believers and non-believers.
- He concludes that if one approaches the Gospels objectively as a historian would any other historical text, they should be able to come to a reliable understanding of Jesus.

Key Takeaways:

- The Gospels are best understood as ancient biographies with historical intent.
- They relied on written and oral sources from eyewitnesses and those who consulted them, close to the events they describe.
- Ancient cultures valued memory and the accurate transmission of teachings, meaning the oral tradition was very reliable.
- While historical-critical methods can help analyze the Gospels, they do not negate their reliability, provided they are used with appropriate critical awareness.
- Even without a Christian bias, the historical evidence for the Gospels is substantial.

This briefing document provides a structured overview of the key concepts in Dr. Keener's lecture, designed for easy understanding and reference.

4. Matthew Study Guide: Session 1, Reliability of the Gospels

Gospel of Matthew Study Guide: Reliability of the Gospels

Short Answer Quiz

1. What does the word "gospel" mean and where does it come from? The word "gospel" means good news and it is derived from Isaiah 52:7, which speaks of messengers bringing news of peace, salvation, and God's reign. This concept of good news is a central theme in the Gospels.
2. What was the "Jesus Seminar" and what were its conclusions regarding the authenticity of Jesus' sayings? The Jesus Seminar was a group that voted on the authenticity of Jesus' sayings using marbles, often for media attention. They concluded that the majority of Jesus' sayings were not authentic, a position not held by most New Testament scholars.
3. What is the primary genre of the Gospels, and how does this affect their interpretation? The primary genre of the Gospels is ancient biography, which means they are intended to be about a real historical person and contain historical information. This means the Gospels should be viewed as historical works, not fiction.
4. What is the difference between modern biographies and ancient biographies? Modern biographies typically follow a chronological order and usually begin with the person's birth. In contrast, ancient biographies were often arranged topically and could start with the adult career of the person.
5. According to Keener, what did biographers do when writing about the recent past vs. the distant past? When writing about the recent past, biographers consulted eyewitnesses or those who had consulted eyewitnesses. When writing about the distant past, biographers often admitted they used legends and were less concerned with strict factual accuracy.
6. How did ancient writers typically compose their works, according to Keener? Writers often began with a main source and wove other sources around it. The work was often read publicly and revised based on feedback, and the final version was then written and circulated after significant development.

7. What is "source criticism" and how does it apply to the Gospels? Source criticism is a method used by scholars to examine the sources that gospel writers used to compose their works. Scholars have determined that the gospel writers depended on multiple sources, not just one person's testimony or recollection of events.
8. What does Keener mean by the "criterion of embarrassment"? Give an example. The criterion of embarrassment is the idea that the early church wouldn't have made up or included details that were difficult or potentially damaging to their cause. One example is Jesus being crucified on the charge of claiming to be the King of the Jews, which could have led to persecution of the early church.
9. What does "redaction history" attempt to uncover when examining the Gospels? Redaction history focuses on analyzing how each gospel writer edits and adapts the material that they use, seeking to understand the writer's theological or rhetorical emphasis through their alterations to a prior source material.
10. How did oral tradition contribute to the reliability of the Gospels? Oral traditions in ancient times were carefully preserved and passed down, especially by disciples. Memorization was a key component in the process, with skilled individuals capable of accurately reciting long passages or the teachings of their masters.

Answer Key

1. The word "gospel" means good news and it is derived from Isaiah 52:7, which speaks of messengers bringing news of peace, salvation, and God's reign. This concept of good news is a central theme in the Gospels.
2. The Jesus Seminar was a group that voted on the authenticity of Jesus' sayings using marbles, often for media attention. They concluded that the majority of Jesus' sayings were not authentic, a position not held by most New Testament scholars.
3. The primary genre of the Gospels is ancient biography, which means they are intended to be about a real historical person and contain historical information. This means the Gospels should be viewed as historical works, not fiction.
4. Modern biographies typically follow a chronological order and usually begin with the person's birth. In contrast, ancient biographies were often arranged topically and could start with the adult career of the person.

5. When writing about the recent past, biographers consulted eyewitnesses or those who had consulted eyewitnesses. When writing about the distant past, biographers often admitted they used legends and were less concerned with strict factual accuracy.
6. Writers often began with a main source and wove other sources around it. The work was often read publicly and revised based on feedback, and the final version was then written and circulated after significant development.
7. Source criticism is a method used by scholars to examine the sources that gospel writers used to compose their works. Scholars have determined that the gospel writers depended on multiple sources, not just one person's testimony or recollection of events.
8. The criterion of embarrassment is the idea that the early church wouldn't have made up or included details that were difficult or potentially damaging to their cause. One example is Jesus being crucified on the charge of claiming to be the King of the Jews, which could have led to persecution of the early church.
9. Redaction history focuses on analyzing how each gospel writer edits and adapts the material that they use, seeking to understand the writer's theological or rhetorical emphasis through their alterations to a prior source material.
10. Oral traditions in ancient times were carefully preserved and passed down, especially by disciples. Memorization was a key component in the process, with skilled individuals capable of accurately reciting long passages or the teachings of their masters.

Essay Questions

1. Discuss the significance of the Gospels being categorized as ancient biographies. How does this genre affect our understanding of their historical reliability and intended purpose?
2. Explain the process of oral tradition in the ancient world, and discuss how it contributed to both the formation and preservation of the Gospel narratives.
3. Compare and contrast the various methodological approaches used to study the Gospels (source criticism, form criticism, and redaction criticism). How has scholarship changed over time, and what are the limitations of each method?

4. Analyze the challenges that a modern reader may face when interpreting the Gospels. How can a deep understanding of genre, historical context, and oral tradition help to overcome these obstacles?
5. Keener argues that the Gospels are historically reliable, even from a non-Christian perspective. Summarize the reasons he provides, and offer a nuanced discussion of the challenges and complexities that are involved when trying to prove the authenticity of a historical document.

Glossary of Key Terms

- **Gospel:** The "good news," referring to the message of salvation through Jesus Christ, also the literary genre of the books of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John.
- **Ancient Biography:** A type of historical writing in antiquity focused on the life of a single individual. Unlike modern biographies, they were not always chronological and often focused on themes and morals.
- **Jesus Seminar:** A group of scholars who voted on the authenticity of Jesus' sayings, concluding that most of them were not authentic.
- **Source Criticism:** A method of biblical analysis that attempts to identify and analyze the sources used by the authors of the Gospels.
- **Form Criticism:** A method of biblical analysis that attempts to classify units of text by literary genre and reconstruct their pre-literary history.
- **Redaction Criticism:** A method of biblical analysis that focuses on how the Gospel writers edited and adapted the material they inherited, in an attempt to discern their theological and rhetorical perspectives.
- **Oral Tradition:** The transmission of stories and teachings by word of mouth, a common practice in ancient cultures.
- **Criterion of Embarrassment:** A principle used in historical analysis suggesting that certain elements in the Gospels are likely authentic because the early church would not have included them if they were made up.
- **Net Transmission:** The process where a community transmits and preserves a teaching or story with many people hearing it, rather than one person passing it to another person.
- **Logia:** A term used in early Christian writings to refer to collections of Jesus' sayings.
- **Q:** A hypothetical collection of Jesus' sayings that scholars believe was used by Matthew and Luke but not by Mark.
- **Peridotomy:** A technical term for the passing down of tradition and teachings, often from teacher to student.

5. FAQs on Keener, Matthew, Session 1, Reliability of the Gospels, Biblicalelearning.org (BeL)

FAQ: The Reliability of the Gospels

- 1. What does the term "gospel" mean, and what is its significance in relation to the New Testament?** The word "gospel" literally translates to "good news". This term, rooted in passages like Isaiah 52:7, refers to the announcement of peace, salvation, and the reign of God. In the context of the New Testament, the Gospels are accounts of Jesus' life, ministry, death, and resurrection, and are the foundation documents of the Christian faith. They highlight how God's promise of restoration begins to be fulfilled through Jesus.
- 2. What is the significance of the "Jesus Seminar," and how does their perspective differ from the majority of New Testament scholars?** The Jesus Seminar was a group of scholars who, using a voting system, attempted to determine the authenticity of Jesus' sayings. They concluded that most of the sayings attributed to Jesus were not authentic. However, their perspective is not aligned with mainstream New Testament scholarship. The majority of scholars, including both liberal and conservative voices, find substantial historical evidence for the authenticity of the Gospels, regardless of their personal beliefs.
- 3. How does the genre of the Gospels as ancient biographies impact their reliability?** The Gospels are best understood as ancient biographies, which were historical accounts of a person's life, not novels or modern biographies. Unlike modern biographies, ancient biographies often arranged events topically rather than chronologically and could contain moral and theological lessons. They were also meant to be informative and entertaining. This genre distinction is vital because it indicates that the Gospel writers were dealing with historical information and not creating fictitious narratives. Recognizing this genre shifts the burden of proof onto those who would claim the Gospels are fabricated.
- 4. How did ancient biographers ensure accuracy, and what sources did they use?** Ancient biographers writing about the recent past often consulted eyewitnesses or those who had consulted eyewitnesses, as well as prior written accounts. They also critically evaluated their sources. While they had some flexibility in details, they could not invent events. Writing about the recent past meant they were held to a higher standard of accuracy. They often cited their sources by name.

5. **What were the primary methods of publishing and circulating documents in antiquity, and how does this affect our understanding of the Gospels?**

Documents in antiquity were circulated through public readings, often at banquets or in smaller circles of friends. Interested listeners could request and pay for their own handwritten copies, and mass production involved scribes taking dictation. The Gospels, being lengthy works, required funding and careful preparation. Their circulation was not a casual affair but a major undertaking, and their spread meant that the information they contained was widely available.

6. **What are the roles of source criticism, form criticism, and redaction criticism, and what are their limitations when analyzing the Gospels?**

- **Source Criticism** focuses on identifying the written sources that the Gospel writers used, such as Mark and Q (a hypothetical collection of sayings).
 - **Form Criticism** analyzes the various literary forms in the Gospels (parables, sayings, etc.) to understand their usage in the early church, and evaluate their accuracy.
 - **Redaction Criticism** studies how each Gospel writer edited their sources for theological and other purposes.
1. While these methods are valuable, some scholars have misused them by making unwarranted claims. For example, if material fits a writer's style, they assumed the material was invented rather than adapted and used flawed criteria to try to evaluate accuracy. They also sometimes assumed that Mark and Q were the only available sources at the time.
 2. **How was oral tradition transmitted in the ancient world, and how does this impact the reliability of the Gospels?** Oral tradition in antiquity was highly developed, with an emphasis on memorization. Disciples of teachers, storytellers, and orators were trained to memorize extensive amounts of material. Information was not passed through a single chain but through communal memory where many witnesses could correct deviations from the main points. This robust oral tradition, when combined with written accounts, supports the reliability of the Gospels and how they were preserved within the church. The period of primarily oral tradition before writing was likely limited to about 40 years between Jesus' ministry and the first written Gospel.

- 3. How does the evidence, both historical and Christian, support the authenticity and reliability of the Gospels?** Historical evidence indicates the Gospels are ancient biographies with historical intent, written soon after the events they described, utilizing written and oral traditions from eyewitnesses. Ancient biographers sought to convey accurate information. The Gospels reflect the culture of Jesus' time and are supported by the strong oral tradition and the practice of note-taking by disciples. Even for those who may not come from a Christian perspective, the evidence should lead one to conclude that the Gospels are a reliable source for historical information about Jesus. For Christians, these historical reasons are compounded by their faith that these texts have divine authority and purpose.