

Dr. Craig Keener, Matthew, Session 1, Reliability of the Gospels Podcast Audio Overview

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All right, so we're diving into the Gospels today. And we're going to be talking about their historical reliability. Sounds good.

And I think this is something that a lot of people are curious about, whether they're prepping for a Bible study or just kind of fascinated by the historical Jesus. Yeah. It's a question that's been debated for centuries.

Right. So how can we be sure that what we're reading in Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John is actually what happened? Yeah. You know what I mean? I think one of the most important starting points is just recognizing the historical context.

Okay. You know, we tend to read the Gospels through a very modern lens. Right.

Expecting them to be like news reports or courtroom transcripts. Yeah, we want the facts. Exactly.

Like just the facts. And it's easy to forget that they were written in a very different time and culture. Totally, yeah.

One of the key things to remember is that the Gospels belong to the genre of ancient biography. Okay, so what does that actually mean? What does that tell us about how they were written and how we should even approach reading them? Well, you can think of ancient biographies kind of like written portraits. They're aimed at teaching a lesson about the person's life.

Not necessarily giving us a minute-by-minute account of everything they did. Accuracy in the events was important, but they weren't obsessed with like a strict chronology the way that we might be today. Yeah, that makes sense.

For example, Plutarch, a very famous ancient biographer from Greece, might rearrange the order of events in order to emphasize a particular virtue or a flaw in the person that he's writing about. So it's less about casting the Gospels out on a chronological error, but more about understanding how they were trying to convey truth in their genre. Exactly.

And this actually helps us make sense of some of the seeming discrepancies that we see between the Gospels. Okay. So for example, the way that Matthew describes the cleansing of the temple is placed differently in Mark's account.

It's not that one of them is wrong and one of them is right. It's just a different authorial choice, each aiming to highlight a different aspect of Jesus's ministry. So they each have their own emphasis and their own way of telling the story.

Exactly. That's really helpful. So if ancient biographies weren't just about reciting facts, what else were they trying to do? Well, they also had a very strong didactic purpose.

They weren't just meant to be entertaining. They were meant to teach a moral or political or theological lesson through the events that they recounted. So it's like history, but with a point.

It's not just like a straight-up exactly. They're using the events to make a point. Okay.

So give me an example from the Gospels. How does this play out? Well, for example, when the Gospels recount Jesus's interactions with the Pharisees, they're not just giving us a historical snapshot. They're also illustrating a point about hypocrisy and true righteousness.

So they're trying to teach us something through these interactions. Exactly. Okay.

That's really interesting. So they're almost like history textbooks, but with a moral compass. Yes.

Exactly. And I guess that's a really key insight for anyone reading the Gospels today. Right.

It means we can trust them to convey historical truth, but they also challenge us, absolutely. ... to live differently, to embody the values that Jesus lived out. That's right.

Wow. That's powerful. Yeah.

Now let's talk a little bit about the sources behind the Gospels. Okay. How do historians trace those? What's that process like? Well, historians use a method called source criticism.

Okay. And it's kind of like being a detective. Okay.

Looking for clues within the texts themselves. I like that. And so you analyze things like language patterns, recurring phrases, and even the use of Old Testament quotes to see if different authors might have drawn from earlier sources.

So it's like you can see the fingerprints of other texts within the Gospels themselves. That's right. That's so cool.

Yeah. So using this method, what have scholars discovered? Well, in fact, most scholars believe that both Matthew and Luke used Mark's Gospel as one of their sources. Really? Yeah.

So they were drawing from Mark? Exactly. Why would they do that? Well, it gets into some really interesting detective work. Right.

For example, if you look at the story of Jesus Calming the Storm, you'll find that Matthew and Luke include details that are unique to Mark's account. Like what? Like the disciples' question, teacher, don't you care if we drown? Oh. And these shared details suggest that Matthew and Luke had access to Mark's version of the story.

So they're like little clues that point back to a common source. Exactly. Wow.

That's really interesting. So we're starting to see how these pieces fit together. Right.

But there's still so much to explore, right? There is. Like how did those early Christians ensure that the stories about Jesus weren't getting distorted like in a game of telephone? Yeah. And that's a great question.

And we'll dig into that right after the break. Sounds good. All right.

We're back. And we're talking about the historical reliability of the Gospels. Yes.

And before the break, we were kind of starting to touch on this question of how those early Christians made sure that the stories about Jesus weren't getting distorted like a game of telephone. Right. How did they preserve that accuracy when it was passed down orally? Well, it's important to remember that ancient cultures placed a very high value on memorization.

Like, think about the disciples. They lived with Jesus. They heard his teachings firsthand.

They witnessed his miracles. Yeah. So they would have committed these experiences to memory.

Wow. And sharing them with others. Okay.

And ensuring that they were passed down accurately. I mean, that's a lot of pressure, right? Yeah. To remember everything perfectly.

Right. But couldn't there still be errors or embellishments creeping in over time? Well, I think it's important to remember that the early church wasn't just like a random collection of individuals. They were a community of faith bound together by their shared beliefs and experiences.

Yeah. Okay. And that means that there was a built-in system of checks and balances.

Okay. Multiple people knew the stories, and they would have constantly checked and reinforced each other's understanding. Right.

To make sure that what was being passed down was accurate. So it wasn't just like one person whispering to another person. Right.

It was more like a whole network of people. Yeah. Keeping those memories alive and accurate.

Exactly. Okay. So there was a communal element to this.

Yes. That helped preserve the accuracy of the stories. Absolutely.

That makes a lot of sense. But what about those claims that we hear sometimes that Jesus's teachings were just borrowed from other religions or myths? Right. Well, it's important to acknowledge those claims.

Yeah. But they don't hold up under scrutiny. Okay.

Scholars have thoroughly debunked most of those alleged parallels. Okay. Showing that they're either based on misinterpretations or chronological impossibilities.

The timing doesn't even work out. Exactly. Wow.

So those claims are kind of like myth busted. Yeah. You could say that.

Okay. That's really helpful. So we've talked about genre.

We've talked about sources. We've talked about oral tradition. Right.

But there's one piece of the puzzle that we haven't touched on yet, and that's the role of eyewitnesses. Yeah. Absolutely.

How did that factor into this whole question of historical reliability? Well, you know, remember these stories weren't written in some far-distant time and place. Right. The gospels were composed within the lifetime of people.

Wow. Who had personally known Jesus, witnessed his actions, and heard his teachings. So it's like we have a direct link to the source.

Exactly. That's incredible. And that's where we'll pick up after the break.

That's good. This is making me think, you know, if these eyewitnesses were so crucial, how do they actually go about preserving these stories? Was it just a matter of everyone trying to remember every word perfectly? That's a great question. Or, you know, while memorization was definitely important, they weren't just relying on their memories alone.

Remember, they were part of a community. Yeah. And communities have ways of preserving their most important stories.

Right. Like in my family. Exactly.

We have certain stories that we tell over and over again. Right. So they had some methods for keeping things accurate even before they were written down.

Yeah. In the gospels as we know them. Absolutely.

Think of it like this. If something really important happened in your family, you might write it down in a journal. Sure.

Or a family history book. Right. It's a way to make sure that those memories aren't lost.

Yeah. Exactly. And the early Christians did something very similar.

Okay. They used notes. They collected sayings of Jesus.

Okay. They even wrote down early accounts of his life and ministry. So these weren't the full-blown gospels.

Right. That we have today. Exactly.

But they were like building blocks. Yeah. Building blocks.

Yeah. That helped to preserve those precious memories and teachings. That's right.

So it wasn't just a free-for-all of storytelling. No. There was a real effort to document and to preserve.

Absolutely. And what's really fascinating is that scholars have actually found evidence of these efforts-yes. Within the gospels themselves.

They have. Do you need an example? Well, for example, Luke-okay. In the very first verses of his gospel-Okay.

He talks about how he carefully investigated everything. He relied on eyewitness accounts-Right. And earlier writings to construct his narrative.

So he's like a historian doing his research. Exactly. That's pretty impressive.

Yeah. And it shows us how seriously they took the task of getting the story right. Yeah.

They weren't just making things up or relying on hearsay. They wanted to make sure they had it right. Exactly.

Okay. So we're starting to see how these different pieces fit together. Right.

We've got the genre, the sources, the eyewitness testimony, the oral tradition. But I have to admit, sometimes I feel a bit overwhelmed- yeah. By all the different scholarly approaches to the gospels.

Right. You've got source criticism, form criticism, redaction criticism. Yeah.

It's a lot to take in. It is a lot. And it can feel like a jungle of academic jargon sometimes.

It really can. But I think the important thing to remember is that all these different approaches are ultimately trying to get at the same thing. Okay.

And what's that? Understanding the gospels better. Okay. Appreciating their complexity and getting closer to the historical truth that they convey.

So it's not about choosing one approach over another. Right. But about using all of them as tools to unlock the secrets of these texts.

Exactly. Each approach offers a different lens through which to view the gospels. Okay.

And when we combine those lenses, we get a richer, more nuanced understanding of what they're trying to tell us. I like that analogy. Yeah.

Okay. So how do all these pieces then fit together when it comes to this big question of historical reliability? Mm-hmm. What would you say to someone who's still skeptical about

whether we can trust the gospels to give us an accurate picture of Jesus? Well, you know, I think it's important to acknowledge that skepticism is healthy.

Yeah. You know, we shouldn't just blindly accept anything we read. Right.

Especially when it comes to something as important as the gospels. Right. However, when we look at the evidence from a historical perspective, we see multiple lines converging to support their reliability.

So it's not just faith versus reason, but faith informed by reason. Exactly. We have the genre of ancient biography, which, while different from modern biography, was still concerned with historical accuracy.

We have the meticulous use of sources, both written and oral. We have the eyewitness testimony of those who knew Jesus personally. And we have the rigorous analysis of scholars who have dedicated their lives to studying these texts.

So when we take all of that together, it starts to paint a pretty compelling picture. It does. Of the gospels' reliability.

Yeah. But even if we accept that they are historically reliable, there's still the question of interpretation, right? Right. How do we know we're understanding these texts correctly? Right.

Especially given the vast cultural and historical distance between then and now. Well, that's where careful study comes in. Okay.

And a willingness to learn. Right. You know, we need to approach the gospels with humility.

Okay. Recognizing that we don't have all the answers. Right.

But we also shouldn't be afraid to ask questions. Yeah. To wrestle with the texts and to engage with different perspectives.

So it's like we're on a journey of discovery. It is. And the more we explore, the more we uncover.

And one of the most exciting discoveries I think that we can make is the realization that the gospels aren't just ancient documents. Right. They're living words that still speak to us today.

Absolutely. You know, we've been talking a lot about the historical and academic side of things. But I think it's important to remember that the gospels are ultimately about encountering a person.

Yes. Jesus. Absolutely.

Beyond all the debates about genre and sources. Right. The gospels invite us into a relationship.

Mm-hmm. A transformative encounter with the one who claimed to be the Son of God. That's right.

And that encounter, I think, changes everything. It certainly does. It challenges us to see the world differently.

Right. To live differently and to love differently. Okay.

So as we kind of wrap up this part of our deep dive, I'm curious, what's one thing you would say to someone who's just starting to explore the gospels maybe for the first time? Mm-hmm. What advice would you give them? I would say, don't be afraid to dive in. Okay.

Read the gospels with an open mind and an open heart. Yeah. Ask questions.

Wrestle with the text. And allow yourself to be challenged by what you encounter. I love that.

Yeah. Because you might be surprised by what you discover. You might.

Yeah. I love that advice. Dive in.

You know, it's easy to get intimidated by all the, like, historical and theological depth of the gospels. But at the end of the day, they're stories. Right.

They're stories about a person who lived and taught and changed the world. And that's something that I think we can all connect with. Absolutely.

And as we've been exploring, you know, in this deep dive, those stories are rooted in history. Yeah. Carefully preserved.

Right. And passed down through generations. And I think that historical grounding gives them a weight and a power that's hard to ignore.

It does. You realize that we're not just dealing with, like, abstract ideas or the theological concepts here. Yeah.

But with real events that had real consequences. Right. And that has, I think, implications for how we understand those teachings.

Right. And apply them to our lives today. Precisely.

Right. If we accept that the gospels are reliable accounts of what Jesus said and did. Yeah.

Then we can't just pick and choose the parts that we like. Right. Or dismiss the parts that make us uncomfortable.

Oh, that's good. We have to wrestle with the whole picture. And that can be challenging.

It can be. But it's also, I think, where the real transformation happens. It is.

It's not just about acquiring knowledge about the gospels. Right. It's about allowing those teachings to shape our hearts, our minds, our actions.

Exactly. So it's not just about reading the gospels. Right.

But about living them out. Absolutely. And that's a lifelong journey.

Yes. Full of discoveries, challenges, and ultimately growth. I think for me, one of the most powerful takeaways from this whole deep dive is the realization that the gospels aren't just ancient texts.

They're living words that still speak to us today. They do. They offer guidance and wisdom and just this glimpse into the heart of God.

And that's a gift that's available to everyone. Yeah. No matter what their background is or their beliefs, the gospels invite us all into a deeper understanding of ourselves, of our world, and of the one who offers hope and healing.

I love that. So as we wrap up this incredible journey through the historical reliability of the gospels, what's one question that you would leave our listeners with? Something to ponder as they continue their own exploration. Well, if we truly believe that the gospels are trustworthy accounts of Jesus's life and teachings, how does that change the way we live, the way we love, and the way we interact with the world around us? That's a great question.

It's a question worth pondering. It is. And it's a question that will continue to challenge us and inspire us as we seek to follow in the footsteps of the one who walked those dusty roads of Galilee 2,000 years ago.

That's beautiful. Thanks for joining us on this deep dive into the gospels. Thank you.