

Matthew, Lecture 1: The Reliability of the Gospels

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Abstract

This lecture by Dr. Craig Keener examines the historical reliability of the Gospels by placing them within the literary context of first-century ancient biography. Keener argues that the oral tradition preceding the written texts was remarkably stable due to ancient cultures' emphasis on rigorous memorization and the formal disciple-teacher relationship. While Gospel writers used methods like source and redaction criticism to arrange material topically or paraphrase for their audiences, they remained firmly committed to historical facts. Ultimately, the lecture demonstrates that the Gospels are trustworthy historical documents rooted in the living memory of eyewitnesses rather than myth or fiction.

Outline

I. Introduction to the Gospels and Matthew

A. Welcome and Background

1. Dr. Craig Keener is the lecturer, married to Médine Moussunga Keener.
2. Author of major scholarly commentaries on the Gospel of Matthew.
3. Focus is on Jesus as the primary teacher (referencing Matthew 23: Call no one rabbi).

B. Meaning of "Gospel" (Good News)

1. Rooted in Old Testament prophecies, especially Isaiah 52:7.
2. Relates to the restoration of God's people and fulfillment of divine promises.
3. Jesus is the agent of restoration and salvation (referencing Matthew 1:1/1:21).

II. Historical Questions and the Defense of the Faith

A. Importance of Historical Apologetics for Ministers

1. Titus 1:9 mandate: hold firmly to the trustworthy message to encourage and refute opponents.
2. The need to provide reasonable answers to historical challenges.

B. Confronting Skeptical Movements

1. The Jesus Seminar: Voted on Jesus' sayings with marbles for media publicity; claimed most sayings are inauthentic.
2. Mainstream scholarly consensus does not support the extreme skepticism of the Jesus Seminar.
3. Leading defenders of historical reliability: Craig Evans, Darrell Bock, Ben Witherington, Craig Blomberg, Craig Keener.

C. Academic Bias and Miracles

1. Post-Enlightenment academic prejudice against the supernatural and miracles.
2. Skeptical assumptions drive a hermeneutic of suspicion.

III. The Genre of the Gospels: Ancient Biography

A. Concept of Genre

1. Genre determines the purpose, function, and rules of a literary work (analogous to a hammer's design).

B. The Gospels as Biographies (Bios)

1. Modern scholarly consensus agrees the Gospels are ancient biographies (refuting 1915-era claims that they were a unique, non-biographical genre).
2. Influential work of Richard Burridge (Cambridge) established this consensus.

C. Distinctions Between Ancient and Modern Biographies

1. Chronology: Modern biographies are chronological; ancient biographies are topically arranged.
2. Structure: Matthew specifically organizes material topically for easier thematic preaching and teaching.
3. Birth/Early Life: Modern biographies require comprehensive childhood details; ancient biographies could begin with adult public career (e.g., Gospel of Mark).
4. Length: Biographies fall within a standard, manageable scroll length.
5. Purpose: Historians and biographers intended to teach moral, political, and theological lessons through real-life examples.

D. Differences from Ancient Novels

1. Novels were generally fictitious and lacked historical prologues or named sources.
2. Novels were primarily for entertainment, whereas biographies were both informative and educational.

IV. Historical Standards and the Use of Sources

A. Eyewitness Testimony and the Recent Past

1. Distant past vs. recent past: Writing about the recent past (within 1-2 generations) allowed biographers to consult eyewitnesses.
2. History and biography of the recent past were expected to be highly accurate (e.g., Tacitus, Suetonius, Josephus).

B. Composition and Publication Methods

1. Biographers typically start with one primary source and weave secondary sources around it.
2. Eyewitnesses also used prior written sources (e.g., Xenophon).
3. High cost of publication: Randy Richards calculates Paul's Letter to Romans (16 chapters) cost ~\$2,000 in modern equivalents; Matthew's Gospel is twice as long and represents a massive financial/literary investment.
4. Dissemination: Public readings at banquets or church gatherings (such as the Lord's Supper).

C. Validation via Parallel Source Comparisons

1. Comparing Suetonius's biography of Emperor Otho with accounts by Tacitus and Plutarch reveals substantial overlap and correspondence.
2. This high correspondence in non-Christian biographies validates the reliability of the Gospels' parallel accounts (Matthew, Mark, Luke).

V. Evaluation of Historical-Critical Methodologies

A. Source Criticism (Source History)

1. Use of sources is a biblical phenomenon (e.g., Book of Jasher, Book of Kings, Book of Chronicles references).
2. Luke 1:1-4 explicitly details Luke's historical method: consulting multiple written accounts and eyewitnesses.
3. Synoptic Relationship: ~90% of Mark's Gospel is incorporated into Matthew.
4. Markan Priority: Majority scholarly view is that Mark wrote first (drawing on Peter's preaching), and Matthew/Luke adapted Mark alongside "Q" (a collection of Jesus' sayings).
5. Evidence Matthew used Mark: Matthew consistently abbreviates Mark's narratives; Matthew uses the standard Greek Septuagint translation where he overlaps with Mark, but his own translation elsewhere.

B. Form Criticism (Form History)

1. Investigates the oral period between Jesus' ministry and the written Gospels (approx. 40-year window).
2. Criteria of Historical Authenticity:
 - a. Multiple Attestation: Teachings appearing across multiple independent sources (Mark, Q, etc.).
 - b. Criterion of Embarrassment: Incidents the early church would not invent (e.g., crucifixion as treason, Jesus' baptism of repentance by John, Gethsemane agony, Jesus' admission of ignorance of the final hour).
 - c. Palestinian Environment: Historical details that match first-century Judean/Galilean culture rather than the later Gentile church.
3. Weaknesses of Traditional Form Criticism:
 - a. Overreliance on the "criterion of dissimilarity" (which falsely assumes Jesus could not agree with Judaism or that the early church could not accurately repeat him).

- b. Rudolf Bultmann's flawed theories of oral expansion/contraction (disproved by E.P. Sanders; Matthew actually condenses Mark).
- c. Lack of credibility in modern internet myths (e.g., Jesus' story borrowed from pagan mystery religions, which actually borrowed from Christianity in later centuries).

C. Redaction Criticism (Redaction History)

1. Analyzes how Gospel authors edited and adapted their source material for specific theological or pastoral purposes.
2. Examples of Redaction:
 - a. Terminology: Matthew uses "Kingdom of Heaven" (Jewish preference to avoid using God's name) whereas Mark/Luke use "Kingdom of God" (for Gentile audiences).
 - b. Structural Arrangement: Cursing of the fig tree (Matthew groups cursed fig tree and its immediate withering together, while Mark splices the temple cleansing in between).
 - c. Compression: Matthew abbreviates Mark's narrative of the paralyzed man let down through the roof to focus purely on the core theological point.
3. Paraphrasing: Standard rhetorical exercise in antiquity; variations in wording do not equate to historical inaccuracy.
4. Core Principle: What a writer preserves is just as important as what they adapt.

VI. Oral Transmission and the Role of Memory

A. The Exclusively Oral Period

1. Maximum of one generation (approx. 40 years) between Jesus' ministry and Mark's Gospel.
2. Living memory of eyewitnesses prevents historical distortion.

B. Memorization Skills in Antiquity

1. Oral cultures valued and developed exceptional memory capacity.
2. Illiterate bards could repeat the entire Iliad and Odyssey from memory.
3. Seneca the Elder could recall and repeat 2,000 names in sequence, or recite 200 verses in reverse in his youth.
4. Orators memorized multi-hour speeches as a standard professional skill.

C. Advanced Discipleship and Transmission

1. Disciples in philosophical and rhetorical schools were required to preserve their teacher's exact messages and actions.
2. Pythagoreans: Required to recall the previous day's lectures before rising from bed.
3. Rabbinic focus: Disciples studied both the words and the deeds/example of their rabbi.
4. Net Transmission: Communal memory corrected individual errors (unlike linear "telephone game" chain transmission).

D. Note-Taking and Writing

1. Students routinely took notes on lectures (e.g., Quintilian's students).

2. Matthew's occupation as a tax collector provided him with the necessary shorthand/literary skills.
3. Papias's second-century tradition notes that Matthew recorded the sayings (Logia) of the Lord.