

Dr. Craig Keener, Matthew, Session 1,

Reliability of the Gospels

6-min. Video Overview

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So, have you ever really stopped to think about the Gospels? I mean, are the stories in them actual, verifiable history? Or are they more like ancient legends? It is a massive question, and today we are going to dive right into the evidence and see what historians are actually saying. Right off the bat, we hit our first and maybe biggest hurdle. We're talking about documents that are 2,000 years old.

I mean, how can we possibly trust something that ancient to be accurate? It's totally natural to assume they're just myths or legends that got twisted and changed over time. For historians, though, it's not a simple yes or no. It's way more like a giant 2,000-year-old puzzle that you have to piece together really, really carefully.

And the first piece of this puzzle, well, it can kind of mess with your head a bit. See, a lot of our modern ideas about what makes a historical text reliable just don't really apply to ancient documents. So, the real first question we have to ask ourselves is this: what were the Gospels actually meant to be in the first place? And that leads us to a crucial insight.

The consensus among scholars today is that the Gospels weren't written to be myths or legends. They were written as biographies. Now, this is where it gets really interesting, because we tend to read the Gospels as if they're modern biographies, right? We expect a strict minute-by-minute timeline, a deep dive into the psychology of the characters, the whole thing.

But they belong to a totally different genre – ancient biography. And ancient biographies played by different rules. An author might arrange events by topic, not by time, to help you understand a person's character.

They were selective, choosing specific details to make a specific point. So, an ancient biography, or a bios as the Greeks called it, wasn't just a random collection of stories. No way.

It was a historical work, and its main goal was to show you who someone really was through their words and actions. The goal was absolute truth, but not necessarily the kind of strict chronological truth we demand today. And what that tells us is that right from the beginning, the authors intended to write history.

Okay, fine, so their intention was historical. But that just leads to another huge question, doesn't it? Did these ancient biographers actually care about getting the facts right, or were they just, you know, making stuff up to push an agenda? This brings up that classic game of telephone argument. You know the one.

The idea that the stories must have gotten completely distorted with each retelling. But what if that's just not how it happened at all? Let's look at what one of the gospel writers

actually said about his process. The author of the Gospel of Luke literally lays out his methodology for us.

He says, look, I used written sources that were already around, I consulted the actual eyewitnesses, and I conducted my own investigation from the very beginning. Does that sound like a game of telephone to you? Not at all. So you see, this wasn't some long chain of whispers getting more and more messed up.

It was a careful process of historical compilation. A lot like what a good historian would do today. And the crucial part? All of this was happening while the eyewitnesses were still alive.

So people could actually go and check the facts. But wait, you might say, what about the stories that were passed down orally before they were written down? Surely those got messed up, right? Well, this is where we bump into another one of our modern assumptions. We completely underestimate the power of memory in ancient cultures.

I mean, let's be honest, without my phone, I could barely remember what I ate for breakfast yesterday. So how on earth could people back then remember entire speeches and long, complex stories so accurately? The answer is, well, it's pretty incredible. Get this: Seneca the Elder, a Roman writer who lived right around the time of Jesus, claimed that he could listen to 2,000 names and then repeat them all back in the exact same order.

2,000 names. And he wasn't some kind of mutant superhero. This was a skill that was highly valued, trained, and practiced.

You have to understand, in the ancient world, memory was like a muscle that you trained every single day. Education for kids was basically all about memorization. Public speakers would memorize speeches that lasted for hours.

And if you were a disciple of a teacher, your number one job was to memorize their teachings word for word. But it wasn't just on one person's shoulders. It was a communal memory.

The whole community worked together to preserve the stories accurately. Okay, okay. If their memories were so great and they were so careful, then why are there differences between the gospel accounts? That's a totally fair question, and it's probably one of the biggest reasons people doubt that the stories are reliable.

So let's look at a classic example, the story of Jesus and the fig tree. In the Gospel of Mark, the whole thing unfolds over two days. But when you read it in Matthew's version, the timeline is totally compressed.

Jesus curses the tree, and bam, it withers instantly. The basic events are the same, but the sequence is different. So what's going on? Is this a sloppy mistake? A flat-out contradiction? Or is it something else? Could it be a deliberate choice by the author? A feature of the genre they were writing in? Well, according to ancient biography.

He says that most of them were arranged topically, not chronologically. So an author like Matthew might group events together thematically to make a powerful teaching point. For

the original audience who understood these rules, changing the sequence wasn't a problem at all.

It was just a standard literary technique. All right, so let's pull all these threads together. When we piece all this evidence together, where do we land on our big question? Are the Gospels history, or are they a hoax? Let's just recap the case for historical intention.

First, we have the genre. They were written as ancient biographies, a form of history. Second, the sources.

The authors tell us they used written accounts and talked to eyewitnesses. And third, the transmission. These stories were preserved in a high-memory culture that took accuracy very, very seriously.

So the bottom line is this. Those differences we see between the Gospels aren't necessarily mistakes or signs of unreliability. More often than not, they are signs of intentional authorial arrangement.

What looks like a historical error to our modern eyes was a standard and perfectly acceptable literary device to them. And that really brings us to our final big question. If the Gospel writers were in fact trying to record history according to the standards and conventions of their own time, how should that change the way we approach and read these ancient documents today?