

Trusting the Gospels

One of the easiest accusations to make against the gospels is that they are a kind of early propaganda to promote Christianity. Why should people trust what they say? Here are some good reasons for trusting the evangelists and the Gospels.

1 Jesus is fact not fiction

Ancient historians record the fact of Jesus. These ancient writers were not believers and had no reason to lie. We can be certain that the gospels are not about a fictional character; in fact evidence for the existence of Jesus the man seems stronger than, say, for Julius Caesar the man.

2 The four evangelists were careful and used good sources

An early historian tells us that Mark wrote down Simon Peter's memories of Jesus. Luke wrote that he'd sifted through plenty of evidence before writing his Gospel. The written Gospels are partly based on the spoken Gospel, which was *carefully* passed on.

3 Four Gospels – different stories, the same story

If you talk to four people who saw a dramatic event, two things become clear. First: *truthful witnesses tell different stories*. Different aspects of any event stand out for different individuals. Second: *truthful witnesses tell the same story*.

4 Christians were martyred

There are surviving records of how Christians were tried in Roman courts. Many were ordered to give up Gospel and other Scripture to be burnt. One Christian said that he would prefer to be burnt himself than give up these holy writings to be burnt (see beside).

5 The Church accepted the Four Gospels and no others

There were other 'gospels'. The Church didn't accept them because they didn't measure up to the truth. By the end of the second century the four gospels, *and no others*, were in official use by the early Church.

6 The modern copies of the Gospel are faithful to the ancient copies.

A good test of the reliability of a manuscript is to ask two questions: one, how many past copies are there? two, how old are these copies? For the Gospels the answers are: one, many copies and many fragments; two, these copies and fragments are very old indeed.

1 Beside are three written sources:

- a passage from a 'gospel' rejected by the Church,
- a passage from a Roman Historian, Tacitus,
- a record from the trial of a Christian.

How does each help source back up the fact that *the four Gospels are trustworthy?*

Excerpt from the writings of Tacitus, a Roman Historian writing at about AD 115.

Nero blamed and tortured a group of people hated for their evil practices, a group popularly known as Christians. Christ, from whom the group took their name, was put to death by Pontius Pilate, one of our governors, during the reign of the Emperor Tiberius. The deadly superstition, stopped for a while, broke out not only in Judaea, the first source of the evil, but also in Rome.

Simon Peter said to them, "Make Mary leave us, for females don't deserve life." Jesus said, "Look, I will guide her to make her male, so that she too may become a living spirit resembling you males. For every female who makes herself male will enter the kingdom of Heaven."

Bishop Felix is questioned (304 AD)

Judge: Are you Bishop Felix?

Felix: Yes.

Judge: Bring me the books and all the written records you hold.

Felix: I have them, but will not give them to you.

Judge: Go and get them. We must burn them.

Felix: I would prefer to burn myself than allow the Holy Scriptures to be burned.

Judge: The Emperor's decrees come before your words.

Felix: God's orders come before those of a man.

- 2** Some of the statements below are false. Rewrite them so as to make them true statements.
- a) Mark wrote that Jesus had the surname 'Christ'.
 - b) Luke and Matthew both used Mark's gospel as a source for their own gospels.
 - c) Mark was writing his gospel for the persecuted Christians of Rome, to give them strength and comfort.
 - d) Mark used John's gospel as a source for his own gospel.
 - e) All the gospels were written in Greek.
 - d) Matthew and Luke both seemed to have access to an unnamed source when writing their gospels.
 - e) All the four gospel writers were among the twelve apostles of Jesus.
 - f) The gospels appear in the Bible in the order they were first written.
 - g) All the gospel writers were Jewish.
- 3** Read the details below. They are evidence that supports the reliability of Gospels, St Mark's in particular. Pick **three** details – one you find very convincing, one quite convincing, and one not very convincing. Explain your choices.

- i) There are many old copies of the accepted gospels, some fragments of copies date back to apostolic times (i.e. when some of the apostles were still alive).
- ii) The Church has been a visible reality from around 30 AD (Pentecost) to now.
- iii) Ancient writers, who were not Christians, wrote about the man Jesus.
- iv) We know that early Christians, who accepted Mark's Gospel as an authority, were willing to suffer and die for their faith.
- v) Descriptions in Mark's Gospel, about the land and physical situation of the people, agree with what archaeologists know of first century Palestine.
- vi) In a time when writing was scarce people used their memories well; writings based on the Christian oral tradition are as reliable as this oral tradition.
- vii) Aramaic patterns of speech can be traced in the Greek of Mark's Gospel.
- viii) It seems clear that by the end of the second century the four gospels, *and no others*, were in official use by the early Church.