

fancy Gospels in many languages are extant.

### 8. Gospel of Nicodemus.

This title is given to a work combining two distinct parts: the *Acts of Pilate* and the *Descensus ad Inferos* (descent to Hades). The *Acts of Pilate* is an account of the trial and crucifixion of Jesus, and of an investigation by the Sanhedrin which receives evidence of the resurrection of Jesus. The work is notable for its anti-Jewish and apologetic tendencies. *Descensus ad Inferos* is the fullest account from the early church of Christ's activity in the realm of the dead between his death and his resurrection: his victory over the powers of Hades and his liberation of Adam and the righteous dead. The *Gospel of Nicodemus* in its present form is generally assigned to the fifth century, but undoubtedly draws on earlier sources.

### 9. Post-Resurrection Revelations.

Those who wished to amplify the known teaching of Jesus or to trace to Jesus secret revelations handed down in esoteric tradition found the most suitable literary vehicle to be an account of Jesus teaching his disciples in the period between his resurrection and ascension. Often such accounts take the form of a dialog in which Jesus is questioned by his disciples about subjects left unclear by his teaching before his death. Gospels of this kind sometimes draw on traditions of the sayings of Jesus, in order to interpret and develop them further, but often the contents are unrelated to Gospel traditions. Though the apocalyptic discourse of Jesus in the Synoptics (Mt 24 par.) was sometimes a model for such works, their genre is often as close to that of the apocalypses as to other kinds of Gospel (and so several of these works are entitled Apocalypses).

Though this kind of Gospel proved especially useful to and popular among Gnostics, it did not originate with and was not confined to Gnostics. Orthodox examples from the early second century are the *Apocalypse of Peter* and the *Epistle of the Apostles*, both significant for the Gospel traditions they contain, the latter for the way in which it seems to draw on the canonical Gospels, including John, within a continuing oral tradition. The Freer Logion (added to Mk 16:14 in one manuscript) is not a complete work, but illustrates the second-century tendency to ascribe additional revelations to the risen Christ. Later non-Gnostic works of this type, from the third century or later, are the *Questions of Bartholomew*, the *Syriac Testament of our Lord*, and the *Ethiopic Testament of Our Lord in Galilee*. Gnostic works of this type include the *Apocryphon of James* (CG I, 2), the *Book of Thomas*

(CG II, 7), the *Sophia of Jesus Christ* (CG III, 4 and BG 8502, 3), the *Dialogue of the Saviour* (CG III, 5), the *First Apocalypse of James* (CG V, 3), the *Coptic Apocalypse of Peter* (CG VII, 3), the *Gospel of Mary* (BG 8502, 1), the *Pistis Sophia* and the *Books of Jeu*.

See also GOSPEL (GENRE); JESUS IN NON-CHRISTIAN SOURCES.

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### GOSPELS (HISTORICAL RELIABILITY)

Different scholars come to widely divergent conclusions when they assess the historical reliability of the Gospels. About the only point on which virtually all are agreed is that the Gospels were written primarily for theological rather than historical purposes. In other words, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John above all wanted to commend their understanding of the person and work of Jesus to their first-century audiences. But most scholars also recognize that in order for the four Evangelists' representations of Jesus to be convincing, they had to match the course of events in his life. How much of a match is required and how

much is actually present are questions which are both vigorously debated. This essay is written from the conviction that a fair assessment of the evidence supports a high degree of historicity. It must be stressed, however, that the Gospels have to be evaluated according to the historiographical canons of their day and not anachronistically compared with modern conceptions of what is and is not so-called reliable history.

1. External Evidence
2. Internal Evidence
3. Philosophical Considerations

### 1. External Evidence.

**1.1. The Text of the Gospels.** Non-Christian religions often allege that the Gospels as they now appear cannot be trusted because the text has been greatly corrupted. This allegation has virtually no evidence to support it. There are 2,328 manuscripts and manuscript fragments surviving from the earliest centuries of the Christian church and representing all portions of the Gospels. The earliest fragment of any portion of the NT currently in existence is the John Rylands papyrus fragment (P<sup>75</sup>) of John 18:31-33, 37-38, which probably dates to c. A.D. 125 or within about thirty years of the original composition of the Fourth Gospel. Twenty-one papyri containing major sections of one or more Gospels can be dated to the third and fourth centuries, while five virtually complete NTs survive from the fourth and fifth centuries. Compared with the numbers and ages of manuscripts which have survived for most other ancient documents, including many believed to contain reliable accounts of historical events, this evidence is overwhelming.

As a result, textual critics (*see* Textual Criticism) have been able to reconstruct a highly reliable prototype of what the original Gospel writers undoubtedly wrote. Estimates suggest that from ninety-seven to ninety-nine per cent of the original text is securely recoverable. More than fifty-four per cent of all of the verses in the Gospels are entirely free of textual variants, and the vast majority of those which remain have no bearing on questions of historicity. Modern editions of the Greek NT (Nestle-Aland; UBS) print the textual variants which have any significant effect on meaning, and most modern English translations use footnotes to alert readers to the most disputed texts (e.g., Mt 6:13b; Mk 16:9-20; Jn 7:53-8:11).

**1.2. Archeology.** Archeology\* has not played nearly as major a role in Gospel studies as it has for many other sections of Scripture. Occasionally the existence of previously unattested places or people has been demonstrated. For example, only in 1888 did the site

of the pool of Bethesda become known (Jn 5:2), and excavations demonstrated that it contained five porticoes as described by John. So too, in 1961 the first reference in Roman sources to "Pontius Pilate,\* Prefect of Judea" was discovered in an inscription in Caesarea Maritima. But for the most part, the type of information which the Gospels contain—narratives of actions and teachings of Jesus—do not lend themselves to archeological corroboration or contradiction. Since no one was able to tape-record them, there are no physical traces by which one can test the trustworthiness of the Gospel record.

**1.3. Written Testimony Outside the Gospels.** Virtually all biblical scholars acknowledge that there is enough information from ancient non-Christian sources to give lie to the myth (still, however, widely believed in popular circles and by some scholars in other fields—see esp. G. A. Wells) which claims that Jesus never existed. Most also recognize that only a paucity of the testimony of the Gospels can be corroborated by a comparison with other materials. Given that Jesus was not perceived by non-Christians as a significant political or military leader, this is not surprising. Ancient historians had little reason to consider that centuries later he would prove significant; even as the founder of a religious movement, he had little impact during his lifetime (*see* Jesus in Non-Christian Sources).

**1.3.1. Greco-Roman Testimony.** The third-century writer Julius Africanus cites a first-century Greek historian, Thallus, who referred to the darkness that occurred at the time of the crucifixion (*see* Death of Jesus). Early in the second century the Roman legate Pliny the Younger wrote that Christians met regularly and sang hymns to Christ "as if to a god" (*Epp.* 10:96.7), in a way that suggested he realized that Jesus had been a human but doubted that he was a god. About the same time the Roman historian Tacitus clearly referred to "Christ who had been executed by sentence of the procurator Pontius Pilate in the reign of Tiberius" (*Ann.* 15:44). Tacitus' Roman contemporary Suetonius speaks in one passage of "Chrestus" as the one at whose instigation a riot involving Jews and Christians in Rome broke out (*Claudius* 25:4)—probably a garbled reference to Christ as the founder of Christianity.

**1.3.2. Jewish Testimony.** Jewish literature from the first centuries of the Christian era contains additional references to Jesus. Some have been censored, so once there were probably even more than now remain. A famous passage in the Talmud speaks of Jesus as "the Nazarene" who "practiced magic and led Israel astray" (*b. Sanh.* 107b). This reference is particularly interesting because it seems to admit that Jesus

worked miracles, even though its interpretation of them differs from Christian belief. In several places Jesus is called the son of "Pandera"; the second-century Christian writer Origen explained that the Jews believed that Jesus was the child of Mary by an adulterous relationship with a Roman soldier by that name (*Contra Celsum* 1:32). The name and legend could well have come from a corruption of the Greek word *parthenos* for "virgin" and thus provide indirect though corrupt testimony to the Gospels' claim that Jesus was not the natural child of Joseph but was virgin-conceived (see Birth of Jesus). Again in the Talmud (*b. Sanh.* 43a) Jesus is said to have been hanged on the eve of the Passover. This text also teaches that "Jesus had five disciples, Mattha, Naqai, Nezer, Buni and Todah," possible references to Matthew, Nicodemus, an anonymous Nazarene, John and Thaddeus.

The most interesting of all of the Jewish testimonies to Jesus is the account in Josephus\* (*Ant.* 18.63-64). Here one learns that Jesus was a wise man who wrought surprising feats, taught many, gathered a large following and was crucified by Pilate. Extant copies of Josephus' writings also affirm that Jesus was the Messiah and that he was raised from the dead. Because Josephus was not a Christian, few people believe that he actually wrote these words; they may well have been added by scribes in later Christian circles which preserved his work. But the rest of his statements fit his style elsewhere and are most likely authentic. Josephus also offers independent corroboration of the ministry of John the Baptist\* (18:117) and of James, the brother of Jesus (20:200).

**1.3.3. Other Christian Testimony.** Outside the New Testament various apocryphal Gospels present additional teachings and deeds of Christ (see Gospels [Apocryphal]). Some of these are clearly legendary attempts to fill in the "gaps" in the Gospel record—stories of Jesus the child prodigy (e.g., the *Infancy Gospel of Thomas* and the *Protevangelium of James*) or additional details concerning his trial, death, descent into hell and resurrection\* (e.g., the *Gospel of Nicodemus* and the *Gospel of Peter*). Many emanate from Gnostic circles and purport to reveal secret teachings of Christ, often spoken after his resurrection in private conversation with the disciples (e.g., the *Apocryphon of John* and the *Dialogue of the Savior*). Two of these contain some sayings attributed to Jesus and often believed to be authentic, or at least as trustworthy as parts of the canonical Gospels (the *Coptic Gospel of Thomas* and the *Apocryphon of James*). But none of these extra-canonical writings can be shown to date from before the mid-second century, so that

the trustworthiness of the NT Gospels, which date from the first century, is in no way impugned. Though widely disputed, those documents from the Gnostic library at Nag Hammadi (esp. the *Coptic Gospel of Thomas*) which contain teachings of Jesus most closely paralleled in the NT are precisely those which are most clearly dependent on and inferior to the Synoptic Gospels (see Blomberg in France & Wenham, vol. 5; Tuckett).

It has often been observed how little the Acts, epistles and Revelation reflect any awareness of the Gospel tradition. Only rarely is a teaching of Jesus quoted (but see Acts 20:35; 1 Cor 7:10; 9:14; 11:23-25; 1 Tim 5:18). Nevertheless, the epistles are filled with numerous allusions to Jesus' teaching (e.g., Rom 12:14; 12:17; 13:8-9; 14:10; 16:9; 1 Thess 2:14-16; 5:2), which suggests that such awareness was much more widespread than a superficial survey of Scripture discloses (see Stanton). The book of James contains allusions to the Sermon on the Mount\* in nearly every paragraph, while Acts reflects the basic outline of Mark in several of the longer speeches which summarize the gospel as preached by Peter and Paul (and in 10:36-41 and 13:24-25 even more specific details are included).

**1.4. Authorship.** Many people have tried to assess the historicity of the Gospels in light of their authorship. It is often assumed that if the traditional ascriptions are correct, then these writers would have reflected firsthand eyewitness testimony in the case of Matthew and John, and secondhand in the case of Luke (cf. Lk 1:1-4). If the ascriptions are incorrect, as most modern scholars believe, then it is often assumed that the Gospels' historicity is impugned. But in fact eyewitnesses can err, accidentally or deliberately, while secondary sources can preserve accurate information reliably transmitted to them. For these reasons, the value of the debate over authorship for questions of historicity has probably been exaggerated.

Strictly speaking, the four Gospels are anonymous documents. The titles were added later, probably early in the second century when the texts were first gathered together as four versions of the one gospel. But the virtually unanimous early-Christian testimony which associates them with Matthew, Mark, Luke and John (see e.g., Eusebius, *Hist. Eccl.* 3:39.4, 16; Irenaeus, *Haer.* 3:1.1-2) should be treated very seriously. And even scholars who see the Gospels as written by anonymous Christians almost always date them within the first century. This is certainly well within a time period that would have permitted accurate information about the life and times of Jesus to have been preserved, even if it in no way guarantees such preservation.

**1.5. Sources.** An author, however close in time to the events he or she describes, is nevertheless only as reliable as his or her sources. The most common reconstruction of the literary interrelationship of the Synoptic Gospels has Matthew and Luke depending on at least two written sources—Mark and Q\* (a hypothetical document accounting for material Matthew and Luke have in common which is not found in Mark; see Synoptic Problem). Q is usually dated to the 50s and Mark is assumed to have utilized source material at least that old. With Christ's crucifixion no earlier than A.D. 30, the time gap between events and written accounts is reduced to about twenty years, a far cry from the centuries that were usually necessary for supernatural legends to attach themselves to other historical characters from antiquity (see Stein).

**1.6. Oral Tradition.** Any time lag between events and their recording allows for potential distortion. Despite all of the external evidence so far cited, many scholars doubt the reliability of the Gospels because they doubt either the ability or the interest of early Christians to have preserved accurately the story of Jesus' ministry as they passed it along by word of mouth. A number of factors, however, supports the likelihood that the Gospel tradition was carefully preserved.

(1) Jesus was perceived by his followers as one who proclaimed God's\* Word in a way which demanded careful retelling. (2) Over ninety per cent of his teachings has poetic elements which would have made them easy to memorize. (3) The almost universal method of education in antiquity, and especially in Israel, was rote memorization, which enabled people accurately to recount quantities of material far greater than all of the Gospels put together. (4) Oral storytelling often permitted a wide range of freedom in selecting and describing details but required fixed points of a narrative to be preserved unchanged. (5) Written notes and a kind of shorthand were often privately kept by rabbis\* and their disciples, despite a publicly stated preference for oral tradition. (6) The lack of teachings ascribed to Jesus about later church controversies (e.g., circumcision, speaking in tongues) suggests that the disciples did not freely invent material and read it back onto the lips of Jesus. (7) The degree to which Jesus emphasized his imminent return, that is, to the exclusion of envisioning the establishment of an ongoing community of followers, has been exaggerated (see Church). Hence, the claim that the disciples would have had no interest in preserving the Gospel tradition until the second generation of Christianity is doubtful (see Form Criticism).

## 2. Internal Evidence.

**2.1. The Intentions of the Evangelists.** Gospel studies have often introduced a false dichotomy between history and theology. One group of scholars seeks to harmonize all of the data of the four Gospels in order to create a composite, comprehensive life of Christ which blurs the unique emphases of each Gospel in its own right. Another group so emphasizes the theological distinctives of each individual Evangelist that it rejects the possibility of constructing any kind of plausible harmony. The two clearest statements in the Gospels about their authors' own intentions suggest that history and theology both played important roles (Lk 1:1-4; Jn 20:31). In fact, it is often precisely when one recognizes the theological emphases of a particular Gospel that one can understand why it differs from the others and can see those differences as complementary rather than contradictory.

Various studies of the Gospel genre (see Gospel [Genre]) have linked Matthew, Mark, Luke and John with apocalyptic,\* aretalogy (a Greco-Roman story of a "divine man"\*), tragedy or comedy, midrash\* (a Jewish form of interpretive re-writing of authoritative narrative) or parable,\* while many have viewed the Gospel as a new genre invented by Mark. But probably the best approach sees important parallels with the more historically reliable Jewish and Greco-Roman biographies and histories (see esp. Aune).

Ancient biographers and historians did not feel constrained to write from detached and so-called objective viewpoints. They did not give equal treatment to all periods of an individual's life. They felt free to write in topical as well as chronological sequence. They were highly selective in the material they included, choosing that which reinforced the morals they wished to inculcate. In an era which knew neither quotation marks nor plagiarism, speakers' words were abbreviated, explained, paraphrased and contemporized in whatever ways individual authors deemed beneficial for their audiences. All of these features occur in the Gospels, and none of them detracts from the Evangelists' integrity. At the same time, little if any material was recorded solely out of historical interest; interpreters must recognize theological motives as central to each text.

### 2.2. A Comparison of the Synoptics.

**2.2.1. Agreement.** The most striking feature one notices in comparing Matthew, Mark and Luke is their similarity. Approximately ninety-one per cent (c. 601 out of 661 verses) of Mark's information reappears in Matthew or Luke, and usually in both. An additional 235 verses appear in some form in both Matthew and

Luke but not in Mark. Approximately sixty-eight per cent of the self-contained units of narrative common to Mark and either Matthew or Luke appear in the same sequence in each. Given the wealth of detail which could have been told about Jesus, the fact that these three Evangelists chose to follow such similar outlines (and almost certainly to borrow from one another in some kind of literary interrelationship) suggests that a relatively fixed manner of telling the gospel originated at an early date in the life of the church. This common *kerygma* ("proclamation") clearly enhances the case for the Gospels' historical reliability.

2.2.2. *Disagreement.* Nevertheless, numerous differences among the Synoptics appear whenever parallel accounts are laid side-by-side. For many critics these differences are of such a nature and number that no amount of external evidence can convince them of the Gospels' trustworthiness. On the other hand, most of the differences are so minor that it seems unfair to refer to them as contradictions. Historians and biographers regularly add, omit or reword stories and portions of stories without necessarily falsifying them. At the same time, there are a handful of more glaring discrepancies which puzzle all readers. But plausible solutions have been suggested for all of them; fair-minded scholars must at least consider credible harmonizations before dismissing the whole process as impossible. In many instances it is precisely when one understands the varying theological concerns of the different Evangelists that one can appreciate how apparently discrepant accounts are in fact complementary rather than contradictory (see Blomberg in Carson and Woodbridge). The following survey offers a representative sampling of seven major types of problems which appear, a few of the most famous illustrations of those problems and some possible solutions.

(1) The theologies of the Evangelists may seem to conflict. Mark portrays the disciples as without understanding following Jesus' walking on the water (Mk 6:52); Matthew has them worship\* him as the Son of God\* (Mt 14:33). In Mark, after stilling the storm, Jesus berates the disciples for their lack of faith\* (Mk 4:40); in Matthew he concedes that they have "a little faith" (Mt 8:26). Both tendencies are credible in light of the disciples' mixture of faith and disbelief elsewhere and each fits into distinctive emphases of the Gospels in which they appear.

(2) One Evangelist may seem to correct his source. In Mark, Jesus' reply to the so-called rich young ruler seems to deny his goodness (Mk 10:18); Matthew rewords the comment so that Jesus merely inquires,

"Why do you ask me about the good?" (Mt 19:17). Matthew is not contradicting Mark but trying to avoid a misinterpretation of him. Similarly, Luke reports Jesus as telling his followers to hate their parents (Lk 14:26); Matthew explains that this means they must love\* God much more than family\* (Mt 10:37).

(3) Events may appear in contradictory orders in different Gospels. Luke places Jesus' rejection in Nazareth at the beginning of his Galilean ministry (Lk 4:16-30); Mark locates it much later (Mk 6:1-6). Usually, it is best not to assume chronology\* unless it is explicitly indicated. Luke has topically relocated this story at the front of his Gospel to show the type of rejection Jesus would receive from his native people throughout his ministry. In the same way, Luke reverses the order of the second and third temptations\* of Christ to build toward a climax with Jesus in the Temple in Jerusalem (Lk 4:1-13; cf. Mt 4:1-11). Both of these are key themes throughout his work.

(4) A passage may be so abbreviated that it seems to contradict a fuller parallel. Mark has Jairus and his companions come to Jesus twice, once to tell him of his daughter's illness and once to say that she has died (Mk 5:21-43). Matthew so compresses the account that Jairus comes only once and tells Jesus right at the outset of the story that his daughter is dead (Mt 9:18-26). This type of literary abridgment was common in antiquity and not perceived as misleading or in error (cf. Lucian, *How to Write History*, 56). Similar telescoping appears in Matthew's account of the withered fig tree (Mt 21:18-22; cf. Mk 11:12-14, 20-21) and in Luke's account of Jesus' trial before the Sanhedrin,\* if Luke is not in fact using a different tradition altogether, rather than Mark (Lk 22:66-71; cf. Mk 14:53-15:1).

(5) Sayings of Jesus may appear in different contexts. The Sermon on the Mount\* (Mt 5-7) and the Olivet Discourse (Mt 24-25) gather together teachings which are scattered all around the Gospel of Luke. Some of these may simply reflect Jesus' repeated utterances; others no doubt reflect the common practice of creating composite speeches. Again, no one questioned the integrity of ancient historians when they utilized a device that modern readers often find artificial. Yet again, both sermons may be excerpts of a much longer original.

(6) A unique event may be told twice in apparently contradictory ways. Many see the feedings of the 5,000 and the 4,000 (Mk 6:32-44; 8:1-10) or the two anointings of Jesus (Lk 7:36-50; Mk 14:3-9) as doublets of the same events. In each case, these are probably better viewed as separate incidents.

(7) Names and numbers may appear to contradict each other. In Matthew Jesus heals two blind men

along the Jericho road (Mt 20:30); in Mark he heals one (Mk 10:46). The latter does not exclude the former. In Mark Jesus exorcises a demoniac in the region near Gerasa (Mk 5:1); in Matthew it occurs in Gadara (Mt 8:28). The former is probably a city; the latter, a province.

**2.3. The Synoptics and John.** The Fourth Gospel stands out as distinct from the Synoptics in at least five principal ways (see Synoptics and John). (1) Most of John's material is unparalleled in Matthew, Mark and Luke, and only rarely does a passage common to the first three Gospels reappear in John. (2) John seems to have a much higher christology; only in his Gospel do explicit equations of Jesus with God ever appear (e.g., Jn 1:1; 10:30; 20:28). (3) The chronologies of John and the Synoptics are difficult to harmonize. Especially noteworthy are John's references to Jewish festivals (see Feasts), which indicate Jesus had at least a three-year ministry traveling back and forth between Judea and Galilee\* (in the Synoptics Jesus seems to visit Jerusalem for the first time the week before his death) and to the day of his crucifixion (apparently on Passover rather than the day after as in the Synoptics). (4) Other historical anachronisms seem to abound, most notably the reference to Jewish excommunication of Christians from the synagogues (Jn 9:22). (5) John's writing style differs markedly from that of the Synoptics; Jesus' language is indistinguishable from John's and Christ speaks in lengthy discourses rather than pithy aphorisms. As a result, even scholars who grant a substantial measure of historical reliability to the Synoptics usually view John as having so overlaid his material with theological interpretation that the Fourth Gospel has become largely worthless for the reconstruction of the historical Jesus.

On the other hand, major themes of John include the revelation of truth\* (see esp. 19:35), the incarnation\* of the Logos\* in space and time (1:14) and the inspiration of the apostles\* by the Holy Spirit\* to enable them to remember what Jesus did and said (14:26; 15:26). John would undermine his own theological emphases if his historical information were in error. He must be given an opportunity to be viewed as reliable before he is assumed to be untrustworthy.

Each of the five distinctives noted above must be set in a proper context. (1) Information is no less reliable for not being multiply attested. John probably wrote either to supplement the Synoptics or in independence from them; either way he was not likely to repeat much of their material (21:25). (2) The Synoptics certainly know of Jesus' divine status even if it is not emphasized (Mt 1:18; Lk 1:35; Mk 14:62), while John also underlines Jesus' subordination to the Father (Jn

14:28). The christologies differ but they do not contradict each other. (3) The Synoptics do not preclude a three-year ministry or additional visits to Jerusalem. The evidence suggesting Jesus' crucifixion on Passover in John (esp. 13:1; 18:28; 19:14, 31) is better taken as referring to the week-long Passover festival rather than just the first day of that feast. (4) Closer analysis dispels allegations of anachronism. The reference to putting Jesus' disciples out of the synagogue\* does not refer to practice outside of Jerusalem nor to any formal ban on Christians as occurred toward the end of the first century. (5) Historical accuracy does not require exact quotation, merely faithful paraphrase. John's extended discourses may reflect homiletical development of the teachings of Jesus, shorter parallels to which may usually be found in the Synoptics (cf. e.g., Jn 3:3 with Mk 10:15). They also often represent private teaching for the disciples, whereas the Synoptics tend to focus more on his public ministry. There is no doubt that history and theology are interwoven in more complex fashion in John, but once it is recognized that he is utilizing a more dramatic genre (see esp. Michaels), a good case can be made for the historical trustworthiness of the Fourth Gospel within the conventions of its genre (see Robinson).

### 3. Philosophical Considerations.

**3.1. Miracles and the Supernatural.** For many readers the historicity of the Gospels is called into question simply because they are filled with miracle stories about the supernatural deeds of Christ. Disbelief in the miracles usually stems from any one of three different objections. (1) Philosophers of science often allege that modern science has proved the impossibility of the supernatural. (2) Philosophers of history often argue that the evidence in favor of a miracle can never outweigh the evidence against it, so that a rational person may never conclude that testimony in behalf of a supernatural event is reliable. Unless someone has personally experienced the same kind of miracle, there is always a more likely explanation for someone else's claim that one has occurred. (3) Philosophers of religion often compare the miracle stories in the Gospels with those in other ancient religious and philosophical traditions and believe that all are equally suspect.

In fact, none of these claims can withstand close scrutiny. First, the proper domain of science is the realm of the repeatable, predictable and verifiable. Miracles by definition are non-repeatable events. If there is a theistic God such as the Judeo-Christian tradition has affirmed, miracles are a natural corollary

of his existence. Whether or not such a God exists cannot be determined by science. Second, personal experience is not a reliable criterion for determining truth. By that criterion evidence against the existence of ice would always demand that a primitive person in a tropical climate disbelieve it. Third, the testimony on behalf of other ancient miracles is usually not as strong, as consistent or as religiously significant as it is in the Gospels. Nevertheless, there is no reason to deny altogether the possibility of the miraculous in certain other ancient settings.

For many philosophers and theologians, the issue of the Gospels' credibility rests ultimately with the accounts of Jesus' resurrection.\* Several alternatives have been put forward to explain the origin of belief in the risen Lord. Those which have largely been abandoned in scholarly circles include the views that (1) Jesus never really died on the cross but later revived; (2) his body was stolen; (3) the women went to the wrong tomb and found it empty; and (4) mass hallucination.

More common is some form of the view that the disciples' belief in the abiding significance of Jesus' message and goals convinced them that he was still alive spiritually and that this belief eventually became transformed, in Jewish categories, into the idea of a bodily resurrection. Had the Gospel begun in Hellenistic circles and later been transformed by Judaism, this view might be credible. But the direction of development was precisely the reverse. From the very outset belief in an empty tomb, and therefore a raised body, formed part of the Gospel tradition (see esp. 1 Cor 15:3-7), and in Jewish circles mere immortality of the soul was seldom affirmed. As long as one rejects a priori antisupernatural prejudices, the evidence may be seen to support a bodily resurrection of Jesus. All the proposed alternatives are even more incredible (see Ladd).

**3.2 The Burden of Proof.** Notwithstanding all of the evidence in favor of the general trustworthiness of the Gospels, many critics find little they can confidently endorse because they adopt a skeptical stance on the issue of the burden of proof. That is to say, they assume that each portion of the Gospels is suspect, and reverse that verdict only when overwhelming evidence points to historical reliability. But this method inverts standard procedures of historical investigation; it applies more rigorous criteria to the biblical material than students of ancient history ever apply elsewhere.

Once a historian has proved reliable where verifiable, once apparent errors or contradictions receive plausible solutions, the appropriate approach is to give that writer the benefit of the doubt in areas where

verification is not possible (cf. Goetz and Blomberg). Neither external nor internal testimony can prove the accuracy of most of the details of the Gospels; the necessary comparative data simply are lacking. But the coherence and consistency of material which cannot be tested with that which can be tested goes a long way toward inspiring confidence in the remaining portions of the texts.

*See also* FORM CRITICISM; REDACTION CRITICISM; SYNOPTICS AND JOHN; SYNOPTIC PROBLEM; TRADITION CRITICISM.

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**GREAT COMMANDMENT.** *See* COMMANDMENT.

**GREAT COMMISSION.** *See* APOSTLE; GENTILES; RESURRECTION.

**GRIESBACH HYPOTHESIS.** *See* SYNOPTIC PROBLEM.