

Can We Trust The Gospels?

Peter J. Williams

Crossway, 2018.

Reviewer Philip Whitehead works in Belfast in the Risk Advisory practice of a leading accounting firm. He holds a PhD in New Testament from the University of Nottingham and previously taught a number of undergraduate classes in the Department of Theology. Philip is a member of a Presbyterian church in Belfast.

I wonder if you've ever had a conversation where the person you're talking with has dismissed the idea of the New Testament giving an accurate account of Jesus out of hand. It's not unusual to come across the view that the gospels are more-or-less fictionalised, that they have a tenuous relationship (at best) to the historical person Jesus of Nazareth, or even that they are simply fairy tales. What can make things harder is that, often, the person making that assumption does so under the impression that this is what all intelligent people think, and that only someone credulous or with ulterior motives would treat seriously the claim that the gospels are trustworthy accounts of Jesus' life. But is that really the case?

When I was studying at university, I took an elective in historiography (the study of history as a discipline and the various approaches and methods employed by historians), where I was tasked with writing an essay on a historiographical controversy of my choice. The lecturer mentioned that a student the previous year had written on the topic of the resurrection of Jesus, and had argued so well that it was a historical fact that Jesus rose from the dead, that the student had been given a first. I was impressed, mainly because the lecturer wasn't a believer himself, but recognised as a professional academic historian that a legitimate case could be made for the historical truth of one of the most startling claims made in the gospels. As I progressed in my studies, I found out more about the field of 'historical Jesus research' and that a great number, perhaps even a majority of academics today who study the issue consider the gospels as serious historical sources. But to come to that realisation having done a number of undergraduate modules specifically on history and New Testament studies was one thing - how could I explain it to friends taking different courses or who hadn't the time or inclination to read thousands of pages of specialised books and articles?

Peter J. Williams has done us a favour by writing a relatively short and accessible book showing some of the most compelling reasons why the gospels should be viewed as historically trustworthy accounts of the life of Jesus. He addresses the most pertinent questions that we might have about the trustworthiness of the gospels, in a way that is well-informed by his extensive professional knowledge as principal of Tyndale House, Cambridge, and a former senior lecturer in New Testament at the University of Aberdeen. Yet each chapter is short and accessible and assumes no specialist knowledge from the reader.

The first chapter begins with the question of what we would know about Jesus of Nazareth if we limited ourselves solely to sources written by non-Christians. Williams looks at the earliest non-Christian writers to mention Jesus and notes how, if all we had to go on was their writings, we would have reason to believe that Jesus was crucified in Judaea under the Roman Governor Pontius Pilate, that he attracted a large number of followers who worshipped him as God, and that this belief had spread far and wide

despite persecution within a few decades of Jesus' death. So here is some confirmation from non-Christian writers in antiquity of a number of the events recorded in the gospels.

Williams goes on to introduce the gospels. The following chapters delve into the historical background of the gospels – what they are, when they were written and why, and how reliable they are as sources for historical investigation of the life and words of Jesus. Williams shows how the gospel writers really show a great deal of knowledge of the geography, politics, culture and everyday life of first-century near East, and the areas of Judaea and Galilee in particular, that is best explained by the gospels being written by people who lived there and at that time.

There are also, as Williams shows, a great number of “undesigned coincidences” in the gospels, by which he means agreement between the gospel writers which it is hard to imagine as deliberately contrived. One example of this would be the two completely different events recounted in Luke and John respectively which feature the two sisters Martha and Mary. Luke recounts a story of Jesus visiting their home, with one sister (Mary) being more contemplative and the other being more activist in their personalities. John’s story featuring Martha and Mary has Jesus visiting them after the death of their brother, Lazarus. If we consider the personalities of Martha and Mary in John’s story, we find that again Mary is the more contemplative and Martha the more activist of the sisters. The simplest explanation for this is that they are real people, rather than fabricated characters. Or Mark recounts, without elaboration, that there is a nickname for the two brothers, James and John: “the sons of thunder”. Luke recounts in his gospel (which is unique to Luke) an incident where James and John ask Jesus if they should call for fire from heaven to destroy a village that has refused them entry – suggestive of the type of personality that might well earn two brothers the nickname “the sons of thunder”. These sorts of coincidence are quite commonplace between the four gospels, in a way that builds cumulatively towards a strong argument in favour of their historicity.

One important question is whether the gospels contain a reliable account of the words of Jesus, as it is not uncommon to hear the claim that the gospel writers simply put their own ideas into the mouth of Jesus, rather than recording his teaching. Such an idea is often deployed in the service of someone who wants, in fact, to substitute their own ideas for the words of Jesus recorded in the gospel, while knowingly telling us what Jesus really meant. Williams puts forward some of the evidence for the gospels recording Jesus’ actual words, within the norms of quotation at the time. Williams doesn’t interact here in a great deal of detail with the discussion around the “criterion of double dissimilarity” that would be found in more technical literature, but does provide the most discussed example of this, which is Jesus’ references to himself as the “Son of Man” being an example that would lead us to think the gospels included Jesus’ authentic words. The reason for this is that early Christians (other than the gospel writers) didn’t tend to use the term “Son of Man” for Jesus a great deal, which would make it an odd thing for the gospel writers to come up and use so frequently with if it weren’t something that Jesus had indeed said. Williams does discuss the question of what language Jesus would have been speaking in (likely Greek and Aramaic at different times, depending on with whom he was conversing) and addresses the weakness in the argument that “things have been lost in translation” to any serious

extent.

A related issue is whether there were later alterations to the gospels. A great many students from Muslim backgrounds are of the impression that the gospels have been corrupted by the church, and indeed there would be a large number of people from Christian or non-religious backgrounds who might also think this. Probably no other text from antiquity has been quite so closely studied in terms of its textual history and transmission as the New Testament, and I find that students are often either surprised or reassured to read the prefaces to the standard editions of the Greek New Testament which make claims of near-certainty about the textual integrity of nearly all of the text. The fact is that there is very little academic debate about the text of the vast majority of the New Testament, and the areas where there are questions tend to be well-known (for example the ending of Mark's gospel) and affect very little in the grand scheme of things. Williams provides a good overview of this, including his perspective as an academic who has been involved in the field of New Testament textual research, without getting into the weeds of technical discussion.

Williams then addresses the issue of alleged contradictions in the gospels. This section could perhaps have been longer, although it does serve well to dispatch the idea of *prima facie* contradiction in Jesus' words being a reason to stop reading and throw the gospels in the fiction pile. If we're honest, we wouldn't be so obtuse with other ancient sources readily accepted as historical, and Williams prompts us to think a bit harder about alleged contradictions by pointing out that a number of 'formal contradictions' in John's gospel are obviously deliberate paradoxes aimed at getting us to think more deeply – such as the claim that God loves the world and a few chapters later that God does not love the world.

The case that the gospels are fictional can sometimes be left unchallenged in discussions, so it was helpful to have a chapter addressing the question of why anyone would make up the details in the gospels. Vague ideas about power or self-interest don't really hold much water when we look in the details, for example, if the gospels are fabrications to claim that a man called Jesus was the Jewish Messiah, then why are there so many points which rub up against the grain of what the Messiah would have been expected to have been? Or if the resurrection is made up, who would make such a thing up in a world where Jews expected a day of resurrection of all the dead, not just one person, and non-Jews would be far more likely to imagine an afterlife for the soul but not the body? There are serious problems with the idea that the gospels are simply made up in service of some religious or cultural agenda.

Finally Williams closes the book with a challenge to the reader. If we have followed his argument that there are very good reasons to trust that the gospels are reliable, trustworthy accounts of things that actually happened – what are we then to make of Jesus? Williams makes the case that if the things recorded are true, even in outline, then we must take seriously the claims of Jesus and the possibility that he is the most important person in history. And what does Jesus ask of people, indeed in each of the four gospels? "Follow me".