

Are the Gospels a Reliable Eyewitness Account of the Life of Jesus?



Three Witness Accounts

When we examine ancient history in an attempt to understand just who Jesus is, we discover that there are three separate witness accounts that we have to consider. First, of course, there are the eyewitness accounts of the New Testament writers. But in addition to these, there are the hostile gentile eyewitness accounts of the Greek world and the hostile Jewish accounts of antiquity (for more information about these two groups, click [HERE](#)). So how are we supposed to know which group we can trust? Let's try to look at the evidence as though we were in a court of law, OK? That's something that I am very familiar with, as I have been in and out of court for nearly 20 years, and have been examining the nature of evidence and eyewitness testimony for that entire time. Let's review what the three witness groups say about the nature of Jesus:

<u>Hostile Gentile Witnesses</u>	<u>Hostile Jewish Witnesses</u>	<u>The Biblical Witnesses</u>
He was said to have been born of a virgin <i>(no comment on whether this was true)</i>	He was said to be born of a virgin <i>(but he was actually fathered by a soldier)</i>	He was born of the virgin Mary <i>(miraculously through the power of God)</i>
He lived in Judea (Palestine)	He lived in Palestine	He lived in Palestine
He was wise and influential	He was a wise teacher	He was a wise teacher
He could accurately predict the future	No mention of Jesus' predictions	He made accurate predictions of the future
He possessed unusual magical powers <i>(no comment on the source of this power)</i>	He possessed unusual magical powers <i>(described as coming from a demonic source)</i>	He demonstrated supernatural powers <i>(due to the fact He was God himself)</i>
He taught his disciples a high moral code	He taught about turning the other cheek	Jesus taught the moral standard of God
He claimed to be God	He claimed to be the Messiah	He claimed to be God
No mention of prophecies that predict Him	He said Isaiah had foretold of Him	He said Isaiah had foretold of Him
His followers thought He was God	He was worshipped by His followers	He was worshipped by His followers
No mention of how He rode into Jerusalem	He rode into Jerusalem on a donkey	He rode into Jerusalem on a donkey
No mention of which disciple betrayed him	He was betrayed by Judah Iskarioto	He was betrayed by Judas Iscariot
He was crucified under Pilate	He was crucified under Pilate	He was crucified under Pilate
No mention of His being beaten or humiliated prior to the crucifixion	He was beaten with rods, given vinegar to drink and wore a crown of thorns	He was beaten with rods, given vinegar to drink and wore a crown of thorns
He was crucified (but no mention of the time)	He was executed on the eve of Passover	He was crucified on the eve of Passover
There was darkness and an earthquake at the time of His crucifixion <i>(explained as a solar eclipse)</i>	No mention of the darkness or earthquake at the crucifixion <i>(therefore there is no explanation offered)</i>	There was darkness and an earthquake at the time of His crucifixion <i>(explained supernaturally)</i>
Jesus rose from the dead, no mention of the ascension or the empty tomb <i>(there is no explanation offered)</i>	His followers said He resurrected & ascended, and the tomb was empty <i>(but later found in a grave)</i>	His followers saw Him resurrected & watched Him ascend; the tomb was empty <i>(He defeated death)</i>



There Are Some Differences!

We need to start off by recognizing the fact that the three accounts are **AMAZINGLY** similar, and record the same basic testimony about the life and death of Jesus. But clearly there are a few differences between the three witness accounts from antiquity. We've highlighted or dimmed the differences to make it easier to discuss them. First, you'll notice that the hostile gentile witnesses are silent on a few important points (there is no mention of the prophecies that predict Jesus, the triumphal entry into Jerusalem, Judas Iscariot, the beating prior to the crucifixion, or the resurrection or ascension). But this does not mean that there is a contradiction with the Jewish witnesses or the Biblical account. It simply means that ancient Gentile writers either assumed their readers knew these issues, or were themselves focused on other issues, or did not carefully guard the entire record (and as a result, some has now been lost).

In addition to this, you'll note that there are some dramatic differences between the Jewish account and the Gentile and Biblical record. The difference here is NOT in terms of the historical details of the story of Jesus, but is instead in the **EXPLANATIONS** for these details. The Jewish record affirms the fact that Jesus was said to be born of a virgin, but denies this truth, saying that Jesus' parents simply covered up the truth about Jesus' true father. The Jewish record affirms the fact that Jesus had supernatural powers, but attributes these powers to demonic forces. Finally, the Jewish record also affirms the fact that there was an empty tomb (and that Jesus' followers claimed he was resurrected and ascended into heaven), but they deny that this was true, and claim that Jesus' grave was later found in the garden next to the tomb. So while the narrative of the life of Jesus closely parallels the Biblical account, there are a number of alternative explanations that are offered.



Reliable Eyewitnesses

So, which of the ancient records are we to believe? Why should we accept the Biblical account when there are clearly a number of other witness records out there? What makes the Bible more trustworthy than the other witnesses? When a prosecutor brings an eyewitness into a courtroom, he or she needs to be very careful to bring the very best eyewitnesses that are available. After all, these folks are eventually going to be cross examined by the defense attorney. So, prosecutors evaluate their witnesses and have determined a set of simple principles that demonstrate the reliability of a witness. Even the jury instructions in each state refer to criteria such as those we are about to discuss! So let's take a look at the criteria for reliable eyewitnesses and see if the Biblical record can compare with the other ancient witness accounts.



Were the Witnesses Even Present?

There are times when someone will claim to be an eyewitness but is actually either lying about this or grossly overstating what he or she saw. It's up to the jury to decide if the witnesses are actually who and what they say they are, or are instead motivated by something that would cause them to lie (we'll discuss that more in a minute!) The more that an eyewitness has been able to observe, the more reliable detail can be gleaned from his or her testimony. Those who have seen the most can describe the most. Those who have the most intimate knowledge of the event are clearly those who can best explain what really happened. That's why **PROXIMITY** to an event is such an important measurement when evaluating a witness! Now let's take a look at the proximity of the Biblical eyewitnesses to the life of Jesus:

1 The Biblical Eyewitnesses

The more that even critical historians study the Bible, the more they are willing to admit the early dating of its authorship. No gospel in the Bible mentions the destruction of the temple in 70AD in Jerusalem (an event that would surely have been mentioned had it occurred prior to the writing of the Gospels), indicating that no gospel was authored later than 70AD. But when you look closely at Luke's writing of the Gospel of Luke and the Book of Acts, you discover that the Gospels are far earlier than that. Remember that Luke wrote these two books (later separated in our Bible) as one large document. We also know that the book of acts ends with Paul in captivity in Rome, prior to his execution which historians place at somewhere between 62-64AD. So we know that the Book of Acts is written before 62AD and that the Gospel of Luke is written sometime before that. Many conservative scholars date the Gospel at about 55-60AD. In addition, Biblical scholars and critics alike believe that Mark precedes the other Gospels, meaning that it has to be written prior to 55AD (much of Mark's Gospel is mentioned in Luke's account). So by dating in reverse in this manner, we can conclude that the Gospels ARE in fact eyewitness accounts (as they claim to be) that are written within 20-40 years of the life of Jesus!

Now you might think that this is a long gap in time, but consider the Greek researcher and storyteller Herodotus of Halicarnassus (fifth century BCE), who is considered to be the world's first historian. In "The Histories", he describes the expansion of the Achaemenid empire under its kings Cyrus the Great, Cambyses and Darius I the Great, culminating in king Xerxes' expedition in 480 BCE against the Greeks. Secular historians believe that this is reliable history and that Herodotus' book also contains a reliable description of the people that the Persians conquered. Yet the work of Herodotus is not nearly as well documented as the work of the New Testament writers! Our earliest copy of "The Histories" (written supposedly in 480 to 425BC), dates at 900AD. That is a 1,350 year gap! The earliest New Testament fragments date to within 25 to 50 years of the writing and our earliest complete manuscript of the New Testament dates to within 300 years of the writing. There are only 8 ancient copies of "The Histories" to compare to one another, while there are over 24,000 ancient copies of the New Testament to compare to one another! The Biblical eyewitnesses were not only PRESENT to observe Jesus, they wrote and preserved their eyewitness testimony in a manner unlike any other ancient eyewitness!

2 The Hostile Gentile Eyewitnesses

When examining the ancient hostile Gentile accounts of Jesus, it is difficult to know whether the witnesses were actually present for much of what they describe. They date fairly close to the life of Jesus (far closer than the Jewish accounts), but they were certainly not as intimate with the historical figure of Jesus as were the disciples. But it is important to note that the Gentile witnesses don't disagree with the Biblical account in the first place!

3 The Hostile Jewish Eyewitnesses

The Jewish record related to Jesus is clearly REACTIONARY. There is no evidence to suggest that ANY of these witnesses were present to actually KNOW or SEE Jesus, although this is quite possible. The Jewish record admits and confirms much of what the Biblical record proposes about Jesus. But remember that the earliest

record in the Talmud dates to 500AD and the earliest record in the Toledot Yeshu dates to 1000AD. These are both very late. While some of what the Jewish witnesses say may be true, they are clearly the later account of the life of Jesus and therefore are the less reliable account. It is also interesting to note that the nearer the Jewish witness to the life of Jesus (i.e. Josephus), the more flattering and similar the description to the Bible. As time passes from the life of Jesus, the Jewish Record strays from the Biblical account.



Are the Witnesses Supported Externally?

If the testimony of an eyewitness can be supported by something other than that particular witness, we can assume that the testimony is that much more reliable. In criminal court cases today, there are often fingerprints or DNA evidence that can substantiate what the witness is saying. It would be great if this kind of forensic evidence was also available when looking at ancient history, but that is not the case for the life of Jesus or any other ancient figure. So we have to look at other kinds of corroborating evidences. In the study of ancient history there are not many to choose from, but we CAN look at OTHER eyewitness accounts and at ARCHEOLOGY to see if a witness's statement is reliable. That is a common tool used by historians. Let's take a look and see if the Biblical record holds up in these areas:



The Biblical Eyewitnesses

It's hard to deny that the New Testament Biblical record is replete with archeological verification today (see below for more detail). Christians today can take extensive tours of the Holy Land due to the fact that the New Testament IS supported by the archeology of the area. When Biblical writers describe a city, it can be located on a map and in the archeological record! Unlike other scriptures from other faith systems, the New Testament is not just a collection of sayings. It is, instead, a description of history, and the geography that is described in the Bible actually DOES exist in the archeological record. While this does not PROVE that the Biblical writers were telling the truth about Jesus; it does lend support to their reliability! And in addition to the archeological verification, there is also the fact that the Gentile and Jewish writers confirm the details of the Biblical account on many important topics!



The Hostile Gentile Eyewitnesses

Again we need to recognize that the Gentile account does not differ from the Biblical account on the key points. It does NOT, therefore, have to provide external archeological verification to prove its reliability in making an alternate claim, because it does not make an alternate claim that can be examined with archeology. But there is a difference in the explanation of the darkness at the crucifixion. The Gentile witness (Thallus) argues that the darkness was caused by a solar eclipse, but the Jews schedule the Passover during a full moon. And a full moon occurs when the moon is on the "back side" of the earth! This means that the earth is BETWEEN the sun and the moon, making it impossible for a solar eclipse to occur (a solar eclipse can only occur when the moon passes between the sun and the earth) Astronomical records show that no solar eclipse occurred anywhere near the city of Jerusalem during the years of 30-33AD. So the Gentile account of the event does NOT have external support.

The Hostile Jewish Eyewitnesses

The Jewish account also makes alternate claims related to several key points. This account alone argues that there was a grave in the Garden adjacent to the tomb and it was here that the gardeners buried the body of Jesus. It also makes claims that the body was exhumed and presented to the ruling authorities! If this was true, we would expect a couple of important archeological artifacts to have been preserved by the Jews. After all, there would be a strong desire amongst the Jews to squelch the upstart Christian faith, and all it would take is the preservation of the body of Jesus to do just that. In addition, while there are present day archeological sites throughout Jerusalem that verify the details of the crucifixion story, including the location of the crucifixion, the garden and the tomb, there is no historically identified location for Jesus 'true' grave in the garden! One would think that the ancient Jews would monumentalize this site and carry it down through history in a manner similar to the way that modern Christians have carefully preserved the archeological history of Christianity. Without this preservation, the Jewish account has no external support.



Have the Witnesses Been Honest and Accurate in the Past?

If a witness has lied about a recollection of an event in the past, juries are allowed to disregard that witness's testimony about any other event that he or she is testifying about. Eyewitnesses are judged all the time by their past truthfulness as it can be measured by outside evidences. If I tell you that something occurs, and you later find that there is fingerprint or DNA evidence to contradict my claim, it is fair for you to question my reliability! In a similar way, we can look at ancient historical testimonies and see if the witnesses have been honest in other areas of the account. If we find that the eyewitness has honestly and accurately described other elements, we can assume that the point we are concerned with has also been described accurately. Let's see how the Biblical records measure up:

The Biblical Eyewitnesses

Let's take a look at the writings of Biblical eyewitnesses, as many of the Gospel details in the life story of Jesus were questioned early by critics of the Bible. These critics used to argue that there was no recorded census at the time mentioned in the Bible, that there was also no record of a governor in Syria named Quirinius, and no tradition of requiring people to return to their ancestral home for purposes of recording their numbers (these details are mentioned in Luke 2:1-3). But archeological findings have now revealed that the Romans regularly recorded the enrollment of taxpayers and that they held censuses every 14 years (beginning with Augustus Caesar). In addition to this, an inscription found in Antioch tells of Quirinius being governor of Syria around 7 B.C. (evidently he was governor twice!) But that's not all. Archeology has proven the Biblical writers to be correct about hundreds of other details that were once questioned, like the existence of Lysanias (Luke 3:1), the existence of a court called "the Pavement" (or "Gabbatha" as mentioned in John 19:13), the existence of Pontius Pilate, the details of Roman crucifixion, the existence of the city of Iconium (Acts 14:6), the existence of the proconsul named Sergius Paulus (Acts 13), and the existence of a man named Gallio (Acts 18), to name just a few! Critics once thought the Biblical writers to be either mistaken or lying about these details until archeological finds in the last two centuries proved the Bible to be correct.

2 The Hostile Gentile Eyewitnesses

If the Gentile account is wrong about the eclipse, we can certainly doubt that particular point. On the other points of similarity with the Biblical record, there is no reason to doubt the truthfulness of the account.

3 The Hostile Jewish Eyewitnesses

One way to examine the honesty and accuracy of this record is to measure WHAT it says about the teaching of Jesus against WHO it says was empowering Him. There definitely seems to be an internal contradiction here. The Jewish writers want to call Jesus a wise man and a teacher who healed the lame and worked amazing deeds. At the same time, they claim that he was a liar who was empowered by demonic forces. How can both descriptions be true? Do wise teachers LIE? Do the demon possessed HEAL the lame and perform amazing DEEDS? There is an internal contradiction in the witness account.



Do the Witnesses Have An Ulterior Motive?

Sometimes a witness can be critically evaluated based on an exposed bias. Is there something that is important to the eyewitness that would cause them to lie about their testimony? Do they have a motive that is hidden and is the driving force behind a lie? We need to look carefully at each eyewitness and uncover their hidden biases before we can determine if they are reliable. Let's see if there is a hidden motive behind the ancient eyewitness accounts:

1 The Biblical Eyewitnesses

Some would argue that the Biblical writers are not being truthful because they want to start a religious system and they would say anything needed to accomplish that goal. But that reasoning doesn't really measure up to the real lives of the apostles and original eyewitnesses. Why would they be motivated to tell this elaborate lie considering that each of them had nothing to gain from the lie itself? All of them died horrible deaths and never changed their stories about the man they knew as Jesus:

Peter was crucified head down in Rome in 66AD

Andrew was bound to death in 74AD

James, son of Zebedee, was beheaded in Jerusalem by sword (Acts 12:1-9).

John was banished to the Isle of Patmos in 96AD (Rev. 1- 9).

Phillip was crucified at Heirapole, Phryga in 52AD

Bartholomew was beaten, crucified, then beheaded in 52AD

Thomas was run through by a lance at Corehandal, East Indies in 52AD

Matthew was slain by the sword in the city of Ethiopia in about 60AD

James son of Alphaeus, was thrown from a pinnacle, beaten to death in 60AD

Thaddeus was shot to death by arrows in 72AD

Simon was crucified in Persia in 74AD

The power of the Biblical record is that the Biblical eyewitnesses had NO positive motive for their story except for the fact that it was TRUE. They gained no wealth, no comfortable lifestyle, and no assurance of a painless death. Witnesses without a positive motive other than truth are THE best witnesses in the world. When you see them suffering for their testimony, you can be sure you are hearing the truth.

The Hostile Gentile Eyewitnesses

The Gentile witnesses are clearly motivated by their concern for the nuisance that the Christians have become in the Roman world. They are indifferent to Christian spiritual claims, but are more concerned with how the young Christians are behaving in the empire and if they are posing a threat. Maybe that's why you see a witness account that agrees, for the most part, with the Biblical record.

The Hostile Jewish Eyewitnesses

The Jews definitely had a motive as they wrote their own version of the life of Christ. Jesus had the nerve to claim to be their Messiah! This alone earned Him the wrath of the Jewish leadership and this is well documented even within the Biblical record! Unlike the Biblical writers, the Jewish leadership had EVERYTHING to gain (and maintain) by being less than truthful on key points. While the Gentile and Biblical record largely agree, the Jewish record is by far the most inflammatory of the three accounts? Why? Because the Christian record powerfully threatened the power and social structure of first century Judaism. The Jewish leadership had a lot to lose here if Jesus was, in fact, the Messiah. And once he failed to meet their incorrect expectations (as a military Messiah) they became convinced His life must be represented in a way that would no longer lead the Jewish nation astray. Remember that the first converts to Christianity were, in fact, Jewish! This desire to stop Jews from converting to Christianity would, in and of itself, provide a strong motivation to be less than honest in representing the life of Jesus.



So, Who Can We Trust?

If we are looking honestly at any event in ancient history, we are going to have to trust the ancient written record and the supporting archeology. So as we look at these three witness groups, we need to evaluate them as we would any other set of witnesses. The Biblical eyewitnesses DO measure up under these standards. They clearly wrote within close proximity to the life of Jesus, their testimony is supported externally by the archeological evidence, they have a reliable tract record (also supported by the archeology) and they are without ulterior motive. While many would argue that we have to account for the life of Jesus purely OUTSIDE the Biblical record in order to be confident that we have the unbiased truth, we need to remember that the Bible itself is a reliable and trustworthy eyewitness account.