

ISN'T THE BIBLE JUST MYTHS & LEGENDS?

A few years ago, there was a documentary on television about Jesus. It opened with the narrator saying, "Most of what we think we know about Jesus comes from the New Testament Gospels: Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. But we can't trust those books for accurate information because they were written by the converted."¹

Now, what's wrong with that logic? It fails to ask the most important question: "*WHY* were the Gospel writers converted?"



In other words, why were they so committed to Jesus, and their own eye-witness accounts of His life and ministry, that they would abandon their livelihoods and treasured religious traditions, which the Jews had held for thousands of years at that point?



Why would they endure persecution, poverty, a loss of friends and family – a loss of standing in their community, and even the loss of their own lives?



WHY were they so unswervingly converted to Christ and His teachings that they would be condemned to hell if they were knowingly deceiving multitudes of people?

Because they saw and knew the evidence. They knew they were being absolutely truthful and recording everything in detail. You see, Christianity is not a blind faith, it's an *informed* faith if you're willing to take an honest look at the evidence!

In fact, Frank Turek, who has a book and podcast called "I Don't Have Enough Faith to be an Atheist" posed that same question to a couple of Muslims when he was debating them on the radio. You see, Muslims don't believe that Jesus died on the cross, so there's no way he could have resurrected. And with this in mind, Frank asked them, "Why did the NT writers suddenly convert from Judaism to believing Jesus rose from the dead?"

One of them said, "Because they wanted power over the people!" But Frank said, "What power did the NT writers gain? NONE! In fact, instead of gaining power, they got exactly the opposite – they got submission, servitude, persecution, torture, and death."

¹ Share in "I Don't have Enough Faith to Be an Atheist" by Norman Geisler and Frank Turek, pg.233

The two Muslims had no answer.

Frank went on to ask them, "What possible motive did the NT writers have to make up the Resurrection story if it wasn't true?"

Again, they had no response. Why? Because they began to realize that the NT writers had every earthly reason to *DENY* the Resurrection rather than to proclaim it. There was no incentive for them to fabricate what they were recording in the NT documents. In fact, if they were trying to start a new religion that they knew was based on lies, then they were risking an eternity in hell by knowingly deceiving people about the path to heaven.

So, the NT writers must have witnessed some very strong evidence to turn away from those ancient beliefs and practices that had defined who they and their forefathers were for nearly 2,000 years!

You see, skeptics claim that because the NT writers were converted, they couldn't possibly be objective because they had such strong feelings for Jesus. But that's nonsense.

Illustration: A doctor can give an objective diagnosis even if he has strong feelings for the patient. In fact, his passion for the patient may cause him to be *all the more* diligent in diagnosing and treating the disease properly. The NT writers could do the same.

And by the way, it's ironic that critics of the Bible automatically consider the New Testament writers as biased and untrustworthy. Because they are often biased themselves. They're biased when they don't investigate the New Testament documents, or the context in which they were written, in order to make an honest, educated assessment of their reliability.

In fact, that's how J. Warner Wallace became a Christian. He was one of the foremost cold-case detectives in the United States - often appearing on *Dateline* to give his expert advice and commentary on unsolved cases. But he was also an atheist who loved to mock the reliability of the Bible. So, he made it his mission to read the New Testament and apply all of his years of knowledge and experience as a world-renowned investigator, in order to disprove the Gospels once and for all. BUT (as often happens) his intense investigation led him to conclude that the Bible is true and trustworthy, and he surrendered his life to Christ. He is now a senior fellow at the Colson Center for Christian Worldview, and an adjunct professor of apologetics at Talbot School of Theology at Biola University, and also at Gateway Seminary, and Southern Seminary.

So, this leads us to the question: *Can the NT be taken seriously? Isn't it just a collection of myths, legends, and exaggerated tales? And aren't there lost books of the NT?*

The good news is, there is more than enough evidence to answer those questions (and more) if you're willing to actually read the NT for yourself, set aside your preconceived assumptions, and let the evidence lead where it will.

With the time we have left, I'm only going to scratch the surface on this topic and hopefully whet your appetite. For a MUCH more in-depth study on the reliability of the NT, I would recommend that you begin with these two books AND listen to their podcasts that go by the same titles:

- *"I Don't Have Enough Faith to be an Atheist"* by Frank Turek
- *"Cold-Case Christianity"* by J. Warner Wallace
- *"The Reason for God"* by Tim Keller

The New Testament books were...

1. Written too early to be legends and myths

Three out of the four NT Gospels were written no more than 40-60 years after Jesus' death. And Luke records the fact that many people who saw the risen Jesus were still alive when he wrote his Gospel. In other words, Luke told his readers that they could go and talk to the eyewitnesses and fact-check his account.

In fact, Luke (who was a doctor) tells us that he painstakingly preserved the historical facts surrounding the life of Jesus...

Luke 1:2-4 "Just as those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word have delivered them to us, ³ it seemed good to me also, having followed all things closely for some time past, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, ⁴ that you may have certainty concerning the things you have been taught."

Luke's statement shows us that the people of his day knew the difference between an "orderly account" (vs.3) and myths/legends. In fact, Jesus had promised the disciples that He would help them remember and accurately record everything He had said and done...

John 14:26 "But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you."

Paul also told people to fact-check his writings with eyewitnesses who were still alive...

1 Corinthians 15:6 "Then he [the risen Jesus] appeared to more than five hundred brothers at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep."

Paul could not have written that statement in a public document unless there actually were hundreds of living eyewitnesses who could confirm *or deny* what he was writing. Paul was saying, "Hey, Jesus' entire ministry – His teachings, miracles, crucifixion, burial, and resurrection – was carried out with thousands of believers *and* skeptics watching. In fact, when Paul was brought before King Agrippa (an unbeliever), he said...

Acts 26:26 "For the king knows about these things, and to him I speak boldly. For I am persuaded that none of these things has escaped his notice, for this has not been done in a corner."

Paul could speak "boldly" about the life and teachings of Jesus because King Agrippa and everyone else knew about them. Paul could speak boldly about these things because none of it was done "in a corner" - all of it was witnessed by multitudes of people.

The people of these towns and cities where Jesus taught and performed miracles had been there in the crowds, watching and listening to Jesus. They saw it all happen with their own eyes. So, if the New Testament documents were historically inaccurate or fabricated – if they were exaggerating about any of this stuff – thousands of eyewitnesses who were still alive would have called them out for it. It would have been impossible for Christianity to gain widespread support if its historical claims were contradicted by numerous living eyewitnesses.

For example, when Mark wrote about Jesus carrying the cross on His way to be crucified, he says...

Mark 15:21 "And they [the Roman soldiers] compelled a passerby, Simon of Cyrene, who was coming in from the country, the father of Alexander and Rufus, to carry his cross."

Why would Mark mention these men by name? Because Mark knew that Simon, Alexander and Rufus were well known to his readers. So he was saying, "Go and talk to them for yourself to verify whether or not I'm telling the truth." The Gospel writers were not creating legends and myths that fit their own agenda; they were painstakingly preserving historical facts, and then challenging their critics to fact-check their work.

That's why John was so confident when he wrote...

John 19:35 “He who saw it has borne witness—his testimony is true, and he knows that he is telling the truth—that you also may believe.”

2 Peter 1:16 “For we did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty.”

Three out of the four NT Gospels were written no more than 40-60 years after Jesus' death. So, they were circulating within the lifetime of people who had witnessed all of these events for themselves.

BUT REMEMBER, it wasn't just Christ's supporters who were still alive. There were also lots of bystanders, officials, and opponents of Christianity who would have been ready to challenge *anything* that was fabricated or exaggerated. So, it would have been impossible for Christianity to spread as it did had Jesus never said or did the things recorded in the NT.

But, not only were the NT accounts *written too early to be legends/myths*, they were also...

2. Too detailed to be legends and myths

Let me give you some examples...

- **Mark 4** gives us the detail that Jesus is asleep on a cushion in the stern of the boat.
- **John 8** tells that Jesus stooped down twice and wrote in the dirt while others were ready to stone the woman caught in adultery.
- **John 21** tells us several unnecessary facts such as...
 - Their boat was 100 yards offshore.
 - When Peter saw Jesus on the shore, he put on his outer garment before jumping into the water.
 - They caught *exactly* 153 fish.

None of these details are necessary to the narrative, so why put them in there? The only reasonable explanation is because these facts and details had been painstakingly preserved by the eyewitnesses.

C.S. Lewis was a world-class literary critic and former atheist. When he read the NT Gospels, he wrote...

“I have been reading poems, romances, vision literature, legends, and myths all my life. I know what they are like. I know none of them are like this.”

But, not only were the Gospels *written too early* and *too detailed* to be legends/myths; they are also...

3. Too brutally honest to be legends and myths

For example, if someone wanted to fabricate a new world-wide religion...

- Would they include the accounts of their hero (Jesus) saying things like: *"If it is possible, may this cup be taken from me"* (Matt. 26:39), or *"My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?"* (Matt. 27:46). This is not the way to portray your savior if you're trying to fabricate a new movement and get the whole world to follow this one man.
- When the disciples introduced the very first eyewitnesses of the resurrection, would they have used women when the testimonies of women were not even accepted as evidence in court?...

Luke 24:9–11 "And returning from the tomb they [the women] told all these things to the eleven and to all the rest. ¹⁰ Now it was Mary Magdalene and Joanna and Mary the mother of James and the other women with them who told these things to the apostles, ¹¹ but these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them."

Why were the apostles reluctant to believe them? Because they had grown up in a culture where the men simply did not trust a woman's testimony. Think about what's happening here: everything about the Christian faith hinges on the reality of Jesus' resurrection so, if the early church leaders were trying to convince people of a fabricated tale, it would have made far more sense to have well-respected *men* as witnesses when Jesus came out of the tomb.

- Would the leaders of this new movement portray *themselves* as cowards, liars, and slow-witted failures? In fact, the leader of the disciples (Peter) is portrayed as the biggest failure of all. The Gospels are extremely bad PR for the apostles, which is *not* the best approach if you're trying to build a movement based on an elaborate lie.
- Would they make up the story of the crucifixion when everyone in the Greek and Jewish culture knew that only the worst criminals were crucified? This would only cause the average person to view Jesus as a common criminal, not a perfect Savior.

So, if the Gospels were edited and fabricated to win over the multitudes, then the NT writers did a very poor job. The writers left far too many "hard sayings" and culturally unacceptable and politically incorrect accounts that would cause people to turn away from Christianity, not embrace it.

So, why would the leaders of the early church make up those accounts when they would only *hurt* their cause? The only logical explanation is that they were simply recording the facts of what happened. Otherwise, it would be totally counterproductive to their cause.

This is why, when J. Warner Wallace spent months investigating the New Testament documents, applying all of his training and experience with eyewitness accounts, he said he came to the inescapable conclusion that these are exactly the type of accounts that he would expect from *truthful* eyewitness.

But what about the “lost” books of the Bible?

Some would say, “Yeah Gene, but you’re only referencing the four gospels that made their way into the NT. But there are a lot of “lost” gospels (lost books) that portray Christianity in a very different light.”

This skeptical view typically goes something like this...

In the first few centuries after Jesus’ death, there were many rival versions of Christianity, but many of those other “gospels” were suppressed and removed by those in power. Our current NT books represent the “version” of Christianity that just happened to “win out” over time.

But let me give you some examples of these “lost” gospels and you’ll see why they were not accepted as part of the Bible...

The Gospel of Thomas

It’s a collection of 114 sayings. However, the Jesus in this book is *very* different from the Jesus we know from the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. For example, there is no discussion of Christ’s death and resurrection in the gospel of Thomas.

The book ends like this...

“Simon Peter said to him, “Let Mary leave us, for women are not worthy of life.” Jesus said, “I myself shall lead her in order to make her male, so that she too may become a living spirit resembling you males. For every woman who will make herself male will enter the kingdom of heaven.”

The Gospel of Peter

It contains similarities with the New Testament Gospels, including Jesus’ trial, crucifixion, burial, and resurrection. BUT, it also implies that Jesus neither suffered pain nor died. Also, it has some bizarre elements such as giant angels escorting a super-sized version of Jesus from the tomb, followed by a cross that actually *speaks*.

The Gospel of Mary

No complete copy of the Gospel of Mary exists, but the fragments say that Mary received private teachings from Jesus. Mary's gospel rejects Jesus' death on the cross as the path to eternal life.

The Gospel of Judas

In this secret account, written by an unknown source, Jesus has conversations with Judas, who is depicted not as His betrayer, but as His most trusted disciple. In the text, Jesus tells Judas that he will be exalted over all the other disciples *if* he betrays Jesus. Why? Because in doing so Judas will help Jesus be freed from the confines of His earthly body.²

You see, even the most respected and well-known critics of the Bible will tell you not to take the so-called lost books seriously. For example, Bart Ehrman is the Professor of Religious Studies at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. He's the foremost anti-Christian NT scholar in America. He has spent his entire adult life studying the NT for the sole purpose of proving it wrong. And he says this...

"[The New Testament Gospels are] the oldest and best sources we have for knowing about the life of Jesus... [This is] the view of all serious historians of every kind, from committed evangelical Christians to hardcore atheists." – Bart Ehrman

Even Bart Ehrman understands that the NT Gospels are the oldest and best sources for knowing about the life of Jesus, NOT the so-called "lost" gospels. No serious and respected scholar believes that those lost gospels were ever meant to be in the Bible.

² For more on the "lost gospels" go to <https://www.christianity.com/blogs/j-warner-wallace/a-thorough-guide-to-the-non-canonical-gospels.html>
Or go to <https://www.josh.org/lost-gospels-dont-belong-bible/>