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The Eyewitness Evidence

Can the Biographies of Jesus Be Trusted?

When I first met shy and soft-spoken Leo Carter, he was a seventeen-year-old veteran of Chicago's grittiest neighborhood. His testimony had put three killers in prison. And he was still carrying a .38-caliber slug in his skull—a grisly reminder of a horrific saga that began when he witnessed Elijah Baptist gun down a local grocer.

Leo and a friend, Leslie Scott, were playing basketball when they saw Elijah, then a sixteen-year-old delinquent with thirty arrests on his rap sheet, slay Sam Blue outside his grocery store.

Leo had known the grocer since childhood. “When we didn’t have any food, he’d give us some,” Leo explained to me in a quiet voice. “So when I went to the hospital and they said he was dead, I knew I’d have to testify about what I saw.”

Eyewitness testimony is powerful. One of the most dramatic moments in a trial is when a witness describes in detail the crime that he or she saw and then points confidently toward the defendant as being the perpetrator. Elijah Baptist knew that the only way to avoid prison would be to somehow prevent Leo Carter and Leslie Scott from doing just that.

So Elijah and two of his pals went hunting. Soon they tracked down Leo and Leslie, who were walking down the street with Leo’s brother Henry, and they dragged all three at gunpoint to a darkened loading dock nearby.

“I like you,” Elijah’s cousin said to Leo, “but I’ve got to do this.”

With that, he pressed a pistol to the bridge of Leo's nose and yanked the trigger.

The gun roared; the bullet penetrated at a slight angle, blinding Leo in his right eye and embedding in his head. When he crumbled to the ground, another shot was fired, this bullet lodging two inches from his spine.

As Leo watched from his sprawled position, pretending he was dead, he saw his sobbing brother and friend ruthlessly executed at close range. When Elijah and his gang fled, Leo crawled to safety.

Somehow, against all odds, Leo Carter lived. The bullet, too precarious to be removed, remained in his skull. Despite searing headaches that strong medication couldn't dull, he became the sole eyewitness against Elijah Baptist at his trial for killing grocer Sam Blue. The jurors believed Leo, and Elijah was sentenced to eighty years in prison.

Again Leo was the only eyewitness to testify against Elijah and his two companions in the slayings of his brother and his friend. And once more his word was good enough to land the trio in prison for the rest of their lives.

Leo Carter is one of my heroes. He made sure justice was served, even though he paid a monumental price for it. When I think of eyewitness testimony, even to this day—all these years later—his face still appears in my mind.¹

Testimony from Distant Time

Yes, eyewitness testimony can be compelling and convincing. When a witness has had ample opportunity to observe a crime, when there's no bias or ulterior motives, when the witness is truthful and fair, the climactic act of pointing out a defendant in a courtroom can be enough to doom that person to prison or worse.

And eyewitness testimony is just as crucial in investigating historical matters—even the issue of whether Jesus Christ is the unique Son of God.

But what eyewitness accounts do we possess? Do we have the testimony of anyone who personally interacted with Jesus, who listened to his teachings, who saw his miracles, who witnessed his death, and

who perhaps even encountered him after his alleged resurrection? Do we have any records from first-century “journalists” who interviewed eyewitnesses, asked tough questions, and faithfully recorded what they scrupulously determined to be true? Equally important, how well would these accounts withstand the scrutiny of skeptics?

I knew that just as Leo Carter’s testimony clinched the convictions of three brutal murderers, eyewitness accounts from the mists of distant time could help resolve the most important spiritual issue of all. To get solid answers, I arranged to interview the nationally renowned scholar who literally wrote the book on the topic: Dr. Craig Blomberg, author of *The Historical Reliability of the Gospels*.

I knew Blomberg was smart; in fact, even his appearance fit the stereotype. Tall (six feet two) and lanky, with short, wavy brown hair unceremoniously combed forward, a fuzzy beard, and thick, rimless glasses, he looked like the type who would have been valedictorian of his high school (he was), a National Merit Scholar (he was), and a *magna cum laude* graduate from a prestigious seminary (he was, from Trinity Evangelical Divinity School).

But I wanted someone who was more than just intelligent and educated. I was searching for an expert who wouldn’t gloss over nuances or blithely dismiss challenges to the records of Christianity. I wanted someone with integrity, someone who has grappled with the most potent critiques of the faith and who speaks authoritatively but without the kind of sweeping statements that conceal rather than deal with critical issues.

I was told Blomberg was exactly what I was looking for, and I flew to Denver wondering if he could measure up. Admittedly, I had a few doubts, especially when my research yielded one profoundly disturbing fact that he would probably have preferred had remained hidden: Blomberg held out hope that his beloved childhood heroes, the Chicago Cubs, would win the World Series in his lifetime.

Frankly, that was enough to make me a bit suspicious of his discernment—until the Cubs’ victory in 2016 proved Blomberg to be more of a prophet than I am.

THE FIRST INTERVIEW:
Craig L. Blomberg, PhD

Craig Blomberg is widely considered to be one of the country's foremost authorities on the biographies of Jesus, which are called the four gospels. He received his doctorate in New Testament from Aberdeen University in Scotland, later serving as a senior research fellow at Tyndale House at Cambridge University in England, where he was part of an elite group of international scholars that produced a series of acclaimed works on Jesus. For the last dozen years he has been a professor of New Testament at the highly respected Denver Seminary.

In addition to *The Historical Reliability of the Gospels*, Blomberg's books include *The Historical Reliability of John's Gospel*, *Jesus and the Gospels*, *Interpreting the Parables*, *Can We Still Believe the Bible?*, and commentaries on the Gospel of Matthew and 1 Corinthians. He also helped edit volume six of *Gospel Perspectives*, which deals at length with the miracles of Jesus, and he coauthored *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* and *A Handbook of New Testament Exegesis*. He contributed chapters on the historicity of the gospels to the award-winning book *Jesus Under Fire*. His memberships include the Society for the Study of the New Testament, Society of Biblical Literature, and the Institute for Biblical Research.

As I expected, his office had more than its share of scholarly volumes stacked on the shelves (he was even wearing a tie emblazoned with drawings of books).

However, I quickly noted that his office walls were dominated not by dusty tomes from ancient historians but by artwork from his young daughters. Their whimsical and colorful depictions of llamas, houses, and flowers weren't haphazardly pinned up as a casual afterthought; they had obviously been treated as prizes—painstakingly matted, carefully framed, and personally autographed by Elizabeth and Rachel themselves. Clearly, I thought to myself, this man has a heart as well as a brain.

Blomberg speaks with the precision of a mathematician (yes, he taught mathematics too, earlier in his career), carefully measuring each word out of an apparent reluctance to tread even one nuance beyond where the evidence warrants. Exactly what I was looking for.

As he settled into a high-back chair, cup of coffee in hand, I too sipped some coffee to ward off the Colorado chill. Since I sensed Blomberg was a get-to-the-point kind of guy, I decided to start my interview by cutting to the core of the issue.*

Eyewitnesses to History

“Tell me this,” I said with an edge of challenge in my voice, “is it really possible to be an intelligent, critically thinking person and still believe that the four gospels were written by the people whose names have been attached to them?”

Blomberg set his cup of coffee on the edge of his desk and looked intently at me. “The answer is yes,” he said with conviction.

He sat back and continued. “It’s important to acknowledge that strictly speaking, the gospels are anonymous. But the uniform testimony of the early church was that Matthew, also known as Levi, the tax collector and one of the twelve disciples, was the author of the first gospel in the New Testament; that John Mark, a companion of Peter, was the author of the gospel we call Mark; and that Luke, known as Paul’s ‘beloved physician,’ wrote both the gospel of Luke and the Acts of the Apostles.”

“How uniform was the belief that they were the authors?” I asked.

“There are no known competitors for these three gospels,” he said. “Apparently, it was just not in dispute.”

Even so, I wanted to test the issue further. “Excuse my skepticism,” I said, “but would anyone have had a motivation to lie by claiming these people wrote these gospels, when they really didn’t?”

Blomberg shook his head. “Probably not. Remember, these were unlikely characters,” he said, a grin breaking on his face. “Mark and Luke weren’t even among the twelve disciples. Matthew was, but as a former hated tax collector, he would have been the most infamous character next to Judas Iscariot, who betrayed Jesus!

“Contrast this with what happened when the fanciful apocryphal gospels were written much later. People chose the names of well-known

*All interviews edited for conciseness, clarity, and content.

and exemplary figures to be their fictitious authors—Philip, Peter, Mary, James. Those names carried a lot more weight than the names of Matthew, Mark, and Luke. So to answer your question, there would not have been any reason to attribute authorship to these three less-respected people if it weren't true."

That sounded logical, but it was obvious that he was conveniently leaving out one of the gospel writers. "What about John?" I asked. "He was extremely prominent; in fact, he wasn't just one of the twelve disciples, but one of Jesus' inner three, along with James and Peter."

"Yes, he's the one exception," Blomberg conceded with a nod. "And interestingly, John is the only gospel about which there is some question about authorship."

"What exactly is in dispute?"

"The name of the author isn't in doubt—it's certainly John," Blomberg replied. "The question is whether it was John the apostle or a different John."

"You see, the testimony of a Christian writer named Papias, dated about AD 125, refers to John the apostle and John the elder, and it's not clear from the context whether he's talking about one person from two perspectives or two different people. But granted that exception, the rest of the early testimony is unanimous that it was John the apostle—the son of Zebedee—who wrote the gospel."

"And," I said in an effort to pin him down further, "you're convinced that he did?"

"Yes, I believe the substantial majority of the material goes back to the apostle," he replied. "However, if you read the gospel closely, you can see some indication that its concluding verses may have been finalized by an editor. Personally, I have no problem believing that somebody closely associated with John may have functioned in that role, putting the last verses into shape and potentially creating the stylistic uniformity of the entire document."

"But in any event," he stressed, "the gospel is obviously based on eyewitness material, as are the other three gospels."

Delving into Specifics

While I appreciated Blomberg's comments so far, I wasn't ready to move on yet. The issue of who wrote the gospels is tremendously important, and I wanted specific details—names, dates, quotations. I finished off my coffee and put the cup on his desk. Pen poised, I prepared to dig deeper.

"Let's go back to Mark, Matthew, and Luke," I said. "What specific evidence do you have that they are the authors of the gospels?"

Blomberg leaned forward. "Again, the oldest and probably most significant testimony comes from Papias, who in about AD 125 specifically affirmed that Mark had carefully and accurately recorded Peter's eyewitness observations. In fact, he said Mark 'made no mistake' and did not include 'any false statement.' And Papias said Matthew had preserved the teachings of Jesus as well.

"Then Irenaeus, writing about AD 180, confirmed the traditional authorship. In fact, here—," he said, reaching for a book. He flipped it open and read Irenaeus' words.

Matthew published his own Gospel among the Hebrews in their own tongue, when Peter and Paul were preaching the Gospel in Rome and founding the church there. After their departure, Mark, the disciple and interpreter of Peter, himself handed down to us in writing the substance of Peter's preaching. Luke, the follower of Paul, set down in a book the Gospel preached by his teacher. Then John, the disciple of the Lord, who also leaned on his breast, himself produced his Gospel while he was living at Ephesus in Asia.²

I looked up from the notes I was taking. "OK, let me clarify this," I said. "If we can have confidence that the gospels were written by the disciples Matthew and John, by Mark, the companion of the disciple Peter, and by Luke, the historian, companion of Paul, and sort of a first-century journalist, we can be assured that the events they record are based on either direct or indirect eyewitness testimony."

As I was speaking, Blomberg was mentally sifting my words. When I finished, he nodded.

"Exactly," he said crisply.

Ancient versus Modern Biographies

There were still some troubling aspects of the gospels that I needed to clarify. In particular, I wanted to better understand the kind of literary genre they represented.

“When I go to the bookstore and look in the biography section, I don’t see the same kind of writing that I see in the gospels,” I said. “When somebody writes a biography these days, they thoroughly delve into the person’s life. But look at Mark—he doesn’t talk about the birth of Jesus or really anything through Jesus’ early adult years. Instead he focuses on a three-year period and spends half his gospel on the events leading up to and culminating in Jesus’ last week. How do you explain that?”

Blomberg held up a couple of fingers. “There are two reasons,” he replied. “One is literary and the other is theological.

“The literary reason is that basically, this is how people wrote biographies in the ancient world. They did not have the sense, as we do today, that it was important to give equal proportion to all periods of an individual’s life or that it was necessary to tell the story in strictly chronological order or even to quote people verbatim, as long as the essence of what they said was preserved. Ancient Greek and Hebrew didn’t even have a symbol for quotation marks.

“The only purpose for which they thought history was worth recording was because there were some lessons to be learned from the characters described. Therefore the biographer wanted to dwell at length on those portions of the person’s life that were exemplary, that were illustrative, that could help other people, that gave meaning to a period of history.”

“And what’s the theological reason?” I asked.

“It flows out of the point I just made. Christians believe that as wonderful as Jesus’ life and teachings and miracles were, they were meaningless if it were not historically factual that Christ died and was raised from the dead and that this provided atonement, or forgiveness, of the sins of humanity.

“So Mark in particular, as the writer of probably the earliest gospel, devotes roughly half his narrative to the events leading up to and

including one week's period of time and culminating in Christ's death and resurrection.

"Given the significance of the crucifixion," he concluded, "this makes perfect sense in ancient literature."

The Mystery of Q

In addition to the four gospels, scholars often refer to what they call Q, which stands for the German word *Quelle*, or "source."³ Because of similarities in language and content, it has traditionally been assumed that Matthew and Luke drew upon Mark's earlier gospel in writing their own. In addition, scholars have said that Matthew and Luke also incorporated some material from this mysterious Q, material that is absent from Mark.

"What exactly is Q?" I asked Blomberg.

"It's nothing more than a hypothesis," he replied, again leaning back comfortably in his chair. "With few exceptions, it's just sayings or teachings of Jesus, which once may have formed an independent, separate document.

"You see, it was a common literary genre to collect the sayings of respected teachers, sort of as we compile the top music of a singer and put it into a 'best of' album. Q may have been something like that. At least that's the theory."

But if Q existed before Matthew and Luke, it would constitute early material about Jesus. Perhaps, I thought, it can shed some fresh light on what Jesus was really like.

"Let me ask this," I said. "If you isolate just the material from Q, what kind of picture of Jesus do you get?"

Blomberg stroked his beard and stared at the ceiling for a moment as he pondered the question. "Well, you have to keep in mind that Q was a collection of sayings, and therefore it didn't have the narrative material that would have given us a more fully orbed picture of Jesus," he replied, speaking slowly as he chose each word with care.

"Even so, you find Jesus making some very strong claims—for instance, that he was wisdom personified and that he was the one by whom God will judge all humanity, whether they confess him or

disavow him. A significant scholarly book has argued recently that if you isolate all the Q sayings, one actually gets the same kind of picture of Jesus—of someone who made audacious claims about himself—as you find in the gospels more generally.”

I wanted to push him further on this point. “Would he be seen as a miracle worker?” I inquired.

“Again,” he replied, “you have to remember that you wouldn’t get many miracle stories per se, because they’re normally found in the narrative, and Q is primarily a list of sayings.”

He stopped to reach over to his desk, pick up a leather-bound Bible, and rustle through its well-worn pages.

“But, for example, Luke 7:18–23 and Matthew 11:2–6 say that John the Baptist sent his messengers to ask Jesus if he really was the Christ, the Messiah they were waiting for. Jesus replied in essence, ‘Tell him to consider my miracles. Tell him what you’ve seen: the blind see, the deaf hear, the lame walk, the poor have good news preached to them.’

“So even in Q,” he concluded, “there is clearly an awareness of Jesus’ ministry of miracles.”

Blomberg’s mention of Matthew brought to mind another question concerning how the gospels were put together. “Why,” I asked, “would Matthew—purported to be an eyewitness to Jesus—incorporate part of a gospel written by Mark, whom everybody agrees was not an eyewitness? If Matthew’s gospel was really written by an eyewitness, you would think he would have relied on his own observations.”

Blomberg smiled. “It only makes sense if Mark was indeed basing his account on the recollections of the eyewitness Peter,” he said. “As you’ve said yourself, Peter was among the inner circle of Jesus and was privy to seeing and hearing things that other disciples didn’t. So it would make sense for Matthew, even though he was an eyewitness, to rely on Peter’s version of events as transmitted through Mark.”

Yes, I thought to myself, that did make some sense. In fact, an analogy began to form in my mind from my years as a newspaper reporter. I recalled being part of a crowd of journalists that once cornered the famous Chicago political patriarch, the late Mayor Richard J. Daley, to pepper him with questions about a scandal that was brewing in the police department. He made some remarks before escaping to his limousine.

Even though I was an eyewitness to what had taken place, I immediately went to a radio reporter who had been closer to Daley, and asked him to play back his tape of what Daley had just said. This way, I could make sure I had his words correctly written down.

That, I mused, was apparently what Matthew did with Mark—although Matthew had his own recollections as a disciple, his quest for accuracy prompted him to rely on some material that came directly from Peter in Jesus’ inner circle.

The Unique Perspective of John

Feeling satisfied with Blomberg’s initial answers concerning the first three gospels—called the Synoptics, which means “to view at the same time,” because of their similar outline and interrelationship⁴—next I turned my attention to John’s gospel. Anyone who reads all four gospels will immediately recognize that there are obvious differences between the Synoptics and the gospel of John, and I wanted to know whether this means there are irreconcilable contradictions between them.

“Could you clarify the differences between the Synoptic Gospels and John’s gospel?” I asked Blomberg.

His eyebrows shot up. “*Huge* question!” he exclaimed. “I hope to write a whole book on the topic.”

After I assured him I was only after the essentials of the issue, not an exhaustive discussion, he settled back into his chair.

“Well, it’s true that John is more different than similar to the Synoptics,” he began. “Only a handful of the major stories that appear in the other three gospels reappear in John, although that changes noticeably when one comes to Jesus’ last week. From that point forward the parallels are much closer.

“There also seems to be a very different linguistic style. In John, Jesus uses different terminology, he speaks in long sermons, and there seems to be a higher Christology—that is, more direct and more blatant claims that Jesus is one with the Father; God himself; the Way, the Truth, and the Life; the Resurrection and the Life.”

“What accounts for the differences?” I asked.

“For many years the assumption was that John knew everything

Matthew, Mark, and Luke wrote, and he saw no need to repeat it, so he consciously chose to supplement them. More recently it has been assumed that John is largely independent of the other three gospels, which could account for not only the different choices of material but also the different perspectives on Jesus.”

Jesus’ Most Audacious Claim

“There are some theological distinctives to John,” I observed.

“No question, but do they deserve to be called contradictions? I think the answer is no, and here’s why: for almost every major theme or distinctive in John, you can find parallels in Matthew, Mark, and Luke, even if they’re not as plentiful.”

That was a bold assertion. I promptly decided to put it to the test by raising perhaps the most significant issue of all concerning the differences between the Synoptics and John’s gospel.

“John makes very explicit claims of Jesus being God, which some attribute to the fact that he wrote later than the others and began embellishing things,” I said. “Can you find this theme of deity in the Synoptics?”

“Yes, I can,” he said. “It’s more implicit, but you find it there. Think of the story of Jesus walking on the water, found in Matthew 14:22–33 and Mark 6:45–52. Most English translations hide the Greek by quoting Jesus as saying, ‘Take courage! It is I.’ Actually, the Greek literally says, ‘Fear not, I am.’ Those last two words are identical to what Jesus said in John 8:58, when he took upon himself the divine name ‘I AM,’ which is the way God revealed himself to Moses in the burning bush in Exodus 3:14. So Jesus is revealing himself as the one who has the same divine power over nature as Yahweh, the God of the Old Testament.”

I nodded. “That’s one example,” I said. “Do you have any others?”

“Yes, I could go on along these lines,” Blomberg said. “For instance, Jesus’ most common title for himself in the first three gospels is ‘Son of Man,’ and—”

I raised my hand to stop him. “Hold on,” I said. Reaching into my briefcase, I pulled out a book and leafed through it until I located the quote I was looking for. “Karen Armstrong, the former nun who wrote

the bestseller *A History of God*, said it seems that the term ‘Son of Man’ ‘simply stressed the weakness and mortality of the human condition,’ so by using it, Jesus was merely emphasizing that ‘he was a frail human being who would one day suffer and die.’⁵ If that’s true,” I said, “that doesn’t sound like much of a claim to deity.”

Blomberg’s expression turned sour. “Look,” he said firmly, “contrary to popular belief, ‘Son of Man’ does not primarily refer to Jesus’ humanity. Instead, it’s a direct allusion to Daniel 7:13–14.”

With that, he opened the Old Testament and read those words of the prophet Daniel.

In my vision at night I looked, and there before me was one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient of Days and was led into his presence. He was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all peoples, nations and men of every language worshiped him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed.

Blomberg shut the Bible. “So look at what Jesus is doing by applying the term ‘Son of Man’ to himself,” he continued. “This is someone who approaches God himself in his heavenly throne room and is given universal authority and dominion. That makes ‘Son of Man’ a title of great exaltation, not of mere humanity.”

Later I came upon a comment by another scholar whom I would soon interview for this book, William Lane Craig, who has made a similar observation.

“Son of Man” is often thought to indicate the humanity of Jesus, just as the reflex expression “Son of God” indicates his divinity. In fact, just the opposite is true. The Son of Man was a divine figure in the Old Testament book of Daniel who would come at the end of the world to judge mankind and rule forever. Thus, the claim to be the Son of Man would be in effect a claim to divinity.⁶

Continued Blomberg: “In addition, Jesus claims to forgive sins in the Synoptics, and that’s something only God can do. Jesus accepts prayer and worship. Jesus says, ‘Whoever acknowledges me, I will

acknowledge before my Father in heaven.’ Final judgment is based on one’s reaction to—whom? This mere human being? No, that would be a very arrogant claim. Final judgment is based on one’s reaction to Jesus *as God*.

“As you can see, there’s all sorts of material in the Synoptics about the deity of Christ that then merely becomes more explicit in John’s gospel.”

The Gospels’ Theological Agenda

In authoring the last gospel, John did have the advantage of being able to mull over theological issues for a longer period of time. So I asked Blomberg, “Doesn’t the fact that John was writing with more of a theological bent mean that his historical material may have been tainted and therefore less reliable?”

“I don’t believe John is more theological,” Blomberg stressed. “He just has a different cluster of theological emphases. Matthew, Mark, and Luke each have very distinctive theological angles that they want to highlight: Luke, the theologian of the poor and of social concern; Matthew, the theologian trying to understand the relationship of Christianity and Judaism; Mark, who shows Jesus as the suffering servant. You can make a long list of the distinctive theologies of Matthew, Mark, and Luke.”

I interrupted because I was afraid Blomberg was missing my broader point. “OK, but don’t those theological motivations cast doubt on their ability and willingness to accurately report what happened?” I asked. “Isn’t it likely that their theological agenda would prompt them to color and twist the history they recorded?”

“It certainly means that, as with any ideological document, we have to consider that as a possibility,” he admitted. “There are people with axes to grind who distort history to serve their ideological ends, but unfortunately people have concluded that always happens, which is a mistake.

“In the ancient world the idea of writing dispassionate, objective history merely to chronicle events, with no ideological purpose, was unheard of. Nobody wrote history if there wasn’t a reason to learn from it.”

I smiled. “I suppose you could say that makes everything suspect,” I suggested.

“Yes, at one level it does,” he replied. “But if we can reconstruct reasonably accurate history from all kinds of other ancient sources, we ought to be able to do that from the gospels, even though they too are ideological.”

Blomberg thought for a moment, searching his mind for an appropriate analogy to drive home his point. Finally he said, “Here’s a modern parallel, from the experience of the Jewish community, that might clarify what I mean.

“Some people, usually for anti-Semitic purposes, deny or downplay the horrors of the Holocaust. But it has been the Jewish scholars who’ve created museums, written books, preserved artifacts, and documented eyewitness testimony concerning the Holocaust.

“Now, they have a very ideological purpose—namely, to ensure that such an atrocity never occurs again—but they have also been the most faithful and objective in their reporting of historical truth.

“Christianity was likewise based on certain historical claims that God uniquely entered into space and time in the person of Jesus of Nazareth, so the very ideology that Christians were trying to promote required as careful historical work as possible.”

He let his analogy sink in. Turning to face me more directly, he asked, “Do you see my point?”

I nodded to indicate that I did.

Hot News from History

It’s one thing to say that the gospels are rooted in direct or indirect eyewitness testimony; it’s another to claim that this information was reliably preserved until it was finally written down years later. This, I knew, was a major point of contention, and I wanted to challenge Blomberg with this issue as forthrightly as I could.

Again I picked up Armstrong’s popular book *A History of God*. “Listen to something else she wrote,” I said.

We know very little about Jesus. The first full-length account of his life was St. Mark’s gospel, which was not written until about the year 70, some forty years after his death. By that time, historical

facts had been overlaid with mythical elements which expressed the meaning Jesus had acquired for his followers. It is this meaning that St. Mark primarily conveys rather than a reliable straightforward portrayal.⁷

Tossing the book back into my open briefcase, I turned to Blomberg and continued. “Some scholars say the gospels were written so far after the events that legend developed and distorted what was finally written down, turning Jesus from merely a wise teacher into the mythological Son of God. Is that a reasonable hypothesis, or is there good evidence that the gospels were recorded earlier than that, before legend could totally corrupt what was ultimately recorded?”

Blomberg’s eyes narrowed, and his voice took on an adamant tone. “There are two separate issues here, and it’s important to keep them separate,” he said. “I do think there’s good evidence for suggesting early dates for the writing of the gospels. But even if there wasn’t, Armstrong’s argument doesn’t work anyway.”

“Why not?” I asked.

“The standard scholarly dating, even in very liberal circles, is Mark in the 70s, Matthew and Luke in the 80s, John in the 90s. But listen: that’s still within the lifetimes of various eyewitnesses of the life of Jesus, including hostile eyewitnesses who would have served as a corrective if false teachings about Jesus were going around.

“Consequently, these late dates for the gospels really aren’t all that late. In fact, we can make a comparison that’s very instructive.

“The two earliest biographies of Alexander the Great were written by Arrian and Plutarch more than four hundred years after Alexander’s death in 323 BC, yet historians consider them to be generally trustworthy. Yes, legendary material about Alexander did develop over time, but it was only in the centuries after these two writers.

“In other words, the first five hundred years kept Alexander’s story pretty much intact; legendary material began to emerge over the next five hundred years. So whether the gospels were written sixty years or thirty years after the life of Jesus, the amount of time is negligible by comparison. It’s almost a nonissue.”

I could see what Blomberg was saying. At the same time, I had

some reservations about it. To me, it seemed intuitively obvious that the shorter the gap between an event and when it was recorded in writing, the less likely those writings would fall victim to legend or faulty memories.

“Let me concede your point for the moment, but let’s get back to the dating of the gospels,” I said. “You indicated that you believe they were written sooner than the dates you mentioned.”

“Yes, sooner,” he said. “And we can support that by looking at the book of Acts, which was written by Luke. Acts ends apparently unfinished—Paul is a central figure of the book, and he’s under house arrest in Rome. With that, the book abruptly halts. What happens to Paul? We don’t find out from Acts, probably because the book was written before Paul was put to death.”

Blomberg was getting more wound up as he went. “That means Acts cannot be dated any later than AD 62. Having established that, we can then move backward from there. Since Acts is the second of a two-part work, we know the first part—the Gospel of Luke—must have been written earlier than that. And since Luke incorporates parts of the gospel of Mark, that means Mark is even earlier.

“If you allow maybe a year for each of those, you end up with Mark written no later than about AD 60, maybe even the late 50s. If Jesus was put to death in AD 30 or 33, we’re talking about a maximum gap of thirty years or so.”

He sat back in his chair with an air of triumph. “Historically speaking, especially compared with Alexander the Great,” he said, “that’s like a news flash!”

Indeed, that was impressive, closing the gap between the events of Jesus’ life and the writing of the gospels to the point where it was negligible by historical standards. However, I still wanted to push the issue. My goal was to turn the clock back as far as I could to get to the very earliest information about Jesus.

Going Back to the Beginning

I stood and strolled over to the bookcase. “Let’s see if we can go back even further,” I said, turning toward Blomberg. “How early can we date

the fundamental beliefs in Jesus' atonement, his resurrection, and his unique association with God?"

"It's important to remember that the books of the New Testament are not in chronological order," he began. "The gospels were written after almost all the letters of Paul, whose writing ministry probably began in the late 40s. Most of his major letters appeared during the 50s. To find the earliest information, one goes to Paul's epistles and then asks, 'Are there signs that even earlier sources were used in writing them?'"

"And," I prompted, "what do we find?"

"We find that Paul incorporated some creeds, confessions of faith, or hymns from the earliest Christian church. These go way back to the dawning of the church soon after the resurrection.

"The most famous creeds include Philippians 2:6–11, which talks about Jesus being 'in very nature God,' and Colossians 1:15–20, which describes him as being 'the image of the invisible God,' who created all things and through whom all things are reconciled with God 'by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross.'

"Those are certainly significant in explaining what the earliest Christians were convinced about Jesus. But perhaps the most important creed in terms of the historical Jesus is 1 Corinthians 15, where Paul uses technical language to indicate he was passing along this oral tradition in relatively fixed form."

Blomberg located the passage in his Bible and read it to me.

For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, and then to the Twelve. After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers and sisters at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles.⁸

"And here's the point," Blomberg said. "If the crucifixion was as early as AD 30, Paul's conversion was about 32. Immediately Paul was ushered into Damascus, where he met with a Christian named Ananias and some other disciples. His first meeting with the apostles in Jerusalem would have been about AD 35. At some point along there,

Paul was given this creed, which had already been formulated and was being used in the early church.

“Now, here you have the key facts about Jesus’ death for our sins, plus a detailed list of those to whom he appeared in resurrected form—all dating back to within two to five years of the events themselves!

“That’s not later mythology from forty or more years down the road, as Armstrong suggested. A good case can be made for saying that Christian belief in the resurrection, though not yet written down, can be dated to within two years of that very event.

“This is enormously significant,” he said, his voice rising a bit in emphasis. “Now you’re not comparing thirty to sixty years with the five hundred years that’s generally acceptable for other data—you’re talking about two!”

I couldn’t deny the importance of that evidence. It certainly seemed to take the wind out of the charge that the resurrection—which is cited by Christians as the crowning confirmation of Jesus’ divinity—was merely a mythological concept that developed over long periods of time as legends corrupted the eyewitness accounts of Christ’s life. For me, this struck especially close to home—as a skeptic, that was one of my biggest objections to Christianity.

I leaned against the bookcase. We had covered a lot of material, and Blomberg’s climactic assertion seemed like a good place to pause.

A Short Recess

It was getting late in the afternoon. We had been talking for quite a while without a break. However, I didn’t want to end our conversation without putting the eyewitness accounts to the same kind of tests to which a lawyer or journalist would subject them. I needed to know: Would they stand up under that scrutiny, or would they be exposed as questionable at best or unreliable at worst?

The necessary groundwork having been laid, I invited Blomberg to stand and stretch his legs before we sat back down to resume our discussion.

Deliberations

Questions for Reflection or Group Study

1. How have your opinions been influenced by someone's eyewitness account of an event? What are some factors you routinely use to evaluate whether someone's story is honest and accurate? How do you think the gospels would stand up to that kind of scrutiny?
2. Do you believe that the gospels can have a theological agenda while at the same time being trustworthy in what they report? Why or why not? Do you find Blomberg's Holocaust analogy helpful in thinking through this issue?
3. How and why does Blomberg's description of the early information about Jesus affect your opinion about the reliability of the gospels?

For Further Evidence

More Resources on This Topic

- Barnett, Paul. *Is the New Testament Reliable?* Second edition. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Academic, 2005.
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- Bruce, F. F. *The New Testament Documents: Are They Reliable?* Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1960.
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