

# When Were the Gospels Written?

## Introduction

- “The Gospels can't be trusted! The supposed accounts of Jesus's life were written hundreds of years after the events they describe.”
- How would you respond to this objection? That's what we're talking about today.
- This is a special webinar from the Think Institute and the Worldview Legacy Podcast, the show that helps Christian men become the worldview leaders their families and churches need.
- My name is Joel Settecase. I am a former pastor and missionary, and now I'm the Executive Director of the Think Institute. I used to defend my faith the completely wrong way, until God changed my attitude and my approach. Now I help believers to talk about their faith with confidence, pass it on to the younger generation, and answer the world's questions, from the Bible.
- **So when were the Gospels actually written?**
- **Why does this challenge matter to us?**
  - It implies that the accounts in the New Testament cannot be trusted.
  - Would you trust someone today writing about George Washington's nextdoor neighbor?
  - Would you trust someone writing your biography 300 years from now, without first-hand accounts?
- It would have major implications for whether we can trust the Gospel.
- And since the Gospel is the answer to mankind's biggest problem (sin) this affects humanity, for eternal life, and for our ability to know God. It could undermine the Christian message.
- Have you encountered this challenge? If not, you will. And if not you, your kids and your wife will. In fact, those in your local area, whom you come into contact with on a daily basis, probably already have encountered this challenge.
- The world is asking this question.
- By being able to answer it, you will be better prepared to live out God's calling in your life, and to build a legacy in your family, your church and your local area. This is an important piece in the puzzle of a complete Christian worldview.
  - Knowing how to answer it can help you share the Gospel, and, Lord willing, to see Jesus change lives as you share your faith.

- So this is a big deal.

Today we're going to answer the following questions:

- Why Is It Inconsistent For A Skeptic To Make Historical Objections?
- How Does The Bible Give The Categories Needed For Historical Objections?
- How Do We Know The Gospels Were Written Early?

Want More Resources Like This?

- If you are intrigued by this topic, and you want to talk more about it with other like minded Christian laymen on the same journey you're on, then you need to know about our online community.
- This is the group where you can discuss and learn from over 700 others on the same journey you're on.
- Every day we're finding answers to important questions, and sharing resources that will help you understand and live out God's unique calling on your life as a worldview leader.
- I'll tell you how to get access to the group

Let's jump in.

- **When you encounter this challenge, beware your first response!** Don't start slinging evidence right away!
- We must defend God's truth God's way.
- We'll use a three-step, presuppositional method.

Step One: Why Is It Inconsistent For A Skeptic To Make Historical Objections? (Reductio Ad Absurdum)

- Reduce the unbiblical position to absurdity.
- **Clarify** your discussion partner's position.
- You want to respond accurately. So you need an accurate understanding of what he means.
- Questions to ask:

1. What do you mean by that?
  2. Is that absolutely true?
  3. By what standard?
  4. How do you know that?
  5. So what? (this is really where you want to get him to).
- **Identify the contradiction.** Is there an internal conflict in the skeptical worldview?
  - What are some of his beliefs?
    - The Bible is not trustworthy.
    - There are certain principles or assumptions by which we may judge the historical trustworthiness of a document.
  - **What are those principles?**
    1. A historical account is more trustworthy if it is written earlier and by eyewitnesses.
    2. It is possible to know the past. It is possible to study history and learn what happened.
  - **Expose the contradiction with questions.**
    - Without God, why think that eyewitness testimony or early writing is better?
      - Is this a "rule" about "the way things work?"
      - Where do rules like this come from?
      - Why think "rules" like this will remain true over time? For all you know, the rules could be changing all the time, right? Is this a random universe?
    - Without God, why think that the past can be known at all?
      - How do we know there was a past at all?
      - Without God's authoritative revelation—telling us for certain that there is an external world and a timeline of history—why believe there is a basis for even one percent certainty about the past?
    - Without God, why assume that the world is consistent?
      - Why think that the principles of evidence that we believe today were true in the First, Second or Third Centuries?
  - Bring it home: the doubting position relies on assumptions that make no sense without the Triune God of Scripture.
    - At best, he may appeal to principles that "everyone knows." But stating that is not the same as explaining or accounting for why that is the case.

## Step Two, Part One: How Does The Bible Give The Categories Needed For Historical Objections?

Do an internal critique on the Christian position.

- “Internal Critique”: seek to falsify or demonstrate a discontinuity with an idea by hypothetically (and comprehensively) assuming its truth in order to prove some internal inconsistency or contradiction with it.”<sup>1</sup>
- You are entering into a worldview, *for the sake of argument*, in order to see if all the parts agree with each other.
- **Consider:** what conditions are needed for the objection to “stick?” These are the same two assumptions made by the skeptic above.
  - A historical account is more trustworthy if it is written earlier and by eyewitnesses.
  - It is possible to know the past. It is possible to study history and learn what happened.
- **Reveal how the biblical worldview gives the basis for those assumptions/principles.**

Principle 1: A historical account is more likely to be true if it is written earlier and by eyewitnesses.

- **Does the Bible support this principle? Yes!**
  - Luke 1:1–3: Many have undertaken to compile a narrative about the events that have been fulfilled[a]among us, **2** just as the original **eyewitnesses** and servants of the word handed them down to us. **3** So it also seemed good to me, since I have **carefully investigated** everything **from the very first**, to write to you in an orderly sequence, most honorable Theophilus, **4** so that you may **know the certainty** of the things about which you have been instructed.
  - John 19:35: He who **saw this has testified** so that you also may believe. His testimony is true, and **he knows** he is telling the truth.

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<sup>1</sup> The Difference Between Internal & External Critiques," 18 April, 2016, Free Thinking Ministries, accessed 15 November, 2021, <https://freethinkingministries.com/the-difference-between-internal-external-critiques>.

- 1 John 1:1-3: What was from the beginning, what we have **heard**, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have **observed** and have **touched** with our hands, concerning the word of life—**2** that life was revealed, and we have **seen** it and we **testify** and declare to you the eternal life that was with the Father and was revealed to us— **3** what we have **seen** and **heard** we also **declare** to you, so that you may also have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ.
- In these verses, the Gospel writers positively mention how they witnessed the events they describe firsthand—or interviewed eyewitnesses.
- **What does this mean?**
  - These passages are included in Scripture. That means that we believe God wants us to believe them and take them seriously.
  - So God wants us to value eyewitness testimony.
  - Scripture supports the importance of eyewitnesses and early authorship!

Principle 2: The past can be known. It is possible to study history to learn what happened in the past.

- Does this Bible teach this principle? Yes!
  - Deuteronomy 32:7: **Remember** the days of **old**; **consider** the years of **past** generations. Ask your father, and he will tell you, your elders, and they will teach you.
  - Psalm 78:3–4: things we have heard and known and that our **ancestors** have **passed down** to us. **4** We will not hide them from their children, but will tell a **future generation** the praiseworthy acts of the Lord, his might, and the wondrous works he has performed.
  - Romans 15:4: For whatever was written in the **past** was written for **our instruction**, so that we may have hope through endurance and through the encouragement from the Scriptures.
- So what does this mean?
  - God wanted these passages, like the other ones, to be included in the Bible.
  - That means that we, as Christians must believe in the possibility of knowing the past. God commands us to do so!

## Step Two, Part Two: How Do We Know The Gospels Were Written Early?

- It's not just that the skeptic cannot account for historical evidence. It's not just that the Christian can.
- It's also that, when scrutinized, the Gospels do actually stand up to the evidence.
- There is abundant, good evidence that the New Testament was written early.
  - *(Note: don't expect your non-Christian discussion partner to immediately accept this evidence—or to immediately drop to his knees and become a Christian! You are presenting it to "vindicate" (prove the truth) of the Christian message, but convincing unbelievers is the work of God.)*

### Acts Was Written Between 60–62 A.D.

- **The Pharisees are portrayed sympathetically.** Later in the First Century, there would be a “Pharisaic revival” that would lead to “a new phase of conflict” with Christianity (so Hemer via Geisler). If Acts were written after 100 A.D., we would expect to see this reflected. Cf. Acts 5:33; 15:5; 23:6ff.
- **Acts portrays the Sadducees as prominent and authoritative.** However, they ceased to be influencers after Jerusalem was destroyed in 70 A.D. This indicates that Luke was intimately aware of the role this group played in the pre-70 A.D. world.
- **The New Testament Fails to Describe the Destruction of the Temple.** An event so catastrophic to the Jewish people would have been mentioned. The fact that it is not, indicates that Acts was written prior to 70 A.D. This holds true for the other New Testament writings.
- **Acts (And the other NT Books) Fails to Describe the Events of 66 A.D.** Roman armies besieged Jerusalem for three years prior to destroying the temple. The siege is not mentioned nor the “deterioration of relations” (Geisler) were mentioned, so these Scriptures must have been written down before these things transpired.
- **Acts says nothing about the breaking down of relations between Rome and Christians.** Nero persecuted Christians in the late 60s A.D. This is not referred to in Acts, indicating that Acts was written prior to that time.
- **Acts is filled with minor, specific details of life in the Roman Empire.** This period stretched from 31 B.C. to 68 A.D., so Luke would have written Acts during those years.
- **The style of Acts reflects a feeling of confidence that would have seemed out of place during the events of the late 60s A.D.** If Acts were written after Nero's

persecutions and the Roman-Jewish War, such apparent triumphalism would not be expected.

- **Terminology used in Acts is typical of an earlier period.** Adolf Harnack<sup>2</sup> cites the Christians' usage of "ho christos" to mean "the Messiah" rather than as a proper name for Jesus (as became typical in later Christian writings).
- **In Acts, Luke Says Nothing About the Deaths of Paul and Peter.** We know from Eusebius (and Foxe, following him) that Paul was killed in Rome during the Neronian wave of persecution in 64 A.D.<sup>3</sup> Peter was also killed at that time, or shortly thereafter in 65 A.D. (so Wallace, cf. also [this Crosswalk article](#)<sup>4</sup>). At the end of Acts, both men are still alive.
- **Acts seems to have been written prior to Peter's arrival in Rome.** If Peter died in Rome in 64 or 65 A.D., this would entail that Acts was written earlier.
- **Acts Says Nothing About The Death of James, the Half-Brother of Jesus.** Josephus (Antiquities of the Jews, 20:9) says James was killed by the Sanhedrin under the procuratorship of Albinus, ca. 62 A.D. James apparently hadn't been killed when Acts was written.
- **Acts Ends Abruptly With Events In The Early 60s A.D.** Geisler says that the book ends with "vivid immediacy." There is not the kind of resolution which one would expect if the book were written years after the events leading up to 62 A.D.

## Luke's Gospel Predates the Book of Acts.

- **From the introduction to Luke's Gospel and the book of Acts, it is clear that Luke wrote his Gospel before he wrote Acts.** The author mentions his "former book," which fits the description of one of the Gospels. "The destiny ('Theophilus'), style and vocabulary of the two books betray a common author. Roman [historian] Colin Hemer has provided powerful evidence that Acts was written between AD 60 and 62."<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Mentioned by Hemer via Geisler in "The Dating of the New Testament," accessed at BeThinking.org on 21 December, 2022 at <https://www.bethinking.org/bible/the-dating-of-the-new-testament>.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. "How Old Was Paul When He Died?" at GotQuestions: <https://www.gotquestions.org/how-old-was-Paul-when-He-died.html>

<sup>4</sup> Accessed 21 December, 2022 at <https://www.crosswalk.com/faith/bible-study/how-did-peter-die-and-why-is-it-so-significant.html>

<sup>5</sup> Geisler in "The Dating of the New Testament," accessed at BeThinking.org on 21 December, 2022 at <https://www.bethinking.org/bible/the-dating-of-the-new-testament>.

- **Paul Quoted Luke’s Gospel in His Letter to Timothy.** Paul wrote 1 Timothy after the events in Acts, between his first and second stints in prison.<sup>6</sup> Wallace<sup>7</sup> writes, "Paul appeared to be aware of Luke’s gospel and wrote as though it was common knowledge in about AD 63–64, when Paul penned his first letter to Timothy." Specifically, Paul calls Jesus' quote in Luke 10:7, "Scripture." So he was familiar with Luke’s Gospel and even considered it Scripture! *This means Luke's Gospel was written early enough that its contents had become widespread knowledge by 63–64 A.D.*
- **Paul Quoted Luke’s Gospel in His Letter to the Corinthians.** In 1 Corinthians 11:23–25, Paul references the Last Supper account in Luke 22:19–20. Paul wrote 1 Corinthians about 10 years before 1 Timothy<sup>8</sup> or about 55 A.D. *That means Luke's Gospel must have already been written by the early 50s A.D.*
- **All this means that Luke “was written less than thirty years of [sic] the death of Jesus.** This is contemporary to the generation who witnessed the events of Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection. This is precisely what Luke claims in the prologue to his Gospel....” (Geisler)

1 Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile a narrative of the things that have been accomplished among us,<sup>2</sup> 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.

## What About The Other Gospels?

- **Luke gives the same account of Jesus’ life as the other Gospels.** There are some differences in detail, but nothing contradictory.<sup>9</sup>
- **Luke Quoted Mark (and Matthew) Repeatedly.** Luke was *not* an eyewitness, but "described himself as as historian, collecting the statements from the eyewitnesses who were present at the time" (cf. Luke 1:1–4). Luke therefore included 350 verses from Mark and 250 verses from Matthew in His Gospel. *This means Mark's Gospel (and likely Matthew's) was written before the 50s A.D.*
- **Some scholars believe Matthew’s Gospel was written “as early as ten to twelve years after the death of Christ.”** It seems that he first wrote it for a Jewish audience in

<sup>6</sup> "Introduction to 1 Timothy," accessed 21 December, 2022, at <https://www.esv.org/resources/esv-global-study-bible/introduction-to-1-timothy/>.

<sup>7</sup> J. Warner Wallace, "Why I Know The Gospels Were Written Early (Downloadable Bible Insert), at Cold-Case Christianity, accessed on 21 December, 2022, at Geisler in "The Dating of the New Testament," accessed at BeThinking.org on 21 December, 2022 at <https://www.bethinking.org/bible/the-dating-of-the-new-testament>.

<sup>8</sup> So Wallace.

<sup>9</sup> Geisler, "The Dating of the New Testament"



Aramaic, and that it was translated later into Greek. This view seems to have been held by church fathers Irenaeus, Origen and Eusebius. Amazingly, according to GotQuestions.org, Eusebius wrote that,

“Matthew wrote his Gospel before he left Israel to preach in other lands, which Eusebius says happened about 12 years after the death of Christ. Some scholars believe that this would place the writing of Matthew as early as A.D. 40-45 and as late as A.D. 55.”

- **The four Gospels are cited over 19,300 times by church fathers between the years of 95—339 A.D.** This is strong evidence that the books were completed before the end of the First Century, during the lifetime of the eyewitnesses (e.g. John, who probably died near the end of the First Century).<sup>10</sup>

## Other Evidence:

- **The Names In The Gospels Correspond Perfectly To Those Of The Palestinian Jews Of The First Century.** According to Bill Pratt writing for Tough Questions Answered,<sup>11</sup> “British New Testament scholar Richard Bauckham did some exhaustive work correlating New Testament names . . . with the list of 3,000 names compiled by Ilan and concluded the following”:
  - **“The Gospels were nearly perfect in how they captured the frequency of names among Palestinian Jews of the time.”**
    - “For instance, Ilan’s list of the 10 most popular names matched rank for rank the list of the most frequent names in the Gospels and Acts. This is an extraordinary confirmatory correlation.”
  - **“By contrast, if you examine the most popular Jewish names in a different region (such as Egypt) at the time, the list is dramatically different.”**
    - “The pattern of names does not match what we know the pattern to be in Palestine.”
  - **“Also by contrast, if you examine the names that appear in the Apocryphal Gospels (such as the Gospels of Thomas, Mary, Judas), you discover that the frequency and proportion of names in these writings do not match what we know to be true of names from the land and time of Jesus.”**
    - “Hence the Apocryphal Gospels do not have the ring of authenticity with regard to personal names and are rightly called into question.”

## J. Warner Wallace’s Timeline for the Gospels

- 0–33 A.D.: Life of Jesus
- 45–50 A.D.: Mark writes his Gospel

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Bill Pratt, “How Do Palestinian Names Lend Credence To The Gospels?” accessed 21 December at <https://www.toughquestionsanswered.org/tag/richard-bauckham/>.

- 50–53 A.D.: Luke writes his Gospel
- 53–57 A.D.: Paul quotes Luke
- 57–60 A.D.: Luke writes Acts
- 61–65 A.D.: James, Peter and Paul die
- 67–70 A.D.: Rome sieges Jerusalem
- 70 A.D.: Destruction of the Temple

Geisler remarks:

“Mark and / or Acts must have been written within the lifetime of the apostles and contemporaries of the events. There would have been no time for mythological embellishment of the records. They must be accepted as historical... No first century date allows time for myths or legends to creep into the stories about Jesus. Legend development takes at least two full generations, according to A.N Sherwin-White (see Sherwin-White, 189).”

Wallace concludes:

The evidence from history (and the texts themselves) most reasonably points to the early authorship of the Gospels. This early dating is helpful in assessing their truth status. If the Gospels were written this early, in the very region where the events took place, it would have been difficult for them to include obvious lies, given that they would have been written to people who were alive during the events recorded in the New Testament. These people would have been available to vet the content of the Gospels and call them out as lies if they contained fallacious information. The early dating of the Gospels is an important factor in determining their reliability....<sup>12</sup>

So the Gospels stand up to historical scrutiny. And this is important to us as Christians. Our worldview requires us to take history seriously. This is in contrast to a godless worldview, which has no basis for doing so.

## Evangelistic Appeal

- **Finally, we're ready to make our evangelistic appeal.** Apologetics should serve our evangelism (2 Timothy 2:24–25).
- We may say something like, "You may not be convinced, but you've seen that your worldview cannot account for principles of evidence, historical study, or consistency in the world and its principles. The biblical worldview accounts for all of these, and it violates none of them. Your unbelief is arbitrary, and this is sin (Romans 1:18-24). The Bible says that the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord. He died for sinners like you and me, was buried, and rose again. He now rules as King and forgives everyone who receives Him as Savior and Lord. Does that make

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

sense?"

## Conclusion

- We have followed a three-step method for answering this challenge.
  - We exposed the inherent conflict in the skeptical position.
  - We revealed how the biblical worldview provides the criteria needed for the argument to make sense.
  - We showed how the Gospels stand up to those criteria.
- We then pivoted to the Gospel of Jesus Christ.
- You don't need to know all the evidence.
- Focus on getting to the Gospel, which is the true solution to your friend's biggest problem.
  - When you make your case this way, you'll show that believing the Bible is *the prerequisite* for even thinking that historical inquiry is possible.
  - That will evaporate the objection that it was written centuries after the events it describes.

It might not convince the person (only the Holy Spirit can do that), but it will go a long way toward giving a reasoned defense for the hope you have within you (1 Peter 3:15–17).

This objection matters. Knowing how to answer it can go a long way toward building a Christian worldview legacy in your family, at work, and in your local area.

## Recommended Resources For Further Research:

- Joel Settecase, "Should We 'Waste Our Time' Preparing To Defend Our Faith?" <https://coldcasechristianity.com/writings/should-we-waste-our-time-preparing-to-defend-our-faith/>.
- J. Warner Wallace, "Why I Know The Gospels Were Written Early (Downloadable Bible Insert), at <https://coldcasechristianity.com/writings/why-i-know-the-gospels-were-written-early-free-bible-insert>
- Norman Geisler, "The Dating of the New Testament," BeThinking.org.
- 'The Baker Encyclopedia of Christian Apologetics' by Norman L. Geisler (pp. 37-41)
- C.J. Hemer, *The Book of Acts in the Setting of Hellenistic History*.

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## Q&A