

The Case for Christianity

Lesson 2A – Are the Scriptures Trustworthy?

“Chronological Proximity Matters”

“Why was the tomb supposedly empty? I say supposedly because, frankly, I don’t know that it was. Our very first reference to Jesus’ tomb being empty is in the Gospel of Mark, written forty years later by someone living in a different country who had heard that it was empty. How would he know?” - Bart Ehrman, New Testament scholar, professor of religious studies, and author of Jesus Interrupted (Jesus Interrupted -New York: HarperOne, 2010), 177.

“The so-called Gospel of John is something special and reflects ... the highly evolved theology of a Christian writer who lived three generations after Jesus.” - Geza Vermes, scholar, historian, and author of The Changing Faces of Jesus (The Changing Faces of Jesus (New York: Penguin, 2002), 8.

“No work of art of any kind has ever been discovered, no painting, or engraving, no sculpture, or other relic of antiquity, which may be looked upon as furnishing additional evidence of the existence of these gospels, and which was executed earlier than the latter part of the second century.” - Charles Burlingame Waite, historian and author of History of the Christian Religion to the Year Two Hundred (History of the Christian Religion to the Year Two Hundred (San Diego: Book Tree, 2011), Kindle edition, Kindle locations 5080–5082.

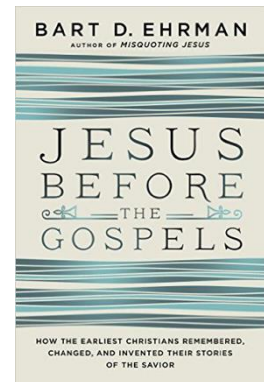


Bart Denton Ehrman (born October 5, 1955) is an American New Testament scholar, currently the James A. Gray Distinguished Professor of Religious Studies at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. He is one of North America’s leading scholars in his field, having written and edited 30 books, including three college textbooks. He has also achieved acclaim at the popular level, authoring five New York Times bestsellers. Ehrman’s work focuses on textual criticism of the New Testament, the historical Jesus, and the development of early Christianity

“Jesus Before the Gospels – How the Earliest Christians Remembered, Changed, and Invented Their Stories of the Savior”

DESCRIPTION - Many believe that the Gospel stories of Jesus are based on eyewitness testimony and are therefore historically reliable. Now, for the first time, a scholar of the New Testament, New York Times bestselling author Bart D. Ehrman (Misquoting Jesus; and Jesus, Interrupted), surveys research from the fields of psychology, anthropology, and sociology to explore how oral traditions and group memories really work and questions how reliable the Gospels can be.

Jesus Before the Gospels is a compelling narrative that not only demonstrates Ehrman’s deep knowledge and meticulous scholarship, but also challenges the historical accuracy of the Gospels and what they tell us about the historical Jesus, the way we read and think about these sacred texts, and how we view history.



An Interview with Author Bart D. Ehrman

Q: What is it that drives your fascination with how Jesus has been "remembered" and "misremembered"?

A: When most people today read the Gospels of the New Testament, they nearly always assume that these accounts were written soon after Jesus' death by people who knew him and his disciples: these are transcripts of the things Jesus said and did, down to the minute detail. What people tend not to realize is that these accounts were written 40–60 years after Jesus had died, by people who did not know him, who did not live in his same country, who did not speak his same language.

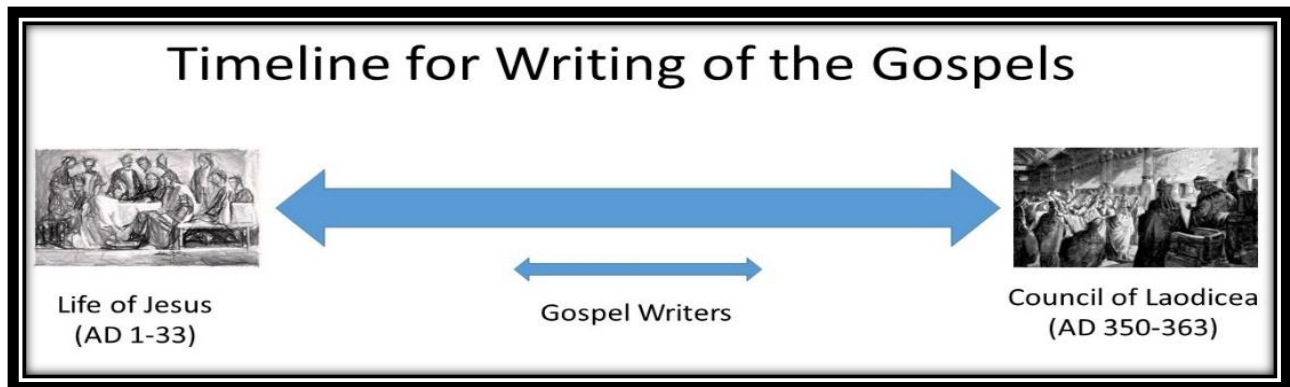
IF THE GOSPELS ARE LATE, THEY'RE A LIE...

Any discussion of the truth of the Christian faith, begins and ends with the veracity of the gospels. They are the primary source for all that we know about the life of Christ and his teachings. As a result, any attempt to defend the truthfulness of Christianity, must begin with an analysis of the reliability of scripture.

Many skeptics allege the Gospels were penned long after the life of Christ and far removed from his teachings. As a result, they contend that they cannot be trusted as an accurate record of his life. Since they were written so late, they were not true eyewitness accounts. It's really as simple as that; true eyewitnesses to the life of Jesus would have lived (and written) in the first century.

Unbelieving scholars argue that the Gospels were written in the second or third century, much closer to the establishment of Christianity in the Roman Empire than to the alleged life of Jesus.

Timeline for Writing of the Gospels



Before we can take the Gospels seriously as eyewitness accounts, we need to decide when they were first written on this timeline. If they first appeared toward the right (closer to the church councils and the formal establishment of the Catholic Church), there is good reason to doubt that they were true witnesses to the sufferings of Christ (**1 Pet. 5:1**) or that they actually saw Jesus with their own eyes (**1 John 1:1-3**). If, on the other hand, they first appeared to the left side of this timeline, the probability of them being historically accurate eye witness accounts increases dramatically.

Circumstantial Evidence Forming a Compelling Case for an Early Dating of the Gospels

Council of Laodicea

A regional assembly of approximately 30 clerics from Asia Minor that assembled about 363-364 AD in Laodicea, Phrygia Pacatiana.

The major concerns of the council involved regulating the conduct of church members and identifying an authoritative list of scripture (establish a biblical canon).

- **THE NEW TESTAMENT FAILS TO DESCRIBE THE DESTRUCTION OF THE TEMPLE** - We begin with perhaps the most significant Jewish historical event of the first century, the destruction of the Jerusalem temple in AD 70. Rome dispatched an army to Jerusalem in response to the Jewish rebellion of AD 66. The Roman army (under the leadership of Titus) ultimately destroyed the temple in AD 70 just as Jesus had predicted in the Gospels... **(Flavius Josephus, Complete Works of Flavius Josephus: Wars of the Jews, Antiquities of the Jews, Against Apion, Autobiography, trans. William Whiston (Boston: MobileReference), Kindle edition, Kindle locations 7243-7249)*

Matt. 24:1-3 (ESV) *Jesus left the temple and was going away, when his disciples came to point out to him the buildings of the temple. But he answered them, "You see all these, do you not? Truly, I say to you, there will not be left here one stone upon another that will not be thrown down."*

You might think this important detail would be included in the New Testament record, especially since this fact would corroborate Jesus's prediction. But no gospel account records the destruction of the temple. In fact, no New Testament document mentions it at all, even though there are many occasions when a description of the temple's destruction might have assisted in establishing a theological or historical point.

- **THE NEW TESTAMENT FAILS TO DESCRIBE THE SIEGE OF JERUSALEM** - Even before the temple was destroyed, the city of Jerusalem was under assault. In approximately AD 67, Titus surrounded the city with four large groups of soldiers and eventually broke through the city's "Third Wall" with a battering ram. After lengthy battles and skirmishes, the Roman soldiers eventually set fire to the city's walls, and the temple was destroyed as a result **(Barbara Levick, Vespasian, Roman Imperial Biographies (New York: Routledge, 1999).*

(Christ foretells of the siege of Jerusalem...)

Luke 21: 20-24 (ESV) *"But when you see Jerusalem surrounded by armies, then know that its desolation has come near. Then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains, and let those who are inside the city depart, and let not those who are out in the country enter it, for these are days of vengeance, to fulfill all that is written. Alas for women who are pregnant and for those who are nursing infants in those days! For there will be great distress upon the earth and wrath against this people. They will fall by the edge of the sword and be led captive among all nations, and Jerusalem will be trampled underfoot by the Gentiles, until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled."*

No aspect of this three-year siege is described in any New Testament document, in spite of the fact that the gospel writers could point to Christ's fulfilled prophecy and the anguish that resulted from the siege as a powerful point of reference for many passages of Scripture that extensively address the issue of suffering.

If the Gospels were written after the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70, then why don't the writers emphasize that Jesus's prophecies had been fulfilled? That would be the natural thing to do. This is exactly what Luke does in the Acts of the Apostles with regard to another prophecy that was actually fulfilled before his book was written:

Acts 11:27-28 (ESV) *Now in these days prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch. And one of them named Agabus stood up and foretold by the Spirit that there would be a great famine over all the world (this took place in the days of Claudius).*

- **LUKE SAID NOTHING ABOUT THE DEATHS OF PAUL AND PETER** - Years before the siege of Jerusalem and the destruction of the temple, another pair of events occurred that were significant to the Christian community. The apostle Paul was martyred in the city of Rome in AD 64 **(James, Montague Rhodes (1924). "The Acts of Paul". The Apocryphal New Testament. Oxford: Clarendon Press)*, and Peter was martyred shortly afterward in AD 65 **(Adam Clarke, Adam Clarke's Commentary on the Bible (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1983), commenting on Acts 28:31)*. While Luke wrote extensively about Paul and Peter in the book of Acts and featured them prominently, he said nothing about their deaths. In fact, Paul was still alive (under house arrest in Rome) at the end of the book of Acts.
- **LUKE'S GOSPEL PREDATES THE BOOK OF ACTS** - Luke wrote both the book of Acts and the gospel of Luke. These two texts contain introductions that tie them together in history. In the introduction to the book of Acts, Luke writes in Acts 1:1-2... *The first account I composed, Theophilus, about all that Jesus began to do and teach, until the day when He was taken up to heaven, after He had by the Holy Spirit given orders to the apostles whom He had chosen.*

It's clear that Luke's gospel (his "first account") was written prior to the book of Acts.

- **PAUL QUOTED LUKE'S GOSPEL IN HIS LETTER TO TIMOTHY** - 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. In 1 Tim. 5:17–18 Paul writes. *The elders who rule well are to be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who work hard at preaching and teaching. For the Scripture says, "You shall not muzzle the ox while he is threshing," and "The laborer is worthy of his wages."*

Paul quotes two passages as "scripture" here—one in the Old Testament and one in the New Testament. *"You shall not muzzle the ox while he is threshing"* refers to Deuteronomy 25:4, and *"The laborer is worthy of his wages"* refers to Luke 10:7. It's clear that Luke's gospel was already common knowledge and accepted as scripture by the time this letter was written.

- **LUKE SAID NOTHING ABOUT THE DEATH OF JAMES** - Luke featured another important figure from Christian history in the book of Acts. James (the brother of Jesus) became the leader of the Jerusalem church and was described in a position of prominence in Acts 15. James was martyred in the city of Jerusalem in AD 62 **(Josephus, Complete Works of Flavius Josephus, Kindle locations 28589–28592)*.

However, like the deaths of Paul and Peter, the execution of James is absent from the biblical account, even though Luke described the deaths of Stephen (Acts 7:54–60) and James the brother of John (Acts 12:1–2).

- **PAUL ECHOES THE CLAIMS OF GOSPEL WRITERS AND QUOTES LUKE IN HIS LETTER TO THE CORINTHIANS** - Even the most skeptical scholars agree that Paul is the author of the letters written to the Romans, the Corinthians, and the Galatians. These letters are dated between AD 48 and AD 60. The letter to the Romans (typically dated at AD 50) reveals something important. Paul began the letter by proclaiming that Jesus is the resurrected "Son of God." Throughout the letter, Paul accepted the view of Jesus that the gospel eyewitnesses described in their own accounts.

Just seventeen years after the resurrection, Jesus was described as divine. He is God incarnate, just as the gospel eyewitnesses described in their own accounts. In fact, Paul's outline of Jesus's life matches that of the Gospels. In 1 Corinthians 15 (written from AD 53 to 57), Paul summarized the gospel message and reinforced the fact that the apostles described the eyewitness accounts to him.

1 Corinthians 15: 3-8 (ESV) *For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me.*

Paul also seems to have been familiar with the gospel of Luke when he wrote to the Corinthian church in AD 53-54.

Also, notice the similarity between Paul's description of the Lord's Supper and Luke's gospel:

1 Corinthians 11: 23-25 (ESV) *For I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it, and said, "This is my body which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me." In the same way also he took the cup, after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me."*

And now, reading from Luke...

Luke 22: 19-20 (ESV) *- And he took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to them, saying, "This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me." And likewise the cup after they had eaten, saying, "This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood."*

Paul appears to be quoting Luke's gospel—the only gospel that has Jesus saying that the disciples are to “do this in remembrance of Me.” If Paul is trying to use a description of the meal that was already well known at the time, this account must have been circulating for a period of time prior to Paul's letter to the Corinthians.

- **LUKE QUOTES MARK AND MATTHEW REPEATEDLY** - Luke, when writing his own gospel, readily admitted that he was not an eyewitness to the life and ministry of Jesus. Instead, Luke described himself as a historian, collecting the statements from the eyewitnesses who were present at the time:

Luke 1: 1– 4 (ESV) *Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile a narrative of the things that have been accomplished among us, just as those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word have delivered them to us, 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, that you may have certainty concerning the things you have been taught.*

As a result, Luke often repeats or quotes entire passages that were offered previously by either Mark (350 verses from Mark appear in Luke's gospel) or Matthew (250 verses from Matthew appear in Luke's account) **(F. F. Bruce, The New Testament Documents: Are They Reliable? (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1984), Kindle edition, Kindle location 409).*

These passages were inserted into Luke's gospel as though they were simply copied over from the other accounts. It's reasonable, therefore, to conclude that Mark and Mathew's accounts were already recognized, accepted, and available to Luke prior to his authorship of the gospel.

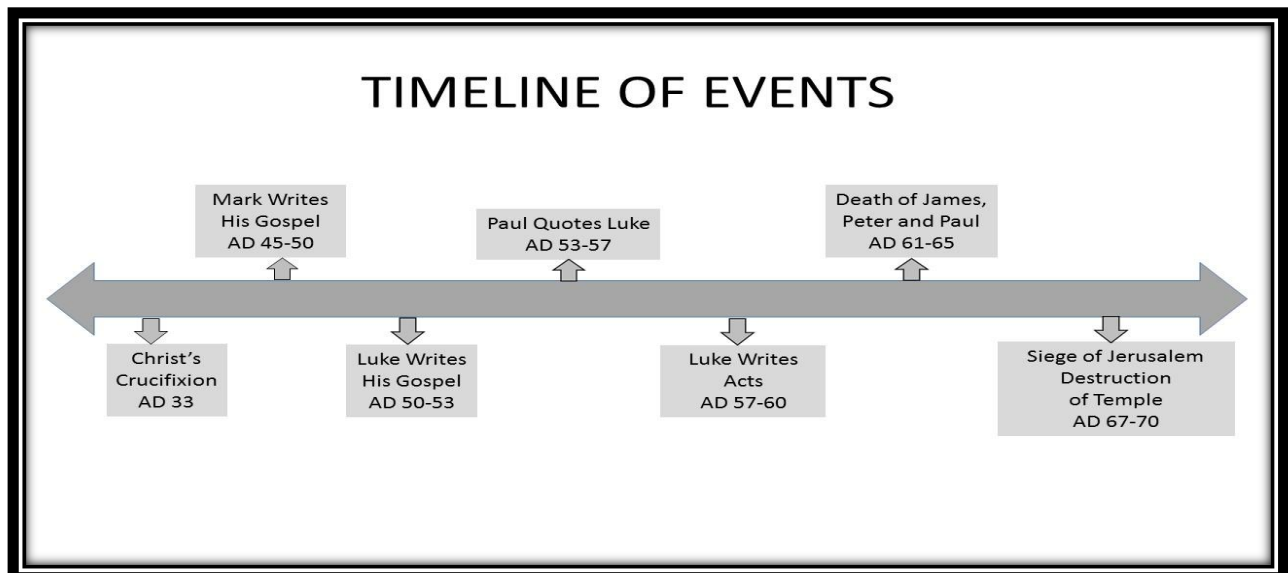
THE GOSPELS APPEAR TO HAVE BEEN WRITTEN SOON AFTER THE CRUCIFIXION OF CHRIST

Given these pieces of circumstantial evidence, what reasonable inference can be drawn about the dating of the Gospels? First we've got to account for the suspicious absence of several key historical events in the New Testament record: the destruction of the temple, the siege of Jerusalem, and the deaths of Peter, Paul, and James. These omissions can be reasonably explained if the book of Acts (the biblical text that ought to describe these events) was written prior to AD 61– 62. These events are missing from the accounts because they hadn't happened yet.

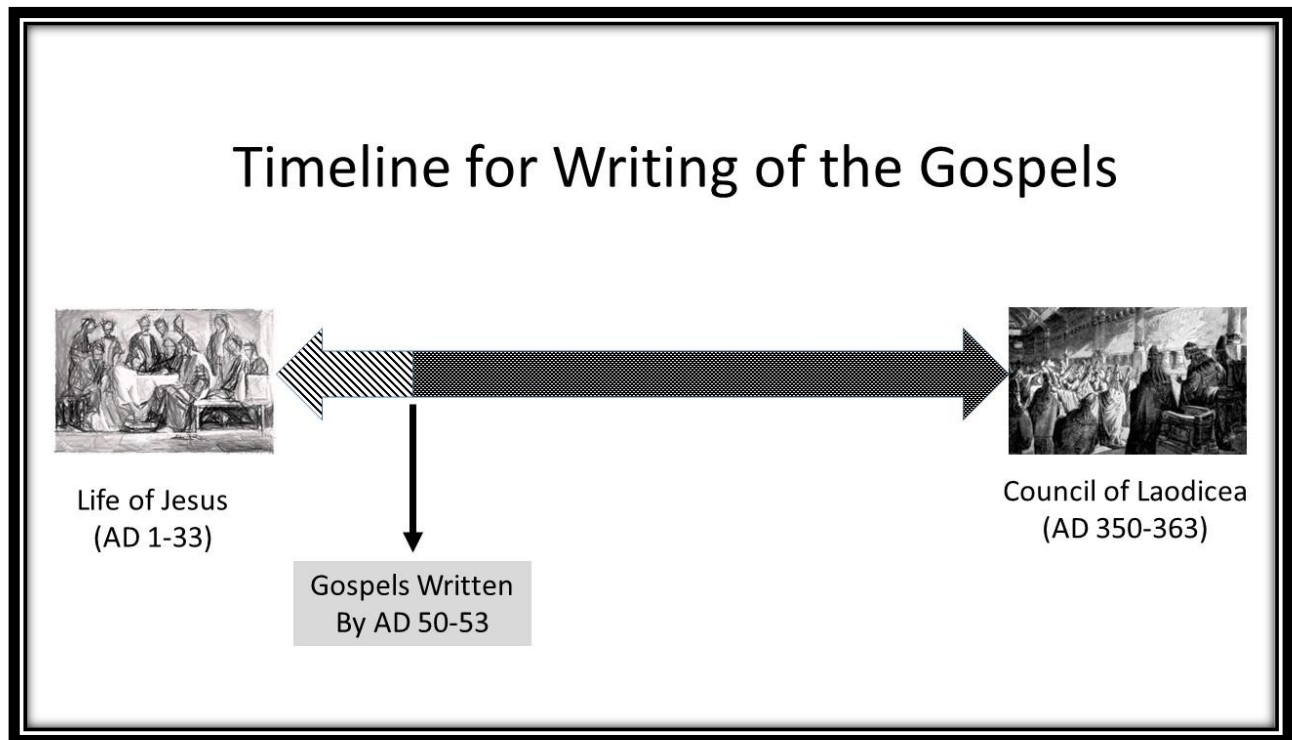
We know from the introductory lines of the book of Acts that Luke's gospel was written prior to Acts, but we must use the remaining circumstantial evidence to try to determine how much prior. The fact that Paul echoed the description of Jesus that was offered by the gospel writers is certainly consistent with the fact that he was aware of the claims of the Gospels, and his quotations from Luke's gospel in 1 Timothy and 1 Corinthians reasonably confirm the early existence of Luke's account, placing it well before AD 53– 57. Paul was able to quote Luke's gospel and refer to it as scripture because it was already written, circulating at this time, and broadly accepted. Paul's readers recognized this to be true as they read Paul's letters. Luke told us that he was gathering data from “those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and servants of the word” (Luke 1: 2).

As a result, he either referred to or quoted directly from over five hundred verses that are found in either the gospel of Mark or the gospel of Matthew. It is reasonable to infer that these accounts were in existence prior to Luke's investigation. If this is the case, Mark's gospel would date much earlier than Luke's, and can be sensibly placed in either the late 40s or very early 50s.

So, let's place the evidence on the timeline to see where the gospel accounts are located relative to the life of Jesus:



The reasonable inference from the circumstantial evidence is that the Gospels were written very early in history, at a time when the original eyewitnesses and gospel writers were still alive and could testify to what they had seen. While skeptics would like to claim that the Gospels were written well after the alleged life of the apostles and much closer to the councils that affirmed them, the evidence indicates something quite different.



So it is reasonable to say that evidence supports an early dating for the Gospels. The gospel writers appear in history right where we would expect them to appear if they were, in fact, eyewitnesses.

Questions For Discussion:

1. In order to defend Christianity, why is it so important to establish the veracity of New Testament scripture?
2. Skeptics challenge the historical accuracy of the gospels due to their belief that they were written many decades or even hundreds of years after the events actually occurred. If this time gap does in fact exist, would their skepticism be warranted? Why or why not?
3. What are the pros and cons of eye witness testimony? How important do you believe it is in determining the accuracy of the gospels?
4. Have you ever had someone challenge your belief in the historical accuracy and validity of New Testament scripture? If so, how did you respond? If not, how **would** you respond if someone challenged the historical accuracy of New Testament scripture?
5. Since Jesus Himself didn't leave behind any writings of His own, we're dependent upon the records of others for knowing what Jesus said and did. While this situation isn't unusual for ancient historical figures, it does raise the question, how do we know that these records of what he said and did are accurate? What factors or characteristics might scripture possess that could increase our confidence in their accuracy?
6. It appears that the Gospel of Mark (likely the first gospel written), was written 12 to 17 years after the crucifixion of Christ. Is this time gap between when the events occurred and when they were recorded, too long to support the belief that they are an accurate record of what actually occurred? Why or why not?