

The Historical Reliability of the NT

SoCM Lesson on Christian Apologetics

The Importance of the Subject

- The Christian faith is a religion based on historical reality
- Modern form critics typically regard the gospels as “folk literature”
- The process of how the traditions of Jesus reached the evangelists:
eyewitnesses → oral tradition → Christian communities → evangelists
- Form critics stressed that the early Christian communities were not interested in history but just wanted to spread their faith
- If the accounts of Jesus were not historically reliable, then the resurrection of Jesus would be false

The Approach of the Subject

- The credibility of the Bible is a multi-faceted issue
- One angle in which to address this matter is to examine the historical reliability of the NT
- Typically, the arguments for the historical reliability of the NT have focused on:
 - The vast number of manuscripts,
 - The dating of those copies, and
 - The nature of the gospel accounts as influenced by eyewitness testimonies

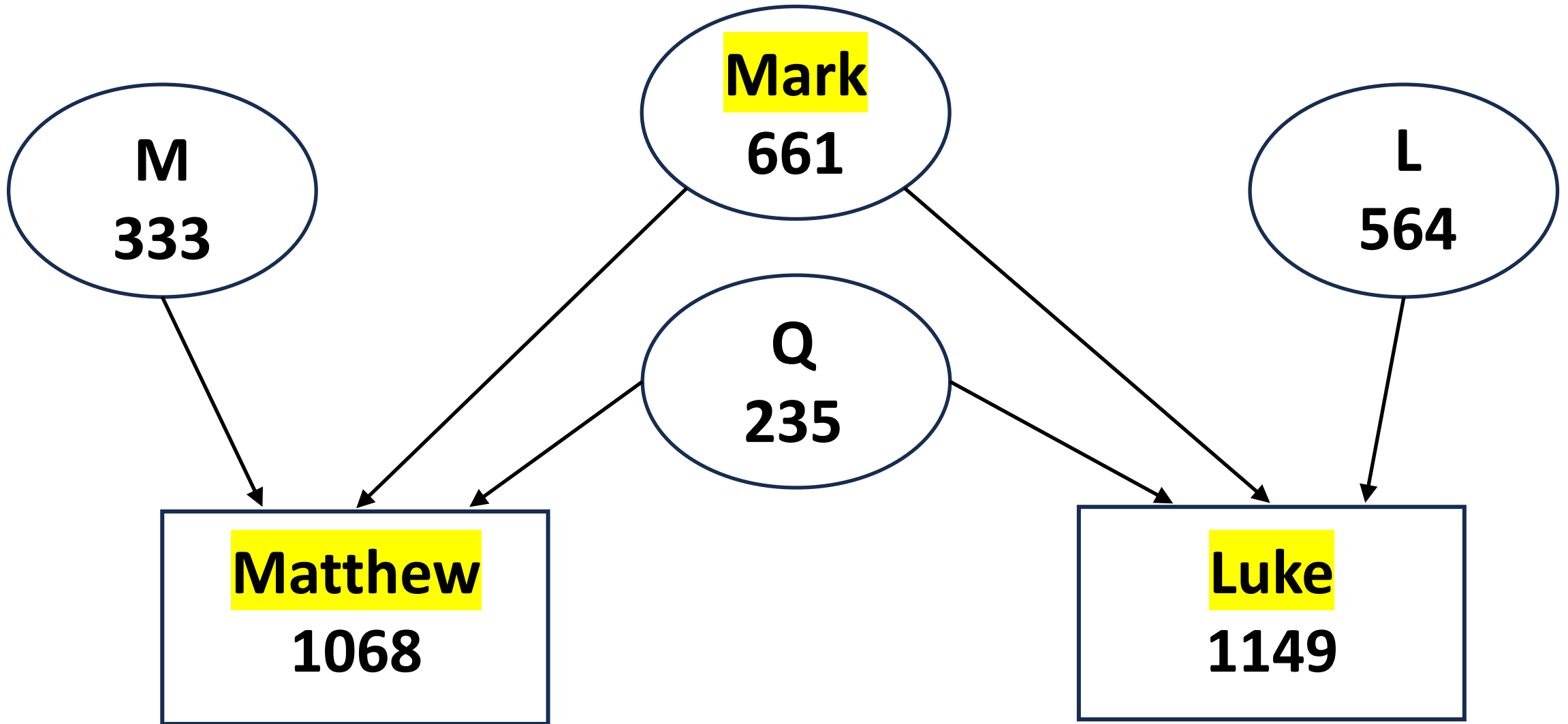
NT Manuscripts

- Since the original writings of NT books are not available, we must rely on copies for recovering the original texts
- There are 98 papyrus manuscripts, 257 uncial manuscripts, and 2,795 minuscule manuscripts, and 2,209 lectionaries. Over **5,700** manuscripts have been catalogued (Aland 1988: 96-101)
- NT textual critics have been able to use these manuscripts to reconstruct a Greek text of the NT
- The NT was also translated into Latin, Coptic, Syriac, Armenian, Georgian, Gothic, reaching into the tens of thousands of manuscripts

Dates of the Gospel Accounts

- Jesus' death (33)
- Mark (late 50s or early 60s)
- Matthew and Luke (early 60s)
- John (80s or 90s)

The Synoptic Problem by BH Streeter



Dating of Manuscripts

- Most of the manuscripts come from the AD 1001-2000
- Another data pool comes from quotations of the NT by church fathers, where over one million have been tabulated from as early as the late first century to the middle ages
- The earliest manuscript, a papyrus fragment of Jn 18, was discovered in 1934
- Known as **P52**, it now sits in the John Rylands Library of the University of Manchester. It is dated as early as **AD 90s to AD 100**

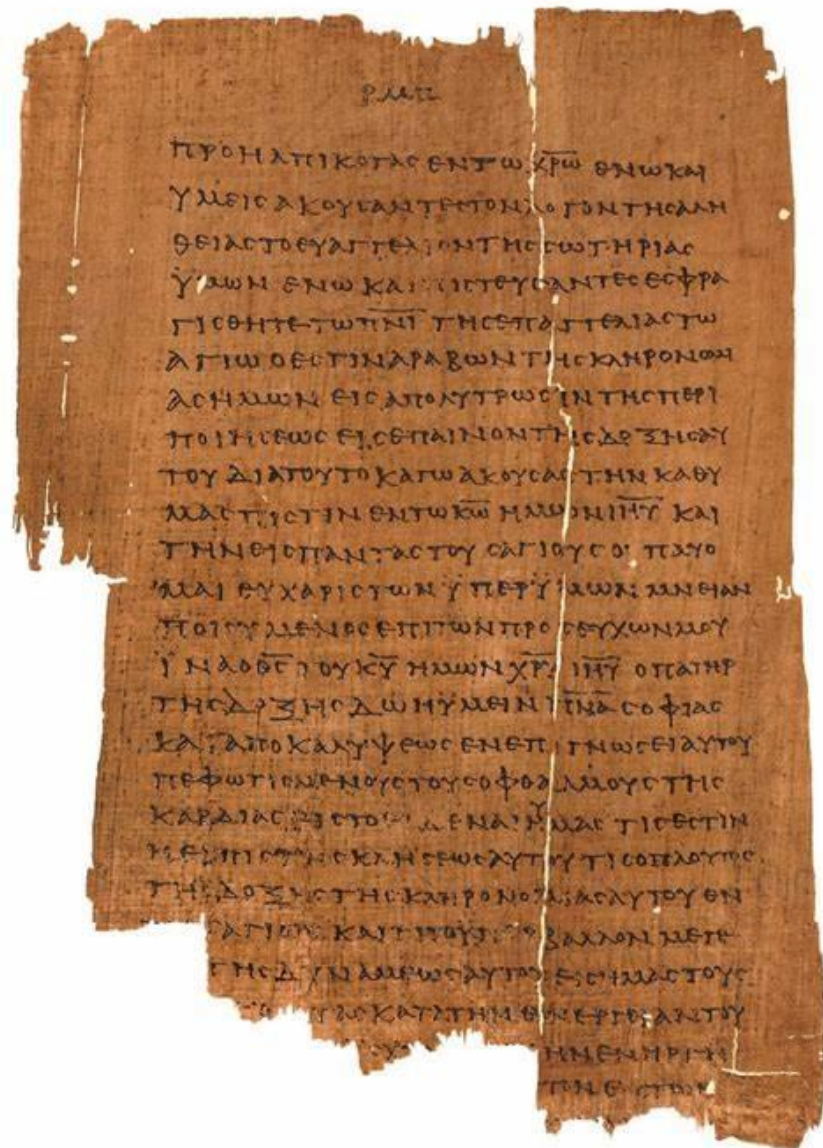
Papyrus 52 of Jn 18:31-33: AD 90 to AD 100



Dating of Manuscripts

- In addition, a fragment of Mark's gospel was discovered dating back to the 1st century
- Significantly, this means we have documents written while some of the first-generation Christians were still alive and even before the NT was completed
- Seventeen papyri from the 2nd century have also been discovered
- The Bodmer and Chester Beatty Papyri contain most of the NT, dating at 100-150 years after the original
- The Codex Sinaiticus is a complete manuscript, and the Codex Vaticanus is a nearly complete manuscript both dating around 250 years after the original

Bodmer and Chester Beatty Papyri: AD 100-150

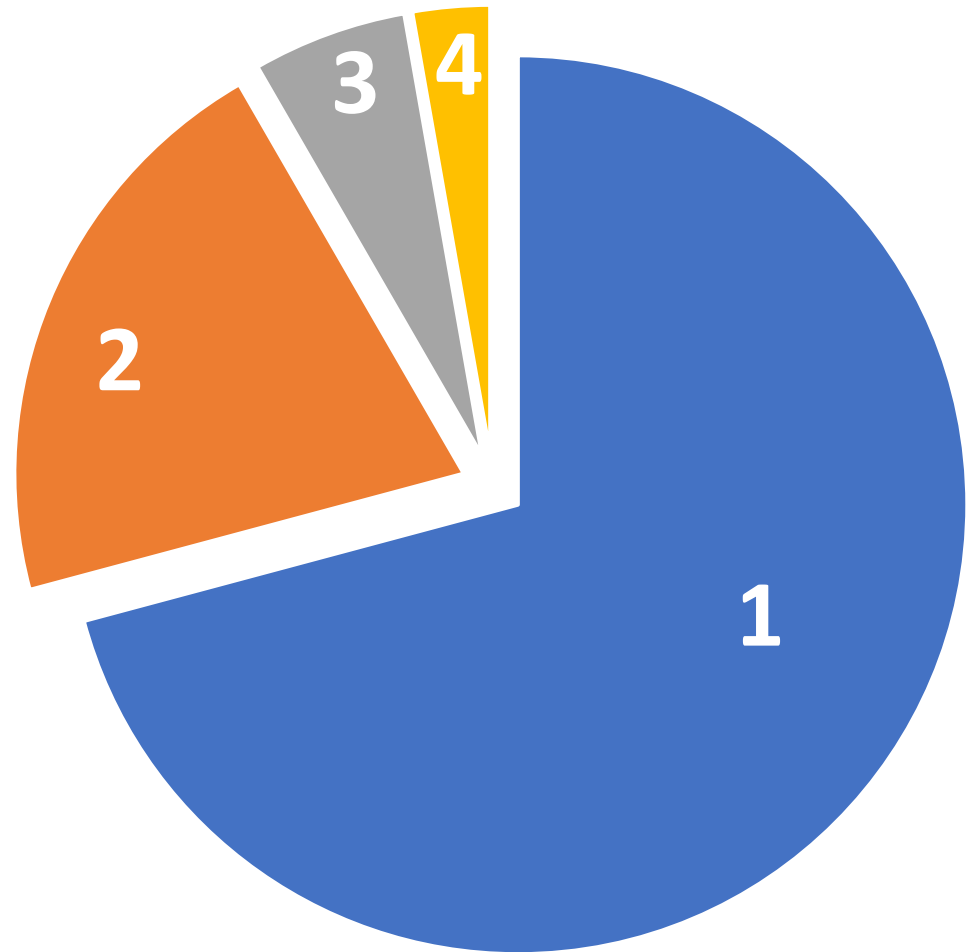


NT Manuscripts and Historical Documents

Histories	Oldest Manuscripts	Numbers Surviving
Homer 850 BC?	3 rd century BC	2400+
Thucydides 460 to 400 BC	1 st century AD	20
Herodotus 484 to 425 BC	1 st century AD	75
Livy 59 BC to AD 17	4 th century AD	27
Tacitus AD 46 to 120	9 th century AD	3
New Testament	100 to 150	5,700+

Kinds of Variants and Translation

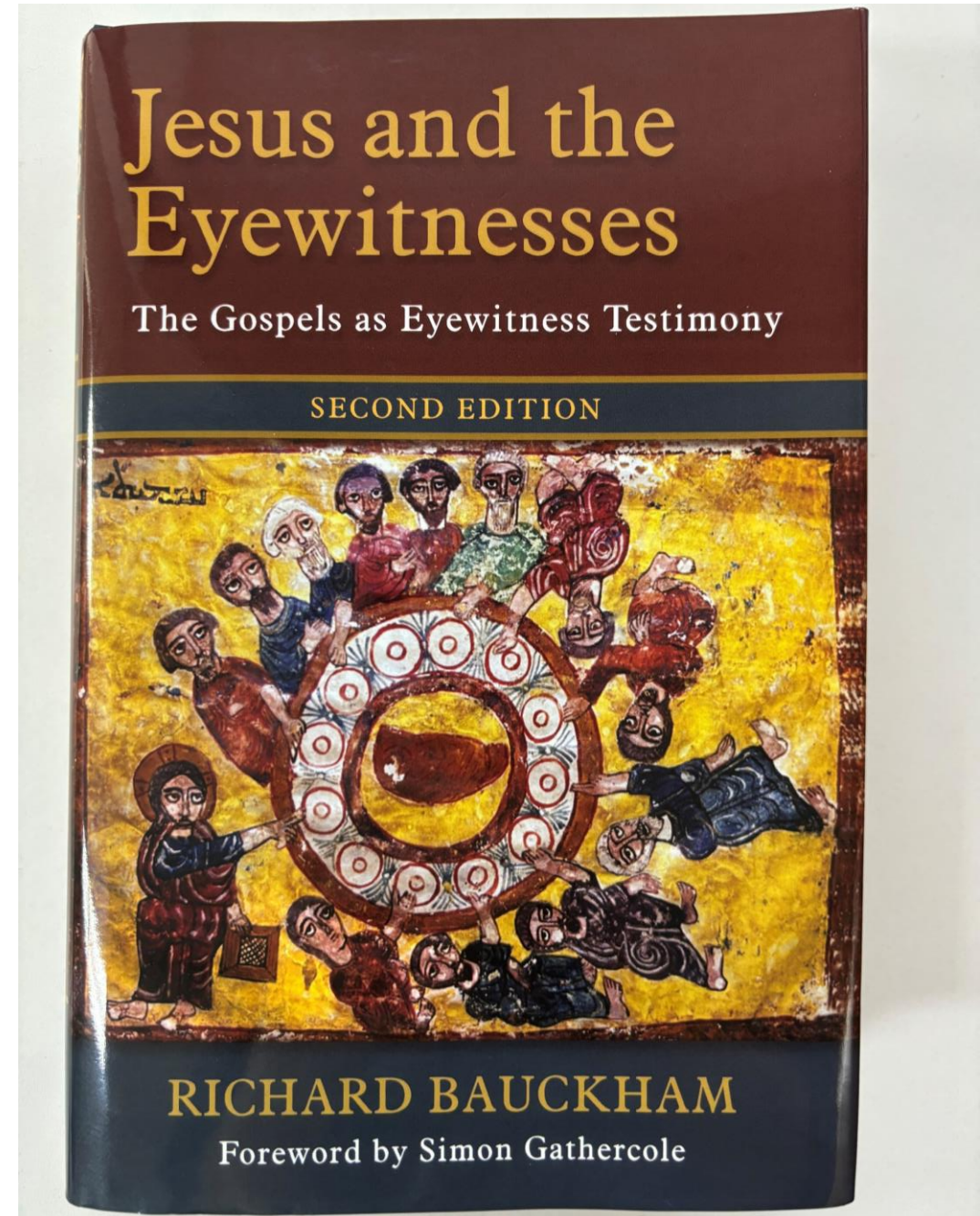
1. Spelling errors (75%)
2. Changes—synonyms and word order—that do not affect translation
3. Omissions that do not change the wording of the original text
4. Meaningful and viable variants (less than 1%)



Jesus and the Eyewitnesses

Another trend is to defend the gospel accounts based on standards derived from ancient historiography

For example, Richard Bauckham, a retired NT scholar from the University of St Andrews, argues that “the period between the ‘historical’ Jesus and the gospels was spanned by the continuing presence and testimony of eyewitnesses, who remained the authoritative sources of their tradition until their death” (2016, 8)



Jesus and the Eyewitnesses

- According to Bauckham, ancient historiography was quite different than modern historiography
- Good ancient history were written while there were still living eyewitnesses around, because they lacked archives and sources that modern historians have
- Thus, the gospels were more like ancient “**biographies**” because they required interviews of eyewitnesses of the events (2016, 5)

Jesus and the Eyewitnesses

- NT texts that explicitly emphasize eyewitnesses
- Luke mentions in his prologue (1:2) that accounts of Jesus were based on “**eyewitnesses**” (αὐτόπτης)
- The emphasis in Acts on “**witnesses**” (μάρτυς) clearly means eyewitnesses (e.g., Acts 1:8, 22; 13:31)
- In the Upper Room discourse, Christ tells the disciples that they will “**bear witness** (μαρτυρέω) because you have been with me from the beginning” (John 15:27)
- Paul mentions the five hundred to whom Christ appeared following his resurrection (1 Cor. 15:3–8)

Jesus and the Eyewitnesses

- Why are some characters named in Mark but not in parallel gospel accounts?
- Mk 15:21: “A certain man from Cyrene, Simon, the father of Alexander and Rufus, was passing by on his way in from the country, and they forced him to carry the cross”
- Assuming Markan priority, Bauckham notes examples of Matthew and Luke dropping personal names that were in Mark (Matt 27:23 and Lu 23:26)
- He concludes that by the time Matthew and Luke wrote, these eyewitnesses had become obscure and thus the actual names were no longer useful

Jesus and the Eyewitnesses

- Josephus (AD 37-100), a Jewish historian, wrote the *Jewish War*, an account of the Roman siege of Jerusalem considered to be conforming to the standards of ancient historiography by the use of oral **tradition** (*paradosis*)
- This is the exact approach used by Paul in 1 Cor 11:2 with regards to the oral “traditions” of Lord’s Supper. He says he “**received**” and “**passed**” the tradition of the Lord’s Supper to the Corinthians (1 Cor 11:23)
- This same formulation regarding the “**received**” and “**passed**” gospel tradition is stated by Paul in 1 Cor 15:3 with regards to Jesus’ resurrection

Jesus and the Eyewitnesses

- ³ For what I **received** I **passed** on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, ⁴ that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, ⁵ and that he appeared to Cephas, and then to the Twelve. ⁶ 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. ⁷ Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles, ⁸ and last of all he appeared to me also, as to one abnormally born
- According to Gerd Lüdemann, a German historian, the oral tradition of Jesus' resurrection (1 Cor 15:3-7) came 1-2 years after the death of Christ

Conclusion

- This study does not prove the truthfulness of what is said in the Bible
- It does demonstrate to a large extent the historical basis of what is said

Discussion Questions

- Do you think historical evidence for the credibility of the Bible is helpful for your faith? Why or why not?
- What would help you to gain confidence of the Bible as God's word?