

Jesus
“*The Ship*”
Luke 1:1-4

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St. Augustine wrote a little book to help the pastors under his care as bishop understand the proper use of the Bible. It's called *On Christian Teaching*. He makes an important point through the metaphor of a ship.

“A ship has a clear purpose,” he said: “It's supposed to take you somewhere.” Let's say you are trying to sail across the Mediterranean from Italy, and you are trying to get home to North Africa. You'd get on a ship. But what if, instead of allowing the ship to take you across the sea, you kept it in port because you had become interested in its rigging and construction. Instead of ever sailing across the Mediterranean, you studied the ship itself, endlessly. In that case the ship would have lost its purpose.

Augustine explained the analogy – “The Bible is much the same. Its purpose is to lead us to God, and to faith in Him. But if we become overly interested in the book itself, we become like those who get lost in studying the rigging on a ship – we never let the Bible serve its purpose.”

I agree – we must let the Bible serve its purpose – we must know its structure and details in order to let it lead us to a personal knowledge of God. And what is true for the Bible as a whole is especially true for the Gospels. They serve an even more specific purpose – they were put down in writing in order to lead people to believe in their main character – Jesus of Nazareth.

But...

But some people get so caught up in the questions about the Gospels themselves, that they never let them serve their intended purpose.

So this morning, we must cover something very important: are the Gospels – the four sources about the life and ministry, the death and resurrection of Jesus reliable history? Asking this question is a bit like asking if a ship is sea-worthy.

The reliability of the Gospels is a huge question for many. Somehow people have allowed themselves to think that the Gospels are mostly legend, or filled with little more than myths. Therefore, they tell us little or nothing about Jesus, but tell us a lot about the faith of the early church. This is like getting lost in the rigging!

I will freely admit – if the Gospels tell us little about Jesus, then all we're left with is ... well, not much.

But if the Gospels are reliable, historically speaking, then that means we have access to the same words and deeds that the original Disciples had. It means we can know Jesus as he really was – and as he is.

This is an important issue for discipleship. After all, if we say that being a disciple is the life-long quest to follow Jesus in every area of life – who is it that we are following, and can we know that he did what these books say? And said what these report?

If we can't know anything about Jesus with any reliability, then our discipleship will always be hesitant. But if these are reliable accounts – we can follow – we can believe in him – because we can really know what he's like and what he did and said.

Two questions:

Are the accounts themselves historically reliable?

And have the texts lost reliability through the centuries of translation?

II

Reliable History

- 1. Let's look first at the historical reliability of the Gospels: *Much of what I'm about to cover is from Kenneth Bailey – one of our foremost Gospel scholars today...***

- a. **Oral Tradition** – the Gospels come out of an oral tradition. The stories were experienced and remembered and were passed along from the first generation of Christians by telling and retelling them in a community setting. This was part of their culture – the way they lived without thinking there might be an alternative. It was not a visual culture (like we have), it was an oral culture, in which the spoken word would have been listened to very carefully and easily remembered. It was the way they lived day-to-day.
 - 1. They didn't have printing presses, and writing and copying were time consuming and expensive.
 - 2. Furthermore, sacred stories in an oral culture, are considered too sacred to write down, you want control over whether the listeners are worthy of hearing the story.
- b. **Here's how it worked:**
 - i. **Haflet Samar** – this is what the oral tradition has been called for 100's of years in that part of the world.
 - 1. **If the story or account of an event is sacred to the community**, it is told in a certain way. This would be the main form of entertainment in the evenings and in worship settings.
 - 2. **It is told in a community setting** so that everybody has a chance to make sure it's being told correctly.
 - 3. **It would have been told by an authorized story-teller** – not just anyone would be allowed to retell the sacred stories.
 - 4. **The story must be told correctly;** otherwise, the community will have to correct the story-teller, and in a shame-based culture, this is the worst thing that can happen to you.
 - a. But there is room given for the stories to be re-arranged in chronology or setting in order to make important points. This does not allow for any 'creativity' related to the story itself – it cannot be embellished or changed.
 - ii. **When it became important or necessary** to write the tradition down on paper, it would be done.
- c. What we know about this is that, even today in oral cultures (many still exist), stories are passed on with extraordinary degrees of accuracy.

- ii. **Scholars who practice this science gather as many manuscripts as possible** of the same text, date them, and then seek out changes.
 1. The larger the number of copies the scholar has, the better they will be able to compare.
- iii. **Furthermore, the closer the manuscripts, or copies, are to the time of the original** purported writing, the better they are able to measure.
- iv. **When it comes to the Bible, we have more manuscripts than for any other ancient literature, as well as manuscripts that are closer to the time of original composition than for any other ancient literature.**
 1. Let me give a few examples by comparison:
 - a. For Caesar's Gallic Wars, an ancient history from the 50's B.C., the earliest manuscript we have is from 900 A.D. – and we only have 8-10 manuscripts to compare with, yet it is considered accurate history.
 - b. Herodotus – written in 5th century B.C. – manuscript? 900's A.D., and only 8 manuscripts – yet never questioned.
 - c. New Testament? Written from 50 A.D. to 90's A.D. – first fragments? 130 A.D. and full manuscripts from 350 A.D. – 5,000 manuscripts in Greek alone.
 2. Thus, we can measure with great accuracy whether or not the texts have lost words or phrases or been altered in any way. Result? 99.5% accurate. (The .5% is not on matters of importance)
 3. The text you hold in your hand is a translation of one of the most historically reliable and carefully transmitted texts ever known to humankind. It has lost none of its original accuracy or reliability.

The conclusion is that the Gospels about Jesus are reliable history. In them we have access to what he said and what he did.

III

Why Is This so Important?

First – I use the term *reliable* very intentionally here. The history contained in the Gospels, like most history, is NOT perfect history. Furthermore, it isn't history put together by modern, scientific, objective, detached researchers. Of course, NO history ever written is ever detached or objective.

The very reliability of the history of the Gospels is designed to move you and me to place our faith in Christ.

It's like this: if these accounts are reliable, then we must deal with the claims Jesus made about himself, and the actions of his death and resurrection. We cannot simply set Jesus aside and go our own way.

Second – it means that we have real truth to deal with. Christ brings a Word – a message from God that is true truth. It isn't made up, it isn't opinions, it isn't sentiment. It is truth which, when we know it by knowing him, is what our lives must be based upon.

You see, the purpose of the Gospels is not to give us a biography of Jesus so that we can go home and say to ourselves, "How interesting..." They were put together as portraits of Christ that would make us go home, get on our knees and worship him as Lord and God.

The only way this kind of faith and worship could ever be worth it, is if what we read here is historically reliable.

Back to the Ship

So let's go back to Augustine's image – the Bible is like a ship designed to take us to a destination. We're not supposed to get lost in looking at the rigging. Hopefully, if you've had questions about this before, you have a few answers now, which means that it's time to get on the ship and sail to God.