

Evaluation of the Argument: "Gospels are reliable because they admit embarrassing things"

The Four Gospels purport to be evidence for Jesus Christ and his life and death and resurrection. If an ancient book appeared about Hercules which claimed he gave wise teachings and contained alleged eyewitness accounts of his wonders and his ascension into Heaven to reign as God of the universe and the book was less fantastic than the gospels few would accept it as true. Christian belief in the gospels is more conditioning than belief. If we were all heathens, and a minority of scholars appeared who realised that there were gospels and that they were reliable as scripture and as history, that discovery would impact little on us. The only reason there is such a fuss about the gospels is because ostensible Christianity is everywhere which makes people biased in its favour. Its ubiquity alone is enough to condition people.

But Christians however do try and make a case for the reliability of the gospels. They say for example that if the gospels were lies they would not contain material that embarrasses believers in Jesus and material that could embarrass even Jesus himself. They say the miracle stories are pretty tame so they ring true.

It is supposed that since the gospels say things about Jesus that were embarrassing for believers and the Church that he must have existed. So evidence against Jesus becomes evidence for him!

The gospels could have left them out even if they were true. The stories might be mistakes. Many religions and apparitions contain unsavoury material. Such mistakes do happen. So the unsavoury gospel yarns could be mistakes and you can make mistakes whether or not it is a real person you are writing about.

The unsavouries are an indicator of fallibility and that there couldn't have been much good to tell about Jesus when they had to settle for a lot of unflattering stuff – the supposedly embarrassing material makes us think there was no Jesus when stories about him were hard to come by. Then again, Hinduism has lots of shocking stories about its favourite god, Krishna so there was a strong religious tradition for attributing evil or bizarre antics for gods though you wanted people to start devotion to them. The idea was that gods could do things people were not allowed to do and still be considered good. In a sick way, people like Gods they say are perfect but who still exhibit flaws. Its human nature. That is why Gods doing malicious things while claiming to be paragons of holiness got more popular not less. Good in the religious sense is boring.

Perhaps the shaming bits and pieces about Jesus were not shaming to the early Church when it put them in the gospels. It didn't have to include them. People might not have realised that they should have been ashamed. The moral sense in those days was very dull. The Church had long enough to see that Jesus could have his popularity despite some of the unsavoury stories about him so it would have ceased to have even noticed that the stories were shocking and would not have desired to hide them. This is what has happened throughout most of Christian history. People have heard about the terrible things God and Jesus did and yet they did not register these actions as evil and distasteful. They would have felt uncomfortable but as they were desensitised by Church conditioning to overlook and applaud what they seen, rightly or wrongly, as evil in the scriptures they took little heed.

All of the unpleasant tales can be reconciled with an interpretation satisfactory to the Christian though not often to the objective person who looks hard enough but they were not written for geniuses but simple people.

Another argument is that if the gospels are untrue then there is no way to explain things like the following -

If you are making up a gospel why not make up one that suits you and maybe can give you a high religious rank such as something like a pope?

Why do the gospels tell stories about Jesus that are not relevant to the readers? Eg the Temple tax material.

Why do the gospels not have Jesus solve the gnostic and circumcision controversies that threatened to tear the Christians apart at the time the gospels were written?

It is overlooked that most books do similar things.

Even believers in miracles admit that miracle tales can be evidence of duplicity.

Most philosophers who say miracles might happen do say that you need to see them yourself and have them carefully assessed by experts before believing. The reason is that if God is trying to say something through a miracle and God comes

first then utmost caution must be exercised. And you don't want to encourage people who crave wonders and excitement and who merely foment and enable superstition and credulity. Another reason is that if a miracle does not call for a minute and cautious examination before it can be believed then nothing does. This outlook calls for scepticism towards the gospel miracles for they are based too much on hearsay and there is no evidence that anybody mentioned in the gospels as a witness to Jesus' miracles knew what was written about them.

Some scholars think that many of Jesus' gospel teachings are authentic and they assume that these teachings can be identified amid the mythmaking and miracle story dress. This is nonsense for these teachings are inseparable from the claim that Jesus did miracles. If the miracles are lies then the teachings are more likely to be lies. It is easier to lie about what a person said than about what they did.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus' teachings were so insane that it was a miracle that he was not lynched and nobody would have listened to him. He also mentioned miracles in the Sermon saying that if anybody did miracles and didn't see him as Lord though calling him Lord then he would reject that person. Why believe any of the Sermon when doing so depends on the miracle people who had better things to do listening to tripe? The sayings of Jesus could have been made up just like the Jews had made up the sayings of David and Solomon in the Book of Proverbs.

The Gospel placenames such as Arimathea and Magdala and Emmaus and Cana have never been identified. And miracles were reported at those places.

Even the story how Jesus got his disciples had to be a miracle - they met him briefly and were smitten and went after him. Christians have observed the similarity between many of the the Jesus stories and the Old Testament stories of prophets and holy men. For example, Luke has Jesus raising a woman's son from the dead on the same hill as Elisha the prophet had allegedly raised a woman's son from the dead centuries before. It is more reasonable to believe that the gospel writers were looking for tales to invent and so they used the Old Testament stories than to believe the Christian claim that God set up Jesus' life to match the stories as if the stories were some kind of prediction about Jesus.

Consider the tale of Jesus and the denarius. The Jewish leaders wanted to get Jesus to say something to get him into trouble. They went to him and flattered him about how he taught the way of God. Many Christians ignore the fact that this means that they were telling Jesus he was a good Jew meaning he upheld the Old Testament with all its nastiness. But they ask Jesus if it is lawful for Jews to pay taxes to Caesar. The Jews resented paying the tax because the Romans had stolen their country and appointed puppet kings. So if Jesus said yes then the people would hate him. And if he said no then he broke Roman law and would have to pay the price perhaps in blood. Jesus takes a coin and asks the Jews whose head is on it. They say Caesar. He then tells them to give to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's. This has to mean he did tell them to pay the tax. If the story had been true, Jesus would have lost his following. The story is embarrassing but still untrue.

Jesus' racist spitefulness towards the distraught Canaanite lady (Matthew 15), his saying that he came only to save Israel, his agony in the garden, his triumphant ride into Jerusalem which implies that he was claiming to be a political Messiah, his crucifixion, his having a sign above his head calling him the King of the Jews – allegedly implying the same - on the cross and his shouting that God had abandoned him on the cross and his tomb being left unguarded between the supposed resurrection and his appearances are listed as proof that he was a real person. The bizarre thing is that the reasoning that the embarrassing things are most probably true is usually promoted by people who scoff at Jesus' miracles. What could be more embarrassing than saying a person did miracles if they did not do it? If you can make up miracles you can make up anything – end of story. We know on many grounds, for example, from the fact that it would be beneath God's dignity to do miracles, that the wonders did not take place.

One major embarrassment was Jesus choosing an apostle, Judas, who betrayed him which led to Jesus' death by crucifixion. But it could be that Judas never meant Jesus to die and was only after the money. The Gospels hint as much. Judas could have believed that God would take care of Jesus. And Jesus said that the apostles were to witness to him on earth and Judas did that in his own way. He did not see the risen Jesus but he made the resurrection happen. And the gospels would have us believe that he knew Jesus could and would rise and that is enough for him to be a giver of evidence for Jesus.

John baptising sinners and Jesus getting baptised seems embarrassing but the Church would have said that it was done for some reason other than to be cleansed of sin. Perhaps Jesus was showing he was renouncing ordinary life and beginning a new career as a wandering prophet. The Church said he got baptised on our behalf to show he planned to atone for our sin though he was innocent.

The gospels themselves give accidental clues that Jesus never existed especially when they say embarrassing things about Jesus that scholars think they would not have made up. But they did make everything up. Here is one instance. To believe that Jesus was able to cause trouble in the Temple and put animals out and stop people coming in means he had a huge

army with him to help him for the Temple was a very big area is too much. He would not have been apprehended as soon as he threw over the first stall if not as soon as he walked in the gate. In fact he would not have got in for the Temple was protected against rioters. The guards knew how to spot suspicious gatherings and could nip such in the bud.

If Jesus was violent in the Temple he would have been arrested there and then which means that the stories of the last supper and his later arrest and crucifixion and resurrection are untrue for he was in jail. The account of Jesus cleansing the Temple is so closely related to Old Testament "predictions" (Isaiah 56:7 and Jeremiah 7) that it could be that these texts supplied the plot. There is no evidence that the writers of the gospels had eyewitness testimony of the event. They don't even claim there was or that they used it. They never allege that Jesus told anything about it. The story does not ring true. Jesus never explains why he did it for if the Temple had been that corrupt then why did he wait to then to do something about it?

Mark has the fig tree being cursed by Jesus before the event and afterwards it is found withered. Putting it all together and assuming the fig tree story is in to tell us something Jesus seems to be cursing the Jewish religion as useless and unfruitful. The attack on the Temple is him acting out his curse.

It is held that the crucifixion must have really happened because there was no way the Church would have made it up for it was so shameful and nobody was likely to recognise a crucified criminal as the Son of God. People do unlikely things and we are told the crucifixion did nothing to stop converts running to the Church after the supposed resurrection. The Bible itself then rejects the argument and states that the purpose of the cross was to allow the resurrection to happen. So the shame is dealt with and overcome. Dying gods were in fashion among the pagans. The notion of a man being degraded and then restored to glory by God was emotionally appealing.

Contrary to Christian liars who say that nobody made up Jesus' crucifixion for being crucified made you a disgrace, Josephus a Jew, wrote that those Jews who suffered crucifixion for their faith under Antiochus were heroes and excellent.

The Church answered the critics of the crucified Jesus by arguing that the Old Testament predicted that the crucifixion would befall the Son of God. So the Church had nothing to worry about - it was nothing that it couldn't handle. To admit that the Son of God died at all in any way would have been embarrassing but the Church solved that embarrassment by inventing the idea of Jesus having to undergo the shame of the cross for our sins.

There was nothing to stop the Church from inventing the crucifixion simply because it wanted to teach that the blood of Jesus saves us from all sin. And perhaps the apostles were first told of the crucifixion of the saviour in visions and they didn't invent it.

Anyway, any harm done by the shame would have been excelled by the advantage of making people feel that Jesus took on all that pain to atone for their sins. The embryonic Church promoted the crucifixion of Jesus without much evidence to help it demonstrate that it did not prove that he was a liar when he said he was the Son of God. When that happened the crucifixion yarn could not be seen as a major problem.

What is embarrassing is how the gospels say that Jesus wanted to be crucified but no Christian draws your attention to that! He did not protect himself with his miracles or threaten those who would crucify him. He did not walk away when he had the chance before his arrest though he knew what was coming. He was deliberately provocative during his trial. Jesus told Peter that he was a Satan when Peter said he hoped Jesus would not be crucified. A Jesus who deliberately courts death on a cross is a fatal blunder and Paul would have denied that Jesus did this. Paul stated that Jesus was a victim who was killed by demons which refutes the view that Jesus pulled his crucifixion on himself.

I am perturbed by people who say the cross story proves that Jesus lived for they would not make that up for it was too shameful and these people have no problem believing the miracles were made up or that Jesus' claim to be God or the Son of God was made up. It is embarrassing to have to make up things like that so why not the cross as well?

The bit about Joseph and Mary leaving the boy Jesus in Jerusalem by mistake is said to be true for it was too embarrassing on all three to have been made up (page 150, Jesus Hypotheses). But maybe the gospeller did not care how he made Jesus' parents look but wanted to show that Jesus was too wise to listen to everything they said. The usual Catholic line is that we don't know the circumstances of how Jesus came to be lost so the story does not necessarily cast his parents in a bad light.

It is also said that if the birth of Jesus had been invented a secret birth in Bethlehem would have been created (page 164, Jesus Hypotheses). Such arguments are simplistic. Lots of fictitious stories say that many people had witnessed the events.

Jesus asked God why he forsook him on the cross. This was a quote from a psalm. A Jew who habitually prayed the blasphemous psalms might not have realised what he was saying when he asked God why he had forsaken him and could easily have made the mistake of putting this insult in the mouth of a non-existent Messiah. Catholics pray, "Lead us not into

temptation”, which accuses God of wanting us to sin which is against the Bible and even say that Jesus made this prayer.

All of the unpleasant tales can be reconciled with an interpretation satisfactory to the Christian though not often to the objective person who looks hard enough but they were not written for geniuses but simple people. The early Church might have written away and just prayed for guidance to solve the apparent problems of the New Testament. There would have been much confusion for they would not have got far in theological development and so the problems are unlikely to have bothered them. Cardinal Newman said that a thousand difficulties did not make one doubt and had his own problems with Catholic theology. The embarrassment argument is completely irrelevant. The blusher bits don't make it probable that the gospels have truth or a ring of truth. For example, in the story of the Canaanite woman Jesus might have told her that he meant no offence by saying that she was a dog before he said it. A Christian would argue this way but it is really changing the story.

The sign, “The king of the Jews,” that Pilate reportedly put over Jesus on the cross is continuously put forward as evidence that the gospels were being truthful at least with this for it is supposedly embarrassing. It implies Jesus was a political king while the Christians saw him as a spiritual king. But the truth is the Christians believe Jesus is a political king by right and will be in actuality when he returns to earth. The fact that the gospels like Pilate proves they are saying he erected the sign because he believed Jesus really was a king by right. They said Jesus claimed to be the anointed one or Christ which means political king so why should they have a problem with the sign? Why would they be embarrassed about the sign if say Pilate put it up in mockery or faith?

The gospels present Jesus as a non-political king so they had nothing to be ashamed of in the King of the Jews title and entry into Jerusalem bit. They were writing for rather uneducated and spiritually vulnerable people anyway. As for his brutality towards the pagan woman and others the Jews were used to having a nasty vindictive racist god. The embarrassing bits were not in the least embarrassing at all.

Jesus said that the meek shall inherit the earth – so if you react to an enemy by being positive and kindly instead of with bitterness and hatred you shall inherit the earth. That is a clear mark of insanity for the enemy will laugh at the meek and destroy him or her. Equally insane is Jesus' teaching that if you won't look after the property of another you wouldn't look after your own either and neither God or man would trust you with it (Luke 16:12). We are accustomed to stupidity in the gospels so it is foolish to use that shameful stupidity as evidence that Jesus must have lived. And yet Jesus said that if his doctrine is false his resurrection could not really happen for it depends on the teaching being right for a sign that sinners are being saved cannot be valid if the message of salvation is doubtful.

The embarrassment of the contraception ban in the Catholic Church does not mean that what the Catholic Church teaches about contraception is right or sincere. If it did mean it was right, then we could argue that the most reliable historical material is whatever is embarrassing to the hero who is written about.

Some of Jesus' disciples had names suggesting that they were his lieutenants and that he was involved in stirring up a revolt against the Romans. The realistic parts of the gospel can be explained without a real Jesus. A fictitious character can be invented by stealing the details and events from some real person's life and the myth might even bear a similar name to the model.

The claim that the gospels said embarrassing things about Jesus therefore they are probably true is full of flaws. The main one is that the religious culture of the time revelled in worshipping embarrassing gods even ones like Attis who got castrated against their will. Jesus needed flaws in order to become popular. And religion feeds off a secret desire to worship a God who supports one but who in fact has a nasty and lying and irrational side which gives one a smug thrill when one sees others suffer. Interestingly, not a line of the New Testament seeks to defend Jesus having to pay for our sins. It is theologians who do that but their opinions are just their opinions. The New Testament simply admits it is ridiculous but insists that it is nevertheless true. The Catholic Church suffers from people who pretend to have visions and these visions contain much embarrassing material. The argument at best shows something might be true but what use is that? And surely it is a bit wiser to believe a modern-day visionary who makes embarrassing claims than anonymous ancient books? At least you know where the stuff is coming from.

And the sobriety of the gospels is a matter of taste and opinion. There is no objective standard for working out how sober they are or if they really are sober. Philosophers find them OTT. Religious material gets crazier the further you go back in time but for their own time the gospels were nutty.

What can we pick out as true? That is anybody's guess. Christian defender of the faith John Warwick Montgomery can have the last word. He wrote in 1967 that, “Practically everything Jesus said was offensive to somebody in the early church, and this is no criterion at all for selectivity.”

The embarrassment argument applies better to alleged divine revelation than history. For example, Zeus raping a virgin

making her give birth to a demigod is stronger in the sight of the argument than saying that the Queen of Sheba was gay.

CONCLUSION

It is supposed that since the gospels say things about Jesus that were embarrassing for believers and the Church that he must have existed. So evidence against Jesus becomes evidence for him!

Christians tend to exaggerate the number of shameful tales or amplify their alleged shamefulness to manipulate people to accept the gospels as honest and painstakingly historical.

The embarrassment argument is totally worthless regarding attempts to prove the Jesus tale and indicates that it is questionable.

We see that the embarrassment criteria is not much help when there is so much against it. The gospels present hearsay as evidence and that is their downfall.