

Peter J. Williams, *Can We Trust the Gospels?* Wheaton: Crossway, 2018. (140 pp.) [ISBN: 1433552957]

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Can We Trust the Gospels is a concise, compelling and erudite compilation of multiple lines of evidence intended to demonstrate the reliability of the four New Testament Gospels, and ultimately, the rationality of the Christian faith. At a brief 140 pages, the text can be read relatively quickly while also refusing to weigh the reader down with an excess of information. Williams' writing style, like his presentation style, is witty, intelligent and scholarly.

Divided into 8 chapters, the book begins with attestation from non-Christian sources, followed by internal evidence to the reliability of the gospels, and closing with a brief discussion of the miraculous and its effect on trusting what is contained within the New Testament witnesses. While many scholars prior to Williams have prepared information similar to this work, several of which are credited throughout the book, none have done so with his sense of brevity. Addressing the non-Christian sources that support the historicity of the gospel accounts, Williams cites only 3, and in so doing, allows only the strongest arguments to be placed at the forefront, providing higher retention for the reader. The strongest point made in the author's opening chapter concerns the rapid spread of Christianity throughout Rome and the challenge this presents to those appealing to a gradual evolution of Christian belief (p. 28). It is also here that Williams begins the repeated refrain of the book that the simplest view of the evidence is more likely than the elaborate alternatives that must be developed by detractors (p. 29).

The author briefly addresses the issue of the Synoptic problem, offering just enough information regarding the nature of Q, unique material to Matthew and Luke, and the possible resolutions to these issues to give the reader a basic understanding of the vast corpus of scholarly material on the matter. A helpful comparison is made between the four Gospels and the main sources of information regarding Tiberius Caesar (p. 40), presumably to counter skeptical assertions that only 4 existing historical accounts of someone as notable as Jesus of Nazareth is suspiciously minute. Given that Tiberius Caesar, an undoubtedly real historical figure, is also only discussed in 4 historical sources, the author provides a much needed, and often neglected, perspective: "the amount of text we have about Jesus is good relative to one of the best-known figures of antiquity." (p. 42)

The bulk of the text that follows concerns the accuracy of reporting within the four Gospels, leaning heavily on the research of Richard Bauckham's *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*, the work of Cambridge theologian John James Blunt and Lydia McGrew concerning "undesigned coincidences", and responds to the tension of Jesus' words being recorded in Greek, when he likely spoke Aramaic. It is on this last discussion that Williams again demonstrates an uncommon ability to condense highly diverse opinions into approachable segments for the lay reader. While acknowledging that Aramaic was likely the primary language of Christ, the author clarifies the need of a working knowledge of Greek for survival in the 1st century and provides

several indications that Jesus may have spoken Greek at certain points recorded in both Matthew (p. 108) and John (p. 109).

It is no surprise that, with the increase of attention being paid to the study of textual criticism, this text would devote a chapter to the manuscript evidence of the Gospels. What is refreshing about Williams' approach to the material is that, rather than regurgitating the statistical data provided in most apologetic writings, the argument is focused uniquely on the work of the Renaissance humanist, Desiderius Erasmus (p. 112). Instead of using the material evidence of the gospels to bolster modern translations over those of the *Textus Receptus*, Williams recognizes that Erasmus was able to identify many of the same questionable Gospel passages as modern textual critics and ultimately produced a Greek New Testament largely compatible with anything produced in modern times (p. 114). The author closes the work with a brief discussion of supposed contradictions in the Gospel of John, citing the use of a literary paradox on the part of Jesus as a simple, but reasonable, solution. For Williams, the appearance of these "deliberate formal contradictions" "show that the author is more interested in encouraging people to read deeply than in satisfying those who want to find fault." (p. 127)

There is much to be praised about this book. Some may object to specific approaches made by the author, especially in regard to his use of Richard Swinburne's *Simplicity as Evidence for Truth* as a fallback defense, but this approach is not irrational in and of itself. Additionally, with the number of supposed contradictions in the corpus of the New Testament, Williams' selection of contradictions only from the Gospel of John may be seen as self-serving, rather than an honest attempt at discussing contradictions found elsewhere. It seems questionable that the explanation of "deliberate formal contradictions" could be applied to every Gospel author.

Most respectable of *Can We Trust the Gospels* is the measured restraint with which it presents each position. This work is not designed to prove that the spiritual message of the Gospels is true, rather it is designed to demonstrate the information contained within them is reliable and trustworthy, and it does this effectively. The author deftly builds his case for reliability with each chapter in such a way as to make the cumulative weight of the data more than a simple refutation which any single point can endure. While this text is not directed at the scholar, it is clearly written from a scholarly mind, presented in an approachable manner to the layperson, and this is its greatest strength. Rather than writing an 800-page tome for researchers, Williams has written a selectively specific survey for the layman, and in so doing, he has filled a hole in the Christian community that has been empty for far too long.