

## Article

# Are the Gospels “Historically Reliable”? A Focused Comparison of Suetonius’s *Life of Augustus* and the Gospel of Mark

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**Abstract:** Are the Gospels historically reliable? Authors of ancient historical literature had objectives for writing that differed somewhat from those of modern historians. Consequently, the literary conventions that were in play also differed. Therefore, it is difficult to speak of the historical reliability of ancient texts without certain qualifications. In this essay, a definition for the historical reliability of ancient texts is proposed, whereby such a text provides an accurate gist, or an essentially faithful representation of what occurred. Four criteria that must be met are then proposed. Suetonius’s *Life of the Divine Augustus* and the Gospel of Mark, are then assessed by using the criteria. Suetonius was chosen because he wrote more closely than his peers to how modern biographers write, and the *Augustus* was chosen because it is the finest of Suetonius’s *Lives*. The Gospel of Mark from the Bible was chosen because it is probably the earliest extant account of the “Life of Jesus.” The result of this focused comparison suggests that the *Life of Augustus* and the Gospel of Mark can be said to be historically reliable in the qualified sense proposed. However, an additional factor challenging this conclusion is described, and further discussion is needed and encouraged.

**Keywords:** Gospels; Gospel of Mark; Suetonius; *Life of Augustus*; historical reliability

## 1. Introduction

Are the New Testament Gospels historically reliable?<sup>1</sup> In this essay, I will approach the question from a foundational level. Before we can answer the question, it will be necessary for us to define what we mean by the term “historically reliable”.

We must first acknowledge that historical investigation has many limitations, of which only a few can be briefly mentioned here. Many events in ancient literature, including the Gospels, cannot be verified, due to a lack of data. Moreover, the metanarrative in the Gospels is beyond the reach of historians. This metanarrative is the overarching sequence of events in which God’s uniquely divine Son has come into the world to save us and has since returned to Heaven, where he shares a throne with his Father, and will return in the future to judge the world. This metanarrative, of course, cannot be confirmed by historians, who simply do not have the tools capable of confirming such events. This does not mean that the metanarrative is false. However, it does mean it cannot be historically confirmed.

When speaking of ancient history writing, the finest ancient historians—Greek, Roman, and Jewish alike—were committed to accurate reporting, and to writing a good story with literary artistry for the reader’s benefit and enjoyment. That almost always meant that authors of ancient historical literature

<sup>1</sup> Perhaps the finest single volume addressing this question is Craig L. Blomberg’s *The Historical Reliability of the Gospels* (Blomberg 2007).

reported in a manner which was less concerned with precision than with the standards held by modern historians. Yet, even modern historiography often involves artistic license.

The movie *Apollo 13* (Howard 1995) was praised for its commitment to historical accuracy. Notwithstanding, director Ron Howard exercised some artistic license.<sup>2</sup> For example, when the actual Apollo 13 spacecraft ran into multiple life-threatening difficulties, flight director Gene Kranz and his team at Mission Control never gave up and produced solutions that brought the astronauts home safely. Kranz's firm assertion, "Failure is not an option", became the unforgettable tagline for the movie. However, the "historical Kranz", you might say, never uttered those words. Instead, they were assigned to him by the scriptwriters, who had learned from Kranz and others that this was a creed at NASA's Mission Control.<sup>3</sup> Those scriptwriters had less than two-and-a-half hours to tell the story of events that spanned six days. Now, this is good writing, and it is an accurate portrayal of Kranz and his team, though not in a precise sense.

The first book, written by my late friend Nabeel Qureshi, was a New York Times best seller: *Seeking Allah, Finding Jesus* (Qureshi 2014). It is an autobiography of his journey from Islam to Christianity. Here is what Nabeel wrote in the introduction:

By its very nature, a narrative biography must take certain liberties with the story it shares. Please do not expect camera-like accuracy. That is not the intent of this book, and to meet such a standard, it would have to be a twenty-two-year-long video, most of which would bore even my mother to tears.

The words I have in quotations are rough approximations. A few of the conversations represent multiple meetings condensed into one. In some instances, stories are displaced in the timeline to fit the topical categorization. In other instances, people who were present in the conversation were left out of the narrative for the sake of clarity. All of these devices are normal for narrative biographies . . . Please read accordingly. (Qureshi 2014, p. 19)

This is a biography written in the 21st century by a meticulous academic.<sup>4</sup> Biographers in antiquity used those types of devices and others. In my view, this does not undermine the overall reliability of the literature, as long as we have the understanding that what we are reading was intended to convey an accurate gist, or an essentially faithful representation of what occurred. Ancient historical literature rarely ever intended to describe events with the precision of a legal transcript.<sup>5</sup>

Sallust commanded one of Caesar's legions, and he would become one of Rome's finest historians. Tacitus referred to Sallust as "that most admirable Roman historian" (*Annales* 3.30), while the famous rhetorician Quintilian said Sallust was a greater historian than Livy and that "one needs to be well-advanced in one's studies to appreciate him properly" (*Institutio oratoria* 2.5.19). So, it is noteworthy that Sallust occasionally displaced statements and speeches from their original context, and transplanted them in a different one, in order to highlight the true intensity, and even the true nature of those events. The finest ancient historians commonly used this technique, and others. In my

<sup>2</sup> See the *Apollo 13* DVD special features on Disc 1, "Lost Moon: The Triumph of Apollo 13," including feature commentary with director Ron Howard and feature commentary with Jim and Marilyn Lovell (Howard 1995). The 1995 motion picture is based on the book *Lost Moon: The Perilous Voyage of Apollo 13* by Jim Lovell and Jeffrey Kluger (Lovell and Kluger 1994).

<sup>3</sup> In his autobiography, Kranz (2000, p. 12) describes the Mission Control team's efforts to formulate "workaround" options during the Apollo 13 flight: "These three astronauts were beyond our physical reach. But not beyond the reach of human imagination, inventiveness, and a creed that we all lived by: 'Failure is not an option.'" Several years ago, one of the NASA engineers who was on Kranz's team approached me after a lecture and told me something to the same effect. Moreover, Jerry C. Bostick, who was NASA's flight dynamics officer for Apollo 13, offers a similar explanation for how the saying became the tagline of the film, which had to do with something he said in passing to the same effect while he was being interviewed by the scriptwriters (Woodfill 2019).

<sup>4</sup> Although *Seeking Allah, Finding Jesus* was a book written for a popular audience, Qureshi earned an MPhil in Judaism and Christianity in the Greco-Roman World from Christ Church, University of Oxford. He had just been accepted into the DPhil in New Testament program when he learned he had stage four stomach cancer. Nabeel died in 2017 at the age of thirty-four.

<sup>5</sup> Of course, artistic license has its limits. And some authors went so far that what they wrote could not be considered "historically reliable" apart from dying the death of a thousand qualifications.

view, that does not undermine the overall reliability of the literature in which they appear, as long as we have the understanding that what we are reading was most often intended to convey an accurate gist of the people and events described, rather than preserving details with the precision of a court transcript.

We may think about historical reliability in two ways: specifically and broadly. Many of us have chosen to get our news from a particular network. Those who live in the United States and have political leanings to the right, usually view FOX, while those with political leanings to the left are inclined to view CNN or the other mainstream media. One can focus on specific stories reported by their preferred news agency and assess whether a story is true, false, mostly true, or mostly false. Alternatively, one can assess that news agency on a broader basis. Regardless of the news agency that one chooses, viewers know that every agency is biased and is select in its reporting. Despite these deficiencies, viewers may still assess their preferred news agency as being generally reliable.

Classicists who understand the objectives of ancient historians do not usually speak of a text as being “historically reliable” in the broad sense. For example, though Tacitus is regarded as being among the most accurate of Roman historians, it would be rare to find a classicist saying that the literature that Tacitus wrote is “historically reliable”. Instead, classicists focus on the specific reports of an author, such as whether it was Curio or Antony who presented Caesar’s counterproposal to the senate in December 50 BCE, over the actual day on which the counterproposal was delivered. In contrast, while historians of Jesus debate over the reliability of specific reports in the Gospels, such as whether Jesus actually claimed to be divine or had predicted his resurrection, it is also the case that some of them speak in the broader sense of the Gospels being historically reliable. It is also in this broader sense that this essay is concerned.

I will begin by proposing a tentative definition for the term ‘historically reliable’, as follows: A text may be regarded as historically reliable when it provides an accurate gist or an essentially faithful representation of what occurred. In what follows, I will offer four criteria, all of which must be met before one is justified in claiming that a text is historically reliable in a broad sense. Some of these criteria may need to be nuanced or abandoned, and additional criteria may be required. What follows in this essay is simply an initial attempt.

In proceeding, I will employ these criteria to assess Suetonius’s *Life of the Divine Augustus* and the Gospel of Mark. I chose Suetonius because he wrote more closely to how modern biographers write. than did others in his day. Others relied on their use of rhetoric to impress and persuade as they told a good story. Suetonius did not, at least not in the same manner and to the same degree. Andrew Wallace-Hadrill (Wallace-Hadrill 1995, p. 19; cf. 18, 23–24) writes,

He is mundane: has no poetry, no pathos, no persuasion, no epigram. Stylistically he has no pretensions. No writer who sees himself as an artist, one of the elect, could tolerate the pervasive rubric; the repetitiveness of the headings, the monotony of the items that follow, the predictable ending “such he did; and such he did; and such he did”. Suetonius is not sloppy or casual; he is clear and concise, but unadorned. His sentences seek to inform, with a minimum of extraneous detail . . . The style is neither conversational nor elevated. It is the businesslike style of the ancient scholar.<sup>6</sup>

Mellor (1999, p. 149) similarly comments, “Unlike the historians of antiquity, Suetonius is not primarily a literary artist; he is the ancestor of the modern scholar”.<sup>7</sup>

I have chosen to focus on Suetonius’s *Life of Augustus*, because it is his finest biography. Suetonius was most interested in the transitional period of the late Republic to the early Empire. This is

<sup>6</sup> Wallace-Hadrill (Wallace-Hadrill 1995) is cited by almost all subsequent literature on Suetonius, and is regarded as one of the most valuable treatments of Suetonius. See also Bradley (1998, p. 12), Hurley (2001, p. 19), and Tatum (2014, pp. 163–64). Wallace-Hadrill (Wallace-Hadrill 1995, p. 10) adds, “Suetonius establishes the independence of his genre by distancing himself from history the further”.

<sup>7</sup> See also Power (2014, p. 13).

understandable, since that period is not only the most interesting time for Rome, it is also one of the most interesting times in human history. Suetonius shows knowledge of many sources for his work, *Julius* and *Augustus*. However, his use of sources in his twelve *Lives of the Divine Caesars* tapers off significantly afterwards, as does the length and quality of those *Lives*. After Nero, Suetonius shows little interest (Wallace-Hadrill 1995, pp. 61–62). This creates a challenge in speaking of the historical reliability of Suetonius's *Lives* as a collection, and prompts us instead to speak of the historical reliability of each *Life*.

I have chosen the Gospel of Mark from the Bible, since it is very likely the earliest of the four canonical Gospels, with the other Synoptics using him as their primary source, and because John's Gospel presents unique challenges that require a separate discussion. Thus, it is easier to speak on the historical reliability of Mark, rather than the historical reliability of the Gospels as a collection.

I will now turn to four provisional criteria for assessing the historical reliability of ancient historical literature and employ them for assessing Suetonius's *Life of Augustus* and Mark's Gospel.

## 2. The Author Chose Sources Judiciously

Gaius Suetonius Tranquillus was born around 70 CE.<sup>8</sup> His date of death is unknown.<sup>9</sup> Suetonius wrote the *Lives of Illustrious Men*,<sup>10</sup> *Lives of the Caesars*, and some other works that have since been lost.<sup>11</sup> It is his *Lives of the Caesars* for which he is best known. Since Suetonius dedicated his *Lives of the Caesars* to the praetorian prefect Septicius Clarus, some scholars date them to the period in which Septicius held that post: 119–122 CE.<sup>12</sup> However, several other scholars think that Suetonius was still writing those *Lives* in the 130s.<sup>13</sup>

For his *Julius*, and especially his *Augustus* in *Lives of the Caesars*, Suetonius outdid other historians of his day in terms of naming his sources. He held three important posts in the emperor's administration: cultural and literary advisor to the emperor (*a studiis*), director of the imperial libraries of Rome (*a bibliothecis*), and supervisor of the emperor's correspondence (*ab epistulis*). While serving in these posts, he would have enjoyed access to many valuable sources. Although those positions afforded Suetonius unique access to some sources, scholars are not certain about which of his sources would not have likewise been available to others (Wallace-Hadrill 1995, pp. 91, 95; Hurley 2001, pp. 8–9).<sup>14</sup>

When Suetonius wrote about emperors that were closer to his own time, he did not name many sources, if any at all. Scholars do not know why this is the case, but have often suggested that, since his

<sup>8</sup> For the dating of Suetonius's birth, see Bradley (Bradley 2012, p. 1409), Edwards (2000a, p. viii), Keener (2016, p. 146), Keener, *Christobiography* (Keener forthcoming), who says from c. 69 CE to c. 130–140 CE; and Hurley (2001, p. 1): "he wrote in the first quarter of the second century".

<sup>9</sup> Regarding the date of Suetonius's death, Edwards (2000a, p. viii) says, "There are no further references to his career, though from a passage in *Titus* (chp. 10), it seems he was probably still writing after 130". Hurley (2001, p. 4) reports much the same: "No more is known of him after he left the court. He may have lived on for some time". Hurley (2001, p. 4n16) notes further, "Suetonius seems to have written of Domitia Longina as though she had died, perhaps in the 130s (*Tit.* 10.2)]". Likewise, Van Voorst (2000, p. 29) says, "ca. 70–ca. 140" (29).

<sup>10</sup> Hurley (2001, p. 6) notes that *Lives of Illustrious Men* contains more than 100 biographies of Roman poets, orators, historians, philosophers, grammarians, and rhetoricians.

<sup>11</sup> Bradley (Bradley 2012).

<sup>12</sup> For the dating of Suetonius's *Lives of the Caesars*, see Bradley (1998, p. 26); Edwards (2000a, p. viii); Keener (2016, p. 146); Keener, *Christobiography* (Keener forthcoming); and Van Voorst (2000, p. 30).

<sup>13</sup> See Hurley (2001, pp. 4, 4n16) cited earlier in note above; see also Wardle (Wardle 2014, p. 4). Therefore, the dates and the span of time during which *Lives of the Caesars* was composed, is uncertain. It is certain that Suetonius's *Life of the Divine Julius* was the first written of the twelve *Lives*. However, the order in which the other eleven were composed is not known (Hurley (2014, pp. 25–26); Edwards (2000a, p. viii)). There is also uncertainty pertaining to whether Suetonius composed the *Lives of Illustrious Men* before his *Lives of the Caesars*. However, there is a tendency among today's scholars for thinking that his *Lives of Illustrious Men* was written first, perhaps as "a practice run for the *Caesars*" (Hurley (2001, p. 6)) and that *Lives of the Caesars* was his final writing project (Bradley (1998, p. 6)).

<sup>14</sup> Hurley (2001, p. 9) adds, "This does not mean, however, that he had found a cache of correspondence in a private palace archive which only he and a select few were privileged to see. Wider access was available because earlier, in the second half of the first century, the elder Pliny and Quintilian had seen the correspondence or parts of it, perhaps in an imperial library. Never-published papers of Julius Caesar could be found in Augustus' libraries (*Iul.* 56.7)".

primary interest was the late Republic and its transition to Empire, his curiosities waned after the time of Augustus. It may also be that he relied much more on oral testimony for the later emperors, since eyewitnesses would have been alive, and there would have been much common knowledge about those emperors. It may also be that Suetonius lacked access to the same sources after Hadrian dismissed him from supervising his correspondences, or for any combination of these reasons.

The most valuable sources that Suetonius consulted for his *Augustus* are some of Augustus's letters, from which there are as many as twelve quotes, Augustus's will, and the *Res Gestae*, Augustus's personal account of his accomplishments, which were written to serve as his funerary inscription. He also consulted the proceedings of the senate. Still, Suetonius does not mention his sources for much of the *Augustus*. He was most likely relying on annalistic sources for most of the time.

However, not all of Suetonius's sources were of this quality. A large percentage of those he mentions by name in the *Augustus* are either otherwise unknown, or are not the type of sources that historians typically use (Wallace-Hadrill 1995, pp. 63–64). Also, scholars, such as Wardle (Wardle 2014, p. 20) suspect that most of the sources that he names actually contribute little to the portrait that Suetonius paints of Augustus. Thus, although the *Augustus* is Suetonius's Life that is the richest in named sources, the majority of that Life is not based on those sources. In addition, as Wardle (Wardle 2014, p. 28) notes, Suetonius chose to use questionable anecdotes, so much so, that the *Augustus* may be said to be based on a combination of pristine historical sources and tabloid rumors.

Gascou (1984) performed the most extensive project pertaining to Suetonius's sources for the *Augustus*. After nearly 900 pages, Gascou concludes with a general observation: Suetonius consulted numerous sources, yet in an indiscriminate manner. Thus, although Suetonius was more generous in naming his sources than most other historians of his era, Plutarch was more discriminate in his choice of sources. Did Suetonius use good judgment when choosing sources? Yes and no.

Turning to Mark's Gospel, little is known about its author. We observe that it is an anonymous work, and that it mentions no sources. Neither should come as a surprise, however, though some scholars have made much over these observations. In a recent article, Gathercole (2018, p. 454) takes a different view to those scholars, and argues that the absence of the author's name in the title and preface is "entirely irrelevant to the question of the Gospels' anonymity". In this impressive article, Gathercole lists more than a dozen ancient historians and biographers who do not include their name in the title or preface, in at least some of their writings.<sup>15</sup> Of even more interest (with only two exceptions, one of which is fictitious), no ancient biographers whose writings have survived identified themselves in the title or preface.<sup>16</sup> We can go even further than Gathercole and note that Julius Caesar does not identify himself as the author of his *Commentaries on the Civil War*, and he writes entirely in the third person, as the author of John's Gospel may have done. Also, some of the most highly regarded historians of that era—Sallust, Livy, and Plutarch—chose not to include their names anywhere in the literature that they wrote!

Notwithstanding the common practice of anonymity in a technical sense, the ancients appeared to have known the identity of the authors who wrote these works, although in many instances, we are left to speculate as to how they knew it. The best source attesting Plutarch's authorship is the Lamprias Catalogue, written more than a century and perhaps more than two centuries after Plutarch's death. Additionally, it is falsely attributed to Plutarch's son. Still, no one questions Plutarchan authorship.

The traditional authorship of Mark's Gospel is that it was written by John Mark, who was an associate of Peter, who was one of Jesus's three closest disciples. Evidence for the traditional

<sup>15</sup> Gathercole (2018) lists Xenophon's *Hellenica* and *Anabasis*, Josephus's *Jewish Antiquities* and *The Life*, Polybius, Diodorus Siculus, Arrian, Sallust, Livy, Tacitus, Florus, Philo, Plutarch, Lucian's biographical writings, Philostratus's *Life of Apollonius* and *Lives of the Sophists*, and Cornelius Nepos.

<sup>16</sup> Gathercole (2018) identifies Lucian, *Passing of Peregrinus*, and the *Life of Aelius* in the *Historia Augusta*. We do not know if Suetonius included his name in the title or preface of his *Life of the Divine Julius*, the first of the twelve *Lives*, because the first portion of that Life has been lost.



authorship of Mark is much better than we have for Plutarch's *Lives*. Our earliest source is Papias, whose five-volume work, titled *Expositions of the Sayings of the Lord*, has survived only in fragments preserved in the writings of others. Eusebius preserves Papias's comments pertaining to his sources, provided below in Greek, with an English translation:

Οὐκ ὀκνήσω δέ σοι καὶ ὅσα ποτὲ παρὰ τῶν πρεσβυτέρων καλῶς ἔμαθον καὶ καλῶς ἐμνημόνευσα, ἵσχυκατατάξαι ταῖς ἐρμηνείαις, διαβεβαιούμενος ὑπὲρ αὐτῶν ἀλήθειαν. οὐ γὰρ τοῖς τὰ πολλὰ λέγουσιν ἔχαιρον ὥσπερ οἱ πολλοί, ἀλλὰ τοῖς τὰ ληθῆ διδάσκουσιν, οὐδὲ τοῖς τὰς ἀλλοτριὰς ἐντολὰς μνημονεύουσιν, ἀλλὰ τοῖς τὰς παρὰ τοῦ κυρίου τῇ πίστει δεδομένας καὶ ἀπ' αὐτῆς παραγινόμενας τῆς ἀληθείας. εἰ δέ που καὶ παρηκολουθηκῶς τις τοῖς πρεσβυτέροις ἔλθοι, τοὺς τῶν πρεσβυτέρων ἀνέκρινον λόγους· τί Ἀνδρέας ἢ τί Πέτρος εἶπεν ἢ τί Φίλιππος ἢ τί Θωμᾶς ἢ Ἰάκωβος ἢ τί Ἰωάννης ἢ Ματθαῖος ἢ τις ἕτερος τῶν τοῦ κυρίου μαθητῶν, ἃ τε Ἀριστίων καὶ ὁ πρεσβύτερος Ἰωάννης, οἱ τοῦ κυρίου μαθηταί, λέγουσιν. οὐ γὰρ τὰ ἐκ τῶν βιβλίων τοσοῦτόν με ὠφελεῖν ὑπελάμβανον, ὅσον τὰ παρὰ ζώσης φωνῆς καὶ μενούσης.

3 "I will not hesitate to set down for you, along with my interpretations, everything I carefully learned then from the elders and carefully remembered, guaranteeing their truth. For unlike most people I did not enjoy those who have a great deal to say, but those who teach the truth. Nor did I enjoy those who recall someone else's commandments, but those who remember the commandments given by the Lord to the faith and proceeding from the truth itself. 4 And if by chance someone who had been a follower of the elders should come my way, I inquired about the words of the elders—what Andrew or Peter said, or Philip or Thomas or James or John or Matthew or any other of the Lord's disciples, and whatever Aristion and the elder John, the Lord's disciples, were saying. For I did not think that information from books would profit me as much as information from a living and abiding voice".<sup>17</sup> (Pap., *Frag.* 3.3–4 in Euseb., *Hist. eccl.* 3.39)

It appears that Papias is claiming to have received information from a disciple of the Elder John, pertaining to what the Elder John was presently teaching. Scholars differ on whether Papias was claiming that the "Elder John" is John the son of Zebedee, or a minor disciple named John who had traveled with Jesus.<sup>18</sup> They also differ on the dating of Papias's writings: from the late 90s to 150 CE, with the majority opinion of c. 130 CE.<sup>19</sup> Even if the majority opinion is correct that Papias wrote c.

<sup>17</sup> Reference numbers and English translation are as given in Holmes (2007, pp. 734–35).

<sup>18</sup> Irenaeus thought that Papias heard John the son of Zebedee directly, whereas Eusebius—perhaps correctly—thinks that Papias was claiming to have received information from those who had known the apostles (Euseb., *Hist. eccl.* 3.39).

<sup>19</sup> For the range and relative consensus of scholarly opinion on the dating of Papias's writings, see Bauckham (2017, p. 14): "We cannot therefore date his writing to before the very end of the first century, but it could be as early as the turn of the century"; Holmes (2007, p. 722): "within a decade or so of AD 130"; Jefford (2006, p. 37): "ca. 130"; Körtner (2010, p. 176): "The majority of scholarship points to the date of writing as 125/130", but Körtner (2010, pp. 176–77) notes that "little attention has been paid to Eusebius' note in *Liber Chronicorum* II (frag. 2)" in which Eusebius makes statements suggesting that Papias wrote around 110 CE; Yarbrough (1983, p. 190): "In summary, considerable evidence points to an early date for Papias' writings. The generally accepted date of 130 or later has little to commend it. We conclude that Papias wrote his five treatises ca. 95–110"; Hill (2007, pp. 42, 48): "He wrote perhaps as early as about 110 and probably no later than the early 130s ... Since Papias learned it from the elder, this tradition about Mark goes back at least another generation, to about the end of the first century if not earlier"; Drobner (2007, p. 55): "[T]he attempts at dating the work ... range from 90 to 140; more recent commentators tend to favor a later date of ca. 130/140"; Gundry (1994, p. 610): "Modern handbooks usually put the date of his writing at ca. A.D. 135. Early though it is, this date is not early enough. The only hard evidence in its favor comes in a statement of Philip of Side, who makes Papias refer to the reign of Hadrian (pp. 117–38 ...). But we have good reasons to distrust Philip's statement. He is notoriously unreliable and wrote approximately a century later than Eusebius did (Philip—ca. 430; Eusebius—ca. 324). Hence, if Eusebius leads us to an earlier date for Papias's writing, we should probably prefer the earlier", and thus Gundry (1994, pp. 610–11) goes on to argue that Papias wrote prior to 110 CE; Schoedel (1992, p. 140): "[A]lthough later dates (e.g., a.d. 130–140) have often been suggested by modern scholars, Bartlett's date for Papias' literary activity of about A.D. 110 has recently gained support (Schoedel 1967, pp. 91–92; Körtner 1983, pp. 89–94, 167–72, 225–26)"; and Koester (2000, pp. 68, 171): "early second century ... ca. 100–150".

130 CE, Papias claims that he had heard what John the Elder taught while that John was still teaching. Thus, this situates the time that Papias received the tradition to be during the late first century.

Papias goes on to say that he had information deriving from the Elder John that Mark had written what he remembered Peter saying.

Καὶ τοῦτο ὁ πρεσβύτερος ἔλεγε· Μάρκος μὲν ἑρμηνευτὴς Πέτρου γενόμενος, ὅσα ἐμνημόνευσεν, ἀκριβῶς ἔγραψεν, οὐ μέντοι τάξει, τὰ ὑπὸ τοῦ Ἰησοῦ ἢ λεχθέντα ἢ πραχθέντα. οὔτε γὰρ ἤκουσε τοῦ κυρίου, οὔτε παρηκολούθησεν αὐτῷ, ὕστερον δέ, ὡς ἔφην, Πέτρῳ, ὃς πρὸς τὰς χρείας ἐποιεῖτο τὰς διδασκαλίας, ἀλλ' οὐχ ὥσπερ σύνταξιν τῶν κυριακῶν ποιούμενος ἱλογίων, ὥστε οὐδὲν ἡμαρτε Μάρκος, οὕτως ἔνια γράψας ὡς ἀπεμνημόνευσεν. ἐνὸς γὰρ ἐποιήσατο πρόνοιαν, τοῦ μηδὲν ὧν ἤκουσε παραλιπεῖν ἢ ψεύσασθαι τι ἐν αὐτοῖς.

Ταῦτα μὲν οὖν ἱστόρηται τῷ Παπία περὶ τοῦ Μάρκου.

15 And the elder used to say this: “Mark, having become Peter’s interpreter, wrote down accurately everything he remembered, though not in order, of the things either said or done by Christ. For he neither heard the Lord nor followed him, but afterward, as I said, followed Peter, who adapted his teachings as needed but had no intention of giving an ordered account of the Lord’s sayings. Consequently Mark did nothing wrong in writing down some things as he remembered them, for he made it his one concern not to omit anything that he heard or to make any false statement in them”.

Such, then, is the account given by Papias with respect to Mark.<sup>20</sup> (Pap. Frag. 3.15 in Euseb., *Hist. eccl.* 3.39.15)

To summarize, sometime in the late first century, Papias learned that Mark had been a follower of Jesus’s lead disciple, Peter, and that Mark had written what he remembered Peter saying. Papias learned this from someone who had accompanied one of Jesus’s disciples, and had heard it while that disciple was still alive and teaching. Even if Papias had written c. 130 CE, which itself may be too late, that is far less than a century after Mark had been written, and only a century after the events that it purports to describe. Also, it is a report that Papias had heard of, within only a few decades of Mark composing his Gospel.

Despite lingering questions about Papias, such as his report that Matthew recorded the teachings of Jesus in Aramaic (Pap. Frag. 3.16 in Euseb., *Hist. eccl.* 3.39.16; see Holmes (2007, pp. 740–41)), and the bizarre report of Judas’s death, which was attributed to Papias in the fourth century by Apollinaris of Laodicea (Pap. Frag. 18.1–7 in Apollinaris of Laodicea), the testimony of Papias pertaining to the authorship of Mark’s Gospel is far superior to the Lamprias Catalogue for Plutarch. Even Irenaeus, who names the authors of all four Gospels, writes just under a century after the final Gospel had been composed.<sup>21</sup> That Irenaeus wrote the report is not in question. Therefore, even Irenaeus is a better source for the authorship of the Gospels than the Lamprias Catalogue is for Plutarch. If Mark wrote what he remembered Peter saying, as Papias claims, Mark’s source is remarkable.

There are additional reasons for thinking that Peter was Mark’s primary source on Jesus. First, in addition to Papias and Irenaeus, there are numerous other ancient sources who attest to the Markian authorship of the Gospel that is attributed to him: Justin, Tertullian, Clement of Alexandria, Origen, Jerome, Muratorian Canon, Eusebius (who relies on Papias and Irenaeus), and the Anti-Marcionite Prologue to Mark’s Gospel.<sup>22</sup> It is difficult to determine which, if any of these sources, are independent

<sup>20</sup> Reference numbers and the English translation are as given in Holmes (2007, pp. 738–39).

<sup>21</sup> According to Gathercole (2018, p. 466n68), Irenaeus wrote between 174 and 189 CE, and Gathercole also cites Irenaeus’s naming Eleutherius as presently holding the episcopate in the twelfth place from the apostles (Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 3.3.3). This episcopate began in 174 CE, and lasted until Eleutherius’s death in 189 CE.

<sup>22</sup> Specifically, see Justin, *Dialogue with Trypho* 106 (where Justin mentions the “memoirs of the apostles” and “memoirs of him” when referring to Mark 3:16–17); Tertullian, *Against Marcion*, 4.2, 5; Clement of Alexandria (in Euseb., *Hist. eccl.* 6.14.5–7a);

of Papias and Irenaeus. What can be concluded is that the tradition affirming that Mark wrote the Gospel attributed to him, began early, was widespread, and lacks any evidence suggesting that another author was ever posited.

Secondly, 1 Peter 5:13 mentions “Mark, my son”, which is consistent with Papias’s claim that Mark knew Peter, one of Jesus’s twelve disciples. Even if Peter is not the author of 1 Peter, the text at the minimum reveals a very warm association between the apostle Peter and a man named Mark; although there is no guarantee that it is the same Mark posited as the Gospel’s author, Bauckham (2017, pp. 538–40) has addressed this concern.<sup>23</sup> Third, that Matthew and Luke stick so closely to Mark when using it as their source may suggest that they highly regarded Mark, which is consistent with reports that Mark’s primary source was Peter. These internal reasons suggest that the apostle Peter was Mark’s primary source for much of the content in his Gospel. When combined with the early and unanimous testimony of others, the case for Mark containing Peter’s eyewitness testimony is quite strong.

Over the past fifty years, a slight majority of critical scholars agree with the traditional authorship of Mark; that is, someone named Mark or John Mark wrote what he remembered the apostle Peter said.<sup>24</sup> Also, a larger majority of critical scholars during that same period date Mark’s Gospel as 50–70 CE,<sup>25</sup> which situates Mark’s composition to approximately seventeen to forty years after Jesus’s death. As stated earlier, great uncertainty exists as to when Suetonius wrote his *Lives of the Divine Caesars*. Most scholars assign a date of c. 119–130 CE, and perhaps even later.<sup>26</sup> Even if we consider the earlier date of 119 CE, that situates Suetonius’s composition of *Augustus* 105 years after Augustus’s death.

Did Mark use good judgment in his choice of sources? If the traditional view is correct that Mark wrote what he remembered hearing Peter say, as the data suggest, we may answer this with a resounding yes.

### 3. The Author Used His Sources Reliably

Surviving copies of Augustus’s *Res Gestae* assist historians in reconstructing the entire text. As Wardle (Wardle 2014, p. 24n104) notes, “Authors such as Velleius, Seneca, and Tacitus echo the wording of *Res Gestae* so closely as to demonstrate that the text was well known and readily accessible”. Thus, we can compare Suetonius’s use of *Res Gestae*, and observe his adaptations. He feels free to paraphrase Augustus’s words, even expanding on them, in order to provide further information (Wardle 2014, p. 24).<sup>27</sup> Moreover, corresponding details in a few stories mentioned by Josephus, Plutarch, Tacitus, Suetonius, and Dio render it almost certain that these authors often drew from the same sources (Wallace-Hadrill 1995, p. 64; Hurley 2001, pp. 14–15). Targeted comparisons by

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Origen, *Commentary on Matthew* 1 (in Euseb., *Hist. eccl.* 6.25.5); Jerome, *De viris illustribus*, 8; Muratorian Canon; Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 2.15.1; and the Anti-Marcionite Prologue to Mark.

<sup>23</sup> Bauckham (2017, pp. 539–40) acknowledges that Mark was a “very common Roman praenomen, the first of the three names borne by every male Roman citizen in this period. In fact, all praenomina were common. But no Roman citizen would be known by his praenomen alone . . . If Cicero or Brutus or Marcus Aurelius or Mark Antony (Marcus Antonius) had written a Gospel, it would most certainly not have been called ‘the Gospel according to Mark.’ On the evidence of name usage alone, the author of the Gospel is very unlikely to have been a Roman citizen. He must have been a slave or a non-Roman, and the only relevant evidence will be for the frequency of the name among those who, not being Roman citizens, bore the name Marcus as their only Latin name, and as a name that could be used alone to identify them”.

<sup>24</sup> With the assistance of my son-in-law, Nick Peters, I gathered the opinions of seventy-five critical scholars on the matters of the authorship and dating of Mark’s Gospel, written between 1965 and 2018. As such, our sampling is by no means exhaustive and considers only literature written in English. Nevertheless, our sampling is large enough to be suggestive. The results have not been published.

<sup>25</sup> It is common to see 65–70 CE as the majority position of critical scholars for the date within which Mark was composed. I suspect many scholars use those dates without giving much thought to the matter, or they check what the majority actually think. I too was guilty of such.

<sup>26</sup> See notes 12–13 above.

<sup>27</sup> One can perform a similar exercise on Plutarch’s *Life of Coriolanus*. Classicists believe that Plutarch’s lone source for that *Life* was *Roman Antiquities* by Dionysius of Halicarnassus. By comparing Plutarch’s account with that by Dionysius, we can decrypt what Plutarch did with his source when writing his *Life of Coriolanus* (see Russell (1963)). One can observe Plutarch doing what every educated youth of the elite in that day had been taught in their teenage years, and what every historian of that era did: paraphrase their sources rather than quoting them verbatim.



Keener (2016) and Goh (2016) are especially revealing. They conclude that while those historians certainly edit and adapt their source material, they do not engage in wholesale invention.<sup>28</sup> On a few occasions, mostly in his *Augustus*, Suetonius quotes his sources verbatim, or nearly so. Sometimes the Latin writer even quoted the source in its original Greek (Edwards 2000a, p. xxviii; Mellor 1999, p. 151). Accordingly, as Wardle (Wardle 2014, p. 25) notes, Suetonius “proves able to convey [a text’s] meaning accurately, but also carefully manipulates the material to suit the temper of his times”.<sup>29</sup> Suetonius appears to use his sources reliably.

Since Mark was the first Gospel and does not name his sources, at least directly,<sup>30</sup> and Jesus is not known to have written any literature, we cannot directly compare how Mark used his source(s). However, we can identify a few items in Mark that have parallel details reported in sources independent of Mark, such as Paul, John, and the Q material. Also, we observe that the agreement is quite good. Eve (2014, pp. 160–61) notes several parallel points pertaining to Jesus appearing in Mark and Paul: Jesus descended from David, is the Messiah, and is the Son of God. The “kingdom of God” and “inheriting” the kingdom of God are known by Mark and Paul. Jesus’s prohibition of divorce and the centrality of loving others are likewise known by Mark and Paul. Eve (2014, pp. 164–66) further observes that Mark and Paul agree that Jesus instituted the Eucharist, that he did so on the evening/night he was betrayed, that he died by crucifixion, and that the Jewish leadership was responsible for having him executed.

We may go further than Eve and note the close similarities in the wording used by Paul and Mark pertaining to Jesus’s Eucharist logia:

Paul (1 Cor. 11:24–25)

<sup>24</sup> καὶ εὐχαριστήσας ἔκλασεν καὶ εἶπεν· τοῦτό μου ἐστὶν τὸ σῶμα τὸ ὑπὲρ ὑμῶν· τοῦτο ποιεῖτε εἰς τὴν ἐμὴν ἀνάμνησιν. <sup>25</sup> ὡσαύτως καὶ τὸ ποτήριον μετὰ τὸ δεῖπνῆσαι λέγων· τοῦτο τὸ ποτήριον ἡ καινὴ διαθήκη ἐστὶν ἐν τῷ ἐμῷ αἵματι· τοῦτο ποιεῖτε, ὡς ἂν πίνετε, εἰς τὴν ἐμὴν ἀνάμνησιν.

<sup>24</sup> And having given thanks, he broke [the bread] and said, “This is my body, which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me”. <sup>25</sup> Likewise, also 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”.

Mark (Mark 14:22–25)

<sup>22</sup> Καὶ ἐσθιόντων αὐτῶν λαβὼν ἄρτον εὐλογήσας ἔκλασεν καὶ ἔδωκεν αὐτοῖς καὶ εἶπεν· λάβετε, τοῦτό ἐστιν τὸ σῶμά μου. <sup>23</sup> καὶ λαβὼν ποτήριον εὐχαριστήσας ἔδωκεν αὐτοῖς, καὶ ἔπιον ἐξ αὐτοῦ πάντες. <sup>24</sup> καὶ εἶπεν αὐτοῖς· τοῦτό ἐστιν τὸ αἷμά μου τῆς διαθήκης τὸ ἐκχυννόμενον ὑπὲρ πολλῶν. <sup>25</sup> ἀμὴν λέγω ὑμῖν ὅτι οὐκέτι οὐ μὴ πίνω ἐκ τοῦ γενήματος τῆς ἀμπέλου ἕως τῆς ἡμέρας ἐκείνης ὅταν αὐτὸ πίνω καινὸν ἐν τῇ βασιλείᾳ τοῦ θεοῦ.

<sup>22</sup> And while they were eating, taking bread, having blessed it, he broke it and gave it to them and said, “Take. This is my body”. <sup>23</sup> And taking a cup, having given thanks, he gave it to them and all drank from it. <sup>24</sup> And he said to them, “This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many. <sup>25</sup> Truly I say to you, I will never again drink from the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new in the kingdom of God”.

<sup>28</sup> See also Keener, *Christobiography* (Keener forthcoming): “Suetonius’s understanding of biography involved not free composition but dependence on prior information; where we can test him, this biographer mostly edited and adapted historical information rather than inventing new stories”.

<sup>29</sup> Moreover, when authors such as Plutarch, Dio, Velleius, Seneca, Suetonius, and Tacitus contain numerous corresponding details, even in similar wording, we rightly conclude that they drew on the same sources. Although this does little or nothing to suggest multiple attestation, it allows us to measure the accuracy to which an author used his sources (Wardle 2014, p. 24n104; Wallace-Hadrill 1995, p. 64).

<sup>30</sup> Not naming one’s sources was not at all untypical of ancient historical writing. See (Wallace-Hadrill 1995, p. 64).

Although not a verbatim similarity, Jesus's Eucharist logia in Mark and Paul are a close match. Though possible, it is not likely that one or more of those present at the Last Supper were taking notes of Jesus's words as would a stenographer during a deposition or trial. Yet, it is quite plausible that the gist of Jesus's Eucharist logia was recalled by several of those present at the Last Supper, and who continued to proclaim Jesus's message in the years that followed his death.

Eve (2014, p. 167) offers the following conclusions pertaining to Mark and Paul:

This brief survey suggests several things. First, it indicates that where Paul can be used as a check on Mark, Paul tends to support the existence of a tradition similar (but by no means identical) to that reflected in Mark. This in turn suggests that, where we have been able to check it, the tradition seems to have been reasonably stable between Paul's time and Mark's, and also that Mark has been reasonably conservative in his employment of it . . .

Second, Paul's own use of the tradition suggests that it was far from uncontrolled. It is something that he cites as being authoritative on more than one occasion, suggesting that he is, to some extent, constrained by it, and that he expects his audience to also be so. The tradition matters to Paul, because it conveys what he takes to be true (at least in the sense of authoritative); it would be surprising if Paul were alone in this attitude.

Third, although Paul never explicitly states precisely where he obtained his tradition from, his letters, particularly that to the Galatians, do provide some possible clues.

Eve (2014, pp. 167–68) then mentions Paul's two visits to Jerusalem, during which he spent time with no less than Peter (primarily), Jesus's brother James, and John (Gal. 1:18–19; 2:1–10).

This puts Paul in touch with some form of Christian tradition at least as early as 34 CE (within four years of the most likely date of the crucifixion) and with a form of the tradition provided by Peter and James, two men who had known Jesus in the flesh, three years later. (Eve 2014, p. 167)

Since Peter was one of Paul's major sources for Jesus, if Mark's primary source was Peter, it should not surprise us to find so many points of agreement on Jesus between Paul and Mark.<sup>31</sup>

It may also be valuable to observe how Matthew and Luke use Mark. Although they often paraphrase and adapt Mark, their changes are minimal in comparison to how other ancient authors paraphrase and adapt their sources. In my work pertaining to how Plutarch reports the same events in the different *Lives* he wrote (Licona 2017), I was surprised to observe the number and the extent of the differences between the accounts. Plutarch does not copy and paste texts when describing the same event in multiple *Lives*, but paraphrases and employs numerous compositional devices, such as compression, conflation, transferal, chronological displacement, and others. It is interesting to observe the same author relying on the same sources and reporting the same events, yet with differences (Licona 2017, pp. 23–111). As a rule, although Matthew and Luke edit and adapt Mark, their redactions are minor in comparison to those of Plutarch (Licona 2017, pp. 199–200). Downing (2011, pp. 529, 531; see also pp. 523–45) writes,

It is because people were taught to “say the same thing in other words” that close repetition of the same words among our sources [i.e., the Gospels] . . . appears so striking and so much in need of comment . . . With so much pressure in favour of paraphrase, and so common a conviction of its validity, it really does seem very strange that we find so much identical wording among our Synoptic Gospels.

<sup>31</sup> Eve (2014, p. 147) is skeptical of Papias's report. However, in my opinion, his reasons require too much of Papias. If one applies the same burden of proof to other ancient sources, perhaps even many modern ones, we could be confident about very little of the reported past. Moreover, it is apparent that Eve is a metaphysical naturalist who eschews the possibility of miracles. Therefore, it does not surprise us to find that he thinks that the stories of Jesus's miracles could not have occurred, and that they are very loosely based on far lesser events, if any at all. See Eve (2017, pp. 66–85, esp. p. 80) The cumulative case that Peter was Mark's primary source is fairly strong.

Elsewhere, having compared Josephus's use of his sources with how the authors of the Synoptic Gospels use theirs, [Downing \(1980, p. 33\)](#) writes,

It is not the divergencies among the synoptists (or even between them and John), in parallel contexts, that are remarkable: it is the extraordinary extent of verbal similarities. The question is, why were they content to copy so much? rather than, why did they bother to change this or that? The procedure is not however mechanical, and there *are* considerable divergencies. But it has to be recognized that the relationship may betoken a much greater respect, one for the other, even than Josephus' for Scripture.

Although one can only speculate, the respect that the Gospels of Matthew and Luke appear to have had for Mark makes sense if Peter is the source behind much of that Gospel, and if Mark was thought to report what he had heard from Peter accurately.

Just as Suetonius, who wrote in Latin, will occasionally quote his source in the original Greek, there are three occasions when Mark, who wrote in Greek, quotes Jesus in the original Aramaic. For example, in the story of Jesus raising Jairus's daughter from the dead, Mark reports that Jesus came into the house, "and, having taken the hand of the child, he said to her, '*Talitha Koum*,' which translated is 'Little girl, I say to you, "Get up"'" (Mark 5:41; see also 7:34 and 15:34).

The data suggest that Suetonius and Mark used their sources reliably.

#### 4. We can Verify Numerous Items Reported

Despite his shortcomings mentioned thus far, most of what Suetonius reported is trustworthy. Suetonian scholar Donna Hurley ([Hurley 2001](#), pp. 1–2) writes,

[The *Caesares*] contain an abundance of factual material to be mined by historians and social historians. Suetonius could be guilty of common error, and some of his information is distorted by misleading generalizations and inappropriate segmentation, but much is trustworthy and often unique . . . Suetonius did not make things up. His catholic reportage did indeed include gossip—but it was not his own . . .

There are numerous items reported in Mark that have been verified by historians of Jesus. A universal consensus of scholars agrees that the data are sufficient for concluding that Jesus of Nazareth lived in Judea in the first century and believed that God had chosen him to usher in his kingdom, that he had brothers, and that he was baptized by John the Baptist. He performed feats that both he and his followers interpreted as miracles and exorcisms. He challenged the reigning Jewish leadership, who ended up arresting him and bringing him before the Roman governor Pontius Pilate, who crucified him in April of 30 or 33. It is rare to find a historian of Jesus who would not affirm any of these "facts".<sup>32</sup> Also, there are even more items that many or even most scholars think can be verified about Jesus, though they are lacking in universal consensus.

Many items in the Gospels comport with existing knowledge pertaining to the historical settings in which the Gospels are situated. [Bauckham \(2017, pp. 39–92\)](#) has shown that when ancient documents and inscriptions are considered, the names mentioned in the Gospels and the book of Acts are not only the common names of Jews living in Israel of that period, and not those of Jews elsewhere, they also appear with roughly the same frequencies in the Gospels and Acts that we find in extrabiblical sources. At the very minimum, this suggests that all of the Gospel authors—or the sources from which they drew—were acquainted with Israel during the time of Jesus.

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<sup>32</sup> [Ehrman \(2016, p. 221\)](#) is an exception when it comes to whether Jesus was known as a miracle worker during his ministry: "I want to consider whether it is absolutely certain that Jesus was already understood to be a miracle worker even in his own day, prior to his death. My view of that question is a minority position, but one that I want to explain. I think the answer is no. I am not saying that I know for certain that Jesus was not considered a miracle worker during his life. But I do think there are grounds for doubt". Ehrman may well be the only member subscribing to this "minority position".

We also know that places mentioned in the Gospels actually existed (e.g., Capernaum, Bethlehem, Bethsaida, Nazareth, Jerusalem, the Mount of Olives). We know that several of the people mentioned in the Gospels actually existed, and lived during the period in which they were situated (e.g., Augustus, Quirinius, Tiberius, the Herods, Pontius Pilate, Caiaphas, John the Baptist, Jesus).

It is germane that Mark was in a position to receive accurate reports about Jesus. This is especially true if Papias's report is correct that Mark wrote what he remembered Peter saying. Yet, even if it is not the case, the author still wrote within only a few decades of Jesus's life, and certainly while some of the eyewitnesses were alive.<sup>33</sup> Paul's undisputed letters and the book of Acts inform us that Jesus's disciples continued to teach about him publicly for more than two decades after his death (Gal. 1:17–18; 2:1–10; Acts 1:8; 4:16; 5:28; 6:7; 8:1, 14; 9:26; 11:27; 12:25; 13:13; 15:2, 4–6; 16:4; 21:17–18).<sup>34</sup> This brings us to the very doorstep of the time period of when Mark was written.<sup>35</sup> These sources also inform us that the Christian church was headquartered in Jerusalem for the first few decades of its existence, and that it served as the supreme doctrinal authority to which even Paul submitted (Acts 15:1–2; 21:17–26).<sup>36</sup> Whatever decisions were made by the Jerusalem leadership applied equally for churches outside the city (Acts 15:1–29, esp. vv. 19–33). Traditions were passed along to the churches, who were commanded to keep them. Thus, although there can be no doubt that stories of Jesus were corrupted as they circulated from person-to-person in an uncontrolled manner, there also can be no doubt that stories of Jesus were guarded by the early church leaders and Jesus's personal disciples, who continued to tell those stories for decades.

Not only was Mark in a good position to receive accurate reports of Jesus, Jesus's teachings would have been quite easily recalled by his disciples, even decades later. Unlike today's pastors, who have to create a new sermon every week for the same congregation, Jesus was an itinerate teacher, who may have had no more than a dozen or so sermons, some of which he taught countless times. He sent his disciples out to teach what they had heard him say. What they had heard Jesus teach, they now taught countless times. They went out in twos, providing the opportunity for one to correct the other when the integrity of Jesus's teaching had been compromised. They returned and heard Jesus teach even more. After his post-resurrection departure, they continued teaching for decades. This scenario is far more likely than the one advocated by scholars such as Ehrman (2016, pp. 3, 4, 62, 65, 101, 102, 289) who suggest that the authors of the Gospels included stories of Jesus in the form that those stories had taken after being circulated carelessly for decades. Those scholars do not take into consideration the continuing role of the eyewitnesses. As Taylor (1933, p. 41) wrote, "If the Form-Critics are right, the disciples must have been translated to heaven immediately after the Resurrection". It also assumes that the Gospel authors lacked the desire or the sense to sift through stories about Jesus, attempt to filter questionable ones, or prefer those stories that were thought to be rooted in the eyewitnesses, some of whom were still alive.

Like any effective teacher, Jesus would likely have desired to communicate his teachings in a memorable form. So, it is no surprise to observe in the Gospels that Jesus taught in parables and

<sup>33</sup> In his work *Memory, Jesus, and the Synoptic Gospels*, McIver (2011, pp. 189–209) considers population estimates of where Jesus frequently ministered, such as Capernaum and Jerusalem. He then estimates the number of eyewitnesses to Jesus who were ages fifteen and above at the time of Jesus's ministry, to be in the neighborhood of 62,000. Noting two major studies on lifespans in the time of Jesus, he shows that out of 100,000 live births, between 671 and 1644 survived to the age of eighty. After all is considered, McIver concludes that between 13,000 and 15,000 eyewitnesses would have been alive thirty-five years after Jesus's death (around the time many think Mark was written), and 600 to 1100 would still have been alive sixty years after His death (when many think John, the final Gospel, was written).

<sup>34</sup> The apostles were in Jerusalem during the days of Paul's persecution of the church. They were there three years after his conversion (Gal. 1:17–18). They were there fourteen years later (Gal. 2:1–10). Finally, they were still there when Paul met with James, and was subsequently arrested for an incident in the Jerusalem temple (Acts 21:17–33), which occurred c. 57–58 CE.

<sup>35</sup> See an earlier note in which I mention how Nick Peters and I gathered the opinions of seventy-five critical scholars on the matters of the authorship and dating of Mark's Gospel, written between 1965 and 2018.

<sup>36</sup> We may add that Paul states that spiritual teachings came from the church in Jerusalem (Rom. 15:25–27; cf. 1 Cor. 9:11). See Licona (2010, pp. 226–28).

employed rhetoric, such as hyperbolic language: “You cannot be my disciple unless you hate your family” (Luke 14:26; cf. Matt. 10:37), or “If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away” (Matt. 5:29; 18:9; Mark 9:47).

This all pertains to what Jesus said. What about what he did? We tend to recall events better when they either impact us in a profound manner, or elicit our strong emotions, such as grief, joy, and astonishment. Those of us who live in the United States and who are old enough to recall the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, can remember where we were, the moment that we learned that planes had flown into the two towers of the World Trade Center. Most of us can even remember what the weather was like on that day. Yet, most of us would be unable to remember what the weather was on September 11 last year.

Joe Galloway was a combat reporter during the Vietnam War, and he accompanied Lt. Col. Hal Moore and his team of American Special Forces during the three-day Battle of Ia Drang River Valley in November 1965.<sup>37</sup> Galloway was later interviewed in the television series titled *Vietnam in HD* (Jackson 2011). On one occasion during the interview, Galloway spoke of his experience during those days of battle, obviously still impacted by them, even after thirty-five years.

I left that landing zone X-Ray battlefield knowing that young Americans had laid down their lives so that I might live. They had sacrificed themselves for me and their buddies. What I was learning was that there’s some events that are so overwhelming that you can’t simply be a witness. You can’t be above it. You can’t be neutral. You can’t be untouched by it. Simple as that. You see it. You live it. You experience it. And it will be with you all of your days. (Jackson 2011)

If the events in the Gospels actually occurred, and let us say that you had been there, observing Jesus healing paralytics, the blind, lepers, and the demon-possessed, you saw him walk on water, raise the dead, be crucified, then shortly thereafter saw him alive and well, it is quite likely that you would be able to recall at least the general details of those events decades later.

Now this is not to assume the possibility of miracles, or that Jesus actually performed them. Instead, it is to contend that, if Jesus did perform miracles, his disciples and other eyewitnesses of those miracles would likely have been able to recall them, even decades later. I am also not suggesting that we should think that we are reading the very words of Jesus, rather than the gist of what he said. Moreover, there is no guarantee that the authors of the Gospels were committed to reporting only the events that had occurred, without adding non-historical elements for effect, or even inventing some stories. Nor is there any guarantee that all of his disciples’ recollections of what he said and did were perfect, since memory is imperfect. However, with matters of great importance, we usually remember the gist of what occurred and what was said with a fair amount of accuracy, even decades later. So, the essence of Jesus’s teachings and deeds could easily have been recalled fairly accurately, even at a much later date, especially since at least some of his disciples continued recalling them during that period in their own preaching and teaching. Thus, Mark was in a good position to receive these, regardless of whether Peter was his main source.

## 5. No More than a Very Small Percentage of Items Reported by the Author have a Reasonable Chance of Being Errors

Common errors are present throughout Suetonius’s *Lives of the Divine Caesars*. Edwards (2000a, p. vii) writes, “Suetonius himself certainly offers little in the way of chronological narrative and it would be rash to rely on the factual accuracy of the stories he tells about the Caesars”. She cautions, “As a

<sup>37</sup> Moore and Galloway later coauthored the award-winning book, *We Were Soldiers Once . . . and Young: Ia Drang: The Battle That Changed the War in Vietnam* (Moore and Galloway 1992), and its sequel, *We Are Soldiers Still: A Journey Back to the Battlefields of Vietnam* (Moore and Galloway 2008). The 2001 motion picture *We Were Soldiers* (Wallace 2001) is based on the first book.



general rule, one should avoid relying on any of Suetonius' statements relating to numbers (e.g., dates, ages, prices)" (Edwards 2000b, p. xxxi). Even with his *Augustus*, the finest of Suetonius's *Lives of the Divine Caesars*, Wardle (Wardle 2014, p. 28; Hurley 2001, pp. 1–2) opines that "it is certain that Suet. does not offer 'the truth' about Aug".

There is another factor that must be considered, and for which every author is guilty to varying degrees: prejudicial selectivity. Let us suppose that a biography of Martin Luther King Jr. is written for the purpose of inspiring others to devote their lives to defending the oppressed. So, the biographer focuses on King's heroic work in the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s while omitting any mention of his marital infidelities, since that information is irrelevant to the biographer's objective. Even if every detail reported in that biography were true, readers would be viewing a sanitized portrait of Martin Luther King Jr. through the author's somewhat distorting lens. How does this impact how we answer the question of reliability?

Along with most ancient biographers of his day, Suetonius was prejudicially selective in what he reported about Augustus, for whom he was especially fond. Although he does not omit negative stories about Augustus, he downplays them. For example, he must include the common knowledge that Augustus stole a pregnant Livia from her husband and married her, that he engaged in repeated adulteries throughout their marriage, and that he had an appetite for deflowering virgins. Nevertheless, Suetonius adds that Augustus loved Livia until the day he died, and that she was beside him until death, even kissing him on his deathbed (Wardle 2014, pp. 37–39). For Suetonius, Augustus's infidelities were small matters in his otherwise chaste life.

Suetonius provides a string of acts illustrating Augustus's tendency to be harsh and ruthless. But these are followed by reports that are apparently meant to soften the negative impact that these stories of his harsh acts may have on readers. For example, he writes,

And the praetor Quintus Gallius, who was holding double tablets under his clothes while fulfilling his duty of paying respects, he suspected of concealing a sword but did not dare to search him on the spot in case something else were discovered; a little later he had him dragged from the tribunal and tortured like a slave by centurions and soldiers and, when he did not confess, ordered him to be killed, having first gouged out the man's eyes with his own hand. (Suet. *Aug.* 27.4 [Wardle])<sup>38</sup>

Suetonius follows this with the alternate account provided by Augustus, which has elements of truth: "However, [Augustus] himself writes that Gallius had requested an audience, made an attempt on his life, and was thrown into prison by him; then having been banned from the city, he was sent away and perished in a shipwreck or an ambush by brigands" (Suet. *Aug.* 27.4 [Wardle]).<sup>39</sup> Stories of Augustus's harsh behavior are then followed by Augustus's twice consideration of handing Rome back to the senate, his beautification of the city, other improvements that he made to it, and the creation of laws that protected the innocent (Suet. *Aug.* 28–34).

Wallace-Hadrill (1986, p. 245) concludes his review of Jacques Gascou's massive volume devoted to assessing Suetonius as a historian with the following:

The Suetonius who emerges from this important study will not necessarily win the confidence and approval of present-day historians; but he will have to be read in a more sophisticated way, with greater awareness of the strengths and weaknesses of the ambivalent genre within which he writes, and of his standpoint and his ability to manipulate his material to suit his conceptions.

If most of what Suetonius reports about Augustus is true, while often stated in a manner that leads readers to a mental picture that is somewhat distorted, to what extent does that challenge the

<sup>38</sup> Translation by Wardle (Suetonius 2014, p. 50).

<sup>39</sup> See also Wardle's comments in his commentary on the text (Suetonius 2014, pp. 209–12).

historical reliability of the *Augustus*? How much selectivity may we allow an author when it affects the overall portrait? It seems we should assess both the facts and the mental picture. And what if the objective of the biography is didactic or to inspire readers to live virtuously? For example, as stated earlier, a modern biography of Martin Luther King Jr. may be written for the sole purpose of inspiring others to devote their lives to defending the oppressed. Accordingly, the biographer would focus on King's heroic work, while omitting any mention of his adulteries, since that information is irrelevant to the biographer's objectives. We might judge that biography as being historically reliable in what it reports, while being cognizant of the author's intent for writing, which consequently has resulted in a portrait that is incomplete and somewhat distorted. Yet, can a reasonable understanding of "historical reliability" tolerate such qualifications? This is a challenge that must be faced when examining and speaking about the historical reliability of ancient historical literature in a broad sense, and thus it requires more thought.

Turning to Mark, and bracketing its theological claims and miracle reports,<sup>40</sup> there are only a few items that have a reasonable chance of being incorrect: Mark's claim that Abiathar was high priest when David ate the consecrated bread (Mark 2:25–26; cf. 1 Sam. 21:1–6), three occasions where Mark may be geographically confused,<sup>41</sup> the day on which Jesus was anointed, and a few minor chronological items in his Passion narrative. Plausible solutions have been offered for all of these, which may or may not be true. Yet, even if every last one of the items just mentioned are truly errors, they make up an extremely small percentage of Mark's Gospel.

Are we viewing Jesus through Mark's distorting lens? It is difficult, if not impossible, to tell. However, it is worth mentioning that we can observe awkward content in Mark, which Matthew and Luke have either softened or omitted altogether. Whereas most of the miracles in Mark, and all of them in Matthew and Luke only require that Jesus say the word or either touch the person or be touched by the person, we find two occasions in Mark where Jesus's method differs in a strange way.<sup>42</sup> In Mark 7:31–35, a man who is deaf and has a speech impediment is brought to Jesus, who puts his fingers in the man's ears, spits and touches the man's tongue, and says, "Be opened", and the man is healed. Matthew 15:29–31 is aware of the event, but does not provide details, while Luke omits the story. In Mark 8:22–26, Jesus spits in the eyes of a blind man and lays hands on him, but the man is not healed completely. So, Jesus lays his hands on the man again, and the man can now see clearly. Matthew and Luke omit this story. Thus, although we cannot tell if Mark has softened stories that he heard about Jesus, we can observe the other evangelists softening Mark's portrayal of Jesus.

<sup>40</sup> As stated earlier, when it comes to theological matters in the Gospels, these cannot be confirmed by using the tools available to historians. Thus, we cannot say that those items are historically reliable or historically unreliable. Nevertheless, that does not prohibit historians from deciding on the non-theological elements in a narrative. For example, although historians are incapable of confirming that Jesus's death atones for sin, they are able to confirm that Jesus died by crucifixion.

<sup>41</sup> First, in Mark 5:1, 13, the distance of Gerasa from the Sea of Galilee, since Gerasa is about thirty miles from the Sea of Galilee. Second, in Mark 6:45, Jesus commands his disciples to get in a boat and cross over to Bethsaida, which is on the northeast side of the lake, but they instead land at Gennesaret (6:53). However, in Matthew 14:22, 34, he commands them to get in a boat and cross over to the other side, and they land in Gennesaret. Third, in John 6:16–21, his disciples get into a boat, begin to cross to Capernaum, and they land where they had intended. Gennesaret and Capernaum are on the northwest side of the lake. For more on this occasion of possible geographical confusion in Mark, see my online article (Licona 2016) at <https://www.risenjesus.com/mark-confused-pertaining-location-feeding-5000>. Third, in Mark 7:31, we read of an awkward journey from Tyre through Sidon to the Sea of Galilee in the midst of the region of the Decapolis.

<sup>42</sup> In his historical and theological study, *Jesus the Miracle Worker*, Twelftree (1999) provides lists of Jesus' miracles, and the summaries of his miracle activities (107–39; 144–64, 370n2; 386n1). The Gospel of Mark reports twenty-three miracle stories or summaries of his miracle activities in: Mark 1:21–28, 29–31, 32–34, 40–45; 2:1–12; 3:1–6, 7–12; 4:35–41; 5:1–20, 21–43 (two miracles); 6:30–44, 45–52, 53–56; 7:24–30, 31–37; 8:1–10, 22–26; 9:14–29, 32–34 (Q); 10:46–52; 11:12–14, 20–26. The Gospel of Matthew reports of twenty-eight of Jesus' miracles and summaries of his miracle activities in: Matt. 4:23–24; 8:1–4, 5–13 (Q), 14–15, 16–17, 23–27, 28–34; 9:1–8, 18–26 (two miracles), 27–31, 32–34, 35; 11:2–6 (absent in Mark); 12:9–14, 15–21, 22–30 (Q); 14:13–21, 22–33 (Matthew includes Peter walking on water, which is unique to Matthew; also found in John 6:16–21), 34–36; 15:21–28, 29–31; 17:14–20, 24–27 (unique to Matthew); 19:1–2 (Matthew mentions Jesus' healings here, while the parallel text in Mark 10:1 does not); 20:29–34; and 21:14–17 (unique to Matthew), 18–22. The Gospel of Luke reports twenty-two miracle stories, and summaries of his miracle activities in: Luke 4:31–37, 38–39, 40–41; 5:1–11 (unique to Luke), 12–16, 17–26; 6:6–11, 17–19; 7:1–10 (Q), 11–17 (unique to Luke); 8:22–25, 26–39, 40–56 (two miracle stories); 9:10–17, 37–43a; 11:14–23 (Q); 13:10–17 (unique to Luke); 14:1–6 (unique to Luke); 17:11–19 (unique to Luke); 18:35–43; and 22:50–51 (unique to Luke).

## 6. Conclusions

In this essay, a provisional definition of “historically reliable” has been provided which suggests that we must think of historical reliability in view of the literary conventions that were in play at the time of writing (Blomberg 2014, p. 213). To say that a particular historical work in antiquity is “historically reliable” does not require reports to have accuracy with the precision of a legal transcript, or that it be free of error or embellishment. “Historically reliable” means that, at the very minimum, that the account provides an accurate gist or an essentially faithful representation of what occurred. In the words of Pelling (2002, p. 160), it is “true enough”. Based on the four provisional criteria for historical reliability in a broad sense, we have seen that we have some grounds for thinking that the Gospel of Mark in the Bible is historically reliable in this sense, perhaps even more so than Suetonius’s *Life of Augustus*. That being said, serious challenges that require more thought remain.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The author declares no conflict of interest.

## Abbreviations

Euseb.	Eusebius
Hist. eccl.	<i>Historia ecclesiastica (Ecclesiastical History)</i>
Pap.	Papias
Frag.	<i>Fragments</i>
Suet.	Suetonius
Aug.	<i>Divus Augustus (Life of the Divine Augustus)</i>
Jul. (or Iul.)	<i>Divus Julius (Life of the Divine Julius)</i>
Tit.	<i>Divus Titus (Life of the Divine Titus)</i>

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