

THE CASE FOR Christmas

*A Journalist Investigates the Identity
of the Child in the Manger*

LEE
STROBEL



The Eyewitness Evidence

Can the Biographies of Jesus Be Trusted?

When I first met soft-spoken Leo Carter, he was a seventeen-year-old veteran of Chicago's grittiest neighborhood. His testimony had put three killers in prison. And he was still carrying a .38-caliber slug in his head—a grisly reminder of a horrific saga that began when he witnessed Elijah Baptist gun down a local grocer.

Leo and a friend, Leslie Scott, were playing basketball when they saw Elijah, then sixteen years old, slay Sam Blue outside his grocery store. Leo had known the grocer since childhood. "When we didn't have any food, he'd give us some," Leo explained to me. "So when I went to the hospital and they said he was dead, I knew I'd have to testify about what I saw."

Eyewitness testimony is powerful. One of the most dramatic moments in a trial is when a witness describes the crime that he or she saw and then points confidently toward the defendant as being the perpetrator. Elijah Baptist knew that the only way to avoid prison would be to somehow prevent Leo Carter and Leslie Scott from doing just that.

So Elijah and two of his pals staged an ambush. Leslie and Leo's brother, Henry, were brutally murdered, while Leo was shot in the head and left for dead. But somehow, against all odds, Leo lived. The bullet, in a place too precarious to be removed, remained in his skull. Despite searing headaches that strong medication couldn't dull, he became the sole eyewitness against Elijah Baptist and his two cohorts. His word was good enough to land them in prison for the rest of their lives.

Leo Carter is one of my heroes. He made sure justice was served, even though he paid a monumental price for it. When I think of eyewitness testimony, even to this day—thirty years later—his face still appears in my mind.¹

Testimony from Distant Time

Yes, eyewitness testimony can be compelling and convincing. When a witness has had ample opportunity to observe a crime, when there's no bias or ulterior motives, when the witness is truthful and fair, the climactic act of pointing out a defendant in a courtroom can be enough to doom that person to prison or worse.

And eyewitness testimony is just as crucial in investigating historical matters—even the issue of whether the Christmas manger really contained the unique Son of God.

But what eyewitness accounts do we possess? Do we have the testimony of anyone who personally

interacted with Jesus, who listened to his teachings, who saw his miracles, who witnessed his death, and who encountered him after his alleged resurrection? Do we have any records from first-century “journalists” who interviewed eyewitnesses, asked tough questions, and faithfully recorded what they scrupulously determined to be true?

I knew that just as Leo Carter’s testimony clinched the convictions of three brutal murderers, eyewitness accounts from the mists of distant time could help resolve the most important spiritual issue of all. To get solid answers, I flew to Denver to interview a scholar who literally wrote the book on the topic: Dr. Craig Blomberg, author of *The Historical Reliability of the Gospels*.

INTERVIEW: **Craig L. Blomberg, PhD**

Craig Blomberg is widely considered one of the country’s foremost authorities on the biographies of Jesus, which are called the four gospels. He received his doctorate in New Testament from Aberdeen University in Scotland, later serving as a senior research fellow for Tyndale House at Cambridge University in England, where he was part of an elite group of international scholars that produced a series of acclaimed works on Jesus. He is currently a professor of New Testament at Denver Seminary.

As he settled into a high-back chair in his office, cup of coffee in hand, I too sipped some coffee to ward off the Colorado chill. Because I sensed Blomberg was

a get-to-the-point kind of guy, I decided to start my interview by cutting to the core of the issue.

“Tell me this,” I said with an edge of challenge in my voice, “is it really possible to be an intelligent, critically thinking person and still believe that the four gospels were written by the people whose names have been attached to them?”

Blomberg set his coffee cup on the edge of his desk and looked intently at me. “The answer is yes,” he said with conviction.

He sat back and continued. “It’s important to acknowledge that strictly speaking, the gospels are anonymous. But the uniform testimony of the early church was that Matthew, also known as Levi, the tax collector and one of the twelve disciples, was the author of the first gospel in the New Testament; that John Mark, a companion of Peter, was the author of the gospel we call Mark; and that Luke, known as Paul’s ‘beloved physician,’ wrote both the gospel of Luke and the Acts of the Apostles.”

“How uniform was the belief that they were the authors?” I asked.

“There are no known competitors for these three gospels,” he said. “Apparently, it was just not in dispute.”

Even so, I wanted to test the issue further. “Excuse my skepticism,” I said, “but would anyone have had a motivation to lie by claiming these people wrote these gospels, when they really didn’t?”

Blomberg shook his head. “Probably not. Remember, these were unlikely characters,” he said, a grin breaking on his face. “Mark and Luke weren’t

even among the twelve disciples. Matthew was, but as a former hated tax collector, he would have been the most infamous character next to Judas Iscariot, who betrayed Jesus!

“Contrast this with what happened when the fanciful Apocryphal Gospels were written much later. People chose the names of well-known and exemplary figures to be their fictitious authors—Philip, Peter, Mary, James. Those names carried much more weight than the names of Matthew, Mark, and Luke. So to answer your question, there would not have been any reason to attribute authorship to these three less-respected people if it weren’t true.”

That sounded logical, but it was obvious that he was leaving out one of the gospel writers. “What about John?” I asked. “He was extremely prominent; in fact, he wasn’t just one of the twelve disciples but one of Jesus’ inner three, along with James and Peter.”

“Yes, he’s the one exception,” Blomberg conceded with a nod. “And interestingly, John is the only gospel about which there is some question of authorship.”

“What exactly is in dispute?”

“The name of the author isn’t in doubt—it’s certainly John,” Blomberg replied. “The question is whether it was John the apostle or a different John.”

“You see, the testimony of a Christian writer named Papias, dated about AD 125, refers to John the apostle and John the elder, and it’s not clear from the context whether he’s talking about one person from two perspectives or two different people. But granted that exception, the rest of the early testimony

is unanimous that it was John the apostle—the son of Zebedee—who wrote the gospel.”

“And,” I said in an effort to pin him down further, “you’re convinced that he did?”

“Yes, I believe the substantial majority of the material goes back to the apostle,” he replied. “However, if you read the gospel closely, you can see some indication that its concluding verses may have been finalized by an editor. Personally, I have no problem believing that somebody closely associated with John may have functioned in that role, putting the last verses into shape and potentially creating the stylistic uniformity of the entire document.

“But in any event,” he stressed, “the gospel is obviously based on eyewitness material, as are the other three gospels.”

Delving into Specifics

While I appreciated Blomberg’s comments so far, I wasn’t ready to move on yet. The issue of who wrote the Gospels is tremendously important, and I wanted specific details—names, dates, quotations. I finished off my coffee and put the cup on his desk. Pen poised, I prepared to dig deeper.

“Let’s go back to Matthew, Mark, and Luke,” I said. “What specific evidence do you have that they are the authors of the Gospels?”

Blomberg leaned forward. “Again, the oldest and probably most significant testimony comes from Papias, who in about AD 125 specifically affirmed that Mark

had carefully and accurately recorded Peter's eyewitness observations. In fact, he said Mark 'made no mistake' and did not include 'any false statement.' And Papias said Matthew had preserved the teachings of Jesus as well.

"Then Irenaeus, writing about AD 180, confirmed the traditional authorship. In fact, here—," he said, reaching for a book. He flipped it open and read Irenaeus' words:

Matthew published his own Gospel among the Hebrews in their own tongue, when Peter and Paul were preaching the Gospel in Rome and founding the church there. After their departure, Mark, the disciple and interpreter of Peter, himself handed down to us in writing the substance of Peter's preaching. Luke, the follower of Paul, set down in a book the Gospel preached by his teacher. Then John, the disciple of the Lord, who also leaned on his breast, himself produced his Gospel while he was living at Ephesus in Asia.²

I looked up from the notes I was taking. "Okay, let me clarify this," I said. "If we can have confidence that the gospels were written by the disciples Matthew and John; by Mark, the companion of the disciple Peter; and by Luke, the historian, companion of Paul, and sort of a first-century journalist, we can be assured that the events they record are based on either direct or indirect eyewitness testimony."

As I was speaking, Blomberg was mentally sifting my words. When I finished, he nodded.

"Exactly," he said crisply.

Ancient Versus Modern Biographies

There were still some troubling aspects of the gospels that I needed to resolve. In particular, I wanted to better understand the kind of literary genre they represented.

“When I go to the bookstore and look in the biography section, I don’t see the same kind of writing that I see in the gospels,” I said. “When somebody writes a biography these days, they thoroughly delve into the person’s life. But look at Mark—he doesn’t talk about the birth of Jesus or really anything through Jesus’ early adult years. Instead he focuses on a three-year period and spends half his gospel on the events leading up to and culminating in Jesus’ last week. How do you explain that?”

Blomberg held up a couple of fingers. “There are two reasons,” he replied. “One is literary and the other is theological.

“The literary reason is that basically, this is how people wrote biographies in the ancient world. They did not have the sense, as we do today, that it was important to give equal proportion to all periods of an individual’s life or that it was necessary to tell the story in strictly chronological order or even to quote people verbatim, as long as the essence of what they said was preserved. Ancient Greek and Hebrew didn’t even have a symbol for quotation marks.

“The only purpose for which they thought history was worth recording was because there were some lessons to be learned from the characters described.

Therefore, the biographer wanted to dwell at length on those portions of the person's life that were exemplary, that were illustrative, that could help other people, that gave meaning to a period of history."

When Was Jesus Born?

History doesn't pinpoint Jesus' birthday. Spring is most likely, because shepherds were watching their flocks at night and this is when ewes bore their young. In fact, around AD 200, theologians concluded Jesus was born on May 20. "Others," said journalist Terry Mattingly, "argued for dates in April and March. This wasn't a major issue, since early Christians emphasized the Epiphany on January 6, marking Christ's baptism."

In AD 385, Pope Julius I declared December 25 as the day for celebrating Christ's birth. "He chose that date," Christian researcher Gretchen Passantino told me, "partly to challenge the pagan celebration of the Roman god Saturnalia, which was characterized by social disorder and immorality."

"And what's the theological reason?" I asked.

"It flows out of the point I just made. Christians believe that as wonderful as Jesus' life and teachings and miracles were, they were meaningless if it were not historically factual that Christ died and was raised from the dead and that this provided atonement, or forgiveness, of the sins of humanity.

"So Mark in particular, as the writer of probably the earliest gospel, devotes roughly half his narrative

to the events leading up to and including one week's period of time and culminating in Christ's death and resurrection.

"Given the significance of the crucifixion," he concluded, "this makes perfect sense in ancient literature."

The Mystery of Q

In addition to the four gospels, scholars often refer to what they call *Q*, which stands for the German word *Quelle*, or "source." Because of similarities in language and content, it has traditionally been assumed that Matthew and Luke drew upon Mark's earlier gospel in writing their own. In addition, scholars have said that Matthew and Luke also incorporated some material from this mysterious *Q*, material that is absent from Mark.

"What exactly is *Q*?" I asked Blomberg.

"It's nothing more than a hypothesis," he replied, again leaning back comfortably in his chair. "With few exceptions, it's just sayings or teachings of Jesus, which once may have formed an independent, separate document.

"You see, it was a common literary genre to collect the sayings of respected teachers, sort of as we compile the top music of a singer and put it into a 'best of' album. *Q* may have been something like that. At least that's the theory."

But if *Q* existed before Matthew and Luke, it would constitute early material about Jesus. Perhaps,

I thought, it can shed some fresh light on what Jesus was really like.

“Let me ask this,” I said. “If you isolate just the material from *Q*, what kind of picture of Jesus do you get?”

Blomberg stroked his beard and stared at the ceiling for a moment as he pondered the question. “Well, you have to keep in mind that *Q* was a collection of sayings, and therefore it didn’t have the narrative material that would have given us a more fully orbed picture of Jesus,” he replied, speaking slowly as he chose each word with care.

“Even so, you find Jesus making some very strong claims—for instance, that he was wisdom personified and that he was the one by whom God will judge all humanity, whether they confess him or disavow him. A significant scholarly book has argued recently that if you isolate all the *Q* sayings, one actually gets the same kind of picture of Jesus—of someone who made audacious claims about himself—as you find in the gospels more generally.”

I wanted to push him further on this point. “Would he be seen as a miracle worker?” I inquired.

“Again,” he replied, “you have to remember that you wouldn’t get many miracle stories per se, because they’re normally found in the narrative, and *Q* is primarily a list of sayings.”

He stopped to reach over to his desk, pick up a leather-bound Bible, and rustle through its well-worn pages.

“But, for example, Luke 7:18–23 and Matthew 11:2–6 say that John the Baptist sent his messengers

to ask Jesus if he really was the Christ, the Messiah they were waiting for. Jesus replied in essence, ‘Tell him to consider my miracles. Tell him what you’ve seen: the blind see, the deaf hear, the lame walk, the poor have good news preached to them.’

“So even in *Q*,” he concluded, “there is clearly an awareness of Jesus’ ministry of miracles.”

Blomberg’s mention of Matthew brought to mind another question concerning how the gospels were put together. “Why,” I asked, “would Matthew—purported to be an eyewitness to Jesus—incorporate part of a gospel written by Mark, who everybody agrees was not an eyewitness? If Matthew’s gospel was really written by an eyewitness, you would think he would have relied on his own observations.”

Blomberg smiled. “It only makes sense if Mark was indeed basing his account on the recollections of the eyewitness Peter,” he said. “As you’ve said yourself, Peter was among the inner circle of Jesus and was privy to seeing and hearing things that other disciples didn’t. So it would make sense for Matthew, even though he was an eyewitness, to rely on Peter’s version of events as transmitted through Mark.”

The Unique Perspective of John

Feeling satisfied with Blomberg’s initial answers concerning the first three gospels—called the Synoptics, which means “to view at the same time,” because of their similar outline and interrelationship—next I turned my attention to John’s gospel. Anyone