Have you ever noticed how people who are having an argument often use a slight of hand, either not realizing what they are doing or doing it in order to misdirect the discussion? What I have in mind is when someone wants to prove a view that we will call X, but instead of directly dealing with the issues of central importance to X, they divert attention to something else that we can call Y. Then, when they claim they have proved Y they lead their audience to think they therefore proved X. On one hand, a lot of time they haven’t even proved Y. But they claim not only they have done *that* but that since they have done that they have also thereby proved X, even though Y is not the same as X. Sometimes Y is not even related to Y.

I don’t know if you’ve seen this before, but it happens a lot, in all sorts of arguments about religion, politics, society, and so on. It certainly happens a lot in circles I’m involved with in biblical studies. The matter is often on my mind, but it came back to mind with some vigor over the past week as I was thinking through this matter of whether we can know with any certainty what the authors of the New Testament actually wrote, based on this whole fiasco of the so-called first-century Gospel of Mark.

After I posted on that topic last week I got a number of interesting responses, including the one I dealt with a couple of days ago in the weekly Readers Mailbag. One other issue that some people have raised is of even greater importance. It is related to what ultimately matters to most people who choose to read Gospel of Mark and the other Gospels at all in the first place. Anyone with a modicum of interest in history and, especially, the history as recounted in the Bible, and most particularly the historical events related in the New Testament Gospels about what Jesus said and did naturally wants to know: did these things really happen? And if so, did they happen in the way they are described?

It’s the fundamental question for anyone interested in the Gospels in relationship to Jesus. It has been at the front and center of biblical studies for over three hundred years now, especially since the 1770s when scholars who had been influenced by the Enlightenment began to turn the critical skills that helped them understand the ancient world more broadly to the New Testament Gospels. When they did so some of them started arguing that the Gospels contain accounts that did not actually happen, and others that happened in some sense but not in the way they are described.

The arguments of these scholars were massively shocking to most readers in the Christian world and were considered scandalous, heretical, evil. The scholars were personally attacked. Some of them (including the first, Hermann Samuel Reimarus) knew that would happen and so chose not to publish their findings rather than ring the deathknell for their careers, reputations, and personal lives; others of them (e.g., David Friedrich Strauss) braved the consequences, published their work, and then in fact did pay the consequences, with their careers destroyed and their lives in shambles. The post-Enlightenment pursuit of truth was not a smooth road, and it’s no wonder so many intelligent people decided not to take it.

The assaults continue today, even though the people who believe that the Gospels are completely accurate no longer have the social and political clout to destroy the lives of others because of their critical research that lead to results that are inimical to traditional Christian belief. For which I say: thank God for tenure. If there was ever an argument for it, this is it. If you can’t go where the truth will lead without destroying your life, most people just ain’t goin’ there. And that is the death of the university.
So back to the sleight-of-hand argument. For a long time evangelical supporters of the complete accuracy of the Bible have argued that “We can trust the Bible because it is the best attested book from the ancient world.” On first glance, that does sound impressive. Really? Is it the best attested book? As it turns out, the answer is absolutely YES. No one disputes it and no one can dispute it. It’s simply true.

And so doesn’t that make the Bible completely trustworthy? Actually, no. It has almost NOTHING to do with the question. It’s irrelevant. That conclusion is a non-sequitur. It is a sleight of hand. These evangelical apologists are claiming to be dealing with view X (Is the Bible completely accurate?), but instead they are arguing about view Y (Do we know what the authors of the New Testament originally wrote?).

All this relates to the alleged discovery of a first-century Mark. Here I will make a few rather important observations that are simply ignored by these apologists; the first couple I’ve made before but they bear repeating.

- This first one may seem weird, but it’s absolutely true and needs to be emphasized. The question of whether the New Testament is the best attested book from the ancient world has no bearing on whether we can be certain that we know what its authors originally wrote. It would only mean that with some level of probability we have a *better* idea of what its authors wrote than we have for what other authors of other books wrote. How could it show that we can e certain about what they wrote? Here’s an analogy: if I can be shown to be better at math than anyone in Durham (I can’t) does that mean I have gotten every math problem I’ve ever done right? Of course not. It means I’m more likely to have gotten a particular math problem right than someone else who is not as good at math. If we are more likely to know what one author wrote than what another author wrote, does that mean we are *certain* what he wrote? We may be for other reasons, but not for this.

- A copy of Mark from the first century has no relevance to whether we have what the author originally wrote. It would prove that we can show what Mark looked like very close to the time it was put in circulation and started being copied. The scribe who produced the copy may well have changed the text he copied in hundreds of places. How would we know? We can’t know.

- A copy of Mark from the first century would only tell us what Mark looked like very close to the time it was put in circulation ONLY for the verses it contains. If it contains, say, five verses, it would show us what one copy in the first century contained for those verses. But not for the hundreds of other verses of the Gospel of Mark or the thousands of verses in the other Gospels, or the many more thousands in the rest of the New Testament. Would it prove that we now have the original New Testament? Uh, how could it prove *that*???

- HERE’S the most important point so far though. Even if we knew for certain what the author of Mark, and the authors of the other Gospels wrote, it would have no bearing on the accuracy of what they wrote. It would have bearing only on the question of whether we can know what they wrote. Why don’t people see THAT AIN’T THE SAME THING?? I suppose people will accept what they want to hear and pretend that if they can prove Y (which they can’t) they therefore have proven X (which is a different issue).

- Let me stress and illustrate that point. Suppose the creationist Ken Ham and the astrophysicist Neil deGrasse Tyson both wrote books discussing when the universe came into existence. Ham argues that it came into existence 10,000 years ago and Tyson argues that it came into existence 13.8 billion years ago. Suppose both authors refer to the faulty views of the other. And suppose we could prove beyond reasonable doubt that we have the exact words that each author wrote (e.g., by arguing that the books are both “extremely well attested” — that is, that we have so many copies we can establish their originals).
Would that prove that they are both correct in what they have to say? How can they both be correct? Obviously, knowing what someone says has no bearing on whether what she or he says is accurate or true.

- So why do some evangelical scholars argue that because they believe they can show Y (we know what the authors of the New Testament originally wrote) that therefore they have proven X (the Gospels are accurate)? Because either they are very sloppy thinkers and don’t recognize a non-sequitur when it bites them on the nose, OR because, more cynically, they realize their listeners/readers won’t recognize a non-sequitur when it bites them on the nose. Is it a ridiculous argument or an intentionally deceptive one? It probably varies from one “scholar” to the next, and I don’t think there’s any way to know for sure. For most of the scholars I personally know who use the argument, I think they simply don’t recognize a dumb argument when they see it.

- MOST IMPORTANT OF ALL. This sleight-of-hand argument conveniently avoids the really vital question. There are in fact massive reasons for thinking that the Gospels are not accurate with respect to the historical Jesus, and these reasons are completely, in every single way, UNRELATED to the question of whether we have the words of the original authors. The biggest one of these reasons: these authors, writing their accounts of Jesus life forty to sixty-five years after his death, living in different countries and speaking a different language from Jesus, were writing accounts that had been changed and sometimes invented as they had circulated by word of mouth year after year after year, starting probably before these authors were even born.

- Suppose we could say for certain we have every single word that Mark originally wrote about Jesus. That has no bearing on the fact that the stories he heard had been exaggerated, modified, expanded, even invented during the period of the oral tradition. That can be shown. It is the subject of one of my recent books, Jesus Before the Gospels. In it I show that contrary to what people always seem to say, oral traditions in the ancient world were not always preserved accurately in anything like our sense, and were not meant to be. They were constantly being changed. And it can proved that the stories in the Gospels had been.

- Anyone who wants to argue about that directly will be dealing with X while claiming to deal with X (i.e. no sleight of hand). That’s why, in terms of subject matter and significance, my book Jesus Before the Gospels (about the accuracy of the Gospel traditions), and my book Jesus Interrupted (about the contradictions and historical problems with the New Testament), are actually far more important for issues that most people care most deeply about than my book Misquoting Jesus (on whether we can know the original words of the New Testament authors).

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What Did Judas Betray?
Judas Iscariot? What’s an Iscariot??