My post a few days ago about whether Paul knew that Jesus had been betrayed by Judas Iscariot — in which I concluded there really was no solid evidence one way or the other — generated several follow-up questions. Many of them simply asked: well, did it really happen? Here is an example, and my response.

**QUESTION:**

I may be showing my ignorance here but could it be that Paul doesn’t know/write about Judas’ betrayal because it never happened? Yes, it is in all four gospels but as you’ve pointed out the four gospels do not agree on who showed up at the empty tomb, what they saw, and what they did next so…. If they get that wrong could it be that the Judas betrayal is also a fabrication/legend?

**RESPONSE:**

It’s a great question, and I’m completely sympathetic to it. But I have to say that I think Jesus really was betrayed by one of his own, Judas Iscariot. In my judgment, that’s just where the evidence points.

As many of you know from the blog and other sources, when trying to determine what really happened in Jesus’ life, we have good news and bad news. The good news is that we have four ancient accounts (all in the New Testament); that’s more than we have for 99.999% of the rest of the human race at the time! So that’s good! The bad news is that these accounts were not produce by eyewitnesses, they are from 40-65 years later, written by authors who did not know Jesus or probably any of his followers, in a language different from Jesus’s, in other countries, based on stories that had been in circulation for decades, and often they are at odds with one another. Ugh.

Scholars therefore have devised criteria for exploring the sources for the life of Jesus — and they are, in fact, virtually the same criteria historians use for establishing just about everything from the past. For example: does the same tradition appear in different sources that didn’t get it from one another (“independent attestation”)? If so, then it is more likely something that happened. By no means does it *prove* it — lots of things are multiply attested that didn’t happen. But it adds to the likelihood.

Moreover, if a tradition runs counter to what the people telling it would *want* it to say (as when a mother is required to testify in court about her son’s alleged alibi), then it is more likely trustworthy (called “the criterion of dissimilarity”: the account is “dissimilar” to what the story tellers would prefer to say.

The betrayal of Judas passes both criteria with flying colors. (It’s not that one cannot *imagine* it was made up; it’s that on the balance of probability, it really does look like it happened.

And so, for example, ...

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