

Criteria for Historical Criticism

How do historians decide which information about Jesus may be deemed “historically plausible” or “historically verifiable”? They typically use criteria such as these to evaluate the relative merit of material found in the New Testament and other ancient sources.

Multiple Attestation

Material is more likely to be deemed historically reliable if it correlates with the witness of other, independent sources.

- The proposal that “Jesus told parables” passes this criterion, since several different sources portray Jesus as telling parables.
- The proposal that “Jesus told the parable of the good Samaritan” does not pass this criterion, because we find this particular parable in only one source, the Gospel of Luke.

Memorable Form or Content

Material is more likely to be deemed historically reliable if it is couched in terms easy to remember (e.g., brief, humorous, paradoxical, or shocking).

- The report that Jesus told a man, “Let the dead bury the dead” (Luke 9:60) passes this criterion, because the saying is provocative and would have been easy to remember.
- The so-called High-Priestly prayer that Jesus is said to have prayed on the night of his arrest (John 17:1–26) does not pass this criterion, because it is long and rambling and would have been difficult for any bystander to have remembered.

Language and Environment

Material is more likely to be deemed historically reliable if it is compatible with the language and culture of the period it describes (rather than reflecting the language and culture for the time and place in which the source was written).

- The parable of the sower (Mark 4:3–8) passes this criterion, because it accurately reflects agricultural practices in rural Galilee that would not have been widely known elsewhere in the Roman Empire.
- The explanation that Jesus gives for this parable (Mark 4:13–20) does not pass this criterion, because it contains language that derives from the early church (“the word”) and compares what happens to the seed to the effects of Christian preaching.

Embarrassment

Material is likely to be deemed historically reliable if reporting the material would have been awkward for the church.

- Stories that portray tension between Jesus and his family members (e.g., Mark 3:21, 31–35) pass this criterion, because those family members came to be highly regarded in the early church, which would have had no incentive for recalling stories about their shortcomings.
- Stories that portray Jesus besting his Jewish opponents in debate (e.g., Mark 12:13–37) do not pass this criterion, since the early church was engaged in disputes with Judaism and no doubt found those stories to be particularly appealing.

Dissimilarity or Distinctiveness

Material is more likely to be deemed historically reliable if it does not support the particular interests of the author.

- The proposal that “Jesus was baptized by John” passes this criterion, because the report of this event does not appear to support any particular claim that the Gospel authors wish to make.
- The proposal that “Jesus commissioned his followers to make disciples of all nations” (Matt. 28:16–20) does not pass this criterion, because the author of the Gospel that portrays Jesus doing this was interested in motivating churches to evangelize gentiles.

Plausible Influence

Material is more likely to be deemed historically reliable if it explains Jesus's purported influence on early Christianity in ways that derive from Palestinian Judaism.

- The notion that Jesus spoke about “the Son of Man” passes this criterion, because early gentile Christians made much of that term but would not have been inclined to favor such a distinctively Jewish concept if it had not come to them as part of the inherited tradition.
- The idea that Jesus told people that knowing the truth would set them free (John 8:32) does not pass this criterion, because the early Christian church's concern with the liberating effects of knowledge owed more to Greek philosophy than to Jewish tradition.

Coherence

Material that cannot be established by the above criteria is more likely to be deemed historically reliable if it is consistent with the information that is so derived.

- A saying found in the apocryphal Gospel of Thomas passes this criterion, because it resembles genuine sayings of Jesus: “Whoever is near me is near the fire; whoever is far from me is far from the Kingdom” (Thomas 82; cf. Mark 9:49; 12:34).

- A saying that implores Jesus’s followers to regard an impenitent sinner “as a Gentile or a tax collector” (Matt. 18:17) does not pass this criterion, because it does not cohere well with our knowledge that Jesus was accepting of gentiles and tax collectors.

Congruity with a Modern View of Reality

Material is more likely to be deemed historically reliable if it does not require acceptance of ideas that contradict modern views of reality.

- The proposal that Jesus earned fame as a popular teacher, even though he had no professional training, passes this criterion, because our modern world recognizes that untrained individuals can possess the inherent ability to become noteworthy teachers.
- The resurrection of Jesus would not pass this criterion, because modern science maintains that people who have been dead for three days do not come back to life.

Summary Chart: Criteria for Determining Historical

Reliability in Jesus Research

CRITERION	Passes this criterion	Does not pass this criterion
Multiple Attestation Material correlates with the witness of other, independent sources.	<i>Jesus told parables.</i> Several different sources portray Jesus as telling parables.	<i>Jesus told the parable of the good Samaritan.</i> This particular parable is in only one source (“L”).
Memorable Form or Content	<i>Jesus told a man, “Let the dead bury the dead”</i>	<i>The “High-Priestly prayer” that Jesus is said to have</i>

Material is couched in terms easy to remember (e.g., brief, humorous, paradoxical, or shocking).	(Luke 9:60). The saying is provocative and would have been easy to remember.	<i>prayed on the night of his arrest</i> (John 17:1–26). It is long and rambling and would have been difficult to remember.
Language and Environment Material is compatible with the language and culture of the period it describes (rather than reflecting the language and culture for the time and place in which the source was written).	<i>The parable of the sower</i> (Mark 4:3–8). Accurately reflects agricultural practices in rural Galilee that would not have been widely known elsewhere in the Roman empire	<i>Explanation of the parable of the sower</i> (Mark 4:13–20). Contains language that derives from the early church (“the word”) and compares what happens to the seed to the effects of Christian preaching
Embarrassment Material would have been awkward for the church to remember and report.	<i>Stories revealing tension between Jesus and his family members</i> (e.g., Mark 3:21, 31–35). The early church had no incentive for recalling stories about tensions within the family of Jesus.	<i>Stories in which Jesus bests his Jewish opponents in debate</i> (e.g., Mark 12:13–37). The early church was engaged in disputes with Judaism and no doubt found these stories appealing.
Dissimilarity or Distinctiveness Material does not support the particular interests of the author or the source.	<i>Jesus was baptized by John.</i> Report of this incident does not appear to support any particular claim that any Gospel author wishes to make.	<i>Jesus commissioned his followers to “make disciples of all nations”</i> (Matt. 28:16–20). The author of this Gospel was interested in evangelizing gentiles.
Plausible Influence Material reflects the enduring influence of Jesus by explaining how a matter rooted in Palestinian Judaism would become a prominent concern in gentile Christianity.	<i>Jesus spoke about the Son of Man.</i> Early gentile Christians made much of this term but would not have been inclined to favor such a distinctively Jewish concept on their own (i.e., unless Jesus had used it).	<i>Jesus told people that knowing the truth would set them free</i> (John 8:32). The early church’s concern with the liberating effects of knowledge owed more to Greek philosophy than to Jewish tradition.
Coherence Material that cannot be established by the above criteria is nevertheless consistent with information that is so derived.	<i>Jesus says in the Gospel of Thomas, “Whoever is near me is near the fire; whoever is far from me is far from the Kingdom”</i> (Thomas 82). This resembles sayings of Jesus found in more reliable sources (Mark 9:49; 12:34).	<i>Jesus implores his followers to regard an impenitent sinner “as a Gentile or a tax collector”</i> (Matt. 18:17). This does not cohere well with knowledge that Jesus was accepting of gentiles and tax collectors.
Congruity with Modern View of Reality Material does not require	<i>Jesus became a popular teacher though he lacked professional training.</i>	<i>Jesus was raised from the dead.</i> Modern science says

acceptance of ideas that contradict modern views of reality.	Such things are known to happen in our modern world.	people who are dead for three days do not come back to life.
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