

Eyewitness Compression

Authorship, Transmission Chains, and the Misclassification of Gospel Testimony

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Central claim

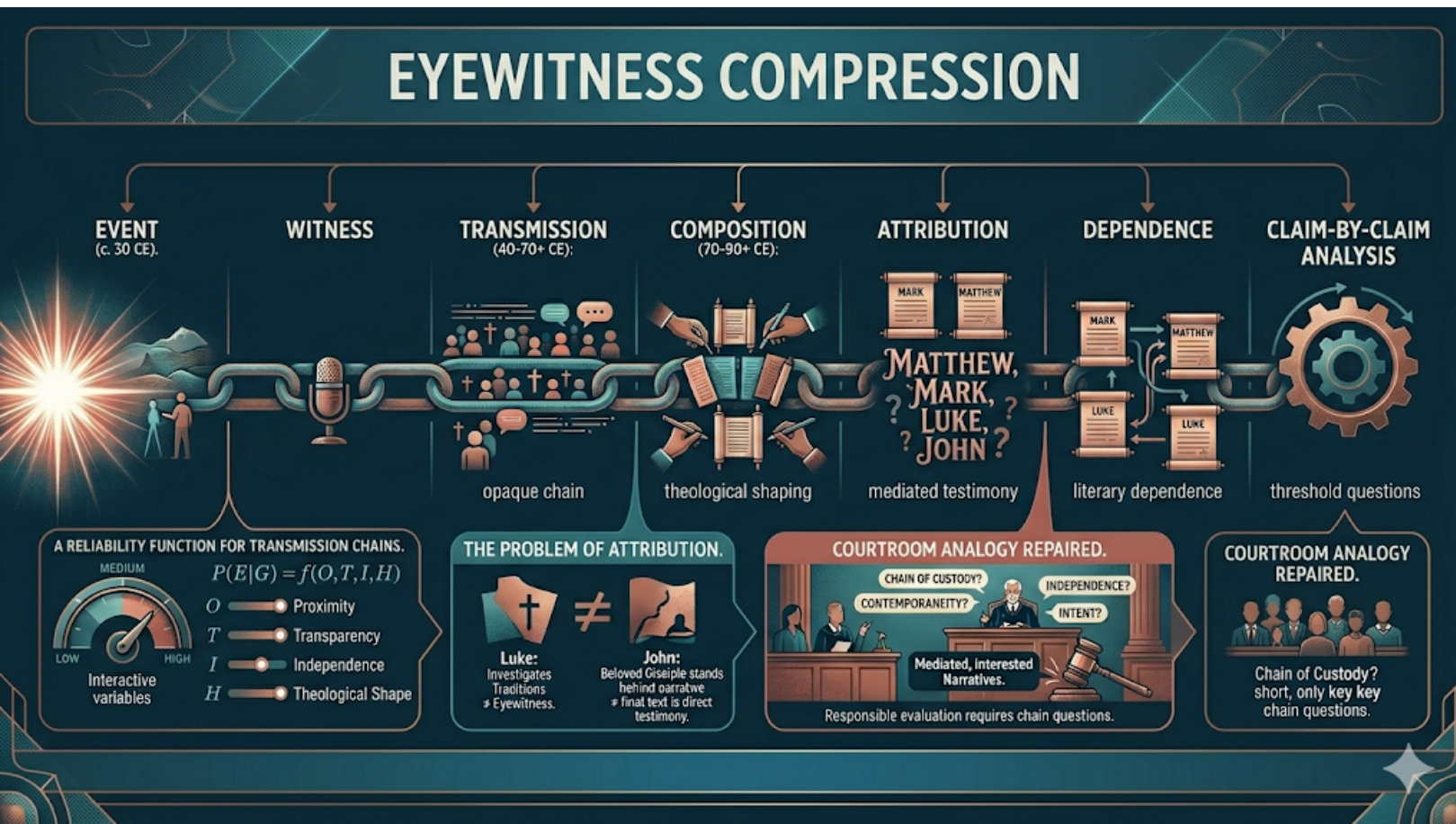
Evidence that the canonical Gospels preserve early traditions, bear ancient authorial attributions, or incorporate eyewitness material does not by itself warrant classifying the four final documents as four independent, direct eyewitness accounts. That stronger classification requires an identified relation between witness and final composer, a traceable path for the claim under review, and an accounting of literary dependence. The resulting caution is evidential, not dismissive: mediated testimony may remain historically valuable, and particular claims may still be well supported.

Preview:

Apologetic move	Required bridge	Documentary record	Bounded result
Early witnesses existed, so the Gospels are eyewitness accounts.	Identify who witnessed what, who composed the final text, and how the material passed between them.	Luke distinguishes sources from narrator; John has witness and attesting voices; Synoptic parallels disclose literary reuse.	Eyewitness influence may be real, but direct authorship and independent attestation must be shown claim by claim.

The issue is classification, not a forced choice between perfect stenography and total invention. Ancient biography, remembered tradition, source use, editorial shaping, and theological interpretation can coexist.

Visual preview:



The upper chain displays the paper's central evidential problem: an event can reach a final text through witness, transmission, composition, and attribution. The lower probability expression is heuristic rather than a measured statistical model, and the repeated courtroom panels are emphasis rather than independent evidence. The native tables and formal appendix supply the exact tests.

Abstract

Popular defenses of Gospel reliability often compress several distinct propositions into one label: people who witnessed Jesus existed; their memories entered early Christian tradition; the canonical texts preserve some of that tradition; the traditional names attached to the texts are historically meaningful; therefore the four Gospels are four independent eyewitness accounts. The conclusion is stronger than the premises. This paper reconstructs the inference and supplies a document-level and claim-level test. Direct eyewitness classification requires evidence connecting a witness to the final compositional agent, tracing the relevant material through its mediating stages, and accounting for literary dependence. These conditions are not met merely by early dating, traditional attribution, vivid detail, or proximity to a witness.

The canonical texts themselves illustrate why the categories must remain separate. Luke's preface distinguishes prior eyewitness transmitters from the narrator's investigated account. John 21:24 places a witness claim beside an attesting "we", leaving the relation among witness, writer, and validating group open to interpretation. Mark and Matthew do not identify their narrators within their narratives, while their external attributions remain genuine evidence that must be weighed rather than either assumed or dismissed. Extensive Synoptic agreement, however, also shows that multiple texts can transmit one literary route; agreement caused by source use is not independent corroboration of the underlying event. Memory research, ancient biography, and early testimony support neither a simple telephone-game model nor unmediated transcription.

The conclusion is deliberately limited. The paper does not show that the Gospels contain no eyewitness material, that mediated testimony is unreliable, or that particular historical and theological claims are false. It shows that evidential status does not automatically pass unchanged along a transmission chain. Historical confidence must be assigned to particular claims in light of source relation, genre, memory, composition, dependence, and rival explanations.

Keywords: Gospels; eyewitness testimony; authorship; oral tradition; Synoptic problem; literary dependence; historical method

1. The Classification Claim

The dispute is often framed too broadly. One side says that the Gospels are eyewitness testimony; another says that they are anonymous or late and therefore historically useless. Both formulations can conceal the relevant alternatives. A final Gospel may preserve testimony from a witness without having been written by that witness. A named author may have used both personal memory and inherited sources. A narrator may be near to witnesses but not one of them. A mediated document may be historically responsible, while a direct witness may be mistaken. These possibilities make source status an evidential question rather than a verdict on truth.

This paper uses *direct eyewitness testimony* for a document-level classification: the person responsible for the final account presents events that person perceived, with a reasonably identifiable continuity between witness, narrator, and composer. *Eyewitness influence* is broader. It includes information attributed to a witness, traditions plausibly originating with witnesses, interviews, remembered teaching, and written sources with a witness connection. The second category can be historically important without becoming the first.

A still stronger apologetic description treats the four canonical Gospels as *four independent eyewitness accounts*. That phrase contains three claims: each final text is direct witness testimony; the relevant accounts arise through distinct evidential routes; and their agreements therefore provide cumulative corroboration. Each element requires support. Four covers do not guarantee four witnesses, and four witnesses do not guarantee independence if one account uses another.

Governing thesis

Evidential status does not automatically pass from an event witness to a tradition, from a tradition to a final composer, from a composer to a later title, or from one literary source to a dependent text. Each bridge may be defensible, but each must be shown. Failure to establish the whole chain blocks a direct-and-independent classification; it does not erase every historical contribution made by the chain.

2. Where Eyewitness Compression Occurs

The compressed inference can be stated charitably. Jesus' public career involved followers and opponents who saw and heard him. Early Christian proclamation arose close enough to those participants for their memories to matter. The Gospels include names, places, local details, and traditions about particular disciples. Ancient Christian writers associate Mark with Peter, Matthew with collected sayings, Luke with Pauline circles, and John with a beloved disciple. These considerations make pure invention an implausibly crude default and give defenders reason to investigate witness connections (Bauckham, 2017; Byrskog, 2000).

The problem begins when distinct evidential statuses are treated as interchangeable. Table 1 shows what each status does and does not establish.

Table 1: An evidence-status ladder for Gospel material.

Status	What it can support	What it does not establish alone
Direct author-witness	The final compositional agent reports personally perceived events.	Accuracy, neutrality, or independence from every source.
Author interviewed witnesses	The account may contain identifiable mediated testimony.	That the narrator witnessed the events or that every unit came from interviews.
Witness-linked tradition	Some content may descend from people near the events.	A traceable route for each claim or control by the original witness.
Early and stable attribution	A named-author tradition may be ancient, widespread, and explanatorily significant.	That the named person composed the final form or witnessed its narrated events.
Literary dependence	A later text preserves and interprets an earlier written source.	A second independent route to the event wherever the source is reused.

The key error is *status inheritance*: if a chain begins with a witness, every later stage is described as eyewitness testimony without asking what changed. But transmission can select, summarize, harmonize, translate, reorder, interpret, and combine material. None of those operations entails dishonesty. They simply mean that the epistemic role of the final text depends on the operations actually performed.

3. The Referent-and-Bridge Test

The phrase “the Gospels are eyewitness accounts” is too compressed to test until its referents are specified. Four groups of questions make it assessable.

3.1 Which document and which textual unit?

- Is the claim about Mark, Matthew, Luke, John, or all four?
- Is it about the whole final document, a passion narrative, a saying, a miracle report, or one editorial comment?

- Which textual form is under discussion when a passage has meaningful variants?

A source may be strong for one episode and silent about another. Textual criticism can often recover early attainable wording with considerable confidence, but establishing wording is not the same task as identifying the event source (Metzger & Ehrman, 2005). A well-attested sentence can still report a mediated tradition; a variant does not automatically discredit the narrative surrounding it.

3.2 Which person is being called the eyewitness?

- Is the proposed witness the narrator, the named traditional author, a source used by that author, or a character within the story?
- What evidence identifies that person with the final compositional agent?
- Did the person perceive the event in question, or only other events in the same narrative?

This context prevents a common slide. A Peter connection to Mark, if historical, would make Peter a proposed source and Mark a transmitter-composer. It would not make Mark an eyewitness to everything Peter reported. Likewise, a Johannine witness source need not settle who arranged, supplemented, or endorsed the final form.

3.3 What bridges the witness to the final claim?

- Was the material remembered privately, performed orally, recorded in notes, translated, or drawn from an earlier text?
- Can the relevant route be identified, or is only a general possibility being asserted?
- What opportunity did the witness have to correct later formulations?
- Which literary and theological interests of the composer shaped selection and presentation?

The point is not to demand a modern custody log from antiquity. Historical arguments routinely work with incomplete records. The point is comparative: a claim deserves the label appropriate to the evidence actually available, not the strongest label that remains possible.

3.4 Is the apparent corroboration independent?

- Does one account reproduce the wording or sequence of another?
- Are two reports drawing on the same oral or written source?
- Which agreements remain after shared material is separated from distinctive material?
- Does the agreement favor the event hypothesis over literary borrowing or common tradition?

These questions clarify what independence means. It is not social isolation and does not require that authors never met. It is evidential independence for a particular claim: the agreement should arrive through a route that is not explained by one account copying, adapting, or sharing the source of the other.

4. What the Four Texts Actually Present

The canonical Gospels do not all make the same authorial gesture. Their differences are evidence, not inconveniences to be averaged away.

Table 2: Document-level indicators and their appropriate force.

Text	Internal presentation	External or literary consideration	Classification warranted
Mark	The narrator does not identify himself as a participant in the narrated ministry.	Papias, preserved by Eusebius, links Mark with Peter; Matthew and Luke extensively reuse Mark.	A serious Peter-linked attribution, but not thereby direct testimony by the final narrator or an independent route in dependent parallels.
Matthew	The narrator does not identify himself as the disciple Matthew; the character appears in the third person.	Early attribution is uniform in the surviving tradition; extensive use of Mark must be explained.	Traditional authorship remains evidence, but direct authorship and independence cannot be inferred from the title alone.
Luke	The preface distinguishes prior narratives and eyewitness transmitters from the narrator's investigation and ordered account.	Literary use of Mark and other sources is central to Synoptic analysis.	Explicitly source-mediated historiographic narration, not a self-claim to direct eyewitness status.
John	John 21:24 refers to the disciple who testifies and writes, then adds "we know" that his testimony is true.	The relation among witness, writer, attesting voice, and final form is debated.	Strong internal witness language, but the document still requires an account of composition and attestation.

4.1 Mark and Matthew: external names matter, but do not finish the inquiry

Calling Mark and Matthew simply "anonymous" can be misleading if it suggests that early attribution is irrelevant. The narrative bodies do not identify their narrators, but titles and reception history constitute external evidence. Gathercole argues that the uniform second-century attributions and the practical need to distinguish multiple Gospels count against treating the names as arbitrary late inventions (Gathercole, 2018). That argument deserves full weight.

Its success would still not yield four direct eyewitness accounts. Papias, as quoted in Eusebius's *Ecclesiastical History* 3.39, describes Mark as Peter's interpreter who wrote remembered material accurately though not in order, and attributes "oracles" in a Hebrew manner of speech to Matthew (Eusebius of Caesarea, 1926). On a favorable reading, this is valuable early evidence for a Mark–Peter route and a Matthean collection. Yet questions remain: whether Papias refers to the final forms now called Mark and Matthew, what material the proposed sources cover, and how composition transformed it. A source relation is not identical to witness authorship.

Matthew's extensive use of Mark sharpens the issue. If the final composer personally witnessed the narrated career of Jesus, why and how was Mark used? Several coherent answers are possible: Mark provided a useful narrative frame; the author endorsed Peter-linked material; ancient compositional convention permitted source reuse; or the traditional identification describes a relation more complex than modern single-author categories. What is not coherent is to cite Markan parallels as independent Matthean recollection without first addressing their literary relation.

4.2 Luke: an explicit case of responsible mediation

Luke 1:1–4 is unusually informative. The narrator reports that many have undertaken accounts, that material was handed down by those who were eyewitnesses and servants of the word, and that the narrator investigated matters carefully in order to write an orderly account. The preface presents an evidential chain:

events and eyewitnesses → transmission and prior accounts → investigation and composition → reader

This is not a confession of unreliability. It is a claim to researched, source-mediated narration. Treating Luke as direct eyewitness testimony weakens the preface by erasing the very method it advertises. The historically

appropriate questions concern the quality of the sources, the narrator's selection, the relationship to Mark and other material, and the fit between claims and external evidence.

4.3 John: witness, writer, and validating voice

John 21:24 offers the strongest internal material for an eyewitness connection: "This is the disciple who is testifying to these things and has written them, and we know that his testimony is true." The verse can support a close relationship between the document and a witnessing disciple. It also contains a grammatical complication. The third-person identification of "this disciple" and the first-person plural "we know" can be read as an endorsing group or final voice distinct from the witness. John 20:30–31 and 21:24–25 also present writing as selective and rhetorically directed, not as an exhaustive transcript (Keith, 2016).

Several models fit at least part of this evidence: the witness wrote the work and a group appended an attestation; the witness supplied testimony shaped by a final composer; "we" is a rhetorical self-reference; or the final text passed through more than one compositional stage. The verse is therefore evidence for witness proximity, but it does not eliminate the referent-and-bridge questions. A responsible argument must state which model it adopts and why.

5. Literary Dependence and the Arithmetic of Evidence

The Synoptic problem is the study of the literary relationships among Matthew, Mark, and Luke. Their close verbal, sequential, and editorial agreements are far more specific than the fact that several people remember the same public event. Most contemporary solutions give Mark a major source role for Matthew and Luke, although scholars continue to dispute the relations among the remaining shared material (Goodacre, 2001).

This matters because the number of documents is not the number of independent evidential routes. Suppose Mark contains a claim and Matthew reproduces it because Matthew used Mark. Luke also reproduces it from Mark. Three surviving texts then attest the wording, but the agreement supplies one identified literary route back from the dependent passages. Matthew and Luke may add independent material elsewhere; their source use does not make them globally dependent in every respect. Independence must be assessed per claim.

The probability point can be expressed without false precision. Evidence raises confidence in a historical claim to the extent that the evidence would be more expected if the claim were true than if a relevant alternative were true. Agreement by two independent observers can be much more expected on the event hypothesis than on separate error. Agreement caused by copying, however, is already expected on the borrowing hypothesis. Counting a copied sentence as a fresh witness therefore exaggerates its incremental force.

Consider two examples.

1. **Shared wording.** Mark, Matthew, and Luke preserve a highly similar sequence and unusual phrase. If Matthew and Luke used Mark at that point, the triple agreement is excellent evidence for textual transmission and weak evidence for three independent memories. The underlying event may still be historical; the parallel count alone does not triple its support.
2. **Distinctive convergence.** Two sources independently place a person, practice, or conflict in the same setting while differing in wording and narrative purpose. If borrowing and a common immediate source are comparatively unlikely, the convergence can add support. It remains necessary to compare coincidence, common background knowledge, and editorial motive.

No universal numerical score follows. Prior plausibility, source access, specificity, dependence, and alternatives vary with the claim. A mundane travel detail and a singular miracle report may therefore have different evidential burdens without assuming in advance that either is true or false. The correct lesson is not "miracles are impossible"; it is that no whole-document reliability percentage can replace analysis of the particular report.

6. Memory, Oral Tradition, and Literary Composition

Two caricatures should be rejected. The first imagines pristine recordings passed unchanged from witness to writer. The second imagines a children's telephone game in which every retelling becomes random noise. Human memory is reconstructive but constrained. People preserve gist, recurring patterns, striking episodes, and socially rehearsed material while also selecting, blending, updating, and interpreting details. Allison uses memory research to challenge atomistic tests that certify isolated sayings as authentic, while Dunn emphasizes remembered impact and the social performance of tradition (Allison, 2010; Dunn, 2003).

Oral-history models can give eyewitnesses an active role without collapsing storyteller, guarantor, and final author. Byrskog argues that ancient historians valued links to participants and that eyewitnesses could remain within the living transmission of events (Byrskog, 2000). This is a better model than assuming uncontrolled rumor. It also confirms the need to identify roles. A witness who authorizes a tradition, a performer who stabilizes it, and a writer who arranges it make different evidential contributions.

Composition adds another layer. The Gospels substantially resemble ancient biography in their concentration on a subject's deeds, character, teaching, and death (Burridge, 2004). Ancient biographical practice allowed paraphrase, compression, topical arrangement, and rhetorical characterization. Licona appeals to such compositional devices to explain some Gospel differences while defending historical reliability (Licona, 2017). The important methodological point survives disagreement over particular harmonizations: literary shaping is neither verbatim reporting nor fabrication by definition.

Recent work also cautions against treating "the community" as a single author behind each Gospel. Walsh places the Synoptic writers among literate cultural producers working with recognizable literary resources (Walsh, 2021). That proposal differs sharply from models centered on stable community memory. The disagreement itself blocks easy compression. "Tradition" is not a mechanism until an account specifies who transmitted what, in which setting, under what controls, and with what literary agency.

7. Authorship Is Evidence, Not a Reliability Switch

Authorship questions matter because they affect access, responsibility, chronology, and source selection. They do not function as an on-off switch for historical truth.

If traditional authorship were established for every Gospel, further questions would remain. Matthew's use of Mark would still bear on independence. Luke's preface would still describe mediated investigation. John's selective purpose and validating voice would still require interpretation. A witness-author could still write decades later, use sources, arrange material thematically, and advance a theological purpose.

Conversely, uncertainty about a final author's civil identity would not make every claim false. Historians regularly use works with disputed authorship when provenance, genre, sources, and external checks provide other controls. Brown's broad New Testament introduction illustrates a common critical posture: positions on authorship and date are weighed document by document rather than converted into a single verdict on Christian origins (Brown, 1997).

The strongest historical method therefore separates four judgments:

1. **Attribution judgment:** how likely is the traditional author's relation to the text?
2. **Source judgment:** what access did the composer have to witnesses, traditions, and documents?
3. **Composition judgment:** how were sources selected, arranged, and interpreted?
4. **Claim judgment:** given those relations and external evidence, how well supported is this particular proposition?

An attribution can improve a source judgment without determining it. A source judgment can support a claim without supporting every claim. This layered structure is more demanding than a slogan but also more generous to the evidence: it allows a text to be strong in one respect and uncertain in another.

8. The Courtroom Analogy, Repaired

Apologists often compare the Gospels to witness statements in a courtroom. The analogy is useful only after its roles are mapped correctly.

A modern court distinguishes a witness's perception, an investigator's interview, notes, hearsay reports, an edited exhibit, and counsel's summary. It asks whether witnesses communicated, whether one statement was based on another, what opportunity existed for cross-examination, whether the statement changed, and how the chain of custody was maintained. A report can be admissible or informative without being direct testimony from the person who drafted the exhibit.

Applied to the Gospels, the relevant questions are:

- Who occupies the witness stand for the specific event?
- Is the evangelist reporting personal perception, a named source, a traditional report, or a prior text?
- Does the final narrator distinguish those roles?
- Which parallels are independent recollections and which are documentary reuse?
- What does the source's rhetorical purpose make more or less likely?

The analogy breaks down if it is used to import modern signed-deposition expectations into ancient biography. It also breaks down if four canonical documents are counted as four sequestered witnesses merely because they are printed separately. Repaired, the analogy reinforces the paper's thesis: reliability depends on the provenance of each claim and the relations among sources.

9. Strong Objections and Replies

9.1 Early and uniform titles are the simplest explanation

Early, geographically broad, and uniform attributions are evidence. They may be more difficult to explain on a theory of wholly arbitrary late naming, as Gathercole argues (Gathercole, 2018). The reply is not that titles count for nothing. It is that a successful attribution argument answers one question—the text's relation to the named figure—while direct eyewitness classification also requires perceptual access, final compositional responsibility, and claim-level provenance. Mark's traditional Peter connection itself illustrates the difference between author and witness source.

9.2 Named witnesses function as guarantors

Bauckham argues that named Gospel characters and *inclusio* patterns can identify eyewitness sources and that the Gospels should be read as closely based on their testimony (Bauckham, 2017). Even if several proposed identifications are accepted, the result is best stated precisely: a final text may be anchored in named testimony. It does not follow that every unit is directly attested, that the evangelist is the witness, or that literary parallels constitute independent witnesses. The theory strengthens some bridges without removing the chain.

9.3 Ancient biography permits flexible reporting

Yes. Genre comparison can make paraphrase, compression, transfer, conflation, and rearrangement less surprising (Burridge, 2004; Licona, 2017). That can defend a text against anachronistic demands for transcript-level identity. But permission for a device does not establish that a particular device occurred, and a compositional explanation is not direct eyewitness testimony. It is an account of how a biographer used material.

9.4 Skeptical standards would eliminate most ancient history

The proposed test does not require video, signatures, or an uninterrupted modern record. It asks that confidence track the evidence available. Historians can rationally accept claims from mediated sources through multiple controls: proximity, explanatory fit, hostile or neutral confirmation, material context, source specificity, and comparative plausibility. The result may be probable without being directly witnessed by the final author. Refusing to mislabel a source is not refusing to use it.

9.5 The distinction is merely semantic

It changes evidential arithmetic. If Luke uses Mark, their agreement on a Markan passage cannot be counted exactly as agreement between two independent observers. If Luke instead preserves distinctive material from another credible route, that material may add support. The labels determine which dependencies are included in the assessment. Classification therefore affects inference, not just vocabulary.

9.6 Uncertainty about chains favors blanket skepticism

No. Failure to establish direct-and-independent status leaves many intermediate positions. A claim may be weakly supported, moderately probable, strongly supported through mediated evidence, or undecidable on current evidence. The appropriate conclusion is calibrated uncertainty. The paper's argument blocks overclassification in both directions.

10. A Claim-Sensitive Method

The practical replacement for eyewitness compression is a short audit that can be repeated for any Gospel claim.

1. **State the proposition.** Replace “the Gospel is reliable” with a claim specific enough to be true or false.
2. **Identify the textual witnesses.** Locate the passages and meaningful textual variants.
3. **Map literary relations.** Mark direct reuse, likely common sources, and genuinely distinctive material.
4. **Identify proposed human sources.** Separate narrator, traditional author, event witness, transmitter, and validating voice.
5. **Assess genre and compositional purpose.** Ask what selection, arrangement, and rhetoric predict.
6. **Compare external controls and alternatives.** Use archaeological, chronological, social, and rival explanatory evidence where relevant.
7. **Assign a bounded conclusion.** State what is supported, how strongly, and what does not follow.

This method can yield favorable results. A geographically precise background detail might be well supported by early attestation and external fit even when final authorship is uncertain. A saying may reflect remembered teaching despite adaptation. A passion claim may receive support from multiple strands whose precise wording

is literary. The same method can lower confidence where sources converge through copying, where an attribution is late or ambiguous, or where a report has no traceable route.

The benefit is symmetry. Christian and non-Christian hypotheses face the same questions. Theism does not turn theological purpose into error, and skepticism does not turn mediation into invention. Nor does devotional authority settle the historical classification for readers who do not already accept it. Public historical argument advances by displaying the bridges.

11. Conclusion

The canonical Gospels arose in a world containing witnesses, memory, oral performance, written sources, ancient biography, theological interpretation, and developing attribution. Any adequate account must allow those elements to interact. The simple label “eyewitness accounts” obscures rather than explains that interaction when it is applied wholesale.

The strongest evidence for witness connection should be retained: Luke expressly appeals to earlier eyewitness transmitters; John presents a witness and a validating voice; Papias links Mark with Peter and Matthew with collected material; early titles and reception patterns support serious attribution arguments; remembered tradition can preserve stable historical content. None of this is nullified by mediation.

What fails is automatic inheritance. A witness source does not make the final composer a witness. A traditional name does not by itself establish perceptual access. Three texts reproducing one source do not create three independent routes. Vivid detail does not identify provenance. Early material is not necessarily direct material. These are not skeptical slogans but elementary distinctions among kinds of evidence.

The warranted conclusion is consequently narrow. Current evidence does not justify treating the four canonical Gospels, as a set, as four independent direct eyewitness accounts. That conclusion neither denies all traditional authorship nor entails that a particular narrated event did not occur. It requires confidence to be earned at the level where evidence operates: document by document, source by source, and claim by claim.

Formal Reconstruction of the Central Thesis

Target conclusion. The available evidence does not warrant classifying the four canonical Gospels as four independent, direct eyewitness accounts. The argument does not conclude that the texts contain no eyewitness material, that mediated reports are unreliable, or that their narrated claims are false.

A. Plain-language reconstruction

1. If the available evidence warrants classifying a final document as direct eyewitness testimony, it must warrant identifying the relevant witness with the final compositional responsibility for the claim, or establish an equivalently direct relation.
2. If agreement among documents counts as independent corroboration for a claim, that agreement must reach the claim through evidential routes not adequately explained by literary dependence or an immediate common source.
3. Luke distinguishes the narrator's investigated account from prior eyewitness transmission; Mark and Matthew do not internally identify their narrators; John distinguishes or at least places in tension a testifying disciple and an attesting "we"; and the Synoptic documents show extensive literary dependence.
4. Therefore the evidence does not establish the required directness and independence for all four final documents. (1–3)
5. Therefore the evidence does not warrant the collective classification "four independent direct eyewitness accounts". (4)
6. This failure of collective classification is compatible with traditional authorship for one or more texts, eyewitness-derived material, responsible mediation, and well-supported particular claims.

Validity and support. Premises 1 and 2 state necessary conditions for the classification under review. Premise 3 is the documentary and literary evidence defended in the paper. The conclusion follows by a necessary-condition test: when evidence does not establish the conditions constitutive of the stronger status, it cannot warrant assigning that status. Premise 6 fixes the scope and prevents the argument from becoming a blanket reliability verdict.

B. Symbolic reconstruction

Symbols

- G : the set of four canonical Gospels.
- c : a particular historical claim.
- $W(g)$: current evidence warrants direct eyewitness classification of final document g .
- $A(g)$: current evidence establishes an appropriate witness-to-final-composer relation for g .
- $S(g_i, g_j, c)$: g_j 's report of c uses g_i as a literary source.
- $I(g_i, g_j, c)$: the two reports independently corroborate c .
- F : the evidence warrants calling all members of G independent direct eyewitness accounts.
- M : at least some Gospel material derives from eyewitnesses.

Direct-classification condition

$$(\forall g \in G) [W(g) \rightarrow A(g)], \quad (\exists g \in G) \neg A(g) \vdash \neg(\forall g \in G) W(g).$$

Plain-English annotation. For every Gospel, warranted direct-eyewitness classification requires evidence that establishes the relevant witness-to-final-composer relation. At least one Gospel lacks that established relation: Luke's preface, for example, presents the narrator as an investigator receiving earlier eyewitness transmission. It follows that the evidence does not warrant classifying every member of the four-Gospel set as direct testimony. This is an epistemic conclusion about what the evidence warrants, not a claim that no traditional author could have witnessed anything.

Independence condition

$$S(g_i, g_j, c) \rightarrow \neg I(g_i, g_j, c).$$

Plain-English annotation. When one Gospel's wording for a particular claim comes from another Gospel, their agreement at that point is not a second independent evidential route to the event. The dependent text may preserve, endorse, or interpret the source accurately, and it may supply independent information elsewhere. The formula denies only independent corroboration for the source-dependent agreement on c .

Collective classification

$$F \rightarrow [(\forall g \in G) W(g) \wedge (\forall g_i \neq g_j)(\forall c) I(g_i, g_j, c)], \quad \neg [(\forall g \in G) W(g) \wedge (\forall g_i \neq g_j)(\forall c) I(g_i, g_j, c)] \vdash \neg F.$$

Plain-English annotation. Calling the collection four independent direct eyewitness accounts commits the speaker to direct classification of every document and to independence wherever agreement is counted as corroboration. The documentary evidence and known literary dependence defeat that conjunction. By modus tollens, the collective label is not warranted. The universal independence clause expresses the unqualified slogan under review; a narrower claim about independent material in selected passages must be assessed separately.

Scope limit

$$\neg F \not\vdash \neg M.$$

Plain-English annotation. Rejecting the collective direct-and-independent classification does not prove that no Gospel material derives from an eyewitness. A text may preserve witness testimony through interviews, oral performance, notes, or an earlier written source. This non-derivability is the paper's central limit: misclassification can be corrected without converting mediation into fabrication.

Validity and support of the symbolic version. The first and third derivations are instances of reasoning from unmet necessary conditions, with the latter using modus tollens. Their soundness depends on the evidential premises established in the document-level analysis. The second formula defines the relevant consequence of literary source use at the claim level. The last formula blocks a converse error. Together the relations establish a bounded classification result rather than a negative judgment about every Gospel claim.

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