

# Legendary Inflation

Social Memory, Narrative Selection, and the Growth of Impossible Biographies

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## Central claim

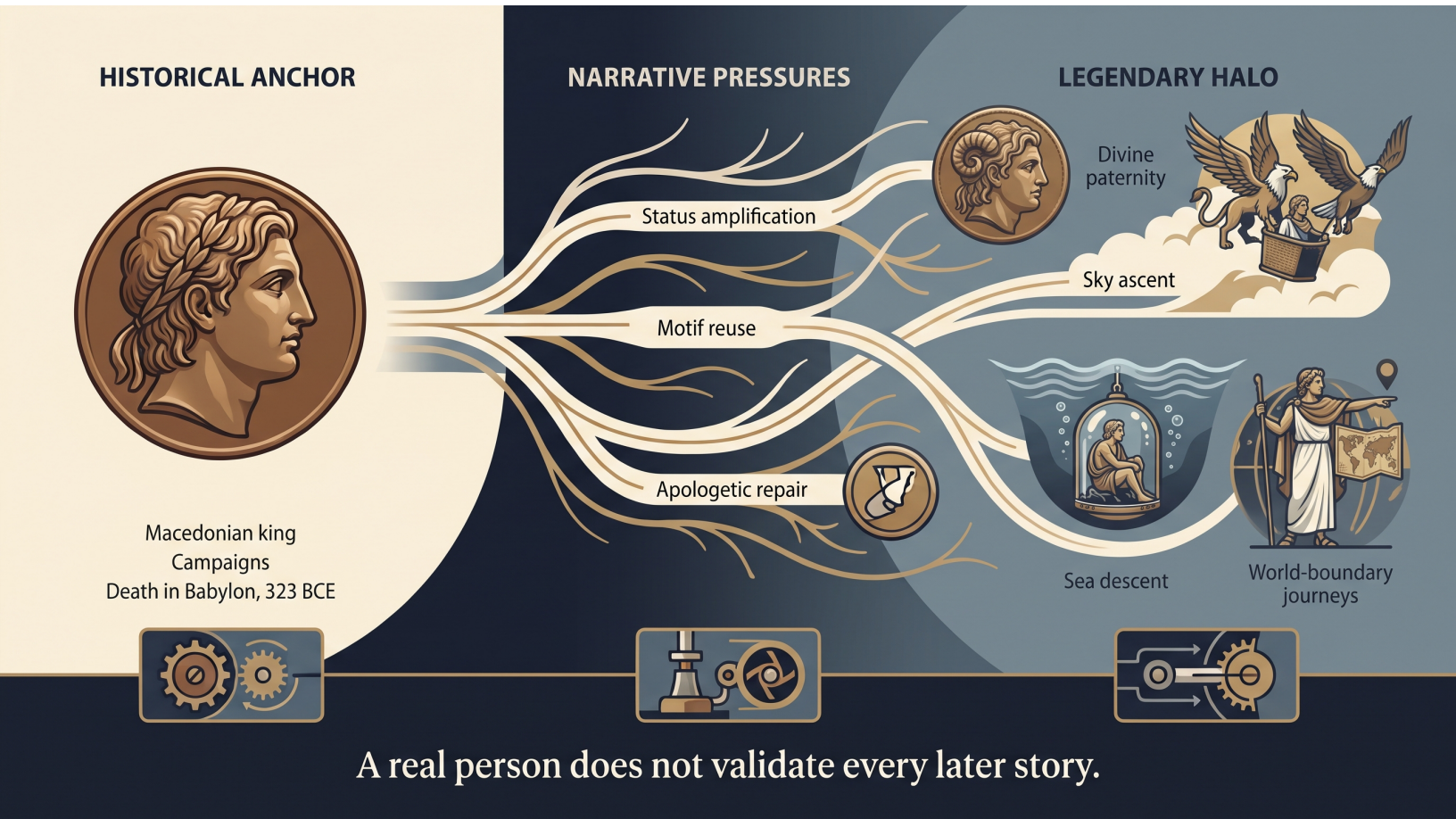
A securely historical person does not confer historical warrant on every extraordinary story attached to that person. Alexander's secure career and extravagant later biography show that identity-bearing transmission can preserve a human anchor while enlarging its narrative halo; early Christian claims therefore need episode-specific support beyond Jesus' probable existence and a community's sincerity. This comparison identifies a risk and a burden of proof, not direct borrowing or the falsity of any particular Gospel scene.

## Preview:

| Historical anchor                               | Transmission pressure                                                                              | Control case                                                                                              | Calibrated conclusion                                                                             |
|-------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| A real person gives stories a memorable center. | Identity, repeated use, familiar motifs, and weak correction can select meaning over exact detail. | Alexander remains historically secure although later traditions give him impossible journeys and origins. | Historicity cannot validate a whole biography; consequential episodes require their own evidence. |

*The argument defeats automatic biographical inheritance. It does not treat Alexander and Jesus as identical cases or convert comparative pressure into a story-level verdict.*

## Visual preview:



*The historical anchor on the left feeds through status amplification, motif reuse, and apologetic repair into the Alexander tradition's divine-paternity, sky-ascent, sea-descent, and world-boundary motifs. The image maps pressures and possibilities; it does not measure their rate or establish a direct source for Christian narratives.*

## Abstract

Historical debate often collapses two questions: whether a person existed and whether later extraordinary stories about that person are reliable. This paper argues that the first answer cannot settle the second. A secure historical anchor can coexist with a heavily enlarged biography when stories become instruments of identity, persuasion, ritual, and communal memory. Alexander the Great provides a clean control case. His existence and major career are exceptionally secure, yet the composite Alexander Romance and its descendants give him divine paternity, journeys to the edges of the world, and ascent into the sky. Historicity plainly did not immunize his biography against legend.

The argument combines reconstructive-memory research, social and cultural memory, oral-tradition method, and narrative analysis. These fields do not imply that memory is unconstrained invention. They show instead how stable gist can coexist with changed detail, how conversational repetition can reshape later recall, how groups select usable pasts, and how performance preserves a tradition by recomposing it. Applied cautiously to early Christian narrative, the model identifies relevant pressures: confessional use, scriptural interpretation, repeated performance, status amplification, apologetic repair, and limited external correction. Reliability-oriented scholarship rightly answers that eyewitness links, ancient biographical conventions, early tradition, and controlled transmission may preserve substantial history. Those considerations can constrain inflation, but none makes the whole portrait inherit warrant from the existence of Jesus or from literary genre alone.

The conclusion is deliberately limited. The Alexander comparison does not prove direct borrowing, equal developmental speed, or the invention of a particular miracle. It establishes a defeater for automatic inheritance: once a biography is identity-bearing and extraordinary, each consequential claim requires source-level and episode-level support. The rational alternative to both devotional literalism and indiscriminate mythicism is layered judgment—retain what the evidence anchors, identify where narrative pressure is strongest, and refuse to make a real person certify an impossible biography.

**Keywords:** legendary development; social memory; oral tradition; Alexander Romance; historical Jesus; Gospel reliability; narrative selection

## 1 The Inference Under Review

A person can be real while stories about that person become impossible. The sentence sounds obvious until a historical concession is asked to carry more weight than it can bear. In public debate about Jesus, the existence of a first-century Jewish teacher is sometimes treated as though it moved the full Gospel portrait toward reliability. On the other side, the presence of miracle, scriptural patterning, or theological construction is sometimes treated as though it erased the person. Both moves turn a layered historical problem into a switch.

This paper challenges the first move without requiring the second. Its target is *automatic biographical inheritance*: the assumption that once a tradition has a real human center, extraordinary scenes surrounding that center receive a presumption of historicity. The assumption can be explicit—“Jesus existed, therefore the Gospel account is basically reliable”—or tacit, as when evidence for a crucifixion, a teacher, or an early movement is allowed to fund claims about divine conception, nature miracles, postmortem appearances, or cosmic status.

The mistake is a missing bridge. A historical anchor explains why a tradition has a name, setting, followers, conflicts, and remembered trajectory. It does not explain why a particular scene is accurate. The anchor can make later stories more compelling because it supplies places, dates, enemies, descendants, monuments, or followers around which a narrative can grow. In that sense, historicity can enable legend rather than block it.

Alexander is decisive at this limited point. His existence, conquests, and death in Babylon are not rescued from obscurity by a late religious text; they are embedded in the political transformation of

the eastern Mediterranean and Near East. Yet later Alexander traditions send him beyond ordinary geography, give him exotic or divine ancestry, and expand conquest into cosmic travel (Pseudo-Callisthenes 1991; Stoneman 2008). A secure anchor and an impossible halo coexist. The example does not tell us how quickly every legend grows or what happened in another tradition. It shows that no valid inference runs from *real person* to *reliable extraordinary biography*.

### The inheritance test

If a defender cites only the existence or ordinary career of a person, ask what independent evidence connects that fact to the extraordinary episode under dispute. Without such a connection, historicity supplies a setting, not a verdict.

The paper develops this point in three stages. First, it defines legendary inflation without treating memory as fiction. Second, it uses Alexander as a control case and maps mechanisms that can preserve a tradition's identity while altering its content. Third, it asks what, if anything, those mechanisms license us to infer about early Christian narrative. The answer is caution with teeth: not "therefore false," but "therefore not inherited."

## 2 A Constrained Model of Legendary Inflation

*Legendary inflation* is the enlargement of a remembered person's biography as later communities make that person carry more identity, authority, explanation, or hope. The word *inflation* names added narrative load, not a single psychological process. Some additions may be conscious literary inventions. Others may arise through ordinary reconstruction, condensation, transfer of familiar motifs, theological interpretation, harmonization, or selective survival. A tradition can change without anyone convening to falsify it.

Four constraints prevent the model from becoming a universal solvent.

First, memory is reconstructive but not arbitrary. Bartlett's classic work showed that recall is shaped by prior schemas and cultural familiarity; later psychology distinguishes several recurrent forms of distortion without reducing remembering to fabrication (Bartlett 1932; Schacter 1999). People can retain a stable outline, striking episodes, and central actors while altering sequence, motive, dialogue, or explanatory detail. A model that predicts only corruption misses the ordinary persistence of gist.

Second, oral transmission is not simply a children's whispering game. Lord's work on oral-formulaic composition showed how skilled performers preserve recognizable narratives through recomposition rather than verbatim recitation (Lord 1960). Vansina likewise treated oral tradition as evidence requiring disciplined analysis of genre, chain of transmission, social control, and function, not as either transparent record or worthless rumor (Vansina 1985). Stability and variation are therefore compatible.

Third, social memory is not merely many individual memories added together. Halbwachs emphasized that groups supply frameworks within which the past is recalled, while Assmann distinguished living communicative memory from more durable cultural forms such as text, ritual, image, and institution (Halbwachs 1992; Assmann 2011). These frameworks can preserve a past by selecting and organizing it. Preservation always answers, at least implicitly, what the past is *for*.

Fourth, narrative form adds intelligibility. A sequence of events becomes a biography when it is arranged around a character, conflict, direction, and outcome. White's analysis of narrativity is useful here: narration does not merely list events but gives them a form that makes them morally or causally legible (White 1980). That insight does not show that narrated events are unreal. It shows why a meaningful life story contains more organization than a transcript.

These constraints support a bounded model. Legendary inflation becomes more likely when a figure is socially important, stories are repeatedly reused, familiar motifs are available, external checks are weak or costly, and enlarged versions better serve the community’s aims. It becomes less likely when independent records are contemporary, correction is institutionally rewarded, rival witnesses can challenge details, and the claim at issue is ordinary rather than identity-defining.

| Mechanism                | What it can preserve                                               | What it can change                                                          | What it cannot prove by itself                         |
|--------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------|
| Reconstructive recall    | Central actor, gist, emotional center, repeated actions.           | Sequence, dialogue, motive, causal links, familiar detail.                  | That a remembered episode is false.                    |
| Conversational retelling | Shared vocabulary and a mutually recognized event.                 | Which details are rehearsed, omitted, aligned, or made socially acceptable. | That a group coordinates deliberately.                 |
| Oral performance         | Narrative identity, themes, formulas, memorable scenes.            | Wording, order, expansion, compression, application to an audience.         | That oral tradition lacks control or skill.            |
| Cultural memory          | Durable identity, ritualized meaning, authorized texts and images. | Which past is canonical, exemplary, suppressed, or newly interpreted.       | That institutional memory contains no historical core. |
| Narrative selection      | Coherence, conflict, climax, and a portable lesson.                | Salience, causation, symbolism, and endings that vindicate the group.       | That narrative artistry excludes historical reference. |

Table 1: Mechanisms of legendary inflation and their inferential limits. The table prevents a pressure model from being misused as an automatic falsity test.

Experimental work on conversational remembering adds an important middle layer. Conversation can improve shared recall, but it can also produce sampling biases, audience tuning, social contagion, and retrieval effects that reshape later memory (Hirst and Echterhoff 2012). This is not an ancient-Gospel experiment by proxy. It supplies a demonstrated mechanism: what people later remember can be affected by what a group repeatedly retrieves and by the audience with whom a past is made shareable. Historical application still requires evidence about the actual community and media.

The model therefore makes comparative predictions, not blanket accusations. Where a remembered figure has little identity value and abundant correction, extraordinary enlargement should face resistance. Where the figure authorizes a community’s existence, stories are liturgically or pedagogically reused, and no external archive can adjudicate many details, selection for significance should be stronger. The model earns its keep only if those conditions can be shown rather than presumed.

### 3 Alexander as Counterexample and Control

Alexander is useful because the argument does not depend on doubt about his existence. The historical record is imperfect and interested, as ancient records often are, but the broad outline of Macedonian conquest is anchored by political, geographical, numismatic, and literary evidence. The legendary tradition does not replace that outline. It grows around it.

The Greek Alexander Romance, conventionally associated with Pseudo-Callisthenes, is a composite work whose forms developed over centuries. In Stoneman’s translation and study, Alexander acquires a disputed or magical paternity, pursues the Water of Life, meets marvelous peoples, travels to the limits of the world, and ascends into the sky carried by birds (Pseudo-Callisthenes 1991; Stoneman

2008). Later languages and cultures make him a philosopher, prophet, tyrant, explorer, or sacred king according to their own narrative worlds. The historical conqueror becomes portable.

That portability matters more than any one motif. Alexander’s known ambition and geographic reach provide a narrative engine: a conqueror of much of the known world is an apt protagonist for journeys beyond the known world. Political greatness invites a birth commensurate with destiny. Failure to reach a boundary invites a story in which the boundary is breached. The legendary episode does not float free of the historical person; it magnifies features that made him memorable.

The case is not a simple curve from sober fact to late fantasy. Surviving historical sources are themselves later than Alexander and shaped by literary and political interests, while legendary materials can preserve old elements. Conversely, lateness does not itself make every detail false. The proper contrast is between claims with convergent historical support and claims whose evidential life is primarily inside the legendary tradition. “Alexander died in Babylon” and “Alexander rose into the sky” do not receive equal warrant merely because both sentences name Alexander.

| Layer or feature    | Historical anchor                                                   | Legendary enlargement                                                            | Inference warranted                                    |
|---------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------|
| Identity            | Macedonian king and conqueror with a vast public career.            | Sacred, prophetic, demonic, or cosmically destined figure across later cultures. | A stable name can support changing meanings.           |
| Origin              | Royal Macedonian lineage within known dynastic politics.            | Exotic or divine paternity adequate to later greatness.                          | Status can pressure a tradition to rewrite beginnings. |
| Travel              | Campaigns across the eastern Mediterranean and Near East into Asia. | Sky ascent, sea descent, marvelous races, and world-boundary journeys.           | Real range can become a template for impossible reach. |
| Death and afterlife | Death in Babylon and contested succession.                          | Continuing journeys, moralized exempla, and roles in religious cosmologies.      | Historical closure does not end narrative usefulness.  |

Table 2: Alexander as an evidence ledger. The comparison distinguishes a secure anchor from later narrative load; it does not claim that every detail in the historical layer is certain or every legendary layer is valueless.

Alexander establishes two conclusions. The strong conclusion is negative: historicity is not an immunizer. A real person can acquire an impossible biography. The weaker but constructive conclusion is methodological: confidence should be distributed across claims rather than across a whole name. Evidence for the king does not migrate automatically to the sky traveler.

Alexander does *not* establish three other conclusions. He does not show that early Christian authors copied the Romance. He does not show that every tradition inflates at the same rate; the chronological distance and transmission ecology differ. And he does not establish which Gospel scenes are historical. The value of a control case is to isolate one proposition. Here it isolates the insufficiency of a historical anchor.

#### 4 Why Legends Grow Without a Conspiracy

Once Alexander supplies the counterexample, the broader model explains how enlargement can occur without treating communities as fraud factories.

### 4.1 Status amplification

Communities often reason backward from significance. If a figure transformed the world, the figure's origin must have announced that destiny. Extraordinary birth, precocious wisdom, prophecy, cosmic signs, and special ancestry make the beginning fit the ending. The inference is narratively satisfying because it removes accident from greatness. Its weakness as history is precisely that later status can generate the expectation of an earlier sign.

### 4.2 Narrative templating

Traditions do not invent significance from an empty repertoire. Cultures already possess recognizable forms for kings, sages, martyrs, prophets, conquerors, and vindicated sufferers. Templating need not be literary copying from one document. A storyteller can compose within a shared grammar without knowing a single alleged source. The proper historical question is therefore not only "Was this scene copied?" but also "Which available forms make this scene intelligible, memorable, and appropriate to this kind of figure?"

### 4.3 Apologetic repair

A troubling event can be preserved and transformed at once. Defeat becomes hidden victory; marginal origin becomes fulfilled prophecy; rejection becomes proof that the community uniquely understands; delay becomes a test of fidelity. Repair does not show that the underlying event was invented. It shows how the meaning of an inherited event can change until the event supports a conclusion that its first appearance did not carry.

### 4.4 Selection by use

Stories used in preaching, ritual, controversy, instruction, art, and pilgrimage enjoy repeated retrieval. Repetition can stabilize them, but it also favors the versions that perform those tasks effectively. A cautious, unresolved anecdote is harder to preach than a scene with conflict, answer, and vindication. Hirst and Echterhoff's survey of conversational remembering is relevant here because repeated social retrieval affects what remains available to later speakers (Hirst and Echterhoff 2012). Use is not the enemy of memory; it is one of the conditions that shapes which memory survives.

### 4.5 Textual stabilization and further interpretation

Writing changes the ecology but does not end development. A text can stabilize a version while inviting commentary, harmonization, sequel, iconography, and liturgical reuse. Assmann's cultural memory is particularly helpful: durable media extend a past beyond living conversation, but they do so by canonizing forms through which later groups encounter it (Assmann 2011). The text constrains future telling while becoming a new object of interpretation.

These mechanisms often work together. Status makes an origin story attractive; available motifs supply its grammar; communal use repeats it; apologetic need sharpens its conclusion; writing fixes one form; later interpretation reconciles it with other forms. None of these steps requires a committee, and sincerity is compatible with every one of them. The relevant contrast is not honest memory versus dishonest fiction. It is memory under different pressures and controls.

## 5 What Transfers to Early Christian Narrative

The application to early Christian texts should begin with a scholarly fact about the debate: ancient biography can be both historically interested and theologically shaped. Reliability-oriented accounts argue that named or identifiable witnesses, controlled oral transmission, biographical convention, and

proximity to events preserve substantial information. Bauckham gives the eyewitness case its most influential modern form; Byrskog relates Gospel tradition to ancient oral history; Keener argues that ancient biographical practice supports broad historical reliability (Bauckham 2017; Byrskog 2000; Keener 2019). Any serious inflation model must answer these positions rather than assuming that “oral” means uncontrolled or that “theological” means fictional.

Memory-oriented and comparative approaches emphasize another set of facts. Gospel traditions were remembered, performed, and written within communities for whom Jesus’ significance was already central. Allison uses memory research to challenge atomized authenticity tests; Rodríguez and Kirk integrate performance, social memory, and textual transmission; Litwa emphasizes the literary techniques through which marvelous narratives could be presented as historical discourse (Dale C. Allison 2010; Rodríguez 2010; Kirk 2018; Litwa 2019). These approaches differ among themselves. Together they block the fantasy of a neutral container carrying untouched episodes from event to page.

The dispute should not be settled by choosing one label—“eyewitness testimony,” “ancient biography,” “social memory,” or “mythic historiography”—and letting it decide every episode. Each label names features that require further analysis. Eyewitnesses can remember, interpret, disagree, and be quoted through later authors. Ancient biographers can use sources while arranging speeches, chronology, and scenes. Social memory can preserve a group’s past while selecting its significance. Mythic discourse can refer to real people and places. Genre and transmission are evidence about a text’s possibilities, not mechanical truth functions.

Five pressures make the constrained inflation model relevant.

First, the tradition was identity-bearing. Jesus was not remembered as an incidental local figure but as the center of proclamation, worship, conflict, hope, and group boundary. That importance gives narrative details unusually high stakes.

Second, the tradition was repeatedly used. Teaching, mission, dispute, communal meals, liturgy, and scriptural exposition required portable stories and sayings. Reuse can preserve material, yet it also selects forms suited to the occasion.

Third, scriptural interpretation organized meaning. Early Christian writers did not merely locate Jesus in time; they narrated him through Israel’s scriptures. Scriptural echoes can arise from remembered actions, deliberate staging, authorial composition, or combinations of these. Their presence does not prove invention. It marks a place where event and interpretation are tightly joined.

Fourth, status amplification was available. A teacher remembered as Messiah, risen Lord, or preexistent agent of creation attracts a biography adequate to that status. The chronological earliness of a high claim can show that the belief is early. It does not by itself show that the event narrated to express or support the belief occurred.

Fifth, external controls were uneven. Public places, rulers, executions, social groups, and broad movement history can be checked more readily than private dialogue, angelic encounter, interior motive, or postmortem appearance. The less publicly recoverable an episode, the more its warrant depends on source proximity, independence, transmission history, and alternatives.

The resulting inference is conditional. If a scene is identity-serving, densely scripturalized, weakly externally constrained, and attested only through dependent narrative streams, legendary pressure is comparatively strong. If it is multiply and independently anchored, costly to the community, resistant to harmonization, and supported by evidence outside the tradition’s own need, pressure is weaker. None of these features functions alone. A useful model accumulates them and states the limit.

## 6 Strong Objections and Replies

## 6.1 The Gospel traditions are much earlier than the surviving Romance

Correct, and the difference matters. The surviving Alexander Romance is a late, composite witness to centuries of development, while the canonical Gospels stand much closer to Jesus. Alexander therefore cannot calibrate the speed or extent of Christian legendary growth. The paper uses him for a narrower conclusion: even maximal security about a person's existence cannot validate extraordinary episodes by inheritance. Chronology must then be evaluated within the Christian case.

Earliness reduces some opportunities for accretion but does not eliminate interpretation. A high claim can arise early because a community's experience and reading of scripture produce it early. Conversely, a late source can preserve early material. "Early" and "late" alter probabilities only when joined to a model of sources, dependence, access, and correction.

## 6.2 Eyewitnesses could police the tradition

They could, and Bauckham's case deserves direct engagement (Bauckham 2017). Living participants can correct names, places, and memorable events; authoritative witnesses can constrain a group. Yet "eyewitness influence" is not the same proposition as "every narrated episode is eyewitness testimony." Historical evaluation still asks which witness, connected through which author, reporting what kind of event, under what conditions, with what independent confirmation.

Eyewitness memory is also human memory. It can be sincere, vivid, and partly wrong; later authors can faithfully report a witness's interpretation; communities can privilege one witness over another. The presence of possible control is therefore evidence, not a universal warranty. The relevant task is to trace control at the level of the claim.

## 6.3 Oral cultures can transmit tradition reliably

Yes. Vansina and Lord are cited precisely because competent oral transmission has structure and discipline (Vansina 1985; Lord 1960). But reliability is differentiated. A tradition may preserve plot, formula, and identity while varying wording or explanation. Genre, performer, audience, institutional authority, and sanctions for deviation matter. Invoking "oral culture" without specifying those controls is no better than invoking "legend" without specifying a mechanism.

The inflation model therefore predicts mixed records: durable core, patterned variation, and occasional expansion. That prediction fits neither a stenographic model nor a total-corruption model. It requires patient comparison among versions.

## 6.4 The Gospels are biographies, not myths

Genre does not settle facticity. Keener's comparison with ancient biography supports serious historical intention and a meaningful range of accuracy; Litwa's comparison shows how marvelous material could be narrated in a historical mode (Keener 2019; Litwa 2019). These conclusions are not contradictory at the level relevant here. A work can be ancient biography, use sources, and still shape a life around theological significance. The question is what its conventions and sources license us to believe about a particular scene.

Calling a Gospel a biography is therefore a starting classification. It tells us to compare it with ancient lives, examine authorial practice, and distinguish modern expectations from ancient ones. It does not allow every content claim to borrow the genre's name as evidence.

## 6.5 Similarity does not prove borrowing

Agreed. Alexander's ascent does not prove that an evangelist copied it, and a divine-birth motif does not establish a single literary source. Legendary inflation is a pressure model, not a genealogy. Similarity can

reveal a repertoire of culturally intelligible forms even when direct dependence is absent. A borrowing claim requires verbal, structural, chronological, and transmission evidence beyond resemblance.

This concession strengthens the central thesis by removing an unnecessary claim. The invalid inference from historical anchor to whole-biography reliability does not depend on Christian borrowing from Alexander. One independent case is enough to show that historicity provides no immunity.

## 6.6 A miracle could have occurred despite parallels

Yes. A parallel is not a disproof, and ordinary causal expectations are not deductive laws against every unusual event. The conclusion concerns warrant. When an episode resembles status-amplifying or vindicating motifs that traditions independently generate, the resemblance supplies an alternative explanation that must be compared with the extraordinary explanation. Evidence must discriminate; compatibility with the religious claim is not enough.

This is also why the paper does not pronounce on one miracle from a general model. It asks whether the available source record makes that event more credible than the live alternatives after dependence, selection, and narrative function are considered. A model can raise the burden without pretending to have paid or defeated it in advance.

## 7 A Claim-by-Claim Evaluation Protocol

The practical alternative to binary judgment is an evidence ledger. It begins with the smallest claim and adds only what the evidence specifically supports. “A movement formed around a remembered teacher” is not the same claim as “this speech is verbatim,” “this nature miracle occurred,” or “this theological interpretation is historically compelled.” Each addition needs its own bridge.

The protocol clarifies why the same document can support different confidence levels. A geographical reference may be independently mundane and easily preserved. A private discourse may depend entirely on authorial construction. A public execution can be strongly anchored while its cosmic interpretation remains confessional. Layered confidence is not inconsistency. It is what happens when propositions have different evidence.

The protocol also improves skeptical argument. Overclaiming invites a defender to refute the easiest excess—for example, by showing that oral traditions can preserve information or that ancient biography can be historically interested. A disciplined critic grants those points and returns to the bridge. Which source establishes this scene? What independence exists? How does the claim outrun the anchor? What alternative explains the same narrative fit?

For religious readers, the same method need not be hostile. A theological interpretation can be meaningful without masquerading as a neutral historical entailment. Faith may affirm more than public historical method can establish, but the distinction should be named. The cost of blurring it is that ordinary evidence for a person or movement is made to underwrite extraordinary claims it was never strong enough to carry.

## 8 Conclusion

Legendary inflation is not the thesis that communities simply forget and invent. It is the more exact claim that identity-bearing transmission changes the selection environment of biography. Reconstructive recall, conversational alignment, oral performance, cultural memory, scriptural interpretation, narrative templating, and apologetic repair can preserve a human center while enlarging what that center is made to mean.

| Question                              | Evidence sought                                                                  | Inflation warning                                                               | Calibrated use                                                                       |
|---------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| What is the exact claim?              | Event, wording, cause, interpretation, and scope separated.                      | A modest anchor silently carries a larger theological conclusion.               | Assign confidence to the specified proposition, not to the figure's whole biography. |
| How close is the recoverable source?  | Date, access, chain of transmission, and opportunities for correction.           | "Early" substitutes for an actual source relation.                              | Treat proximity as one constraint among several.                                     |
| Are witnesses or sources independent? | Distinct access rather than repeated dependence on one stream.                   | Several texts are counted as several witnesses without source analysis.         | Discount dependent repetition while preserving genuine convergence.                  |
| What work does the scene perform?     | Identity, apologetic, liturgical, scriptural, or dramatic function.              | The episode perfectly repairs a communal problem and lacks external constraint. | Function raises a rival explanation; it does not itself prove invention.             |
| Which motifs shape the scene?         | Verbal echoes, typology, genre conventions, and available narrative repertoires. | Resemblance is promoted directly to proof of copying.                           | Distinguish shared grammar from demonstrated literary dependence.                    |
| How does the account vary?            | Changes in sequence, speech, actors, setting, and emphasis across versions.      | Harmonization hides development by importing every detail into one event.       | Ask which core survives and what each author contributes.                            |
| What would count against it?          | Disconfirming evidence, rival expectations, and revision conditions.             | Every variation becomes confirmation of theological depth.                      | Preserve claims only at the confidence their risks and controls warrant.             |

Table 3: A source-evaluation protocol for identity-bearing biography. It disciplines both automatic trust and automatic dismissal; it does not turn qualitative judgment into false numerical precision.

Alexander makes the governing inference visible. His historical reality is secure, yet his later biography reaches into divine paternity, impossible geography, and cosmic exploration. The historical king does not certify the sky traveler. That counterexample is enough to defeat automatic biographical inheritance.

Applied to early Christian narrative, the result is caution without a shortcut. Eyewitness influence, ancient biography, early tradition, and controlled oral practice can preserve substantial history. Confessional identity, scripturalization, repeated use, status amplification, and uneven external control can also shape the portrait. Neither list decides a scene in advance. The task is to trace sources, dependence, function, variation, and alternatives at the level of the claim.

The principal limit remains firm: Alexander does not prove Christian borrowing, equal rates of development, or the falsity of any miracle. He proves something more modest and more difficult to evade. A real person is not a warranty for an impossible biography. Readers should keep the anchor, test the halo, and make every extraordinary addition earn its own confidence.

## A Formal Reconstruction of the Central Thesis

### A.1 Syllogistic reconstruction

1. If a person's secure historicity were sufficient to warrant extraordinary claims in that person's received biography, then extraordinary claims about any securely historical person would gain warrant merely from the person's existence and ordinary career.
2. Alexander is securely historical, but his existence and ordinary career do not warrant the later claims of divine paternity, sky ascent, sea descent, or world-boundary journeys.
3. Therefore secure historicity is not sufficient to warrant extraordinary claims in a received biography.
4. The inference from a historical Jesus to the broad reliability of extraordinary Gospel scenes relies on that insufficient bridge unless episode-specific evidence is supplied.
5. Therefore Jesus' probable existence and a community's sincerity do not by themselves warrant those extraordinary scenes; each requires evidence proportionate to its content and alternatives.

The inference is valid as a counterexample to a universal sufficiency claim followed by its application. Premise 2 is historical and interpretive: it depends on the well-anchored distinction between Alexander's career and the later Romance tradition. Premise 4 is conditional and does not claim that every Christian argument actually relies only on historicity; reliability arguments may add eyewitness, source, genre, or experiential evidence. The conclusion preserves the paper's limit. It defeats inherited warrant, not the metaphysical possibility or historical truth of any particular extraordinary event.

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