

The Historical Reliability of the New Testament Text— Part Three

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Last month we began to look at ten facts important to a discussion of the reliability of the New Testament Text. The first two facts were: 1) the bibliographical test (corroboration from textual transmission); and 2) the internal evidence test (corroboration from content accuracy). We now continue.

Fact three: the external evidence test (corroboration from reliable sources outside the New Testament).

This test seeks either to corroborate or to falsify the documents on the basis of additional historical literature and data. (In this section, we will look at Christian sources; in the next section, fact four, we will look at non-Christian sources.) Is there corroborating evidence for the claims made in the New Testament outside the New Testament? Or are the claims or events of the New Testament successfully refuted by other competent reports or eyewitnesses? Are there statements or assertions in the New Testament that are demonstrably false according to known archaeological, historic, scientific or other data?

The New Testament again passes the test. For example, Luke wrote one-fourth of the New Testament. His careful historical writing has been documented from detailed personal archaeological investigation by former critic Sir William Ramsay, who stated after his painstaking research, “Luke’s history is unsurpassed in respect of its trustworthiness.”¹ A. N. Sherwin-White, the distinguished historian of Rome, stated of Luke: “For [the book of] Acts the confirmation of historicity is overwhelming. Any attempt to reject its basic historicity even in matters of detail must now appear absurd.”²

Papias, a student of the Apostle John³ and Bishop of Hierapolis around 150 A.D., observed that the Apostle John himself noted that the Apostle Mark in writing his Gospel “wrote down *accurately*... whatsoever he [Peter] remembered of the things said or done by Christ. Mark committed *no error*... for he was *careful of one thing*, not to omit any of the things he [Peter] had heard, and not to state any of them *falsely*.”⁴ Further, fragments of Papias’ *Exposition of the Oracles of the Lord*, ca. 140 A.D. (III, XIX, XX) assert that the Gospels of Matthew, Mark and John are all based on reliable eyewitness testimony (His portion on Luke is missing).⁵

Even 200 years of scholarly rationalistic biblical criticism (such as form, source and redaction approaches) have proven nothing except that the writers were careful and honest reporters of the events recorded and that these methods attempting to discredit them were flawed from the start.

Fact four (corroboration from non-Christian sources).

The existence of both Jewish and secular accounts, to a significant degree, confirm the picture of Christ that we have in the New Testament. Scholarly research such as that by Dr. Gary R. Habermas in *Ancient Evidence for the Life of Jesus*, and other texts, indicates that

“a broad outline of the life of Jesus” and His death by crucifixion can be reasonably and directly inferred from entirely non-Christian sources. ⁶

Using only the information gleaned from these ancient extrabiblical sources, what can we conclude concerning the death and resurrection of Jesus? Can these events be historically established based on these sources alone? Of the seventeen documents examined in this chapter, eleven different works speak of the death of Jesus in varying amounts of detail, with five of these specifying crucifixion as the mode. When these sources are examined by normal historical procedures used with other ancient documents, the result is conclusive.

It is this author’s view that the death of Jesus by crucifixion can be asserted as a historical fact from this data... ⁷

Further, Habermas points out that the empty tomb can reasonably be established as historical from extrabiblical sources and that the resurrection of Christ Himself can be indirectly inferred from non-Christian sources. ⁸

Fact five (corroboration from archeology).

There exists detailed archaeological confirmation for the New Testament documents. ⁹ Dr. Clifford Wilson is the former director of the Australian Institute of Archaeology and author of *New Light on the New Testament Letters; New Light on the Gospels; Rock, Relics and Biblical Reliability* and a 17-volume set on the archeological confirmation of the Bible. He writes: “Those who know the facts now recognize that the New Testament must be accepted as a remarkably accurate source book.” ¹⁰ Many recent scholarly texts confirm this, such as Dr. Randall Price’s *The Stones Cry Out: What Archaeology Reveals About the Truth of the Bible* (Harvest House, 1997); A. J. Hoerth, *Archaeology and the Old Testament* (1998); and J. McRay, *Archaeology and the New Testament* (1991).

Fact six (corroboration from enemies’ silence).

The complete inability of the numerous enemies of Jesus and the early Church to discredit early Christian claims (when they had both the motive and ability to do so) argues strongly for the veracity of the early Christian claims in light of the stupendous nature of those claims (Christ’s Messiahship, deity and resurrection) and the relative ease of disproof (Jesus’ failure to fulfill prophecy; producing Jesus’ body).

Fact seven (corroboration from eyewitnesses).

The presence of numerous eyewitnesses to the events recorded in the New Testament ¹¹ would surely have prohibited any alteration or distortion of the facts, just as today false reporting as to the events of the Vietnam War or World War II would be corrected on the basis of living eyewitnesses and historic records.

Some argue that the gospel writers’ reporting of miracles can’t be trusted because they were only giving their religiously excited “subjective experience” of Jesus, not objectively reporting real miraculous events. They *thought* Jesus did miracles, but were mistaken.

What is ignored by critics is what the text plainly states, and the fact that the gospel writers could not have gotten away with this in their own day *unless* they had been telling the truth. They claimed that these things were done openly, not in a corner (Acts 26:26), that they were literally eyewitnesses of the miraculous nature and deeds of Jesus (Luke 1:2; Acts 2:32; 4:20; 2 Peter 1:16), and that their testimony should be believed *because* it

was true (John 20:30-31; 21:24).

Indeed, they wrote that Jesus Himself presented His miracles in support of His claims to be both the prophesied Messiah and God incarnate. In Mark 2:8-11, when He healed the paralytic, He did it so “that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins”—a clear claim to being God. In John 10:33, when the Jews accused Jesus of blaspheming because as supposedly only a man He was yet claiming to be God, what was Jesus’ response? “Do not believe me unless I do what my Father does. But if I do it, even though you do not believe me, believe the miracles, that you may know and understand that the Father is in me, and I in the Father” (John 10:37-38)—another claim to deity. When John the Baptist was in jail and apparently had doubts as to whether Jesus was the Messiah, what did Jesus do? He told John’s disciples to go and report about the miracles that He did, which were in fulfillment of specific messianic prophecy (Matthew 11:2-5). Many other examples could be added.

The truth is that the teachings and miracles of Jesus, as any independent reading of the Gospels will prove, are so inexorably bound together that if one removes the miracles one must discard the teachings and vice versa. It is logically impossible to have any other Jesus than the biblical one. It is precisely the biblical Jesus—His deeds and teachings—who has such abundant eyewitness testimony, as any reading of the Gospels and Acts proves.

(to be continued)

Notes:

1. William M. Ramsay, *The Bearing of Recent Discovery on the Trustworthiness of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1959), p. 81; cf. William F. Ramsay, *Luke the Physician*, 177-179, 222 as given in F. F. Bruce, *The New Testament Documents: Are They Reliable?*, pp. 90-91.
2. A. N. Sherwin-White, *Roman Society and Roman Law in the New Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965) from Norman L. Geisler, *Christian Apologetics*, p. 326.
3. Gary R. Habermas, *Ancient Evidence for the Life of Jesus: Historical Records of His Death and Resurrection* (New York: Nelson, 1984), p. 66.
4. Philip Schaff, Henry Wace, eds., *A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, 2nd series, vol. 1, Eusebius: Church History, Book 3, Chapter 39, “The Writings of Papias” (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1976), pp. 172-173, emphasis added.
5. Gary R. Habermas, *Ancient Evidence for the Life of Jesus*, pp. 66, 177.
6. *Ibid.*, pp. 112-115.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 112.
8. *Ibid.*, pp. 112-113.
9. See our chapter on archeology in *Ready With An Answer* and F. F. Bruce, “Are the New Testament Documents Still Reliable?”, *Christianity Today* (October 28, 1978), pp. 28-33; F. F. Bruce, *The New Testament Documents: Are They Reliable?*, chs. 7-8; Sir William Ramsay, *The Bearing of Recent Discoveries on the Trustworthiness of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1979); C. A. Wilson, *Rocks, Relics and Biblical Reliability* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1977), ch. 2, *New Light on New Testament Letters and New Light on the Gospels* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1975); Edwin Yamauchi, *The Stones and the Scriptures*, Section II (New York: Lippincott, 1972).
10. C. A. Wilson, *Rocks, Relics and Biblical Reliability* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1977), p. 120.
11. See any complete concordance listing under “witness,” “eyewitness,” etc.

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