

Historical Reliability of the Bible

This is the text of a talk given by Michael Actis-Grande on Nov. 17, 2009 as part of the *Questioning Christianity* seminar and discussion sponsored by DiscipleMakers, Penn State University

Introduction

Hi, my name is Mike Actis-Grande and I'm going to talk about the historical reliability of the Bible, for time's sake I am focusing solely on the New Testament. I'll be throwing at a lot of facts and some numbers that will make me sound kind of like a know-it-all so I just wanted to say before I start that I do have doubts about whether the things in the Bible really happened. I wake up some mornings and ask, "Am I really going to put my faith in what this old book says?" But the more I study these topics in college and own my own I always come to the same conclusion: that there is historical evidence to back up my faith.

So, how does a historian determine if an ancient document is accurate? There are several ways to approach this but I am going to go through 2 tests set up by military historian C. Sanders: the bibliographic test and the internal evidence test. There are other tests and topics I can talk about here but for time's sake I am only going through these two.

The Bibliographic Test

The Bibliographic Test examines the textual transmission of an ancient text. We do not have the original manuscript of any book of the New Testament, so historians must be careful in assessing how close to the original text are our manuscript copies. In other words, when we pick up a New Testament today, are we reading the same words that the original authors wrote down?

Textual critics look for several things to do their job. The number of manuscripts (a larger number is always better), and their date; the earlier, the better. The New Testament passes this test better than any other body of ancient literature. We have roughly 5,700 Greek New Testament manuscripts with the earliest fragment dating to about 125 AD and large portions of the gospels found as early as 200 AD.

In addition to the Greek manuscripts, if you count other fairly early manuscripts written in Latin, Coptic, Syriac, Armenian, etc. we have about 20,000 manuscripts. Even without any of these manuscripts, Dr. Bruce Metzger, the world's top New Testament manuscript expert from Princeton, states that we could still reproduce the texts of the New Testament from the quotations found in the early church fathers.

To compare these numbers to other ancient works is just embarrassing. The next best is the Iliad with about 640 manuscripts, and the earliest fragments come from the 3rd century A.D., that's a gap of almost 1,000 years! The history of Thucydides written in the 5th century BC is available from only 8 manuscripts and they don't exist until 900 AD, 1300 years after! Aristotle wrote his poetics in 343 BC but we don't find a manuscript until 1400 years later and yet the information in these works is rarely doubted.

Dr. Craig Blomberg of the Denver Theological Seminary goes as far to say that the Greek New Testament is 97-99% accurate.

Internal Evidence Test

So even if the New Testament passes the Bibliographic test, that only proves that we have what was originally recorded. In order to pass the Internal Evidence Test a document must be shown to be credible and truthful. So this centers around a few questions, Were the Gospels written close enough to Jesus' lifetime to be accurate? Were the first Christians even interested in recording history?

The closer an ancient document is to the events it records, the more accurate it is. Conservative scholars date the Gospels of Mark, Matthew, and Luke sometime in the 60s and John in the 90s, liberal scholars put Mark in the 70s, Matthew and Luke in the 80s and John in the 90s. Either way, all the gospels were written in the first century and are within two generations of the death of Jesus.

Let's compare this with other the biographies of other religious leaders and once again they pale in comparison to the Gospels.

Buddha lived in the sixth century B.C. and we have no written biography until the 1st century A.D. Muhammad died in 632 A.D. and we lack a biography until 767 A.D. But with Jesus, we have a biography written as early as 65 A.D. (or 70ish depending on who ask); that's a gap of only about 37 years.

But were the people who wrote the Gospels even in a position to know about Jesus?

Traditionally, the Gospels are written by Matthew and John, apostles of Jesus, Mark a companion of Peter the apostle, and Luke, who carefully interviewed eyewitnesses and looked at other written sources to make his gospel.

With the exception of John, these traditional claims about the writers are very modest and are not likely to have been made up. Mark and Luke were not apostles and may not have even known Jesus. Matthew is an apostle, but his status as a former tax collector, an unpopular profession, makes him the worst person next to Judas who you would want as a reliable author. And these claims were unchallenged for centuries after the gospels were written; there was just never doubt about who wrote them. Some modern scholars have said that it was only disciples of these four men who wrote the gospels but that still puts us only two people away from eyewitnesses.

So they were early and likely connected to eyewitnesses but did the authors care about recording actual history? Some scholars say no because they think the disciples believed in the imminent return of Jesus, they didn't care about preserving traditions about Jesus carefully.

But let's let the authors speak for themselves, Luke's prologue says this: "Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile a narrative of the things that have been accomplished among us, just as those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word have delivered them to us, it seemed good to me also, having followed all things closely for some time past, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, that you may have certainty concerning the things you have been taught."

Luke makes it clear that others had tried to write about Jesus but these weren't satisfactory to him, he wanted to make sure he spoke to people who saw the events for themselves. The literary nature of the prologue is best compared to other ancient histories like Thucydides and Herodotus. A. E. Harvey of Oxford University says, "the fact that [he] wrote such a preface at all [shows] he had at his disposal many of the techniques and literary conventions of a professional Greek historian".

The other Gospel writers lack this prologue but the very similar content and style of them makes it clear that they too held the same concern for history that Luke had.

And it's not just in the prologue where we see the Gospel writers' commitment to historical fact, because their religious beliefs were centered on the belief that Jesus really lived, died, and resurrected. They go out of their way to record what happened accurately even when it would portray seemingly embarrassing and contradictory material. Here are a few examples:

- The inability of the apostles to understand Jesus on a regular basis
- Their flight after Jesus' arrest
- Peter's denial of Jesus three times
- Jesus' failure to work miracles at Nazareth; his despair on the cross
- Apostles died for Christ

Conclusion

If we applied the same unfair requirements that liberal scholars put on the New Testament to other ancient works, then we would have to conclude that we can know almost nothing about the ancient world. I think it is time to start treating the New Testament as a legitimate source on the life of Christ and his apostles.