*The Historical Reliability of the Life and Work of Jesus*

"*The story of Christ's life is exaggerated*."

"*The Bible's account of Christ's life was written long after the actual events occurred; it is full of folklore and myths*."

These sentiments are common among self-proclaimed Bible critics. However, such criticism has little ground to stand on. Let’s consider the reliability and accuracy of the Bible from three angles: (1) the manuscripts, (2) the eyewitness accounts, and (3) archeology.

*Manuscripts*

Historical scholarship has shown us that the New Testament is the most accurate and trustworthy historical document of its period. There were hundreds and thousands of meticulous, hand-written copies made available. The quantity of New Testament manuscripts is unparalleled in ancient literature. There are over 5,000 Greek manuscripts, 8,000 Latin manuscripts, and another 1,000 manuscripts in other languages (Syriac, Coptic, etc.). In addition to this extraordinary number, there are tens of thousands of citations of New Testament passages by the church fathers in the first centuries A.D. In contrast, the typical number of existing manuscript copies for any of the works of the Greek and Latin authors, such as Plato, Aristotle, Caesar, or Tacitus, ranges from one to 20. Also, no variant readings are significant enough to call into question any of the writings of the New Testament. The New Testament can be regarded as 99.5 percent pure, and the correct readings for the remaining 0.5 percent can often be ascertained with a fair degree of probability by the practice of textual criticism.

The time span of the New Testament manuscripts is exceptional. The manuscripts on papyrus came from the second and third centuries A.D. The John Rylands Fragment (P52) of the Gospel of John is dated at A.D. 117-138, only a few decades after the Gospel was written. The Bodmer Papyri are dated from A.D. 175-225, and the Chester Beatty Papyri date from about A.D. 250. The time span for most of the New Testament is less than 200 years (and some are within 100 years) from the date of authorship to the date of our earliest manuscripts. This sharply contrasts with the average gap of over 1,000 years between the composition and the earliest copy of the writings of other ancient authors.

*Eyewitness Accounts*

But let’s go a step further. Can we be assured that the main contents of the New Testament, concerning the life and work of Jesus Christ, are accurate? The story of Jesus' life is marvelous. Unfortunately to some people it is too marvelous. God becoming a man? This man working miracles? The blind receive sight? The sick are healed? The dead are raised? Crucified and resurrected? Impossible! Unbelievable! Surely the record of Jesus' work has compelled many critics to assert that the accounts in the Gospels have been exaggerated or falsified.

The critics, however, have neglected the obvious. The Gospels, which record the bulk of Jesus' life, were written by eyewitnesses or were taken from first-hand information. These eyewitnesses were not far removed in time from the events. Nor did they view the events of Jesus' life in secrecy. They were eyewitnesses among other eyewitnesses. This is a very important fact. It illustrates God's wisdom, because He preserved accuracy and integrity through the record of eyewitnesses.

The independent eyewitness accounts in the New Testament of the life, death, and resurrection of Christ were written by people who were intimately acquainted with Jesus Christ. Their gospels and epistles reveal their integrity and complete commitment to the truth, and they maintained their testimony even through persecution and martyrdom. Most of the New Testament was written between A.D. 47 and 70, and all of it was complete before the end of the first century. There simply was not enough time for myths about Christ to be created and propagated. And the multitudes of eyewitnesses who were alive when the New Testament books began to be circulated would have challenged blatant historical fabrications about the life of Christ.

Imagine all the doubt that would arise if the account of Jesus' work came from a spiritual prophet who received visions while alone in the desert. Or what if the account came from Jesus' words only. Everything He said would be called into question. There would be no one to corroborate his story. A person would need to conjure up quite a bit of faith to believe his account. Talk about blind faith.

Or what if the history of Christ's work was written by individuals living 100 years after the events. Anyone would have a difficult time staking their faith upon possible myths.

But the account of Jesus’ life and work was compiled through eyewitnesses of historical events and through first-hand information. The writers emphasized the fact that they were eyewitnesses to the life of Christ, thereby insuring and assuring its accuracy.

“For we did not follow cleverly devised tales when we made know to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of His majesty." (2 Peter 1:16) "We were witnesses of these things as you yourselves know." (Acts 2:22)

Why was it important that eyewitnesses recorded the life and work of Jesus? The integrity of the record was preserved. How so? First, there were other disciples who were eyewitnesses to the events. Should the Biblical writers change the facts, the other eyewitnesses would immediately protest. The very fact that the early church accepted the record of Jesus' work as it was passed down indicates the other eyewitnesses must have corroborated the record. Eyewitness accounts stood to strengthen the faith of the believers.

But even more, eyewitness accounts had the power to shut the mouth of those who were hoping to stamp out early Christianity. The Biblical writers did not stand upon their own trustworthiness. In effect, the eyewitnesses were saying: “You were all there. You all saw what happened. Please speak out if our record is incorrect.” Had the writers twisted the facts, the opposition could have easily confirmed to everyone that the writers lied. But history shows us no such opposition existed. The early critics could not denounce that which many people saw with their own eyes.

*Archeology*

The Old and New Testaments make abundant references to nations, kings, battles, cities, mountains, rivers, buildings, treaties, customs, economics, politics, dates, etc. Because the historical narratives of the Bible are so specific, many of its details are open to archaeological investigation. While we cannot say that archaeology proves the authority of the Bible, it is fair to say that archaeological evidence has provided external confirmation of hundreds of biblical statements. Higher criticism in the 19th century made many damaging claims that would completely overthrow the integrity of the Bible, but the explosion of archaeological knowledge in the 20th century reversed almost all of these claims. Noted archaeologists such as William F. Albright, Nelson Glueck, and G. Ernest Wright developed a great respect for the historical accuracy of the Scriptures as a result of their work.

*Conclusion*

To accuse the Bible of containing distortions or exaggerations or mythical events is simply unfair, and it indicates the critic has not done his/her research. The Bible is the most accurate historical document of its era, the contents of Christ's life are established upon eyewitnesses, and history itself, archeology only confirm, not disavows, the record.

There is no reason to believe that accounts of Jesus' life are exaggerated or distorted. They are not a compilation of folklore and myth. Therefore, we can trust the records concerning the person and work of Jesus Christ as they have been handed down to us more than any other ancient records. Our faith as Christians is not based upon cleverly devised tales, but upon eyewitness testimony and historical artifacts. Our faith is based upon the unshakable facts recorded in the most reliable historical document ever!

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