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## Q&A: The Reliability and Inspiration of the Bible

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# The Reliability and Inspiration of the Bible:

**Question:** Are the Gospels historical narratives?

**Answer:** Perhaps the predominant view today in New Testament studies is that the Gospels are basically Roman biographies. Scholars think, at the very least, that the Gospels are good enough sources that we may answer the key questions about Jesus' life.

**Question:** How do we know the disciples didn't get real sloppy with their accounts, thereby preserving little or nothing of what Jesus said and meant?

**Answer:** We can test what they reported against all the data we have on Jesus in order to see whether it correctly reports a consistent picture of what Jesus was saying. This test or "criterion" is called coherence, whereby it is asked how does this particular teaching compare with other things Jesus said about this topic? Or overall, does this fit our image of Jesus? On factual issues like the death and resurrection of Jesus, we can also compare the Gospel teachings to the early creedal reports in the epistles, such as 1 Corinthians 15:3ff. Actually, this is so crucial today that most scholars go first to these very early creeds in the epistles and Acts even before they even look at the Gospels. So we want to know the best explanation for the sources we have and we have enough data to do this. For a book that answers this question from several perspectives, see Paul Barnett, *Jesus and the Logic of History* (Eerdmans).

**Question:** Would God have allowed only the most crucial teachings to be preserved? I mean, would the Holy Spirit also allow lesser teachings to be preserved?

**Answer:** Remember that if the resurrection occurred, Jesus is now in the best position to know that Scripture is inspired. Jesus taught that it was inspired. Perhaps the key is that what is recorded is truthful. Now look at Jesus' teachings. We have both central, major doctrines as well as many smaller issues, like comments on life in general, worry, paying taxes, and so on.

**Question:** Is the New Testament (particularly the Gospels) part of the "inspired Word of God" that Christians should look to as God's final authority on all things?

**Answer:** Yes, the Bible is inspired in the sense that what the Holy Spirit gave us what God wanted us to have. It is written by those who were in a position to know the nature of the earliest teachings of Jesus, as well as practices in the early church.

**Question:** What are some of the works that you would recommend for showing that Jesus existed in history, and that the New Testament wasn't just a bunch of forgeries written over a century after the disciples and apostles? A friend of mine is always asking me about several books from pretty radical places that denies these sorts of things.

**Answer:** I'd recommend some of the following:

- Barnett, Paul, *Is the New Testament Reliable?* (InterVarsity, 1986)
- Bock, Darrell. *Can I Trust the Bible?* (Booklet: Order from RZIM, 1-800-448-6766)
- Blomberg, Craig, *The Historical Reliability of the Gospels* (InterVarsity, 1987)
- Gary Habermas, *The Historical Jesus* (College Press, 1996)

**Question:** On many websites that go after Christianity, it is often said that Christianity is based on other older religions and there are many parallels. Could you make a comment? Could you also recommend some good general books that counter these claims about the Gospels and the rest of the New Testament?

**Answer:** There are many technical works that explode the thesis that Christianity borrowed its central teachings from other ancient religions. Actually, this is not even a very popular view among critical scholars. For example, in spite of many comments to the contrary from popular (i.e., non-specialist) critics of Christianity, pre-Christian religious sources do not teach a crucified Savior who rose from the dead, appeared to his followers, and taught them to go into the world preaching and teaching a similar Gospel.

For a few more general sources, see the following:

- Anderson, JND. *Christianity and World Religions: The Challenge of Pluralism* (InterVarsity Press, 1984).
- Nash, Ronald. *Christianity and the Hellenistic World* (Zondervan Publishing House/Probe Ministries, 1984).
- Habermas, Gary. *The Historical Jesus: Ancient Evidence for the Life of Christ* (College Press, 1996).

**Question:** Is there solid evidence that the Gospels were written fairly closely to the life of Jesus? I was reading a writing by someone who admitted that, while he was not a New Testament scholar, the Gospel of Mark should still be placed at about 90AD. Wasn't there a fragment from John's Gospel that is not a whole lot later than this? Who are some of the scholars who agree with you? Please comment.

**Answer:** Most scholars (even critics) place Mark at about 40 years after Jesus (or about 65-75 AD). They often date Matthew and Luke at about 50-55 years after Jesus (about 80 -85 AD). John is usually dated about 95AD. Virtually nobody places Mark at 90 AD. You'd have to look very hard to find even a few respected scholars who do this. To my knowledge, no one questions that the fragment from John that you mention. It is dated perhaps 125AD and is very valuable, since it only dates about 30-35 years after the Gospel was written. Craig Blomberg presents material with which the majority of NT critics agree. If you read other texts like those by Ben Witherington, NT Wright, R. Brown, John Drane, etc., I think you'll read the same or similar things. So the Gospels are written close enough to Jesus' time to be very valuable sources regarding his life.

**Question:** What archeological evidence is there for the Bible being historically true? Please recommend a good article that presents a good overview of this issue. Thanks.

**Answer:** I'd recommend a recent article written by ancient historian Paul Maier, professor of ancient history at Western Michigan University. It is: "Archaeology--Biblical Ally or Adversary?" in the Christian Research Journal, Vol 27 (2004), pp. 12-21. Maier summarizes the current discussion.

**Question:** Have you written anything concerning the reliability of the New Testament?

**Answer:** I published a recent article, called "Recent Perspectives on the Reliability of the Gospels," and it was published by the Christian Research Journal Vol. 28, 2005. You could try calling (949) 858-6100 to ask about a copy.

**Question:** If you don't mind, how early is the Gospel of John known in the church? Could you give me a few examples? How about the earlier Gospels?

**Answer:** Obviously, for any historical work, the earlier the evidence, the better, since it is therefore closer to the original. Scholars think that they may be able to find allusions to John as early as Christian writings from 97 to 110 AD, namely Clement, Ignatius, and Polycarp. This is incredible, because the Gospel of John was probably only written about 95 AD. Further, Papias, writing about 125 AD, is said to have known John, hearing him speak. A small copy of papyrus with just a few verses from John, known as the Rylands Papyri, dates from about 125 AD. Needless to say, even though there is very little text, this is exceptionally early attestation to this Gospel writing. Plus, various sayings of Jesus in the first three (Synoptic) Gospels are definitely preserved in these very early writers-- Clement (ca 97 AD), Ignatius (ca 107 AD), & Polycarp (ca 110 AD). This is exceptionally early evidence when we are discussing ancient history.

**Question:** Concerning Scripture, what sort of books do you recommend concerning general overviews of reliability, inspiration, and books that deal with "problem passages"?

**Answer:** Here's a book or two in each category:

- Inspiration: Robert Lightner, *The Saviour & the Scriptures* (Presbyterian & Reformed, 1966).
- Overall reliability: Craig Blomberg, *The Historical Reliability of the Gospels* (InterVarsity, 1987); Paul Barnett, *Is the New Testament Reliable?* (InterVarsity, 1986).
- Problem passages: Norman Geisler & Thomas Howe, *When Critics Ask: A Popular Handbook of Bible Difficulties* (Victor, 1992); Gleason Archer, *Encyclopedia of Bible Difficulties* (Zondervan, 1982).

**Question:** Who finished the Pentateuch? After Moses died someone had to complete the writing. But Moses is the author because he wrote most of it. Right?

**Answer:** Sure, someone finished the book of Deuteronomy. Why should that be a problem? In Scripture, writers often speak for their teachers. The Gospels report Jesus' words after his death. According to the early second century writer Papias, the second Gospel is Mark's record of Peter's teachings. Another example is Luke writing from his unique relationship with Paul. Before that, Luke himself tells us that he was writing about the accounts passed down by the original eyewitnesses (Lk. 1:1-4). Even the traditional view of inspiration allows for the students of the prophets and apostles to speak on their teachers' behalf.

**Question:** You have said that the best way to argue for the inspiration of Scripture is to build on Jesus' teachings. Briefly, what would that look like? Where can I find one of your treatments of this subject?

**Answer:** I address this subject in: "Jesus and the Inspiration of Scripture" Areopagus Journal, Vol. 2 (January, 2002), pp. 11-16. See also the last question in the next section on the Canon.

**Question:** I have heard that the Bible measures up very well in historical accuracy when compared with other documents from a similar time period. Could you please give me some examples of this?

**Answer:** What is usually meant is that the New Testament has far more manuscript evidence from a far earlier period than other classical works. There are just under 6000 NT manuscripts, with copies of most of the NT dating from just 100 years or so after its writing. Classical sources almost always have less than 20 copies each and usually date from 700-1400 years after the composition of the work. In this regard, the classics are not as well attested. While this doesn't guarantee truthfulness, it means that it is much easier to reconstruct the New Testament text. Regarding genre, the Gospels are usually taken today to be examples of Roman biographies.

**Question:** Do you really believe all the Old Testament stories really happened? Or do you think that these tales were told just to teach morality?

**Answer:** I accept the historicity of the biblical stories when they are meant to be taken literally. For example, Jesus' parables are not meant to be taken in that manner. Poetical texts regularly use all sorts of literary devices. Good scholarship attempts to sort it all out. But this doesn't mean that historical texts cannot have a moral, too. I'd say that most of the biblical texts present moral or didactic themes, whether or not they are meant to be taken literally.

**Question:** What texts support the notion that Paul met at a very early date with the other key apostles, in order to verify his Gospel message?

**Answer:** Paul made at least two trips to Jerusalem to check out the Gospel, as reported in Galatians 1:18-20 and 2:1-10. The first time, he met with Peter and James, the brother of Jesus. On the second occasion, Peter, James, and John were all present. Depending on what we do with Acts 15 (some say it is the same trip as Galatians 2, while others disagree), Paul may have made at least three trips to Jerusalem to confirm his preaching of the Gospel. And as he says in Galatians 1:20, he was not lying about this.