

CHAPTER 4: Is the Bible True? (part 2)

Discovering Archaeological Evidence that Confirms the Bible is Historically Reliable

Reference: *Surprised by Faith*, pages 37-54 (fourth edition); pages 44-57 (third edition)

Getting Focused

- Are there many contradictions in the Bible?
- How can I know that people, places and events recorded 2,000 years ago are really true?
- What difference does it make whether the New Testament is history or not?

The evidence we considered in chapter 3 gave us the confidence to know that the New Testament we use today is essentially the same as when eyewitnesses wrote it shortly after the life and ministry of Jesus Christ. They were transmitted accurately for 2,000 years. But this evidence doesn't guarantee that the people, places and events recorded there are also historically true. To determine this, we will use an independent source of scientific evidence. The many recent discoveries of archaeology give abundant evidence and assurance that today's New Testament records are historically reliable.

Making the Discovery

1. To be _____ reliable, a writing must be factual: containing information about real people, real places, and actual events. Historically reliable writings are often written by eyewitnesses of the events.
2. Writings that are _____, on the other hand, are exaggerated or fictional accounts of individuals, places or events. Legends are often written by people who lived at least 150 years after the events they wrote about.
3. _____ evidence, like archaeological discoveries, supports the historical reliability of the Bible. Archaeology has consistently affirmed the credibility of the New Testament as history.

New Testament _____ are real. For example, Jesus' brother James, Pontius Pilate and Caiaphas.

New Testament _____ are real. For example, the Capernaum synagogue, Peter's home, and the Pool of Siloam.

New Testament _____ are described correctly. For example, the Roman census and Jesus' crucifixion.

4. The discovery of early _____ of the New Testament supports its historical reliability.

Legends have never been shown to originate and to be accepted as historically true within the same generation as the actual events. Since the New Testament Gospels have been shown to be eyewitness accounts, they cannot be legends. This is especially true when the records are tested with people living in the same area as the people and events themselves.

...[F]or these stories to be legends, the rate of legendary accumulation would have to be "unbelievable"; more generations are needed... [E]ven the span of two generations is too short to allow legendary tendencies to wipe out the hard core of historical fact (A.N. Sherwin-White, *Roman Society and Roman Law in the New Testament*, p. 190).

5. The testimony of _____ affirms the historical accuracy of the New Testament.



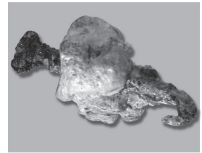
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DISCOVERY #4

"Ah-ha!" Archaeological discoveries have confirmed that the New Testament writings are historically reliable!

Application and Reflection

1. The Bible records the testimony of eyewitnesses who confirmed that Jesus, while eternal God, was also a real man of history.

What was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the Word of Life—and the life was manifested, and we have seen and testify and proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and was manifested to us... (1 John 1:1-2).

2. The Bible records the names of people, places and events that have all been confirmed by archaeological discoveries as historical.

Now in the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea... in the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas... (Luke 3:1-2).

[Jesus] said to him, “Go, wash in the pool of Siloam...” (John 9:7).

“Unless I see in His hands the imprint of the nails...and put my hand into His side, I will not believe” (John 20:25b).

What if you were to encounter someone from another religion who claimed that their religious book has even greater integrity and historical reliability than the New Testament? What are the facts? (The discussion below will help you to respond appropriately.)

Eastern religions like Hinduism and Buddhism do not put the same emphasis on textual studies that we do in the West. Truth for them is not measured so much by a historically reliable record (or person) as it is in religious authority or experience. They feel that if it “works” to create a spiritual experience or if it has a long-standing tradition, then it is valid. The history of their sacred books as measured by early, numerous and accurate texts is not important. As a result, they are not concerned by having few texts to work with if asked to document authorship, integrity or historical reliability.

On the other hand, Muslims claim that their Qur’an has more integrity and is more reliable than the New Testament. They point out that they have only one version of their holy book and everyone’s copy is identical to what God dictated to Muhammad in the seventh century A.D.

But that is not the complete story. They either don’t know or don’t tell that within twenty years of Muhammad’s death the Qur’an had suffered from such a large collection of variants that it necessitated the Orthmanic revision. “In fact, there are still seven ways to read the text (vocalization and punctuation), all based on Orthman’s recension” (Norman L. Geisler and William E. Nix, *A General Introduction to the Bible* [Moody Press, 1986], p.475). There is also an intolerance among Muslims toward scholarly textual criticism. The Qur’an must not be subjected to any form of criticism—any questioning of it is considered heresy (Stephen Neill, *Christian Faith & Other Faiths* [InterVarsity Press, 1984], pp.57-90). Until recently, all early variant Qur’an texts had been lost or intentionally destroyed so that there was no way to determine how the current Qur’an compares to the original text (which has never been found).

A large cache of early manuscripts has recently been found but not yet published. Early indications are that, as would be expected, there are textual variations. If this is true, then the current Qur’an is not the only version (as Muslims allege) and it must be subjected to the same textual studies as the New Testament or any other ancient document. Until that is done, there is no way to determine its integrity and historical reliability based on textual and external evidence.

Finally, the Mormons claim that their holy book, written by Joseph Smith, the Book of Mormon, has integrity and is reliable. They point out that this is a record of Jesus when he visited the Americas. There are similarities to the New Testament Gospels, for example, the names of people, cities, and geographic features like rivers and mountains. But unlike the biblical Gospels, when you try to find any external evidence for them in the archaeology and history of the Americas—they are nowhere to be found! Rather than being supported by the external evidence—the Book of Mormon is refuted by it. It is more consistent with the evidence to classify this book as mythology.

No matter which religions or religious literature you compare, the New Testament emerges as unique in its depth of evidence for integrity and historical reliability.

Do you think the evidence presented in the last two chapters would help the unbelieving people you know to be more open to the Christian faith? If so, what can you do to help them discover it?

3. **The Bible says** that Jesus' word (preserved as historically reliable in the Bible) is the truth and standard for each person's accountability before God.

“He who rejects Me, and does not receive My sayings, has one who judges him; the word I spoke is what will judge him at the last day” (John 12:48).

Looking Ahead

Why is it so important for the argument of God's existence that the New Testament is a trustworthy, first-century, historical record? Because that is the essential condition for testing the claim that Jesus is God. Some people claim that Jesus was simply a great moral teacher or a secondary deity. The evidence considered in the next chapter will help you decide whether Jesus is God as Christians claim.

Answers to “Fill in the Blanks”: 1. historically; 2. legends; 3. External, people, places, events; (Photos, clockwise from top left: Pontius Pilate inscription, Joseph Caiaphas bone box, crucifixion victim, James bone box); 4. manuscripts ; 5. scholars