

## Why Trust the Bible?

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### Reasons to trust the Bible

- 1) Arguing from the truth of Christianity – e.g. from the resurrection
- 2) Arguing for the general reliability independently – the subject of today's talk

NB 1 still applies even in the absence of arguments for 2!

### Old Testament

Focus of the Christian faith is on the events of the New Testament, the person and ministry of Jesus, so we will focus mainly on that, but there is a lot to be said for the historical works of the Old Testament

- ❖ Basic framework of latter parts no longer in doubt (debate mostly about miracles, and Torah).
- ❖ External and archaeological corroboration of most non-Israelite leaders, many Israelite Kings, multiple events (including dating), Babylonian exile, etc.
- ❖ "In the fifth year of King Rehoboam, Shishak king of Egypt came up against Jerusalem..." 1 Kings 14:25
  - Multiple Shoshenqs of Egypt, but only one (Shoshenq I) invaded Palestine – precisely fits the chronology of Rehoboam
- ❖ "This same Hezekiah closed the upper outlet of the waters of Gihon and directed them down to the west side of the city of David." 2 Chronicles 32:30
  - Hezekiah's Tunnel now found

### Exodus

Often thought to have been invented with tabernacle, etc., in 7th century BC, despite ostensibly happening c. 13<sup>th</sup> century.

But all the facts – some of which could not have been known beyond e.g. 11<sup>th</sup> century or outside of Egypt, point towards a 13<sup>th</sup> century origin of the story:

- ❖ Cosmopolitan nature of Ramesses II's tenure (less so in other periods)
- ❖ Ramesside construction and inhabitation of Pi-Ramesses (abandoned in 1130 with virtually no remains or mentions)
- ❖ Egyptian military presence in northern Sinai (at this period in particular)
- ❖ Mention of Israel in Canaan only just after this time (on the Merenptah stela in c. 1209)
- ❖ Format of covenant (fits precisely this period)
- ❖ Tabernacle structure (fits precisely this period, fits *Egyptian* structures in particular, and most closely the war-tent of Rameses II himself)
- ❖ Significant demographic changes in eastern Canaan around this time (enormous increase in population, new settlements, with relevant changes in pottery style and other Jewish features – e.g. lack of pig bones)

*Further reading:* Kenneth Kitchen – The Reliability of the Old Testament (advanced)

## **New Testament**

Focusing primarily on the Gospels and Acts, since they contain the most narrative information, but other works in the New Testament still contain detail of historical interest.

Four levels of New Testament accuracy:

- ❖ The world (topography, landmarks, religion, politics)
- ❖ The characters (major and minor)
- ❖ General outline of events (known from secular history alone)
- ❖ The detail of the events

Key question: *if the New Testament accounts were invented without basis in fact, eyewitness testimony or reliable oral tradition, what would we expect?*

*Especially* bearing that the Gospels were written outside Palestine, and most scholars suggest they were written after 70 AD – in which year Jerusalem was sieged, the Temple and other landmarks burnt and destroyed, and the religious and political context changed completely (e.g. the disappearance of Sadducees).

### **The world**

#### Topography, landmarks – examples from Joh

Many places in John previously thought to be symbolic and fabricated – archaeology has revolutionised this view.

*Pool of Bethesda* – previously thought to be a symbol ('House of Mercy', with 5 porticoes representing Torah), now found in Jerusalem with (unusually) 5 porticoes.

*Capernaum* – 1<sup>st</sup> century synagogue found in Capernaum, near the harbour. Also evidence of Roman remains, fishing trade, and Peter's house.

*Nazareth* – some Jesus mythicists suggest it never existed in the 1<sup>st</sup> century. We now have 1<sup>st</sup> century remains.

*Golgotha* – John records it as being outside the city, with a garden and a new tomb. But the Church of the Holy Sepulchre is inside the city walls. Why? Because in 40s AD Agrippa I built new walls bringing the site into the city – a later writer would have therefore said the site was outside the city. The old walls have now been found. Excavations at the site show remains of a quarry with chiselling and hewing (i.e. a likely site for new tombs), with a bare rocky area appropriately called 'Golgotha' ('skull'), and 1<sup>st</sup> century tombs! The site is also now known to be near what Josephus called the 'Garden Gate'.

#### Religion and politics

*Burial* – some scholars used to suggest that criminals in Roman Empire (including in Judea) would not be properly buried. But literary evidence now shows decisively that Jews buried even crucifixion victims, and that the Romans likely allowed this. We have archaeological remains of a standard burial of a crucifixion victim (Yehohanan, dated to 1<sup>st</sup> century AD).

*King Herod* – thought to be odd that King Herod was so paranoid about a rival claim to be King that he murdered a town of babies. But evidence from Josephus shows that he killed two of his own sons for suspected treason.

*Roman citizenship* – Acts records a Roman tribune making a point of how much his citizenship cost. This fits the time of Acts 22, late 50s AD, before which Claudius' reign (41-54 AD) saw a dramatic drop in the cost of Roman citizenship

*Sadducees* – Mark records Sadducees (who say that there is no resurrection) asking Jesus a trick question about the resurrection. Instead of referring to the abundant detail on resurrection in other Jewish sources, Jesus' response from the Torah fits the independently known datum that Sadducees only took Torah to be authoritative.

*Herod Antipas' marriage* – Herodian Dynasty is extremely complex – Herod the Great had many sons called Herod, including 2 called Philip; multiple Herodiases; intergenerational marriage; remarriages. Both Herod Archelaus and Herod Antipas had illicit marriages, and both married their brother's wives. But only Antipas had an *illicit marriage to his brother's wife* (since his brother was still alive). Mark says that 'Herod' killed John the Baptist for criticising his marriage to his brother's wife – and since the action is in Galilee it is likely that Antipas is in mind. So Mark accurately catches an incidental detail of this complex family.

## **The characters**

### Major

Jesus, John the Baptist, the Herodian family, Caiaphas the High Priest, Pontius Pilate and James the brother of Jesus are all known to Josephus.

Jesus' existence is attested by at least 13 different ancient sources, including at least 6 non-Christian sources: Josephus, Pliny the Younger, Suetonius, Tacitus, Mara bar Serapion. Jesus' existence is not doubted by any credible ancient historians.

### Minor

Jewish names in Palestine around the time of Jesus differed enormously from Jewish names in the Diaspora. We would not expect the Gospels to accurately reflect the popularity of names in Palestine if they were invented – but they do, quite strikingly. They also use epithets exactly when we would expect them (i.e. in popular names when there is a risk of ambiguity), and exactly the kinds of epithet we know were used at the time.

## **The general outline**

We know the following (and more) entirely from non-Christian sources:

- ❖ Jesus was known as a moral teacher and a wise man
- ❖ He was widely believed to be a miracle worker
- ❖ He gained a large following
- ❖ He was condemned to death by crucifixion under the authority of Pontius Pilate at the suggestion of the Jewish chief priests during the Passover
- ❖ The movement stopped temporarily after his death
- ❖ It very quickly resumed
- ❖ His followers claimed he appeared to them alive
- ❖ The Christian movement grew rapidly in Judea and soon spread as far as Rome
- ❖ Christians were subjected to violent persecution within the first few decades
- ❖ They would meet on a fixed day to worship Jesus together
- ❖ They had a reputation for radical generosity and yet were reviled

## **The details**

### Multiple attestation

The New Testament contains at least 7 independent sources (Paul, Mark, 'Q', Matthew's unique material, Luke's unique material, James, John), and most of the key events of Jesus' life and the early church are attested independently by several sources.

### Embarrassment

Several key events and themes of the gospels would have been embarrassing or difficult to explain for the early Christians – they had a vested interest in not mentioning them – so their inclusion speaks to the historicity of those events as well as the integrity of the Gospel authors:

- ❖ The frequent thickheadedness of the male disciples
- ❖ The fleeing of the male disciples at the arrest of Jesus
- ❖ Peter's denial of Jesus; the crucifixion itself
- ❖ The honourable burial of Jesus by a member of the Jewish Sanhedrin, the council which had condemned Jesus to death
- ❖ Women as the discoverers of the empty tomb

### Undesigned coincidences

An undesigned coincidence is an instance where two or more sets of incidental details, usually (but not always) found in two separate sources, interlock in a satisfying way, but do so in a way that is subtle and unobtrusive and hence is unlikely to be the result of deliberate design.

- ❖ John 6 records Jesus asking Philip (an unusual member of the 12) where to get bread before the feeding of the 5,000; John 1 mentions that Philip is from Bethsaida; Luke 9 records that the feeding of the 5,000 was near Bethsaida
- ❖ Mark 6 records Jesus telling his disciples to get the crowds to sit down on the green grass; John 6 records that the event was near the time of Passover, the only time of year where grass is green in Galilee

### General carefulness

Colin Hemer identifies over 200 specific facts from the last 16 chapters of the book of Acts that have been confirmed by archaeological and historical research: details of local customs, ports, local trades, political figures, etc.

E.g., Acts correctly identifies the proper titles for numerous local/regional officials. Titles of local officials throughout the Roman Empire varied hugely and often changed from decade to decade.

### Restraint

- ❖ The Gospel authors avoided the temptation to speculate about Jesus' childhood and early years (contrast with the Apocryphal Gospels)
- ❖ No description of Jesus' physical appearance is ever given in the Gospels
- ❖ Jesus is never quoted as saying anything about circumcision, even though it would have been very useful for early church leaders to be able to attribute teaching about this topic to Jesus
- ❖ The resurrection itself is not narrated (contrast with the Gospel of Peter)
- ❖ No narrative (only mentions) of the resurrection appearances of Jesus to Peter and James, despite the prominence of these two in the early church