

## Apologetics Bible Study # 6, Is the New Testament reliable?

While in his mid-twenties, on the Sunset Strip in West Hollywood, Louis Lapidès met a group of Christians who were handing out Bibles to anyone who would take them. Louis told the Christians that as a Jew he had no interest in the Christian Bible. One of them replied that he should only read the Old Testament, and it would lead him to the Messiah who was Jesus the Christ. Louis then accepted the Bible.

He went home and began to read, starting with Genesis. The more Louis read, the more he realized that the Messianic prophecies of the Old Testament provide a detailed picture of Jesus of Nazareth. He came to Isaiah 53 and read:

Surely He has borne our griefs  
And carried our sorrows;  
Yet we esteemed Him stricken,  
Smitten by God, and afflicted.  
But He was wounded for our transgressions,  
He was bruised for our iniquities;  
The chastisement for our peace was upon Him,  
And by His stripes we are healed.  
All we like sheep have gone astray;  
We have turned, every one, to his own way;  
And the LORD has laid on Him the iniquity of us all.<sup>1</sup>

Louis saw that this was clearly a prophecy of Jesus of Nazareth. In desperation he contacted his step-mother and asked her to send him a Jewish Bible so he could read it instead. He then began to read the Jewish Bible and quickly concluded that it said exactly the same thing! Soon after, Louis converted to Christianity.<sup>2</sup>

Some years later Louis was asked if there was any possibility that these Messianic prophecies could refer to anyone else. In answer, he said,

The odds alone say it would be impossible for anyone to fulfill [all] the Old Testament prophecies. Yet Jesus—and only Jesus throughout all of history—managed to do it.<sup>3</sup>

The Apostle Peter made reference to Jesus having fulfilled the Messianic prophecies, in addition to describing the importance of the eyewitnesses of the glorified and risen Christ, when he said:

<sup>16</sup>For we did not follow cunningly devised fables when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but were eyewitnesses of His

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<sup>1</sup> Verses 4-6

<sup>2</sup> Lee Stroebel, *The Case for Christ* (Grand Rapids, MI.: Zondervan), 2016

<sup>3</sup> [www.jesus.org/is-jesus-god/old-testament-prophecies/did-jesus-accidentally-fulfill-the-old-testament-prophecies.html](http://www.jesus.org/is-jesus-god/old-testament-prophecies/did-jesus-accidentally-fulfill-the-old-testament-prophecies.html)

majesty. <sup>17</sup> For He received from God the Father honor and glory when such a voice came to Him from the Excellent Glory: “This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased.” <sup>18</sup> And we heard this voice which came from heaven when we were with Him on the holy mountain.

<sup>19</sup> And so we have the prophetic word confirmed, which you do well to heed as a light that shines in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts; <sup>20</sup> knowing this first, that no prophecy of Scripture is of any private interpretation, <sup>21</sup> for prophecy never came by the will of man, but holy men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit. (NKJV)<sup>4</sup>

That is, not only was Peter an eyewitness of the Lord in all His glory, but he, along with us, can now see clearly how Jesus fulfilled all the Messianic prophecies. Old Testament believers did not have that privilege. The fulfillment of the Messianic prophecies not only established Jesus as the Messiah, they also further established the prophets who issued those predictions as being genuine prophets of God.

Fulfillment of prophecy was one of the primary tests used to distinguish true prophets from false. Jeremiah said: “The prophet who prophecies peace will be recognized as one truly sent by the Lord only if his predictions come true.”<sup>5</sup>

This means that the fulfillment of prophecy demonstrated that the true prophets were such because they were speaking under the direction of God, the Holy Spirit.<sup>6</sup> That is, the prophets said and wrote what God the Holy Spirit inspired them to write. This is our all-important doctrine of the inspiration of Scripture. And if God directed the writing of Scripture, then Scripture, God’s word, will never be wrong. This is the equally important doctrine of the infallibility of Scripture. We stand firmly on these two doctrines.

Sadly, two generations ago or more it became fashionable for liberals and skeptics to argue that the New Testament documents are not reliable because they were written in the second and third centuries. This would mean that the New Testament documents are not the testimonies of eyewitnesses but rather are accounts, so say the liberals and skeptics, that were written down only after being passed on by word of mouth over several generations and over a hundred years or more and are, therefore, not trustworthy.

This view of the skeptics is not based on evidence, however. It is based on the underlying assumption that miracles don’t happen, and since our New Testament insists that Jesus rose from the dead, this view must have evolved over many years.

This radical view of Scripture has become the dominant view of numerous quasi-religious colleges and universities in our land as well as the view of many churches. The consequence of this position is that if we cannot trust the New Testament documents, then we cannot be sure that

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<sup>4</sup> II Peter, Chapter 1.

<sup>5</sup> Jeremiah 28:9. See also II Timothy 3:16.

<sup>6</sup> Peter here not only included a declaration of verbal inspiration, he also supplied an implied argument. The argument is this: it is only by means of God’s inspiration that the prophets could have accurately predicted the many features of the coming Messiah because only God knows the future.

Jesus rose from the dead. And if we cannot be sure that Jesus rose, then we cannot be sure that Christianity is true. The result of this view has been the destruction of the Christian faith for untold numbers of people. In addition, there are now large numbers of people in our land who do not believe that the Bible is true.

This skeptical philosophy was strictly followed by the Jesus Seminar which operated from 1985 to 2006. In the Jesus Seminar, 74 authorities were asked to vote on whether certain *sayings* of Jesus and certain events of the New Testament were historical or not. Among the assumptions of the seminar were the views that Jesus was born to two human parents, that there are no miracles and that Jesus did not rise from the dead.

Not surprisingly, the Seminar concluded that Jesus was a magnificent moral teacher but was not a supernatural Messiah. Critics of the Seminar, however, pointed out that its conclusions were merely the result of its beginning assumptions, not the product of any genuine scholarship. (As is often said, “garbage in, garbage out.”)

The liberals and skeptics who were part of this project should have heeded the admonition of C.S. Lewis when he said:

I am trying here to prevent anyone saying the really foolish thing that people often say about Him: "I'm ready to accept Jesus as a great moral teacher, but I don't accept His claim to be God." That is the one thing we must not say. A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic--on a level with the man who says he is a poached egg--or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God: or else a madman or something worse. You can shut Him up for a fool, you can spit at Him and kill Him as a demon; or you can fall at His feet and call Him Lord and God. But let us not come with any patronising nonsense about His being a great moral teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to.<sup>7</sup>

So Lewis pointed out the inconsistency of the position of the liberals and skeptics, but this does not, by itself, establish the view that the New Testament can be trusted.

How can we respond to those among us who do not believe that the New Testament is true? We can always quote Scripture, of course, but these individuals don't accept the Scriptures as being inspired or even as being reliable. Some of these skeptics will go so far as to say that we can't even be sure that a person called Jesus of Nazareth ever lived!

We begin with a fairly simple question, that being: Can we prove that a man from Judea, called Jesus of Nazareth, at around 33 AD, was put to death by means of crucifixion? In answer, we can point out that the Bible contains seven eyewitness sources who say this happened. The fact that these sources—Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, Peter, James, and Paul—are included in the Bible does not reduce their value as historical sources.

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<sup>7</sup> C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, (New York: Macmillan Publishing co. Inc. 1952), 56.

In addition to the Biblical sources, we can also point out that there are another five sources that are both non-Biblical and non-Christian that also attest to the historicity of the crucifixion.

Josephus, for example, said:

When Pilate, upon hearing him [Jesus] accused by men of the highest standing amongst us, had condemned him to be crucified . . . .<sup>8</sup>

This account by Jewish historian Josephus (37-100 AD) is especially noteworthy because he was a contemporary of a large number of people who had personal knowledge of the crucifixion. Josephus had access to these people. In addition, Josephus was commissioned by the Roman government to write the history of the Jews, so he would also have had access to all the official records surrounding the life and death of Jesus, including the accounts of Pontius Pilate. Accordingly, the above statement by Josephus must be recognized as having a very high level of credibility.

The Roman historian, Tacitus, in 115 A.D., said,

Nero fastened the guilt [of the burning of Rome] and inflicted the most exquisite tortures on a class hated for their abominations, called Christians by the populace. Christus, from whom the name had its origin, suffered the extreme penalty during the reign of Tiberius at the hands of one of our procurators, Pontius Pilate.<sup>9</sup>

Other clear references to the crucifixion of Jesus include statements by the Greek writer, Lucian of Samosata; a letter to his son written by Mara Bar-Serapian and the Jewish writings called the *Talmud*. Consequently, it is fair to say that the crucifixion of Jesus is one of the most clearly established facts of history. Even the atheist scholars admit that if we were to give up the historicity of the crucifixion, we would additionally have to give up most of our knowledge of the history of the world up to that time. The crucifixion is simply beyond any serious doubt.<sup>10</sup>

This brings us to the more important question. We know that Jesus was killed by crucifixion under sentence of Pontius Pilate. Do we know that he was raised from the dead? Do we know that the documents that say he was raised from the dead are reliable and were not passed down by word of mouth only to be finally written down in the Second and Third Centuries?

This question brings us to a very important principle, namely: the New Testament church insisted that only those who were themselves eyewitness of the resurrection could be identified as apostles and who could then give reliable accounts of all that Jesus had said and done. This principle was clearly stated in no uncertain terms when it became necessary to replace the late Judas with another apostle. Peter there explained:

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<sup>8</sup> *Antiquities* 18: Chapter 3, Arabic version. This section by Josephus also states that Jesus' followers claimed he had risen from the dead.

<sup>9</sup> Tacitus, *Annals*, 15.44 (A.D. 115)

<sup>10</sup> Gary R. Habermas and Michael R. Licona, *The Case for the Resurrection of Jesus*, (Wheaton, IL: Kregel Publications), 2004.

Therefore it is necessary to choose one of the men who have been with us the whole time the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, beginning from John's baptism to the time Jesus was taken up from us. For one of these must become a witness with us of his resurrection (Acts 1:21.22).

Notice the detail and clarity with which Peter spoke. To be an apostle (an authority on what was true), someone had to have been with us "the whole time the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, beginning from John's baptism to the time Jesus was taken up from us." Why? Because only then could this person serve as a witness (eyewitness) of the resurrection and related events.

Peter made it abundantly clear that no second-hand reports, no hearsay, no rumors would be allowed. Only eyewitness testimony. It is evident, therefore, that the New Testament documents we possess are either themselves eyewitness accounts or are directly based on the eyewitness testimony of those who had first-hand information of the events they described. The New Testament accounts were not passed down by word of mouth. They are eyewitness records. There is no legitimate reason to doubt the historical accuracy of what these documents say.<sup>11</sup>

There is other persuasive evidence that the New Testament is the testimony of the eyewitnesses. That is, we know the books to be historically, geographically and culturally accurate. The following statement exemplifies the archaeological confirmation of the accuracy in Luke's historical accounts:

There are literally hundreds of archaeological finds that support specific persons, events and facts presented in Luke-Acts, including many that were once thought to be incorrect. Especially noteworthy is Luke's correct usage of official titles. He calls the rulers of Thessalonica "politarchs," Gallio the "Proconsul of Achaëa," the one in Ephesus a "temple warden," the governor of Cyprus a "proconsul" and the chief official in Malta "the first man of the island," a title confirmed in Greek and Latin inscriptions.

Likewise, Luke is known to be correct in chronological references. His reference to "Lysansias the tetrarch of Abilene" at the time John the Baptist began his ministry (A.D. 27), once thought to be incorrect, is now known by Greek inscriptions to be correct. Lysansias was tetrarch between A.D. 14 and 29. Other chronological references are known to be correct including those to Caesar, Herod, and even Gallio (Acts 18: 12-17).<sup>12</sup>

This statement provides a small sample of the vast amount of specific details in the New Testament which have been confirmed through modern research. (Gallio, for example, is known to have been Proconsul of Achaëa from 51-52 A.D. That is when Paul would have appeared before him, allowing us to date this section of Acts with some certainty.) Notice especially that Luke calls the leader on the Island of Malta the "first man of the island." How could he have

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<sup>11</sup> The above information is only a taste of the overwhelming evidence that supports the reliability of the New Testament. For additional information, see F.F. Bruce, *The New Testament Documents; Are they reliable, and* Gary R. Habermas and Michael R. Licona, *The Case for the Resurrection of Jesus*.

<sup>12</sup> Norman Geisler, *Christian Apologetics*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1976), 325.

known that title if he had not been there? The only reasonable way to account for such accuracy is to recognize that the books contain reliable, firsthand information. These documents contain real history; they contain reliable information.

We additionally have credible historical records which attest to the eyewitness character of many of the New Testament books. Papias (AD 60-135), a disciple of the Apostle John, for example, said:

The Elder (John) used to say also: “Mark, having been the interpreter of Peter, wrote down accurately all that he mentioned, whether sayings or doings of Christ, not however, in order. For he was neither a hearer nor a companion of the Lord; but afterwards, as I said, he accompanied Peter, who adapted his teachings as necessity required, not as though he were making a compilation of the sayings of the Lord. So then Mark made no mistake, writing down in this way some things as he [Peter] mentioned them; for he paid attention to this one thing, not to omit anything that he heard, not to include any false statement among them.<sup>13</sup>

Papias also said, “Matthew recorded the oracles in the Hebrew tongue.”<sup>14</sup> And Irenaeus, who was Bishop of Lyons in A.D. 180 and a student of Polycarp who in turn was a student of the Apostle John, said:

Matthew published his Gospel among the Hebrews in their own tongue, when Peter and Paul were preaching in Rome and founding the church there. After their departure, Mark, the disciple and interpreter of Peter, himself, handed down to us in writing the substance of Peter’s preaching. Luke, the follower of Paul, set down in a book the gospel preached by his teacher. Then John, the disciple of the Lord, who also leaned on his breast himself produced his Gospel, while he was living at Ephesus in Asia.<sup>15</sup>

Such statements, along with similar remarks by other leaders in the New Testament church, give powerful testimony to the authenticity of our Biblical documents. Notice the mention Papias makes of Mark’s not having been a “hearer nor a companion of the Lord.” Since Mark did not personally have that eyewitness experience, it was necessary for him to have received his information from someone who did have firsthand information, in this case Peter. Such statements make it crystal clear that the New Testament church would accept a book as being authoritative only if it contained the testimony of eyewitnesses.

In the face of this kind of evidence, a remarkable transformation among New Testament scholars has taken place. These scholars no longer say that the New Testament was written in the Second and Third Centuries. They now candidly acknowledge that all of the New Testament was written in the First Century and that many of these books were written by, or are based on the testimony of, those who were eyewitnesses! Needless to say, this is a phenomenal shift of position. This is

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<sup>13</sup> Eusebius. *Ecclesiastical History*, III. 39, as quoted by Colin Chapman in *An Erdmans Handbook: The Case for Christianity*, (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Erdmans Co., 1981) p. 234.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Irenaeus. *Against Heresies. III*, as contained in Ante-Nicene Christian Library: *Translations of the Writings of the Fathers*. Vol. I, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson. (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark Co., 1869), 258-259.



not to say that liberal colleges and universities have gotten the message. God willing, they shall. But it is to say that the genuine scholars have done an about-face. These scholars include conservatives, moderates, liberals, agnostics and atheists. They now all largely the same thing.<sup>16</sup> And they typically admit that it was the eyewitnesses themselves who claimed Jesus had risen from the dead.

Instead of stating that it takes 100 years or more for resurrection accounts to evolve, the current view of the experts is summarized by prominent New Testament scholar, Gary Habermas, as follows:

There is a virtual consensus among scholars who study Jesus' resurrection that subsequent to Jesus death by crucifixion, his disciples really believed that he appeared to them risen from the dead. This conclusion has been reached by data that suggest that (1) the disciples themselves claimed the risen Jesus had appeared to them, and (2) subsequent to Jesus' death by crucifixion, his disciples were radically transformed from fearful, cowering individuals who denied and abandoned him at his arrest and execution into bold proclaimers of the gospel of the risen Lord. They remained steadfast in the face of imprisonment, torture, and martyrdom. It is very clear they sincerely believed that Jesus rose for the dead.<sup>17</sup>

Wow! First we have the overwhelming evidence that it was the eyewitnesses who were the foundation of the New Testament Scriptures! Now we have the consensus of the scholars that it was the eyewitnesses themselves who said they had seen the risen Lord! These eyewitnesses, it is now recognized, were claiming the resurrection within a year or two of the crucifixion. And these eyewitnesses were obviously totally convinced in the truth of what they said.

This is not to say that historical truth is determined by opinion polls. But it is to observe that there must be a reason why these scholars have changed their position and adopted the position outlined above. The reason is that the historical evidence is too one-sided to ignore.<sup>18</sup>

Imagine this kind of evidence in a courtroom—a dozen plus witnesses who would swear to having seen something with their own eyes—all telling basically the same story—and all of them willing to die rather than change their minds! Needless to say, this would be an open and shut case in a court of law. (Keep in mind that the liberal view that the New Testament was written in the Second and Third Centuries by persons who were not eyewitnesses was never based on evidence, but rather was based on evolutionary and materialistic assumptions.)

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<sup>16</sup> Gary Habermas and Michael R. Licona, the *Case for the Resurrection of Jesus*

<sup>17</sup> Gary Habermas and Michael R. Licona, the *Case for the Resurrection of Jesus*.

<sup>18</sup> Even skeptical scholars almost universally accept I Corinthians 15 as being written by Paul in about 55 A.D. in which he recounts the resurrection appearances of Jesus to the 12 Apostles plus James and Paul plus 500 other persons.

It should also be an open and shut case for us. Using standard methods of historical research, the resurrection of the Christ is a well-documented event of history. The New Testament records which describe the resurrection have been shown to be highly credible. The resurrection is true. Jesus is risen from the dead. He has conquered death and the grave. Because of his death and by means of his resurrection the Father has declared all of us forgiven for every wrong we have ever done. He has opened the gate of paradise for us where we can be with Him, face to face, for all time.