

Study Guide #7: Is the New Testament Reliable?

Introduction

In Explorer I, Study Guide #6, we evaluated the New Testament documents and found them to be authentic. In other words, today we have the New Testament as it was essentially written by the authors themselves. In this Study Guide, we will examine these same documents to see if they are reliable as accurate historical records. There are two types of tests historians apply to an ancient document to determine if it represents reliable history: (1) Internal Test and (2) External Test. We begin with the Internal Test and then move to the External Test.

Question #1: Would you describe what the Internal Test for reliability is?

Answer: Yes, there are at least 3 primary aspects of the Internal Test for an ancient document's reliability. They concern (1) inconsistencies or possible historical errors; (2) believability; and (3) characteristics of the heroes in the story. If some inconsistencies or possible erroneous statements have other reasonable explanations, the benefit of the doubt is given to the document—even if no reasonable explanation can be *proven* to be the *correct* explanation. This common-sense rule of thumb was given to us by the Greek philosopher Aristotle (d. 322 B.C.). As for inconsistencies between more than one writer describing the same event, if they are matters of insignificant details, they are viewed as good evidence that the event actually happened on the grounds that if the story had been invented, the authors would have gotten together and agreed on every detail. Moreover, if the writer was attempting to persuade his readers of something that was not likely to be accepted, it's viewed as evidence that he did not make it up. He may be mistaken, but he did not invent the story, for anyone wanting to persuade someone of something would invent a story likely to be believed by his readers. Finally, if a writer describes himself or any of the heroes in his account in excessively glowing terms regarding their behavior or character, that is understood as good evidence that the writer made up or at least exaggerated the story.

Question #2: Would you give an example of an inconsistency in an account of an event in the New Testament that you think has a reasonable explanation?

Answer: Yes, one example is the different accounts of the death of Judas Iscariot, the disciple who betrayed Jesus. Matthew 27:5 says that he went out and hanged himself. But Luke, in Acts 1:18, tells us that Judas fell **“headlong...burst open in the middle and all his entrails gushed out”** (NKJV). Although these are 2 different accounts of Judas' death, they don't necessarily contradict each other. Judas may have hanged himself near a rocky ledge and at some point fell before or after his actual death, and hitting the rocks below, his guts came out. Since this is



Judas Iscariot's Betrayal of
Jesus

a reasonable explanation of the apparent contradictory statements, the benefit of the doubt goes to both writers—even though we cannot prove it.

Question #3: Can you give us an example of an historical error in the New Testament that you can explain?

Answer: In Matthew 27:9-10, Matthew attributes a prophecy to Jeremiah that was actually made by Zechariah. Some apologists for the Christian faith have proposed that Matthew may have understood Jeremiah's prophecy (Jeremiah 32:6-8) as God declaring that fields and vineyards would be bought and



Potter's Field in Jerusalem

sold at a future time as a *type* of the purchase of the potter's field by the priests of Judah, and that Zechariah predicted the price of the field (Zechariah 11:12-13). As a result, Matthew may have seen both prophecies as fulfilled, but he only mentioned Jeremiah. This is a plausible explanation. Or it could simply be that Matthew made a mistake in assigning this prophecy to Jeremiah. Only those Christians who believe in Verbal Inspiration of the Bible cannot accept the idea that a Bible writer (this time, Matthew) could make a mistake. But it certainly is not a significant mistake that effects any teaching of the Bible. [NOTE: See Explorer I, Study Guide #16 for a discussion of the

inspiration of the Bible: "What is Biblical Inspiration?"]

Question #4: What event described in the New Testament has the most inconsistencies in the different accounts of it?

Answer: The greatest number of inconsistencies among the gospel writers concerns the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus. These include differing views of what was written on the cross (of Jesus) and who came to the tomb and when they came. These discrepancies can be easily found by reading the later chapters in all 4 gospels. There may be plausible explanations for each of these apparent discrepancies. Some Christian apologists insist that the original gospels didn't contain them, but they resulted from copyist mistakes over the centuries. However, the nature of some of the discrepancies is very unlikely to have been the result of copyist errors. The important thing to note is that all agree that there was a reference to Jesus as "the king of the Jews" on the cross, that certain women were the first to see the empty tomb, and that the apostles Peter and John also saw the empty tomb. [NOTE: Again, see Explorer I, Study Guide #16 ("What is Biblical Inspiration?") for a discussion of the nature of the Bible's inspiration.]

Question #5: How does the "believability" issue relate to the New Testament writers?

Answer: All who have read the gospels understand that the writers were attempting to persuade their readers that Jesus was the Messiah promised in the Hebrew Scriptures. But the nature of the Messiah they depicted in Jesus was very different from what the Jews as a whole expected. The common expectation was that the Messiah would be a male descendant of King David who would defeat Israel's (Judah's) enemies and establish his kingdom in Jerusalem, from which he would eventually bring justice to the entire

world. Instead, Jesus is pictured in the gospels as a (1) male descendant of King David whose kingdom was not of this world, but was a heavenly kingdom (Matthew 22:21; Mark 12:17; Luke 20:25; John 18:36), and (2) that He was God as well as man (Matthew 14:33; Mark 15:39; Luke 1:35; John 1:34). If these writers were trying to persuade the Jewish people that Jesus was the Messiah, they certainly would have invented a much more believable Messiah! This is good evidence that they were accurately describing what Jesus taught about Himself. In other words, it's evidence that this is an historically accurate description of what Jesus taught.

Question #6: How does the character test apply to the New Testament writers?

Answer: The gospel writers tell us that Jesus' disciples were often arguing among themselves and trying to find out from Jesus who among them would be the greatest in His kingdom when He set it up (Matthew 18:1; Mark 9:34; Luke 9:46). Two of the gospel writers record that Peter, James, and John fell asleep repeatedly in the Garden of Gethsemane when Jesus anxiously wanted them to be praying for Him (Matthew 26:36-45; Mark 14:32-41). Mark's gospel acknowledges that all of Jesus' followers fled the scene after Jesus was arrested in the Garden of Gethsemane (Mark 14:50). Matthew, Mark, and Luke each tells the story of Peter's denial of Jesus at 3 specific times on the night of Jesus' arrest and trial, including the fact that he swore (Matthew 26:69-75; Mark 14:66-72; Luke 22:54-62). Finally, John's gospel admits the apostles were hiding out in a room after the crucifixion of Jesus because they were afraid of the Jewish leaders (John 20:19). In other words, since the Jewish leaders had killed their leader, they might be coming after them next. The plain truth is that the gospel writers show no signs of glossing over their weaknesses or even cowardice. Instead, they portrayed themselves as whimpering, selfish, and fearful individuals prone to run at the first sign of trouble.



Peter Denies Jesus

Question #7: What is your conclusion regarding the Internal Test of reliability for the New Testament documents?

Answer: The Internal Test for determining the historical reliability of the New Testament concerns (1) inconsistencies and/or errors; (2) believability; and (3) the character of the heroes. We conclude that overwhelmingly the gospel writers passed the Internal Test with flying colors and have all the earmarks of accurate, reliable history.

Question #8: What is the External Test of reliability?

Answer: Concerning the External Test of reliability, historians examine a document in the context of information obtained from other reliable sources, including archaeology and other historical documents. Then they compare that data with the information in the ancient document that they are studying.

Question #9: Regarding the External Test, Luke 2 describes an empire-wide census ordered by Roman Emperor Caesar Augustus at the time of Jesus' birth. Yet modern historians have no evidence for such a census. Isn't that a major historical error?

Answer: Luke 2:1-2 reads as follows: “And it came to pass in those days that a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. This census first took place while Quirinius was governing Syria” (NKJV).

There are 3 major problems with the chronology presented in Luke 2 when compared with known historical facts. *First*, there is no known empire-wide *decree* (as such) ever issued by Augustus for a census. *Second*, the general census undertaken by the authority of Augustus closest to Jesus' birth was in 8 B.C., which is too early for the birth of Jesus according to other known chronological facts. *Finally*, Quirinius (also known as Cyrenius) didn't become governor of Syria until after Herod's death in 4 B.C., which is too late for Jesus' birth (for He was born during Herod's reign in Judea). [NOTE: Judea was part of the Roman province of Syria. Some scholars think Luke mistakenly identified a census ordered under Quirinius in A.D. 6, which is too late to coincide with Jesus' birth.]



Joseph & Mary Travel for Census

First, although Augustus apparently never issued a formal *decree*, as in a law, for an empire-wide census, we do know that he authorized (as an administrative action) 3 broad imperial censuses, with the closest one to Jesus' birth being in 8 B.C. *Second*, some historians have interpreted two different discovered inscriptions as meaning that Quirinius was the *co*-governor of Syria (of which Judea was a part) *before* the death of Herod. With Judea known as ripe with rebellion in those days, it's possible that the 8 B.C. administrative action by Augustus for a universal census could not be implemented because of political instability in Judea, but that it was implemented 2 or 3 years

later during the time of Jesus' birth, when Quirinius was (possibly) the co-governor of Syria. Moreover, having been authorized by Augustus, Luke called it a “decree” since it had the effect of one. Other scholars have proposed different reasonable explanations for Luke's statement. The point is that there are reasonable explanations, so the benefit of the doubt should go to Luke. In this context, it's worth noting that no known pagan or Jewish critics of Christianity in the first 3 centuries of the Christian Era ever criticized Luke's testimony here.

Question #10: What is your conclusion regarding the External Test and how do both the Internal and External tests affect your view of the reliability of the New Testament?

Answer: Although not every question of historical detail has yet been answered, neither has any external evidence proved any of the New Testament's history to be erroneous. Indeed, archaeological discoveries from the 19th century onward have verified countless references in the New Testament (and Old Testament

also) without refuting a single one. The late scholar Dr. Clark Pinnock summed up this evidence in the following way:

There exists no document from the ancient world witnessed by so excellent a set of textual and historical testimonies, and offering so superb an array of historical data on which an intelligent decision may be made. An honest [person] cannot dismiss a source of this kind. Skepticism regarding the historical credentials of Christianity is based on an irrational [i.e., anti-supernatural] bias.¹

From an examination of the Internal and External tests of reliability used by trained historians, there can be no reasonable doubt about the fact that the New Testament documents that we possess today represent an historically accurate account of the basic events in Judea in the 1st-century A.D. At the same time, we acknowledge that the supernatural claims of the New Testament—the miracles of Jesus, the resurrection of Jesus, et. al.—naturally require a higher standard of evidence to determine whether or not they actually occurred. Those and other key questions related to the person of Jesus is examined in Explorer I, Study Guides #8-12.

¹ Clark Pinnock, *Set Forth Your Case* (New Jersey: The Craig Press, 1968), p. 58.