

PROOF FOR THE HISTORICAL JESUS

By Marion R. Fox

INTRODUCTION

The question of whether or not Jesus existed has been asked for several years. Few historians (even atheists) question the historicity of Jesus of Nazareth. The historical nature of Jesus of Nazareth was not questioned until recent times (within the last couple of centuries). The standard line of the Communist parties in most areas of the world is that Jesus of Nazareth never existed. In order to answer this question it is necessary to first set forth how the truthfulness of historical events is known.

Veyne states that: "History is the relating of true events. In terms of this definition, a fact must fulfill a single condition to be worthy of history; it must really have taken place." (pages 11-12) One should neither confuse the methods of science with history nor the methods of history with science. Veyne contrasts the science of physics with history "The true difference is not between historical facts and physical facts, but between historiography and physical science. Physics is a body of laws, and history is a body of facts." (page 10) Some claim that history is not a system of faith, but it is based upon the same principles and the same type of evidence as faith.

PRESUPPOSITIONS OF MANY HISTORIANS

Many have adopted the atheistic presuppositions of modern anthropology: "Fresh attention to experience, feelings, small units, and everyday life has opened exciting new vistas to historical empathy. But some such work risks misunderstanding the theoretical orientation of its lodestar discipline of anthropology, without which all thick description would dissolve into perspectivist anecdote." (Jarausch and Hardy, page 191) There is no academic discipline that is more atheistic than anthropology. Much of the historical evidence is subject to several different interpretations if one neglects evidence or reasons improperly. There is no justification for choosing the atheistic viewpoint without giving consideration to the theistic viewpoint.

Some of the historians have given attention to feelings or subjective authority (cf. Jarausch and Hardy, page 191). This subjective approach to evaluation of the evidence makes their conclusions subject to the biases of the historian. Many arguments "beg the question" and are logically unsound.

THE USAGE OF MATHEMATICAL PROBABILITY TO EVALUATE EVIDENCE

One method this author will use to prove that Jesus of Nazareth lived is to demonstrate the probability that the witnesses who claimed to know Jesus were lying when they were faced with threats of loss of property, loss of esteem in their community, bodily harm, imprisonment, and loss of their lives. The probability of a sequence of events occurring is: $P_1 \cdot P_2 \cdot P_3 \cdot \dots \cdot P_n$ (Alder and Roessler, page 52). Where P_1 is the probability of the first event occurring, P_2 is the probability of the second event occurring, P_3 is the probability of the

third event occurring, etc. While it is true that the ancient people did not have the highly developed mathematical system of probability that we have, they could see the principles of probability, from experience. In addition the probability of a single event occurring is: $P = s/(s + f)$ where s = the number of ways that an event can successfully occur and f = the number of ways an event can fail to occur (Alder and Roessler, page 56). For example, if an event has 100 possible ways it can occur and only 1 of them is successful, the other 99 being ways it will fail to occur, the probability is $P = 1/(1 + 99) = 1/100 = .01$ or 1 chance in 100.

The probability of 50 events all occurring with each event having a probability of 1 in 100 is 1 chance in $100^{50} = 10^{100}$. This is 1 chance in 1 followed by 100 zeroes. Emile Borel states concerning events which are Negligible on the Human Scale: “*one one-millionth* as a reasonable value for a negligible probability on the human scale.” (page 27) Borel states concerning events which are Negligible on the Terrestrial Scale: “the negligible probability on the human scale must be regarded as negligible on the terrestrial scale, that is to say, a billionth of one one-millionth, or 10^{-15} , unity divided by a number of 15 figures.” (page 27) Borel says: “We may be led to set at 10^{-50} the value of negligible probabilities on the cosmic scale. When the probability of an event is below this limit, the opposite event may be expected to occur with certainty, whatever the number of occasions presenting themselves in the entire universe ... A phenomenon with a probability of 10^{-50} will therefore never occur, or at least never be observed.” (page 28) This is 1 chance in 1 followed by 50 zeroes.

If the probability is 1 chance in 2 (a 50-50 chance, a pure guess with only two options) it will only require 166 such events to have a probability of 1 chance in 10^{50} . If 166 prophecies can be found in the Scriptures to be fulfilled, it demonstrates that the Scriptures have foreknowledge. The reader should be aware that many questions have more than two options. For example, the question “on what day of the year was Jesus born?” has 366 options and a pure guess would have 1 chance in 366 to be right.

HISTORICAL RESEARCH METHODS

Isaac and Michael state that: “Historical research depends upon data observed by others rather than the investigator.” (page 45) Historical research analyzes authenticity of the source material, accuracy of the source material, and significance of the source material.

The data investigated by historical research is generally grouped into two categories: (1) data from primary sources (where the author was a direct observer of the recorded event). (2) data from secondary sources (where the author is reporting the observations of others and is one or more times removed from the original event). The data from primary sources have priority in historical research.

TYPES OF CRITICISM OF THE SOURCES

The first type of criticism (judging of the source) is external criticism (Is the document or relic authentic?) This is called “higher criticism” when the document being considered is the Bible. The Graf-Wellhausen documentary hypothesis claims the Pentateuch was constructed from four documents. This system has been deserted by some scholars who have given good

reasons to desert the system. Linnemann has deserted the “Documentary Hypothesis” of the modernist (pages 18-20). Oden has also deserted the “Documentary Hypothesis” of the modernist (pages 104-105 and 129).

The Graf-Wellhausen documentary hypothesis is based upon at least two assumptions: (1) miracles cannot occur and (2) predictive prophecy cannot occur. This theory was answered by J. W. McGarvey in his book *Short Essays in Biblical Criticism*. McGarvey also discussed extensively the authorship of Deuteronomy in his book *The Authorship of the Book of Deuteronomy*. Modernistic scholars have applied this same reasoning to the New Testament under the headings of: redaction criticism, literary criticism, structural criticism, and form criticism. They have assumed that the book of Mark served as a source for the books of Matthew and Luke.

The second type of criticism is internal criticism. Criticism refers to the rigorous, systematic, and exhaustive examination of the document (both externally and internally). Internal criticism says if the document is authentic, then is the data accurate and is the data relevant? These questions go to the heart of the question of textual criticism. The Westcott-Hort method of textual criticism is based upon the assumption there is a neutral text. Nestle says “Similarly the idea of a ‘Neutral text’ has been retired.” (page 43) Another system of textual criticism is the eclectic method of compiling the Greek text of the New Testament. The eclectic method is unsound because it is based upon subjective authority. It is not the intention of this author to deal with all systems of textual criticism.

Several questions are asked with regard to the New Testament documents: (1) Was the document written in the proper time frame and (2) was the document written by the persons who were purported to have written it?

The liberal scholar “John A. T. Robinson” argues convincingly that the New Testament was written in the proper time frame and that the writers were those who were purported to have written the various books of the New Testament (Robinson). Since liberals generally date the biblical documents late the fact that Robinson dates them during the time they were purported to have been written is strong evidence that the arguments are weighty.

METHODS OF INTERNAL CRITICISM

Two basic questions are asked by textual critics with regard to the internal evidences from a document: (1) does the author have any motives or biases which would cause him to distort the facts and (2) does the author have any limitations which would cause him to either misunderstand or distort the facts?

The apostles of Jesus Christ were honest men with no ulterior motives. They suffered and endured many things for preaching that Jesus was resurrected. First, they left profitable occupations to follow Jesus of Nazareth (Mark 1:16-20, Mark 2:14, John 18:15-16, and Luke 8:3). Second, the apostles and other witnesses sacrificed much (I Corinthians 4:9-13). Third, they were threatened (Acts 4:17-21). Fourth, they were cast into prison (Acts 4:3,

5:17-18, 12:3-4, 16:23-24, etc.). Fifth, they were beaten (Acts 5:33, 40-41, 16:20-23, II Corinthians 11:25, etc.). Sixth, they were killed for their testimony (Acts 12:1-3 etc.).

APPLICATION OF HISTORICAL RESEARCH METHODS TO THIS PROBLEM

TESTIMONY FROM THE CHRISTIAN SCRIPTURES

The Christian Scriptures (the New Testament) speak of Jesus (These are primary sources of data). The references to Jesus are too numerous to list. It is not reasonable that a fictitious person could have the impact that Jesus of Nazareth had. What is the probability that over 500 witnesses of Jesus and His resurrection (I Corinthians 15:3-6) would lie in the face of (1) suffering physical harm, (2) sacrificing of their jobs, homes, and family relationships, (3) and facing death for their testimonies? If a very conservative probability of 1 chance in 100 is assumed the probability that these witnesses were lying becomes so low that no self-respecting mathematician would even consider the thought that they were lying. With a probability of 1 chance in 100 ($P = .01$) the overall probability that 500 witnesses would all be lying is $P = 1$ chance in 100^1 . This probability is so much lower than that which Borel says cannot occur that it staggers the imagination of anyone who knows even freshman level college algebra.

TESTIMONY FROM NON-CANONICAL CHRISTIAN WRITINGS

Christian writers of the late first and second centuries speak of Him (These are secondary sources of data). Clement of Rome spoke of Jesus as an historical person (1 Clement 1:2 and 42). The writings called the Didache (about A.D. 100) spoke of Jesus as an historical person. Polycarp spoke of Jesus as an historical person (A.D. 150). Polycarp was about 80 years old, and claimed to have known the apostle John. Robinson dates The Didache, 1 Clement, The Epistle of Barnabas, and The Shepherd of Hermas all prior to AD 85 (pages 352-353). If Robinson is correct in his early dating of these books the testimony is even stronger evidence of the historicity of Jesus of Nazareth because the document is more credible if it was written closer in time to the event.

TESTIMONY FROM THE WRITINGS OF THE ENEMIES OF CHRISTIANITY

The enemies of Christianity speak of Jesus (These are secondary sources of data). Josephus (A.D. 37-100), the famous Jewish historian, mentions Jesus of Nazareth twice (*Antiquities of the Jews* 18:3.3 and 20.9.1). This section of the writings of Josephus has been questioned by external critics (those who question its' authenticity). Paul Winter made an excellent defense of these passages in Josephus (pages 289-302). [Winter did not defend all parts of these passages but did defend the parts essential to this argument {That Jesus of Nazareth was mentioned by Josephus}].

The *Jewish Babylonian Talmud* (A.D. 450) speaks of the existence of Jesus. This document was derived from 1st century A.D. documents. The Talmud speaks of Jesus as an historical person (*b Shabbath* 104b). The tradition is brought down from Rabbi Eliezer, whose teacher (Rabbi Johanan ben Zakkai) was a contemporary of Jesus of Nazareth. This document

claims that Jesus (called Ben Pandera) was born out of wedlock when Mary was seduced by a Roman soldier named Pandera or Panthera. This proves that the Jewish records show that the Jews knew of the claim that Jesus was born of a virgin birth. The Babylonian Talmud also attributes miracles to Jesus and claims that He performed them by the power of magic, or witchcraft.

Pliny the younger (A.D. 112), the governor of Bithynia, wrote a letter to the emperor Trajan concerning how to deal with Christians (*Epist.*, X. 96). Pliny states that Christians worship Jesus as God. Pliny also discusses how the early Christians suffered for their claims that they had observed miracles and for their claims that Jesus of Nazareth was resurrected.

Tacitus (A.D. 115) wrote of Jesus of Nazareth (*Annals*, XV. 44). Tacitus also states that Jesus was condemned to death during the reign of Pontius Pilate. Other aspects of Christianity (how the early Christians suffered torture and death, rather than deny Jesus of Nazareth) are discussed in his writings.

Seutonius (A.D. 120) wrote of how the Jews were expelled from Rome by Claudius Caesar because of the disturbances they caused over Chrestus (Christ) (*Via Claudii*, XXV. 4.). This confirms other aspects of the New Testament (how the main source of persecution for the early church was the Jewish leaders). This probably refers to the Jewish persecution of Christians referred to in Acts 18:2.

EXTRA BIBLICAL EVIDENCE THAT THE WITNESSES SUFFERED AND DIED FOR THEIR TESTIMONY THAT JESUS WAS RESURRECTED

EVIDENCE FROM THE ENEMIES OF CHRISTIANITY.

Tacitus (A. D. 115), a Roman historian, mentions the sufferings of Christians in the time of the emperor Nero (*Annals* 15.44). Seutonius (A. D. 120), a Roman historian, mentions the sufferings of Christians in the time of the emperor Nero (*Life of Nero*, 16.2).

Pliny (A.D. 111), an imperial legate of the province of Bithynia in Asia Minor, wrote a series of long letters which gave details of how he was to conduct trials of Christians (*Pliny, Epistles* 10.96).

Josephus (A.D. 30-100), a Jewish historian, mentions the crucifixion of Jesus of Nazareth (*Antiquities* 18.116-119 and 20.200).

EVIDENCES FROM CHRISTIAN WRITERS

Clement (A.D. 95) wrote of the suffering and death of the witnesses (*I Clement* 1:5-6). *I Clement* 1:5-6 “But, to pass from the examples of ancient days, let us come to those champions who lived nearest to our time. Let us set before us the noble examples that belong to our generation. By reason of jealousy and envy the greatest and most righteous pillars of the Church were persecuted, and contended even unto death. Let us set before our eyes the good Apostles ... Paul by his example pointed out the prize of patient endurance ...

6 Unto these men of holy lives was gathered a vast multitude of the elect, who through many indignities and tortures, being the victims of jealousy, set a brave example among ourselves.”

The book commonly called “II Clement” also refers to Jesus (II Clement 1:1). II Clement 1:1 “Brethren, we ought so to think of Jesus Christ, as of God, as of the Judge of quick and dead. And we ought not to think mean things of our Salvation: for when we think mean things of Him, we expect also to receive mean things. And they that listen as concerning mean things do wrong; and we ourselves do wrong, not knowing whence and by whom and unto what place we were called, and how many things Jesus Christ endured to suffer for our sakes.”

The book entitled: “*Foxe’s Book of Martyrs*” was derived from the writings of both Christians and the enemies of Christianity. This book contains vast amounts of evidence of the sufferings of the early Christians. The evidence of this book is so overwhelming that even atheists accept the truth that the early (first century A.D.) Christians suffered. Their sufferings prove they were convinced that Jesus was an historical person.

IMPLICIT EVIDENCE OF THE SUFFERING OF THE EARLY CHRISTIANS

The citizens of the Roman empire could be divided into three groups; Government officials, the intellectuals (the philosophers), and the common people. None of these groups were disposed to be friendly to the new religion of Christianity. The government officials used the religions to control the people, but they were not able to control Christianity and, therefore opposed Christianity. The intellectuals were, to a large extent, atheists. The common people were bound by their superstitions to their pagan religions. Since Christianity both competes with and claims to be the exclusive religion of the true God, it would be met with great opposition by these groups. The early Christians could not find any group of people disposed to give them aid, if they were being persecuted by any one.

The Jews spoken of Christianity and claimed that “it is know to us that everywhere it is spoken against.” (Acts 28:22) Other writers spoke disparagingly of Christianity. Tacitus says: “Consequently, to get rid of the report, Nero fastened the guilt 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 Pilatus, and a most mischievous superstition, thus checked for the moment, again broke out not only in Judea, the first source of the evil, ... Accordingly, an arrest was first made of all who pleaded guilty; then, upon their information, an immense multitude was convicted, not so much of the crime of firing the city, as of hatred against mankind.” (Tacitus, Annals, Book XV, 44)

REASONS WHY ONE MIGHT WANT TO DENY THE HISTORICAL NATURE OF JESUS OF NAZARETH

All those who deny the historical nature of Jesus of Nazareth can be grouped into two basic categories, the honest and the dishonest. Some might deny the historicity of Jesus ignorantly, because they have been taught this error by infidels (the Communist party line etc.). Some people foolishly accept things because “scholars say it is true” without examining the evidence themselves.

The Scriptures command the reader to “prove all things” (I Thessalonians 5:21). All should be noble and fairly examine anything they are told (Acts 17:11). One should follow scholarship (the pursuit of knowledge by a systematic means). True scholarship is neutral in the examination of facts. True scholarship draws the conclusion warranted by the evidence.

Those who ignorantly deny the historicity of Jesus should be gently shown their error (II Timothy 2:24-26). Christians should snatch them out of the fire (Jude 22-23). Those who are ignorant, but honest, might be converted (cf. Saul of Tarsus-I Timothy 1:12-14).

Some who deny that Jesus truly lived have ulterior motives. None have a right to assume that a person is guilty of ulterior motives without evidence (I Timothy 6:4). If one can successfully deny that Jesus lived, it is not necessary to answer the claims that He is the Son of God. This is an easy way to “get around” having to obey the gospel.

CONCLUSION

It is evident that Jesus of Nazareth truly lived in the place and time the New Testament claims. The evidence for this conclusion is overwhelming. Most atheistic historians acknowledge that Jesus of Nazareth truly lived in Palestine during the time frame set forth in the New Testament. By the acknowledgment of these historians, those who deny His existence, are placed into a position of denying the conclusion of their own scholars. Since Jesus lived, what will man do with Him (Matthew 27:22 and Mark 15:12)?

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Alder, Henry L.; Roessler, Edward B. (1964). *Introduction to Probability and Statistics*. San Francisco, CA: W. H. Freeman & Co.

Borel, Emile. (1962). *Probabilities and Life*. New York: Dover Pub. Inc.

Isaac, Stephen; Michael, William B. (1985). *Handbook in Research and Evaluation*. San Diego, CA: EdITS Publishers.

Jaraus, Konrad H.; Hardy, Kenneth A. (1991). *Quantitative Methods For Historians*. Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press.

Josephus, Flavius. (1973). *The Complete Works of Flavius Josephus*. Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications.

Linnemann, Eta. (1990). *Historical Criticism Of The Bible: Methodology or Ideology?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, translation of German 1986).

McGarvey, J. W. (1902). *The Authorship of the Book of Deuteronomy*. Cincinnati, OH: Standard Pub. Co.

McGarvey, J. W. (1956). *Short Essays in Biblical Criticism*. Nashville, TN: Gospel Advocate Pub. Co.

Nestle, Eberhard, Nestle, Erwin, Aland, Kurt, Aland, Barbara. (1990). *Novum Testamentum Graece*. (26th edition) Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft.

Oden, Thomas C. (1990). *After Modernity...What?* Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

Robinson, John A. T. (1976). *Redating the New Testament*. Philadelphia, PA: The Westminster Press.

Tacitus, P. Cornelius. (Hutchins, Robert M., ed.). (1952). *The Annals and the Histories*. Chicago: Encyclopedia Britannica, Inc.

Veyne, Paul. (1984). *Writing History*. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press.

Winter, Paul. *Journal of Historical Studies*. Vol. I, 1968.