

“The Sword of His Mouth”

Written on: July 31, 2023

Article by: Paul Birston

Revelation 2:12–17

Part 1

Scripture Reading and Introduction

Jesus our Saviour is the most important and influential person in the world. While He walked on earth and lived among His people, He spoke words of eternal truth, power and beauty like no other words ever spoken or written then or since. On one occasion that we know of, He wrote something. He wrote on the ground when He was in the Temple talking with the scribes and Pharisees who had brought to him a woman whom they caught in adultery (John 8:1–11). After His resurrection, Jesus sent His Spirit to empower His chosen authors to bring us the New Covenant including seven letters Jesus Himself dictated to John in Revelation 2 and 3.

Today, Jesus our risen Saviour is among us (Revelation 2:1). We have the blessing and privilege to read, hear and heed His seven letters that He dictated to John to the angels, the messengers, of His people assembled together in Asia in the first century (Revelation 1:3). In this series of three articles, we focus on His letter to the church at Pergamum.

Jesus said,

12 “And to the angel of the church in Pergamum write:

The One who has the sharp two-edged sword says this:

13 ‘I know where you dwell, where Satan’s throne is; and you hold fast My name, and did not deny My faith even in the days of Antipas, My witness, My faithful one, who was killed among you, where Satan dwells. 14 But I have a few things against you, because you have there some who hold the teaching of Balaam, who kept teaching Balak to put a stumbling block before the sons of Israel, to eat things sacrificed to idols and to commit sexual immorality. 15 So you also have some who in the same way hold the teaching of the Nicolaitans. 16 Therefore repent; or else I am coming to you quickly, and I will make war against them with the sword of My mouth. 17 He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who overcomes, to him I will give some of the hidden manna, and I will give him a white stone, and a new name written on the stone which no one knows but he who receives it.’”



Wow! These are powerful words, both encouraging and convicting. What is this place like where Satan lived and had his throne? Why would the situation there require Jesus to use such strong convicting language?

The Pergamum Jesus Knew in John's Day

Jesus' people in Pergamum, also known as Pergamon or Pergamos, lived about 80km or 48 miles as the crow flies north of Smyrna (Izmir today) and 25km or 15 miles inland from the Aegean Sea.

Like Smyrna, Pergamum had a beautiful productive setting among hills and fertile valleys at the Caicus River. Strabo, who lived from about 64 BC to AD 24, was a geographer, historian and philosopher from Pontus to the northeast of the Roman province of Asia on the Black Sea. He was contemporary to Jesus' early and young adult life. He travelled widely around the Mediterranean Basin visiting and writing about many famous places that he saw. Strabo wrote about the quality of the land at Pergamum, "The Caicus flows past Pergamum, through the Caicus Plain, as it is called, traversing land that is very fertile and about the best in Mysia" (Strabo's *Geography*, Book 13, Chapter 4, available online). Pergamum's acropolis sits on a 305 metre (1,000 ft.) high steep conical hill with spectacular views of this green fruitful countryside all around it.

Strabo wrote about the history of the city. He said Pergamum ruled over neighbouring places and "is a famous city and for a long time prospered along with the Attalic kings.... Pergamenians have become famous in my time."

Lysamichus who built up Smyrna left a large sum of 9,000 talents which Pergamene kings, notably Eumenes, used to build up Pergamum into a powerful and impressive city. It featured many temples to pagan gods, a library of over 200,000 books second only in size to Alexandria's famous library, theatres, and temples for the worship of Roman emperors. Like Smyrna, Pergamum became an ally and friend of Rome, acting as capital of Asia until the first Roman emperor Augustus moved the capital status to Ephesus in 27 BC.

Pergamum had three levels topographically, spiritually and politically. The acropolis, upper city, to the north, was the domain of royalty, nobility and military commanders. The middle city down the steep slope to the south had the temples and athletic fields for the common people of less education. The third area across the Selinus river to the southwest had the famous Asclepeion temple and healing centre with bathing pool, library and other temples named after Asclepius, pagan god of healing.

So Pergamum was a leading city politically, culturally and religiously. Pergamenians worshipped many of the most influential pagan gods including:

* Zeus, the father of the Olympian gods,

* Athena, goddess of wisdom, handicraft and warfare and patron goddess of Athens (Greek people still call their capital city Athena after her today),

- * Dionysus / Bacchus god of wine and revelry,
- * Demeter, goddess of agriculture, harvest, grains and fertility,
- * Asclepius, “saviour” and god of medicine and healing, whose symbol was a snake chosen for its ability to shed its old skin as a symbolic indicator of new birth and restored health,
- * Serapis, a syncretistic Greek-Egyptian god with attributes of Hades and Demeter and
- * Aphrodite / Venus, goddess of love, procreation, passion and pleasure.

Pergamenians also worshiped Roman emperors and human heroes.

Rome was the supreme military and administrative power during the lives of Jesus and His Apostles. During the first century its military, political and geographic rule were expanding significantly.

Against this background of human military, political and religious power, Jesus instructed John to write, **“The One who has the sharp two-edged sword says this...”** From what we have learned about Pergamum and from John’s vision of Jesus in Revelation chapter 1 we see that Jesus’ use of this metaphor of the long and sharp two-edged battle sword of judgment is particularly suitable for what He is about to say about the severity of the problems in Pergamum. This sword is larger than the one most frequently referred to in the New Testament.

With this image and His threat in verse 16, the sword of Jesus’ mouth frames the most serious concerns the Lord has with some in the Pergamene assembly. Similarly, in Rev. 19:15 and 21, John’s vision reveals Jesus using the sharp sword of His mouth for the final judgment of the nations.

Jesus’ words and the image of His sword are a reminder and guide for us who live in a world influenced by military, cultural and religious might that is contrary to God’s will which He reveals in His Word. We can take heart along with our faithful brothers and sisters in Pergamum, that Jesus’ spiritual and ruling powers are infinitely superior to any human kingdom. The joys of eternal life are vastly superior to any earthly pleasure.

Jesus goes on to say in verse 13, **“I know where you dwell, where Satan’s throne is; and you hold fast My name, and did not deny My faith even in the days of Antipas, My witness, My faithful one, who was killed among you, where Satan dwells.”**

As Jesus knew all about the culture of Ephesus and Smyrna, He also knew about the difficult context in which His people in Pergamum lived. In Smyrna His people faced opposition from the synagogue of Satan, the assembly of the **“accuser of our brethren,”** as John identifies him in 12:10, **“who accuses them before our God day and night.”** Jesus’ people in Pergamum live where Satan’s throne is. A throne is a seat which also acts as a visual symbol of power and authority. Though no one can point to a specific physical seat, it is clear that Satan wielded much power and authority in Pergamum judging by its pagan rites and lifestyles. As Revelation so vividly shows us,

Jesus' sword, His power and authority, His victories and judgments, are vastly superior to any other.

Throughout Revelation, John contrasts the superiority of God and His throne over Satan's throne or any other. We get our first revelation of God our Father's and Jesus' throne in His promise to His churches in His final letter of His seven letter, the one to Laodicea in 3:21, **“He who overcomes, I will grant to him to sit down with Me on My throne, as I also overcame and sat down with My Father on His throne.”** From here on throughout Revelation, we have many glorious visions of God on His throne and with Jesus the victorious Lamb on His.

To be continued.

Golden, BC

What is the meaning of life?

Written on: July 31, 2023

Article by: Roy Davison

This question is often asked by someone who feels that his life has little meaning. He wonders who he is and why he is here. Maybe a better question is: “How can I *find* meaning in life?” or even “How can I *make my life meaningful*?”

The Bible gives God’s answers to these questions!

Your life can have meaning, from a Christian perspective, through:

1. your family
2. your friends
3. your work
4. your service
5. your faith.

The Scriptures enable us to live meaningful lives because they teach us truths about ourselves, others, and the world in which we live.



We find many answers in Genesis, the first book of the Bible. Our origin, identity and mission are stated.

“So God created man in His own image; in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them” (Genesis 1:27).

We are created in the image of God! This explains both our origin and our identity. We are a creation of God. Adam is called “the son of God” (Luke 3:38). We are God’s offspring (Acts 17:28, 29). God is our Father!

Our life, as an image bearer of God, has meaning regardless of our circumstances! We understand our identity better when we learn about God and His attributes from the Scriptures. This enables us to follow our Father’s example and to obey His instructions. This gives meaning to our lives.

Family relationships give meaning to our lives. God created us male and female. This is an extremely important aspect of our identity and of the meaning of our lives.

The *continuation of life* is an important part of the *meaning of life*. “Then God blessed them, and God said to them, ‘Be fruitful and multiply; fill the earth and subdue it’” (Genesis 1:28).

The husband-wife relationship gives meaning to life. “Let your fountain be blessed, and rejoice with the wife of your youth” (Proverbs 5:18). “Live joyfully with the wife whom you love” (Ecclesiastes 9:9).

The parent-child relationship gives meaning to life. “Children’s children are the crown of old men, and the glory of children is their father” (Proverbs 17:6). These relationships give meaning and great joy to life when the Creator’s instructions are followed.

People who are not blessed with a marriage partner or children, can have spiritual children through the good influence they have on others. The Messiah, who did not have physical children, says: “Here am I and the children whom God has given Me” (Hebrews 2:13). Paul, who was single, calls Timothy: “my beloved and faithful son in the Lord” (1 Corinthians 4:17).

Friends give meaning to our lives. “There is a friend who sticks closer than a brother” (Proverbs 18:24). “Ointment and perfume delight the heart, and the sweetness of a man’s friend gives delight by hearty counsel” (Proverbs 27:9). “Friends” is one of the designations for Christians! John closes his third letter with, “Our friends greet you. Greet the friends by name” (3 John 14).

Meaning is given to the life of a Christian by these spiritual relationships in the church of Christ. First of all, we have a relationship with Jesus who said, “You are My friends if you do whatever I command you” (John 15:14) and “Whoever does the will of My Father in heaven is My brother and sister and mother” (Matthew 12:50). Paul encourages Christians: “Be kindly affectionate to one another with brotherly love” (Romans 12:10).

Productive work gives meaning to our lives. “Nothing *is* better for a man *than* that he should eat and drink, and *that* his soul should enjoy good in his labour” (Ecclesiastes 2:24). God told Adam and Eve to subdue the earth and to “have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air, and over every living thing that moves on the earth” (Genesis 1:28).

God also works! “Jesus answered them, ‘My Father has been working until now, and I have been working’” (John 5:17). We are made in the image of our Creator, so we also are able to work and create, and we find fulfillment in doing so!

Because rest is required to enable us to work, rest also adds meaning to our lives.

God created us so that we spend about a third of each day sleeping. After creation, God rested on the seventh day (Genesis 2:3). The law of Moses provided for a weekly day of rest. Jesus gives rest to Christians: “Come to Me, all you who labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest” (Matthew 11:28). Notice that rest is appreciated by those who labour. After our work on earth is done, we can look forward to an eternal rest (Hebrews 4:9). After a busy time, Jesus told His disciples: “‘Come aside by yourselves to a deserted place and rest a while.’ For there were many coming and going, and they did not even have time to eat” (Mark 6:31). A well-earned holiday can add meaning to life!

Serving others gives meaning to our lives. Jesus encourages us to serve others explaining that He himself “did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many” (Matthew 20:28).

The life of someone who serves is meaningful. Paul told the Ephesian elders: “I have shown you in every way, by labouring like this, that you must support the weak. And remember the words of the Lord Jesus, that He said, ‘It is more blessed to give than to receive’” (Acts 20:35).

Some people mistakenly think that amassing wealth gives meaning to life. But Jesus warned, “Take heed and beware of covetousness, for one’s life does not consist in the abundance of the things he possesses” (Luke 12:15). In Ecclesiastes, Solomon, one of the wealthiest men who ever lived, said that all material gain is vanity.

The Christian faith gives meaning to our lives. Jesus said, “I have come that they may have life, and that they may have it more abundantly” (John 10:10). A Christian not only knows where he came from, he also knows where he is going. His hope – based on the promises of God – reaches beyond the grave. Like Abraham, he seeks “the city which has foundations, whose builder and maker is God” (Hebrews 11:10).

Helping to spread the gospel of Christ gives meaning to the life of a Christian. What a privilege that we may proclaim God’s message of salvation to the world! What could be more meaningful than helping someone inherit eternal life. Our assignment is: “Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature. He who believes and is baptized will be saved; but he who does not believe will be condemned” (Mark 16:15, 16).

What have we learned? In the Bible, God explains the meaning of life. Because we are created in the image of God, we understand the meaning of our lives better, the more we learn about God. Meaning is given to life by: our family; our friends; our work; our service and our Christian faith.

“Whatever you do, do all to the glory of God” (1 Corinthians 10:31). To glorify God is the ultimate meaning of life!
Amen.

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Victory Through Loss

Written on: July 31, 2023

Article by: Seth Maus

In his letter to the Philippians, Paul penned a line that has adorned an uncountable number of Christian trinkets in the millennia since: “*But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. Indeed, I*

count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord.” (Philippians 3:7-8a). This scripture is often quoted to show a Christian’s willingness to give up material possessions to serve Christ. That’s a noble sentiment, one we all should strive to emulate... but is that all Paul meant with this text?

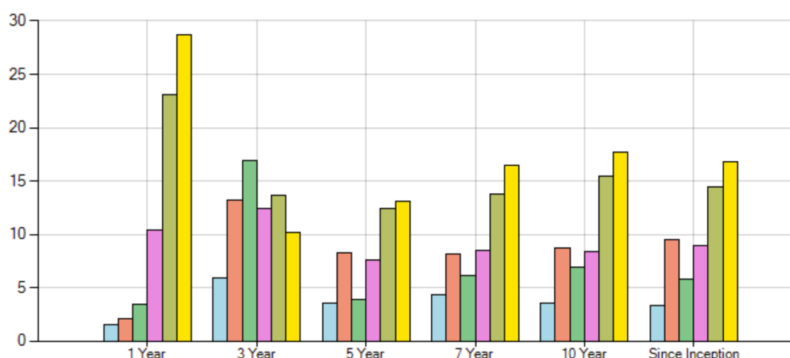
In the lead-up to the quote above, Paul lays out a lesser-known but critical section of scripture. He says:

“For we are the circumcision, who worship by the Spirit of God and glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh— though I myself have reason for confidence in the flesh also. If anyone else thinks he has reason for confidence in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless.” (Philippians 3:3-6).

Interestingly, Paul makes no mention of material goods (though I suspect he would be entirely on board with the idea of giving up physical comforts for Christ’s sake). Instead, Paul speaks about something far harder for humans to give up: ourselves.

Paul spent his early life as a devout Jew – far more zealous than most Christians who grew up in the church. While it’s unclear how high up in the religious order Paul was at the time of his conversion, he was doubtless destined to be a future leader of Israel, someone who would have the admiration and respect of an entire nation. His past was impeccable, his future was bright, and his character was pristine: he had followed the law and performed all the works – if anyone deserved eternal life (from a human perspective), it was him. Yet, Paul gave it all up. He gave up confidence in his works, he gave up the prestige of power, and he gave up the adoration of his people, all to immerse in the true life of Christ. Paul gave up himself.

With this in mind, we should turn the focus back to us: what have we given up for Christ? Do we slap Philippians 3:7 on our wall as a pretty picture and convince ourselves we fulfill it when we skip our morning coffee so we can give the congregation



an extra couple of dollars that week? Or have we truly given up ourselves? Have we become willing to suffer embarrassment, scorn, and even hatred for the glory of Christ? Have we set aside our strength to lean wholly on his, trusting not our reputation or respectability but His power to bring us to life? I suspect we all (myself included) can lower ourselves a little further. Take heart that the reward is well worth the cost.

For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith— that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead. (Philippians 3:8b-11)

The Myth of a Missionary Vacation

Written on: July 31, 2023

Article by: Thayer Salisbur

I trust that none of you believe in the tooth fairy, Santa Claus, or the myth of a missionary vacation. Our visit to the States is certainly a change of pace, but it is hardly a time of fun and frolic.



We left Eswatini the morning of June 6. We were supposed to drive to Johannesburg and then fly to Frankfurt and Detroit. After reaching Detroit we were to drive to Fort Wayne, Indiana. Before we ever reached Johannesburg our plans began to change. Lufthansa had some kind of delay that made the Johannesburg to Frankfurt to Detroit route impossible. So, they put us on British Airways to London and on Delta from London to Detroit. Unfortunately, our bags went on to Frankfurt and from there to Atlanta. They were finally reunited with us on June 9, late in the evening.

Saturday, June 10, the work began. We drove to Toledo and made a presentation concerning the work for all the area congregations. Fifty brothers and sisters were present. On Sunday Chery made a presentation to the children, while Thayer made a presentation to the adults at Flanders Road.

Monday morning, we stopped by the credit union to make some adjustments to our account, and then headed on to Carlisle, Pennsylvania. The car looked and ran great. But the AC did not work. We did not need it that day (thanks to the cooling effect of the fires in Alberta). But we decided that it ought to be fixed. While working on the AC, we discovered that the brake lines were all seriously corroded. Not having time, or the right equipment, to repair the brake lines, we left our car with Joseph (our oldest son). We borrowed a car from Thayer's brother and continued with our appointments (Broad Top, PA on June 18, Kingwood, WV on June 22, Ravenna, Ohio June 24 and 25, Streetsboro, Ohio June 25, and Paulding, Ohio on June 28).

Sunday, July 2 was the only time slot not filled, so we worshipped with the East Allen Church in New Haven, Indiana that Sunday. Although we were not able to make a presentation, we were able to talk with a few people who are aware of the work, and to sign a few up to receive the newsletters.

Encouraging gestures

Everywhere we have gone, we have been encouraged.

At the area-wide presentation in Toledo, Kevin Syph of the Ridgewood church suggested that a collection be taken to help cover our travel expenses. Something like that has been done at each place we have stopped. This has relieved a burden from us. We had saved up enough to the round-trip airfare, but we did not have money to the ground travel in the States. Everywhere we have gone we have received enough to cover the expense of travel. In most cases the amounts were generous beyond our expectations.

We cannot travel to all the places from which we receive support. We set up a Zoom call with the Northern Lights Church in Fairbanks. The technology did not work perfectly, but it was better than not being able to speak with them at all. One supporter from Texas, knowing that we could not travel there, came to Indiana to see us!

The bottom line

While hardly a vacation, the trip has been encouraging so far. We have been able to report to many who already support the work, and to introduce others to what we are doing. We look forward to returning to the work toward the end of the month. But first we must travel to Mississippi to see Preston and we still have presentations to make at Portland and Lagrange Indiana and in Champaign, Illinois.

African Textbook Ministry, Church of Christ, 5130 Flanders Road, Toledo, OH 43623

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Our phone number while in the States (until July 24) continues to be 260 298 3611.

Missions Newsletter – Ruth Zimmerman

Written on: July 31, 2023

Article by: Ruth Zimmerman

Hello from “Rainy Lae”. It has been pouring for much of the past couple of days and is a cool 82°F (28°C) right now as I start to write this. This is the last day of our week-long break between terms at the Melanesian Bible College, and a good opportunity to get this overdue report sent! I pray that you are well and enjoying His blessings.



The past three months have been busy and focused. Getting through eight months of financial reports, etc. (from my leave) took up a lot of spare time, while simultaneously settling into life here again, and the start of the school year. God is good and He allowed me a one-week rest period (a.k.a. Malaria) in the thick of it. We have now completed the first two ‘blocks’ (6-week terms) of classes at M.B.C. As mentioned in the last report, this is a transition year from the current 3-year *Tok Pisin* program to two years, and the introduction of an English program next year. We currently have a

smaller student body than usual, with no new students, and the 2nd and 3rd year students completing their time at M.B.C. together. I opted not to run a literacy class this school year and have been using the time each morning at the library (book processing and printing).

M.B.C. student body, 2023 (on a tilt!?!)

The 3rd year students enjoying the new PowerPoint projector during a morning class



Each year, for practical experience, the final year students plan and host a “One Day Youth Camp”. It will take place this year on July 22nd. Youth from the congregations in and near Lae (13-14 in number) are invited and the turn-out is usually 250-300. As part of the experience, the M.B.C. students work out a budget and raise the amount needed to host the event. As part of their fund-raising, they came last week and cleaned the

Missionary Centre, the very large house used for overseas visitors. Because of mold, it has to be washed each year, regardless of whether we have company or not (the last visitor was in 2019!). What usually takes a small group of us a week or two to clean, the students finished in two days! Their energy and humour made a large job fun, and we had a great time of fellowship each day, afterward, while we ate together.

After 3+ years of retyping, revision and editing, we finally were able to tackle printing a new lot of Het Tok ("Head Talk"; a topical index translated and printed by missionary Tobey Huff in the 1980s). Printing started in late March and was finished on May 4th. Whereas other materials printed at M.B.C. are sold at cost and without profit, all money raised from the sale of Het Tok goes back to supporting M.B.C.

Brother Bafi Donao – an M.B.C. graduate from the 1990s, and preacher in Sio, Morobe Province – helping with the binding process while visiting Lae. Current M.B.C. student, Sent (from Mati, Western Highlands Province; not pictured) has also helped greatly in the past few weeks, first with finishing Het Tok and now with Song bilong Lotu (Songs of Worship).

200 copies complete, May 23!

A few of the M.B.C. students in our haus kuk (cook house) following the massive cleaning session.

Our ladies' class this year, at M.B.C., has been challenging and has meant re-adjusting how we teach. We currently have three ladies in class: Hane, from Port Moresby (pronounced "Honay"), is doing her second year of classes. She has learned *Tok Pisin* well but has a fairly significant hearing problem which has left us wondering how much she is actually hearing in class! Raqawec, from Indagen (pronounced "Rakawa"), was a literacy student last year and should have repeated the course this year, however due to the change to a two-year program, she is now in full time Bible classes. She has tackled each class with bravery, helped by her daughter, Tatila, our third student. We have all been encouraged that Raqawec's reading continues to improve each week. Tatila, a young Christian, was taken out of elementary school this year to help her mother but seems to be enjoying her time with us and learning a lot. She even prepared and presented a lesson at the weekly ladies' Bible study held on Thursdays! Please keep each of them in prayer. I enjoyed teaching the course *Plan bilong God bilong Kisim Bek Man* (God's Plan of Salvation) to them last block, and will start teaching *Beten* (Prayer) tomorrow. This will be the first time I've taught this course.

Timbit and Oreo Also known at times as "Termite" and "REO Speed-Demon". Timbit recently ate a large hole in the back door, leading to its replacement, and when accidentally locked in the bathroom, decided to go out through the window screen (which didn't have any holes before that!). Looks can be VERY deceiving!

Prayer Points:

1. The Melanesian Bible College – for the students as they enter their last block of classes with us and prepare to return to their homes; Also, for the continuing changes taking place in the school.
2. Brother Rick Niland in Toowoomba, Australia – Rick had major spinal surgery in late March and remains in hospital nearly three months on. Shortly after the first surgery, a second was done to fix a broken vertebra. The incision from that surgery became badly infected and healing has been slow. Rick has also had complications and has had a hard time with the medications he is on. Please continue to pray for Rick and Ruth and for continued healing. (Rick worked as a 'kiap', or patrol officer, in Papua & New Guinea prior to the arrival of the Cannons in the early 70s, and then he and Ruth worked as missionaries beside Joe & Rosa Belle).
3. Roommate Miring – experiencing dental and sight issues.
4. Brother Taylor David, and wife Robyn – for ongoing physical healing approaching two years after his brain surgery, and for safety (he still doesn't have a titanium plate and has weakness in one side of his body, making him frequently off-balance).

I always appreciate hearing from you. At this point, I am FAR behind in replying to emails. The workload (teaching, printing and library, and preparing for my class this block) has meant that I have been really poor at keeping up with writing. Please be patient if you write. I will eventually answer! .

May God continue to bless you.

Love and blessings in HIM,

Ruth

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His Blood on Their Heads

Written on: July 31, 2023

Article by: Bruce Terry

During the week of Jesus' crucifixion, he gave several prophecies which were fulfilled forty years later. Although many Christians realize that Jerusalem was destroyed in A.D. 70, few know many details about that event, since the New Testament does not describe it except in prophecy. The history of the great tribulation that took place when Jerusalem was destroyed is recorded by Josephus in his writings entitled *The Jewish War*. It was a fitting punishment to those who at Christ's trial had cried out, "His blood be on us and on our children!" (Matthew 27:25).



As one reads the account that Josephus has written about the destruction of Jerusalem and the events leading up to it, he is reminded of such scriptures as Luke 19:41-44; Matthew 24:2, 15-22, 34; Mark 13:2, 14-20, 30; Luke 21:6, 20-24, 32; Matthew 27:25; and Luke 23:28-31. Some, not realizing the horrors that took place then, have applied several of these scriptures to a supposedly future tribulation. I have heard remarks like, "The Romans only killed one million Jews, but Hitler killed over five million, thus the tribulation that Jesus talked about could not have taken place in the first century." When I first heard this, I had no answer. But the more I read Josephus, the more I realized the extra horrors that took place then. Truly the blood of the crucified innocent Christ did come back on those who wanted him crucified and on their children. Not only did the Romans conquer them, destroying the city, but the Jews fought against each other, showing less mercy to their fellow countrymen than the Romans did. This is to say nothing of the widespread starvation (so great that it drove at least one mother to kill and eat her own baby) and disease which eventually took their tolls. Tribulation cannot be measured only by the numbers killed, but also in terms of human suffering, both physical and mental. With this in mind, I want to share with you a summary account of the events leading up to the destruction of Jerusalem as recorded by Josephus.

Having related how the armies of the Roman general Vespasian and his son Titus had conquered Galilee and the coastal cities and then encamped at Caesarea for a brief rest in A.D. 68, Josephus states:

"Every city was now agitated by tumult and civil war, and the moment they had a respite from the Romans they turned their hands against each other. . . . The various cliques began by pillaging their neighbours, then banding together in companies they carried

their depredations throughout the country; insomuch that in cruelty and lawlessness the sufferers found no difference between compatriots and Romans. . . . In the end, satiated with their pillage of the country, the brigand chiefs of all these scattered bands joined forces and, now merged into one pack of villainy, stole into poor Jerusalem. . . . Fresh brigands from the country entering the city and joining the yet more formidable gang within, abstained henceforth from no enormities. For, not restricting their audacity to raids and highway robberies, they now proceeded to murders. . . . Dire panic now seized the people, and as if the city had been captured by the enemy none cherished any thought but that of his personal security". (IV, 131-142)

He goes on to record how they jailed several of the most influential persons in Jerusalem and then butchered them on the pretense that they had conferred with the Romans concerning the surrender of Jerusalem. When they were unopposed in this, they deposed the high priest, took over the temple as their fortress and turned the Holy Place into their headquarters. Then they chose a new high priest by casting lots. The lot fell to a man named Phanni, "who not only was not descended from high priests, but was such a clown that he scarcely knew what the high priesthood meant;" (IV, 155) he became a subject for jesting and sport to them. Such were the crimes committed by those who called themselves the Zealots (see Luke 6:15) which led to open civil war in Jerusalem.

Josephus goes on to relate: "This latest outrage was more than people could stand, and as if for the overthrow of a despotism one and all were now roused" (IV, 158). Incited by a speech of one of the chief priests, Ananus, the citizens tried to destroy the Zealots. The Zealots were outnumbered but better trained and armed, so that neither side could gain a clear cut victory. The citizens blockaded the Zealots in the temple and tried several plans to get them out and destroy them. But John of Gischala, who had the confidence of the leaders of the citizens, was divulging their plans to the Zealots. The leaders even sent him as their delegate to the Zealots to arrange a treaty. But instead of arranging a treaty, he lied and told the Zealots that the citizens were planning to invite the Romans to take over the city and urged the Zealots to send for help. The Zealots decided to send for the Idumaeans (or Edomites, as they are also called) for aid. They quickly responded by sending 20,000 men to Jerusalem. The citizens shut the gates of the city so that the Idumaeans had to camp outside. That night a terrific storm broke out. While most of the citizens were in their houses, the Zealots sneaked out of the temple and opened a gate to let the Idumaeans into the city. "The Idumaeans spared none. . . . and day dawned upon eight thousand five hundred dead. The fury of the Idumaeans being still unsatisfied, they now turned to the city, looting every house and killing all who fell in their way" (IV, 310,313-314). Ananus was killed, but this was providential justice, since he had had James the brother of Jesus killed some six years earlier. The "Zealots and the Idumaeen hordes fell upon and butchered the people as though they had been a herd of unclean animals. Ordinary folk were slain on the spot where they were caught; but the young nobles they arrested and threw into prison," (IV, 326-327) where "they were scourged and racked" (IV, 329) and then killed, 12,000 of them perishing like this.

Josephus then relates, "Having now come to loathe indiscriminate massacre, instituted mock trials and courts of justice. . . . The Idumaeans now began to regret that they had

come, taking offence at these proceeding” (IV, 334,345). When one of the Zealots finally told them the truth about why they had been summoned to Jerusalem, the Idumaeans first liberated the citizens confined in prisons, numbering about two thousand (these immediately fled from the city and joined Simon, of whom we shall speak presently); they then left Jerusalem and returned home. . . . the Zealots . . . grew yet more insolent . . . They thirsted above all for the blood of the brave and the nobility, massacring the latter out of envy, the former from fear; . . . Those with whom any had ancient quarrels having been put to death, against those who had given them no umbrage in peace-time accusations suitable to the occasion were invented: the man who never approached them was suspected of pride; he who approached them with freedom, of treating them with contempt; the who courted them, of conspiracy. The one penalty for all charges of the gravest or the most trifling nature was death; and none escaped save those whose humble birth put them utterly beneath notice, unless by accident. (IV, 353-356,364-365)

Numbers began deserting daily, eluding the Zealots. But flight was difficult, because guards were posted at all the outlets and anyone caught there, on whatever business, was slain, on the assumption that he was going off to the Romans. . . . Along all the highways the dead were piled in heaps; . . . The Zealots . . . carried barbarity so far as to grant interment to none, . . . they left the dead putrefying in the sun. For burying a relative, as for desertion, the penalty was death, and one who granted this boon to another instantly stood in need of it himself. (IV, 378-383)

The situation in the rest of Judea was not much better. The Sicarii, or Assassins, mentioned in Acts 21:38, took possession of Masada, an almost impregnable fortress situated on a mesa near the Dead Sea. They began using it for a base for carrying out raids on the whole district. When they raided a village, they would massacre hundreds of women and children, plunder the houses, seize the ripest of crops, and carry off their spoil to Masada. Other predatory bands began pillaging their own villages and then making off into the wilderness, where they joined forces to fall upon larger cities. “There was, in fact, no portion of Judea which did not share in the ruin of the capital” (IV, 409).

Finally the Roman general Vespasian decided to march against Jerusalem. He began by subduing the surrounding countryside of Peraea, Judea, and Idumaea. In Peraea, Josephus relates, “Fifteen thousand perished by the enemy’s hands, while the number of those who were driven to fling themselves of their own accord into the Jordan was incalculable” (IV, 435). Further, when Vespasian had captured two villages right in the heart of Idumaea, “he put upwards of ten thousand of the inhabitants to death, made prisoners of over a thousand, expelled the remainder and stationed in the district a large division of his own troops. who overran and devastated the whole of the hill country” (IV, 447-448). Then in the summer when he was ready to attack Jerusalem, news reached him that the emperor Nero was dead. He consequently deferred his march against Jerusalem, but did ride with his cavalry up to the walls of Jerusalem, reducing the region around the city. He then retired to Caesarea to wait to see who would be made emperor. His own troops proclaimed him emperor and he left with them for Egypt to secure the empire.

The Roman Empire went through three new emperors in less than two years until Vespasian was finally successful in his bid to become emperor. While waiting, to see who would finally become emperor, Vespasian had suspended most of the warfare against the Jews. But with his ascent to the throne, he sent his Titus to capture Jerusalem in the spring of A.D. 70.

During the lull in the war, hostilities again broke out among the Jews. A certain Simon, son of Gioras, had joined the Assassins at Masada, but later left them to gather his own army. He conquered the area north of Jerusalem and Idumaea south of Jerusalem and then marched to Jerusalem itself. The Zealots had captured his wife, and, according to the Jewish historian Josephus, “he vented his wrath upon all whom he met. Any who had ventured outside the gates to gather herbs or fuel, unarmed and aged individuals, he seized, tortured and killed...Many others he sent back into the city with their hands cut off” (IV, 540-542) with instructions to relay certain threats to the people. “These threats so terrified not only the people but even the Zealots, that they sent him back his wife. . . .” (IV, 544) Simon once again attacked Idumaea and drove multitudes to flee to Jerusalem. He followed them there, “and again surrounding the wall killed any of the labouring class whom he caught going out into the country” (IV, 557).

Civil strife once again broke out inside the city and the citizens invited Simon inside the walls to destroy the Zealots. Simon’s army drove them to the temple once again but was unable to destroy them. Thus the city came under the control of Simon while the Zealots controlled the temple area.

As if this was not enough, the Zealots then split into two factions fighting one another. John of Gischala, who had earlier betrayed the citizens to the Zealots, gained control of the Zealot forces. Eleazar, one of the original leaders, seceded from the party with a considerable following of Zealots and took possession of the inner court of the temple. In spite of all this, the temple sacrifices continued, but many priests and worshipers were accidentally killed by John’s catapults. “The dead bodies of natives and aliens, of priests and laity, were mingled in a mass, and the blood of all manner of corpses formed pools in the courts of God” (V, 18). When not fighting Eleazar, John would sally out with more confidence and in (greater strength against Simon. And, to whatever part of the city he turned his steps, his invariable practice was to set light to the buildings stocked with corn and all kinds of provisions, and upon his retreat Simon advanced and did the same; as though they were purposely serving, the Romans by destroying what the city and provided against a siege and severing, the sinews of their own strength. . . . almost all the corn, which might have sufficed them for many years of siege, was burnt up. Through famine certainly the city fell, a fate which would have been practically impossible, had they not prepared the way for it themselves. (V, 23-26)

Such was the state of affairs in Jerusalem when Titus returned with four Roman legions. When Titus finally marched on Jerusalem in the spring of A.D. 70 with four Roman legions, the city was torn with civil war between three factions. During the Passover, the Zealots under the leadership of John of Gischala gained access to the inner temple defended by the Zealots under Eleazar and defeated them. Thus the two Zealot factions reunited and the city was only split between two parties. But this did not slow down the

pace of the civil war, for the Jewish historian Josephus relates, “For not even when the Romans were encamped beneath the walls, did the civil strife slacken within” (V, 255). Discussing the tribulations of the Jews, he remarks, “Certainly, they suffered nothing worse at the hands of the Romans than what they inflicted upon each other, nor after her experience of them did the city meet with any novel calamity; on the contrary, her more cruel disaster preceded her fall, and the relief which her captors brought her outweighed the loss” (V, 256). In other times of trouble, the Jews have stood together against the enemy, but here they fought against one another so that the prophecy spoken by Jesus might be fulfilled: “For then there will be great tribulation, such as has not been from the beginning of the world until now, no, and never will be” (Matthew 24:21).

Jesus also said, “But when you see Jerusalem surrounded by armies, then know that its desolation has come near” (Luke 21:20). Thus it was that the outer wall was breached by the Romans about May 25th and the second wall about May 30th. The inner wall proved more formidable and it was August before it was penetrated.

Meanwhile, the famine raged in the city. Josephus relates: “The recklessness of the insurgents kept pace with the famine, and both horrors daily burst out in more furious flame. For, as corn was nowhere to be seen, they would rush in and search the houses, and then if they found any they belaboured the inmates as having denied the possession of it; if they found none they tortured them for more carefully concealing it. . . . For, whenever they saw a house shut up, this was a signal that the inmate were taking food, and forthwith bursting open the doors they leapt in and forcing the morsels almost out of their very jaws brought them up again. Old men were beaten, clutching what was in their hands. There was no compassion for hoary hairs or infancy: children were actually lifted up with the fragments to which they clung and dashed to the ground. To those who had anticipated their raid and already swallowed their expected spoil they were yet more brutal, as defrauded of their due. (V, 424-425, 432-434)

The tortures they devised went so far as to drive sharp stakes up the bodies of their victims. And yet the tormentors were not famished; their cruelty was not due to hunger, but to sheer meanness. Rightly does Josephus comment, “no other city ever endured such miseries, nor since the world began has there been a generation more prolific in crime” (V, 442). Truly the blood of Christ did come back on the Jews.

Regarding those who were caught by the Romans sneaking outside the city in search of food, the Jewish historian Josephus states, “They were accordingly scourged and subjected to torture of every description, before being killed, and then crucified opposite the walls. . . . there were five hundred or sometimes more being captured daily. . . . The soldiers out of rage and hatred amused themselves by nailing their prisoners in different postures; and so great was their number, that space could not be found for the crosses nor crosses for the bodies” (V, 449-451). How ironic that those who shouted “crucify him” regarding their Messiah should suffer the same fate! But then they also said, “His blood be on us and on our children!” (Matthew 27:25).

In an effort to end the Jewish resistance by starving them out, the Romans built a siege wall around the part of the city which had not yet been captured. The famine became worse and as people became too weak to bury the dead, they at first burned the bodies

and later flung them from the ramparts into the ravines. The stench was intolerable as the valleys became choked with the dead and the thick matter oozed from under the clammy carcasses. Inside the city, the rebels “issued a proclamation forbidding any throughout the city to confabulate or congregate in one spot—for fear of treason” (V, 533).

At this time many began to desert to the Romans. Some “arrived swollen from hunger, like persons afflicted with dropsy, and then, overcharging at a gulp their empty stomachs, burst asunder” (V, 549). Some others sold their possessions before they deserted and then swallowed the gold coins. Then “one of the refugees in the Syrian ranks was discovered picking gold coins from his excrement; . . . a rumour ran through the camps that the deserters had come full of gold, where upon the Arab rabble with the Syrians proceeded to cut open the suppliants and search their intestines. . . . actually in one night no less than two thousand were ripped up” (V, 550-552). Josephus notes, “God and no other had condemned His whole people and was turning every avenue of salvation to their destruction” (V, 559). When Caesar prohibited the practice, the Arabs and Syrians would go out to meet the deserters and disembowel them while the Romans were not looking. “In few only it was found: the bare hope of finding it caused the wanton destruction of most. This calamity in fact drove many of the deserters back” (V, 561).

Inside the city, the famine made death run rampant. It was “reported that the corpses of the lower classes thrown out through the gates amounted in all to 600,000. . . . a measure of corn had been sold for a talent, and...some were reduced to such straits that they searched the sewers and for old cow dung and ate the offal therefrom. . . .” (V, 569-571).

The picture that has been painted in this article of the horrors of that great tribulation are certainly not pretty but the worst is yet to come. And yet, these things did not have to happen; but they happened because the Jews did not know the time when their Messiah visited them (Luke 19:44).

The Jewish historian Josephus records that on July 24, A.D. 70 the Romans broke through the inner wall at the Antonia, a fortress northwest of the temple. From there they began to attack the temple. On August 5th or 6th, the daily continual sacrifice ceased to be offered in fulfillment of Daniel 9:27. To stop the Roman advance, the Jews began to burn the temple porticoes or porches.

In the meantime, the famine continued to worsen. Josephus reports that “the dearest of relatives fell to blows, snatching from each other the pitiful supports of life” (VI, 194). Even the brigands became crazed with hunger to the extent that they would burst into the same house two or three times within a single hour looking for food. Toward the end the people “abstained not from belts and shoes and stripped off and chewed the very leather of their bucklers. Other devoured tufts of withered grass” (VI, 197-198). But the most horrible effects of the famine were seen when Deuteronomy 28:53-57 was fulfilled. No tribulation could be called great tribulation in which that passage was not fulfilled. As verse 53 says, “And you shall eat the fruit of your womb, the flesh of your sons and

daughters, whom the Lord your God has given you, in the siege and in the distress with which your enemies shall distress you” (ESV).

So it was that a woman named Mary, daughter of Eleazar, from the village of Bethhezuba in the region east of the Jordan River, who was eminent because of her family and fortune, became the fulfillment of this prophecy. As the famine inside Jerusalem progressed, whatever food she had managed to obtain was being carried off by the brigands in their daily raids. Regarding her response, the Jewish historian Josephus records the following:

Seizing her child, an infant at the breast, “Poor babe,” she cried, “amidst war, famine, and sedition, to what end should I preserve thee? With the Romans slavery awaits us, should we live till they come; but famine is forestalling slavery, and more cruel than both are the rebels. Come be thou food for me, to the rebels an avenging fury, and to the world a table such as alone is wanting to the calamities of the Jews.” With these words she slew her son, and then, having roasted the body and devoured half of it, she covered up and stored the remainder. At once the rebels were upon her and, scenting the unholy odour, threatened her with instant death unless she produced what she had prepared. Replying that she had reserved a goodly portion for them also, she disclosed the remnants of her child. Seized with instant horror and stupefaction, they stood paralyzed by the sight. She, however, said, “This is my own child, and this is my handiwork. Eat, for I too have eaten. Show not yourselves weaker than a woman, or more compassionate than a mother. But if you have pious scruples and shrink from my sacrifice, then let what I have eaten be your portion and the remainder also be left for me.” At that they departed trembling, in this one instance cowards, though scarcely yielding even this food to the mother. (VI, 205-212)

A few days later the temple was destroyed by the Romans. On August 27, A.D. 70, they set fire to the gates and porticoes around the temple. On August 30th, the sanctuary itself was set ablaze during a battle in front of it. Josephus says, “Most of the slain were civilians, weak and unarmed people, each butchered where he was caught. Around the altar a pile of corpses was accumulating; down the steps of the sanctuary flowed a stream of blood, and the bodies of the victims killed above went sliding to the bottom” (VI, 259). Since the sanctuary was burning, the soldiers set fire to the other temple buildings, including the treasury. “They then proceeded to the one remaining portico of the outer court, on which the poor women and children of the populace and a mixed multitude had taken refuge, numbering six thousand...the soldiers, carried away by rage, set fire to the portico from below, . . . and out of all that multitude not a soul escaped” (VI, 283-284). Regarding them, the Jewish historian Josephus records,

They owed their destruction to a false prophet, who had on that day proclaimed to the people in the city that God commanded them to go up to the temple court, to receive there the tokens of their deliverance. Numerous prophets, indeed, were at this period suborned by the tyrants to delude the people, by bidding them await help from God, . . . Thus it was that the wretched people were deluded at that time by charlatans and pretended messengers of the deity. (VI, 285-286, 288)

All of this is in accordance with Jesus' prophecy about false prophets in Matthew 24:24: "For false Christs and false prophets will arise and perform great signs and wonders, so as to lead astray, if possible, even the elect" (ESV).

Josephus further relates, "The Romans, now that the rebels had fled to the city, and the sanctuary itself and all around it were in flames, carried their standards into the temple court and, setting them up opposite the eastern gate, there sacrificed to them, and with rousing acclamation hailed Titus as emperor" (VI, 316). This is why Luke (in Luke 21:20) parallels Matthew's "abomination of desolation . . . standing in the holy place" (in Matthew 24:15) with the armies surrounding Jerusalem; for it was the standards of those armies which were to become the abomination sacrificed to in that holy place when it was desolated.

From the temple area the Romans easily took the lower city, south of the temple, and set it on fire in late August or early September, A.D. 70. Although the rebels now held only the upper city, west of the temple, their cruelty did not end. They attacked Herod's palace where many had fled for safety and killed 8,400 people there, looting their money. The Romans penetrated the walls to the upper city around September 25th. "Pouring into the alleys, sword in hand they massacred indiscriminately all who had taken refuge within . . . they choked the alleys with corpses and deluged the whole city with blood, . . . Toward evening they ceased slaughtering, but when night fell the fire gained mastery," (VI, 404, 406-407). and the next day saw "Jerusalem in flames" (VI, 407).

Of those taken prisoner, the tallest and most handsome were reserved for the triumphal march; of the rest, those over seventeen were sent either to the mines of Egypt or to be destroyed in the provincial theaters by the sword or wild beasts, while those under seventeen were sold as slaves. Josephus reports, "The total number of prisoners taken throughout the entire war amounted to ninety seven thousand, and of those who perished during the siege, from first to last, to one million one hundred thousand" (VI, 420).

"The Romans now set fire to the outlying quarters of the town and razed the walls to the ground . . . Caesar ordered the whole city and the temple to be razed to the ground, leaving only the loftiest of the towers, . . . and the portion of the wall enclosing the city on the west" (VI, 434; VII, 1). Thus it was that Jesus' prophecy in Matthew 24:2 regarding the temple stones being thrown down was fulfilled. Truly Christ's blood did come on the Jews who crucified him and on their children (Matthew 27:25) in accordance with his prediction. And if His predictions regarding the desolation of Jerusalem were fulfilled, should not we be watching for the fulfillment of His predictions about His second coming?

Quotations from Josephus taken from:

H. St. J. Thackeray, trans. *Josephus III: The Jewish War: Books IV-VII*. Loeb Classical Library. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1928.

<http://bterry.com/articles/bloodonheads.htm>

The Jesus of History and The Search for the Historical Jesus

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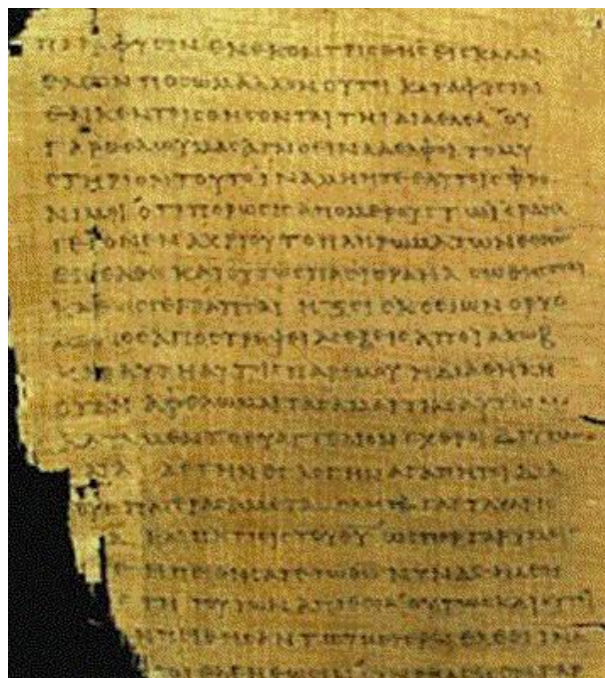
Article by: Kevin Cleary

Part Two: Criteria of Authenticity

Part two brings us to a discussion of how critical scholars understand the development of the bible.

Most would suggest that Paul's letters are the earliest Christian material, usually pointing out that Paul contains no reference to when Jesus lived, the virgin birth, miracles stories or to bodily resurrection. The only source(s) that would be considered as possibly earlier than Paul would be what are called 'saying gospels'. The theory is that these existed as collections of some of the common sentiments that Jesus communicated in His preaching. The most commonly referenced document is the "Q" gospel where "Q" stands for the German word "quelle" meaning source (Evans 55) (Geisler 618). This document is said to be a collection of sayings which was built upon by Matthew, Mark and Luke (Crossan, *The Birth of Christianity* 105). The gospel of Thomas is another document often claimed to be earlier than the canonical gospels and sometimes used as a source. More recently, J. D. Crossan has suggested that what he calls the cross gospel was another source that was used by Mark, then Matthew and Luke and finally John, which contained the passion narrative (Crossan 404).

This multiple source theory suggests that these contain a core collection of accurate information about Jesus now preserved in the New Testament gospels. Much of what is there, however, is said to have been added by various authors for pragmatic reasons (Crossan, *The Historical Jesus*, 258). For example it is suggested that the Matthew 18:15-20 pericope was invented to deal with disputes between Christians in the early centuries. Mark 7:14-22 is another example, where Jesus talks about what defiles a man. It is argued that since the concept of all foods being clean didn't become common in the Church until after Acts chapter ten, this passage must have been added after that time. In appendix 1 of by Crossan, he includes a list of sayings which he has marked with a + or – indicating whether or not a saying is original to Jesus or a later addition (Crossan, *The Historical Jesus*, 427). This kind of thinking is common among "second quest" scholars.



It should be noted that more recently a number of scholars have emphasised the Jewishness of Jesus. This emphasis among some scholars has been labelled a “*third quest*” (N. Wright 105). In general, those who accept the Jewish background of Jesus, try to place Him in that context and are less critical of the New Testament than those of the second quest.

It’s important to point out that not everyone divides historical Jesus research this way, many would still consider this part of the second quest. Before leaving the discussion of those who have undertaken to describe what Jesus was really like, an important note should be made. There have always been and continue to be scholars who argue and believe that the gospels are a reliable and accurate source of information about Jesus.

Those who come to the scriptures with the **assumption** that they are not an accurate or reliable source of information about Jesus, must then invent some method of separating fact from fiction. This has led those engaged in the search of the “*historical Jesus*” to develop certain criteria which they use to test the reliability of a particular passage or event.

Now it should be pointed out, that it is a valid exercise to apply criteria and reason to what we believe. We do this all the time when faced with a claim that seems unlikely or is for some other reason hard to believe. When this happens we also use certain criteria to test the trustworthiness of that claim. We might ask:

- who saw it happen?
- Are there some observable historical results of this claim?
- Is there a corroborating record somewhere of what happened?

Therefore it is not out of place to apply this kind of thinking to scriptures. The historical reliability of the Bible is one of the key things that separate it from other so called holy books. But having said that, there is both a right way and a wrong way to examine evidence. The right way is proceed with an open mind that is willing to go where the evidence leads. The wrong way is to start with preconceived notions about what happened or with an unwillingness to accept the results of the examination.

The criteria used to establish the historicity of an action or saying of Jesus are called “criteria of authenticity”. Craig Evans identifies six of these while also pointing out that he is aware of over twenty five that have been used or proposed by various scholars (Evans 48). Joel Willitts created a chart of criteria based on John Meier’s work which has five. (80). Stanley Porter lists five criteria, which he says, “have figured most prominently through the twentieth century till today” (100). When evaluating these lists and comparing them, a few commonalities become apparent. A general consensus emerges as to the most important criteria of authenticity which are as follows:

1. **Historical Coherence:** This criterion considers the known facts and uses them to establish a base line. It is generally accepted that Jesus attracted a following; that he drew negative attention from authorities, was executed and then proclaimed as Messiah and Son of God (Habermas 224-225). If some suggestion

is made about a saying or act of Jesus that doesn't fit with these, then its authenticity is questioned.

2. Embarrassment: This criterion deals with material in the gospels which would be embarrassing or inconvenient to the early church. These would not have been invented and so must be historical.
3. Multiple attestation: The question asked here is, how *many* sources are there for a certain saying or event. In other words, how many times and or how many places does the same story or event appear? The more it is found the more likely it is to be historical. There is considerable discussion about what constitutes a source.
4. Semitic Language Phenomenon: This criterion expresses the expectation that the sayings and activities of Jesus should reflect the language that He spoke and the culture in which he lived.
5. General Coherence: This criterion considers the overview of Jesus material and asks, does a saying or passage fit or agree with other material whose historicity has already been established?
6. Double dissimilarity: This criterion holds that material that is not consistent with early Christianity or ancient Judaism must have been original with Jesus. This is because neither of the aforementioned groups is likely to have invented a saying of Jesus that they would disagree with.

It is important to note that these criteria may yield very different results depending on the framework in which they are applied. Therefore, we need to ask – what is the appropriate framework? Should one come to scripture saying that only those portions which pass all the criteria are actually from Jesus? Or should these criteria serve only in a positive way to further confirm the historicity of Jesus' life and teaching?

There are two important things that will help to answer this question. The first pertains to the matter of miracles. If prior to reading the scriptures we decide that miracles cannot happen and never have, our skepticism has rejected them in advance. But if we accept that God can intervene in the flow of history, then there is no reason to reject the accounts provided by scripture indicating that He has done so.

Norman Geisler has demonstrated that to reject miracles out of hand is unreasonable. If a person accepts the existence of God and the miraculous nature of creation itself, why would they then rule out subsequent miracles during the following years?

The objections that have been raised against miracles are not sufficient to rule them out.

For example, those who argue from personal experience might conclude that since they have never seen a miracle, that miracles therefore do not happen. Yet many of the events that we accept as established fact fall outside of our personal experience. Even non-miraculous events are by their nature non-repeatable. With respect to these, we have learned to trust eyewitness accounts from reliable sources. Experience – even our collective experience can only prove that miracles are rare, a fact with which the scriptures agree. It is not unreasonable to believe in things that are rare.

- Each person on earth is unique and will only live once.
- The earth is one of a kind.
- All lifeforms on it, are exceedingly rare in the context of a lifeless universe all around us, yet no one doubts that life exist.

It is therefore not valid to begin with the false assumption that God does not exist and that miracles do not happen in order to validate a skeptical approach to the Biblical record since it disagrees with those assumptions. (Craig 254). A fair reading of the bible would give equal credence to both the miraculous and non-miraculous narratives, especially in light of the historical corroboration that is now available.

The second point that needs consideration is the overall historical accuracy of the New Testament documents. There are a number of good reasons to accept the New Testament as a trusted source of historical information.

1. When compared to what is known from secular history the New Testament is found to be extremely accurate.
2. The authors of the New Testament were close to the events they recorded. Many were direct witnesses or relied upon others who were eyewitnesses as their source of information.
3. The New Testament documents were written very shortly after the events they record. Had they been in error, those who were eyewitness would have objected and insisted that the record be set straight. Furthermore, not enough time had elapsed for the development of mythology. Consider the invitation of the apostle Paul in I Corinthians 15:1-11 for his readers to personally interview those who were eyewitness of the risen Christ.
4. The events as recorded in the New Testament have great explanatory power. Unless these events, including those recorded in the gospels are true, what possible reason would Jesus' followers have had to continued their allegiance to Him and His teachings? Why would they die for a lie...placing themselves under God's condemnation and knowing that theirs was a lost cause?
5. The events as recorded in the gospels also explain how the conversion of people who had been opposed to Jesus and Christianity (like the apostle Paul), came about.
6. One further reason that favours the historicity of the New Testament is the evidence of divine involvement both in its writing and its preservation.

It is reasonable therefore to conclude that an extremely skeptical approach to the New Testament is unwarranted and unfairly prejudicial. It is normal for ancient historical documents to be treated as reliable sources unless evidence arises to the contrary. This kind of treated ought to be extended to the scriptures as well, as indicated by the *criteria of authenticity* suggested above. This approach will then deepen our understanding and fortify our faith in what has already been proven to be a reliable source of information.

Abraham Believed God

Written on: July 31, 2023

Article by: Dave Knutson

Anyone reading the high-level summary of the life of Abraham in Romans 4 would never guess that the ‘father of the faithful’ did not always live up to that name.



The story of Abraham begins in earnest in Genesis 12 when God called Abraham with these words:

“Now the Lord said to Abram, “Go from your country, And from your relatives, And from your father’s house, To the land which I will show you; And I will make you into a great nation, And I will bless you, And make your name great; And *you shall* be a blessing; And I will bless those who bless you, And the one who curses you I will curse. And in you all the families of the earth will be blessed.” Gen 12:1-3

Abraham believed God and set out for the land that God had promised to give to him and to his descendants Gen 12:4-9. No sooner had he arrived in Canaan when a famine sent him to Egypt looking for food. On the way, he became afraid that the Egyptians would kill him and take Sarah because of her beauty. Without consulting God he convinced Sarah to pretend that she was only his sister and not also his wife. Abraham doubted God’s word and took steps to protect himself. Despite Abraham’s doubt and true to his word, God intervened with miracles making it clear to the Egyptians that Sarah was not to be touched nor Abraham harmed. Having been warned by God, Pharaoh delivered the polite version of an old fashioned *cussing-out*. The king was in the right, and Abraham was in the wrong. Because he doubted, God spoke to Abraham again, this time through a pagan king.

More than a decade later, Abraham did the same thing a second time. He was again afraid and lied to a Canaanite king named Abimelech...about his wife Sarah...with similar results.

In the years between these two events, Abraham grew in his faith. God repeated his promises to Abraham and Abraham for his part believed God and trusted Him such that God credited this to him for righteousness.(Gen 15). God ‘cut a covenant’ with Abraham and took an oath to fulfill his promises. He even put a time stamp on the arrival of Isaac (Gen 17:21) just before Abraham’s lapse into fear and doubt.

How strange then that the apostle Paul should write:

In hope against hope he (Abraham) believed, so that he might become a father of many nations according to that which had been spoken, “So shall your descendants be.” ***Without becoming weak in faith*** he contemplated his own body, now *as good as* dead since he was about a hundred years old, and the deadness of Sarah’s womb; ***yet, with respect to the promise of God, he did not waver in unbelief but grew strong in faith***, giving glory to God, and being fully assured that what *God* had promised, He was able also to perform. Therefore it was also credited to him as righteousness. (Rom 4:18-22)

Knowing what we do about Abraham, how can the scriptures claim that Abraham did not become weak in faith nor waver in unbelief? Or that instead, he grew strong in faith? ¹

Two things are readily apparent.

The first is that the scriptures do not ignore or gloss over human failure. They tell it like it is. Abraham is not made out to be someone whom he was not. At the same time, his failures and lapses in judgment were not allowed to define his life. His life with God was characterized by obedience as an expression of his faith.

The Hebrew writer captures this along with a glimpse into the theological substance of that faith when he wrote:

“By faith Abraham, when he was called, obeyed by going out to a place which he was to receive for an inheritance; and he left, not knowing where he was going. By faith he lived as a stranger in the land of promise, as *in* a foreign *land*, living in tents with Isaac and Jacob, fellow heirs of the same promise; for he was looking for the city which has foundations, whose architect and builder is God.” Heb 11:8-10

Abraham lived in the land, believing that it would one day become the possession of his descendants. In order to believe that, he also believed that God would give him an heir. He lived in that land but never built a house or established a village. He was a tent dweller as an expression of his theological insights into the promises of God. He looked beyond the physical promises to embrace their full spiritual implications. These gave strength to his convictions and longevity to his obedience. It is then very fitting, that in a chapter about faith and grace, that God delivered a gracious assessment of this man’s long obedience. In so doing, God promises to extend His graciousness to us, saying:

“Now not for his sake only was it written that it was credited to him, but for our sake also, to whom ***it will be credited***, to *us* who believe in Him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead, *He* who was delivered over because of our wrongdoings, and was raised because of our justification”. Romans 4:23-25

Abraham believed God and God was gracious.

God was not just gracious in spite of Abraham's occasional doubt, He was gracious knowing that faith on earth is a decision made in a place where doubt often seems more reasonable. This is why God has intervened in history, revealing his will through inspiration and preserving it by inscripturation. He has altered the course of history by opposing the wicked and blessing the righteous. And he has provided evidence of his existence that is both available all around us yet easily ignored (Romans 1:18-32)

The scriptures also reveal that spiritual forces of wickedness from beyond the temporal realm engage our thinking and influence our lives (Eph. 6:12). The spiritual struggle to believe is warfare conducted both by our souls and for their eternal destiny. The stakes are high and the results are eternal.

Now the kind of faith that has never doubted is the kind that many of us once had. Raised in the lord's church, we accepted what we were taught without digging any deeper. Sooner or later, our faith was challenged, forcing us to reconsider.

Some are overwhelmed and go down in flames. It does not occur to them to doubt their doubts instead of their faith, for even the capacity to doubt is from God. Doubt raises obstacles. Faith offers solutions. Others, like Abraham, do not waver in unbelief, but grow strong in faith. They accept the overwhelming evidence for God and for His plan of salvation.

Real faith then is not possible without doubt. Faith calls us to trust God for good and sufficient reasons and with that assurance that all doubt will disappear in the life to come. There are no shortcuts to the kind of faith which God credits to us for righteousness. The path is through doubt to a mature faith.

Barrie ON

¹We could cite other instances of equivocation on the part of Abraham. He asked God if Eliezer of Damascus as the the 'son of his house' might be his heir. Then he petitioned God to allow Ishmael to be his heir having come up with his own solution to the problem.

Back Home in Eswatini

Written on: July 31, 2023

Article by: Thayer Salisbury

Our return trip was uneventful. We left Fort Wayne on the morning of July 25 and arrived home on the afternoon of July 27. We may not be as lively as we once were, but we are still good travellers. We were unpacked and getting back into a routine within a couple of days.



Surgery

Of course, we will not have much chance to stay in our routine. August 7 we will travel to Johannesburg. Thayer has a pre-op checkup with a doctor on the 8th and surgery is scheduled for the 10th. For those of you interested, the surgeon calls this a “Gastroscopy and insertion NGT and laparoscopic reduction of giant hernia and Hernia repair and Nissen fundoplication.” Sounds exciting, doesn’t it? We must remain in Johannesburg until after the post-op appointment on August 24.

Elections

During our prayer request time on Sunday, the MC reminded the congregation to pray about the upcoming parliamentary election – and to keep a close eye on their children in the run-up to the election. Do you see the connection?

Children frequently disappear just before elections in Africa. It is important to keep your children close to home. In walking to school, they must be warned to stick together. A young child walking alone may end up the victim of a candidate hoping to win the election. Many Africans (including some in high office) still believe that the spiritual forces may be manipulated by means of child sacrifice. The blood and internal organs of children are used in charms sold to assure victory in the election.

This is horrible, of course. But I wonder if, in the sight of God, it is any worse than the situation in the post-Christian nations – where sexual perversion, mutilation, and the killing of children is openly advocated by so many.

We were met with many a welcoming smile on our first Sunday back. The most precious smile for me was that of a seven-year-old boy rescued about a year ago. He had been forced to beg so that his grandmother did not have to work. He had also been trafficked

to homosexuals. It takes time to overcome abuse like that. For nearly a year after being rescued, he never really smiled. But he is smiling now.

There is so much wickedness in our world today, and that wickedness is so often promoted by the very people who ought to be punishing it (Rom 13). But there are those who do what they can. The family who rescued this little boy is poor. They do not have clout with the government. But they saw a boy they could help, and they helped. Yes, we should cast our votes for the moral candidate (if there is a moral candidate), but more importantly we should do what we can to help someone near us. The solution to the world's ills is not in the hands of governments. The living Christ, working through his earthly body, is the solution to the world's problems. Politics is, to a large extent, a distraction from the work that really needs to be done.

Prayer items

Remember us in your prayers

Pray for our ability to work through distractions.

Pray for our health and safety.

Pray that more schools will use the books. Pray for

Political & economic stability in the region.