

Lecture 1 – The Story; The Historicity of the Gospels

“Repent for the kingdom of heaven is near.” Matthew 3:2 (NIV)

Key Terms

Historicity, C.S. Lewis’ trilemma, irreducible historical minimum

Objectives

*To understand the basic challenges to and defenses of the historicity of the Gospels

Lead Question

Is the historicity of the Gospels essential to our faith? How would you explain its importance to a 7th grader?

Note: For a helpful introduction to the relationship of history to our faith read V. Phillips Long’s book, *The Art of Biblical History*.

The Story; The Historicity of the Gospels

I. The Story

A. Growing up in Nazareth

1. Hellenistic
2. “Galilee of the Gentiles”

B. A compelling message:

1. The kingdom is at hand (John the Baptist)
2. “Repent for the kingdom is near” literally translated is “the reign of God is at hand.”

C. Signs, wonders and uncertainty

Jesus among the people

D. Consternation

Pharisees offended

E. Withdrawal for private teaching of disciples

F. Into Jerusalem and the temple

G. The powers arrayed—Jesus and the high priests

H. Tragedy...until something happened

II. The Historicity of the Gospels

A. Theme: The historicity of the Gospels is vital for the task of apologetics and evangelism because most semi-educated people have imbibed at the fountain of liberal skepticism.

1. The Gospel manuscripts easily meet the accepted standards for reliability advanced by objective historiography: access to events reported and objectivity (cf. embarrassing information).
2. Critics confidently subvert the reliability of the Gospels, passing off their disparaging judgments as the common conviction of all educated people.

B. Sample of critical literature

1. Mitchell, *The Gospel According to Jesus*, 1992. Separating “diamonds from dunghills.” *All reputable scholars acknowledge that the official gospels were compiled, in Greek, many decades after Jesus’ death, by men who had never heard his teaching, and that a great deal of what the “Jesus” of the gospels says originated not in Jesus’ own Aramaic words, which have been lost forever, but in the very different teachings of the early church...No good scholar...would call the Christmas stories anything but legends.* (Mitchell, 3-7).
2. The Jesus Seminar, *The Five Gospels & The Search for the Authentic Words of Jesus*, by Funk, Hoover et. al. Famous rating of authenticity of Jesus’ sayings by vote. Poor

credentials of the 40 scholars participating in seminar.

All Gospels late, unreliable, with non-miraculous Jesus. The true Jesus is a teacher, “Love your enemies...Turn the other cheek...Blessed are the poor...Give to Caesar ...Our father.”

3. Sample statements by Robert Funk, leader of the seminar.
4. Why would anyone want to kill this man? Given Roman reticence for capital punishment, how could Jesus be crucified? The moral sayings by an itinerant preacher are not sufficient cause.

*For more information on the Jesus Seminar visit their web page at <http://religion.rutgers.edu/jseminar>

*In what ways does the Jesus Seminar undermine biblical Christianity? How would you counsel your brother or sister who was struggling with these issues?

C. The challenge of the hour

1. University and media skeptics. They do not concede the “general reliability” of Bible.
2. C.S. Lewis’ famous trilemma argued: Jesus was either Lord, lunatic or liar.
 - a. Jesus claims deity in the Gospels. He does so either sincerely or insincerely.
 - b. If he was insincere, he is a vile liar who deceived his friends. But Jesus is not a vile man.
 - c. If he was sincere but wrong, he is a madman. But Jesus is not a madman.
 - d. Therefore He is Lord.
3. Critics avoid trilemma by denying that Jesus claimed deity. Legendary additions to His life allegedly follow pattern of fictionalized biographies of emperors and other community leaders.
4. Christian workers must often advance and defend the reliability of the Bible to seekers.

D. Issue: True Christianity stands or falls on its historicity.

We must answer the critics.

III. The Basis for Historicity (imagine the setting: at a major American research university)

- A. The universally accepted facts: Attested in Greco-Roman, Jewish, and Christian sources
 1. Jesus of Nazareth, itinerant preacher executed by crucifixion (the most ignominious death) for sedition after gathering many adherents in a popular movement.
 3. Yet “something happened” so that His death only enhanced His influence.
- B. Jesus’ influence
 1. Split Judaism into two camps
 2. Christianity became dominant religion of Greco-Roman world in 240 years.
- C. The nature of Jesus’ historical significance: How is Jesus significant?
 1. History-maker
 2. Great thinker
 3. Great personality
- D. The redemptive story of Jesus
 1. Jesus’ influence far exceeds these three reasons.
 2. Jesus lives forever, because He rose from a substitutionary death in resurrection victory.
 3. He is creator, sustainer and judge of the universe. His conduct fits His claim of deity.
- E. Secular response: What is the basis of these claims? What are the sources, the evidence?

IV. Our Sources (A vital interest for minds trained in the social sciences)

- A. Secular Roman and Jewish historians
 1. Roman: Pliny the younger, Suetonius, Tacitus, Julius Africanus, verify the basic data of Jesus’ life, death by crucifixion, and lasting influence.
 2. Jewish source: refers to “the Nazarene who practiced magic and led Israel astray.” Sanhedrin 107b
 3. Josephus: Jesus a wise man who performed feats, had followers, was crucified by Pilate.

B. The four Gospels

1. Gospels agree with the secular histories and go much farther. Example: the crucifixion. Given the status of crucifixion, if Jesus' disciples fabricated this, they would be too stupid for words.
2. Conclusion: Secular and Christian sources give us an irreducible historical minimum.

C. Other gospels

About 50 extant or mentioned. Sources: Nag Hammadi Library, Robinson and NT Apocrypha, Hennecke and Schneemelcher. Categories: gospels of infancy and parents, gospels of passion and resurrection, Jewish-Christian gospels, heretical gospels.

1. Gospels of Jesus' infancy and parents satisfy curiosity. Examples.
2. Gospels of passion and resurrection. Examples.
3. Heretical gospels, especially gnostic gospels. See Nag Hammadi Library

*Sayings of Jesus decontextualized. Almost no reference to history.

Gnostic: secret knowledge to the initiated

Mystical: pantheistic and self-contradictory

Docetic: No interest in miracles, final week, Jesus' relations with the poor, the outcast, etc.

Evaluation: These gospels show by way of contrast how strong the biblical Gospels are.

D. The quality of the NT witnesses. We have many reasons to believe that the Gospel accounts are historically reliable, even without appealing to the work of the Holy Spirit.

1. Education and memory. Ancient education developed skills in memorization. Scribes in training expected to memorize "every word and expression" of their teachers.
2. The synoptic Gospels' reports of Jesus' teaching attain nearly 90% identical wording.
3. Standards for historiography allowed selectivity within speeches but not alteration. Early Christians punished for fabrication. See Tertullian, ANF 3:677 on an early Christian novel. "But if the writings, which...go under Paul's name, claim Thecla's example as a license for women's teaching and baptizing, let them know that, in Asia, the presbyter who composed that writing, as if he were augmenting Paul's fame from his store, after being convicted and confessing that he had done it from love of Paul, was removed from his office."
4. Writing: "If your rabbi is teaching, and you have no paper, write it on your sleeve."
5. Poetry and Jesus' rhetorical style are memorable. See Stein.
6. Memorable events emblazon themselves on the minds of witnesses for life. Illustration

Disciples and other eyewitnesses had chance to recount history in each other's presence, perfect their memory by reminding and correcting each other if necessary. cf. Wenham.

How would you encourage your Christian brother or sister whose faith is attacked by those who claim Jesus was just "a good teacher"?

How would you help a young post-modern understand the essential role that the historical reliability of the Gospels plays in their new-found faith?

Describe for the skeptic or nervous believer how non-biblical sources strengthen our faith in Jesus.