

WGC
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Has anyone ever told you that the stories of the Bible are fairy tales? Even if no one has said those words to you, you're probably aware that it's a common belief in our world. Maybe you've even been tempted to think it yourself.

The reason the majority of people believe the Bible is full of fairy tales is not because they've read the Bible and researched it for themselves, but because that's what popular intellectuals and writers are saying. They may not be using the word fairy tale; but they are using words like legend and myth.

This past week I listened to an interview with an archeologist named Israel Finkelstein who is also a practising Jew. Mr. Finkelstein distinguishes between tradition on the one hand and history on the other. On the one hand, he celebrates Passover every year with his family because that is the tradition of his people. It's what gives him a sense of belonging and meaning in life.

On the other hand, he denies that the Passover event recorded in the book of Exodus ever took place. As a modern rationalist he is convinced that miraculous events like the ones recorded in the book of Exodus simply don't happen. As an archeologist he's

convinced that there is no hard evidence for those events.

When I was in Graduate School, I was introduced to thinkers like Mr. Finkelstein who claim to be Christians. Like him they distinguish between tradition and history. On the one hand they attend church and celebrate Christmas and Easter.

On the other hand they deny that the miracles recorded in the Gospels, including the virgin birth of Jesus and his resurrection, ever took place. The Gospel writers, they argue, wrote those stories not to tell us what actually happened in history, but to assure us that God has power over nature, over diseases and over death.

Their arguments persuade a lot of people. I remember talking to a friend about the resurrection of Jesus. We had gone through Bible College and Graduate School together.

At some point, he started to make the same distinction between tradition and history. On the one hand he still believed that God has power over death. On the other hand he could no longer believe that God had actually raised Jesus from the dead.

For him it wasn't important that Jesus came back to life. All that mattered was that we trust God's ability to rescue us from death.

If you're right, I asked to him, and God really has power over death, why can't you believe that he raised Jesus from the dead? And, if you're right that God did not raise Jesus, then why should I believe he has the ability to rescue me from death?

You see, what we believe as Christians is closely tied to God's actions in real history; and, if God did not act in history the way the Bible describes, then many of the things we believe become nothing more than fairy tales; and the things we do as believers become a pitiful waste of time.

That's why the apostle Paul wrote these words in 1 Corinthians 15,

And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins. Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ are lost. If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied.

Like I said, many of the things we believe as Christians are based on the acts of God recorded in Scripture. For a lot of modern people, though, it's easier to doubt those acts of God than it is to believe in them. -

How do we answer their doubts? How do we overcome our own doubts about the claims of Scripture?

One thing that helps me overcome these doubts is my belief that the Bible itself is God's written and reliable Word.

I believe that about the Bible first and foremost because that's what Jesus believed about his Bible. By the way, Jesus' Bible consisted of the Hebrew Scriptures, which make up our Old Testament. Our Bible also includes the New Testament.

If I claim to be a follower of Christ, then I'm going to adopt his attitude toward Scripture in general. In John 10:35 Jesus made it clear that the claims of Scripture cannot be set aside because they speak with divine authority. So my faith in Christ includes faith in the Bible as God's written and reliable Word.

At the same time I believe that, if the Bible is God's written and reliable Word, history will testify to its truthfulness. For that reason I love to pay attention to history. I don't consider myself a historian; but I am a student of history because in studying the past my faith is enriched and affirmed.

Now, even though I see history as a powerful witness to the reliability of the Bible, I recognize that the study

of history has its limitations. First of all, the study of history can be very subjective. When we study the past, we tend to see the things we want to see and ignore the things we don't want to see.

Let me tell you about the Smith family. The Smith family was very proud of their history. Their ancestors had come to America on the Mayflower. Among their relatives were Senators and Wall Street wizards.

To celebrate their story, the descendants of these people decided to compile a family history, a legacy for their children and grandchildren. To do the job right, they hired a renowned author.

During the research, though, a problem arose. You see, great-uncle George had turned to bank robbery and horse thieving. At the end of his career, he was arrested, imprisoned and executed by electric chair. His story was a blemish on the family's history.

The family was concerned; but the author they had hired said not to worry. He promised to solve the problem. When the book appeared, this is what the Smith family read about Uncle George, "Early in life George Smith successfully acquired great wealth through his interactions with the banking and agricultural industries. Later in life he occupied a chair of applied electronics at an important government institution. He was attached to his position by the

strongest of ties. His death came as a great shock." End of story.

Like I said, history has its limitations. We tend to see the things we want to see and ignore the things we don't like.

Another limitation of history is that it can never provide absolute proof for anything. One archeologist might discover chariot wheels at the bottom of the Red Sea and say they belonged to the Egyptian army that chased the Israelites. Another archeologist might look at those artifacts, shrug her shoulders and walk away or come up with an entirely different story.

Like I said, the study of history can't prove anything beyond doubt; all it can do is provide evidence that needs to be interpreted. At the same time, though, some interpretations make a whole lot more sense than others.

So, this morning, I'm not pretending to give absolute proof for anything. Rather, what I want to do is point out evidence that I see as a testimony to the truthfulness of the Bible. Each one of us has to judge the evidence, much like members of a jury.

Something we have to remember is that God never provides so much proof to force us to believe in him and his Word. There's always a demand for faith. At

the same time, God always provides enough evidence to make faith a reasonable thing.

If you've come here this morning convinced that the Bible is full of fairy tales, nothing I say will change your mind. If you've come here open to the possibility that God has acted in history, you may find the evidence persuasive.

Artifacts Left in the Desert Sand

So, let me share with you three ways that I see history testifying to the truth of Scripture and the events that it reports. The first way is through the artifacts it has left in the sand.

For most of us here this morning, the stories of the Bible are as much a part of history as the story of Christopher Columbus and the story of Neil Armstrong landing on the moon. Based on what the Bible tells us, there's no question in our minds that Joshua fought the battle of Jericho and David killed Goliath.

For other people, though, the stories of the Bible are legends and myths unless there's solid evidence for them outside the Bible. For that reason, a lot of historians have questioned the historical factuality of everything from the existence of Abraham to Israel's exodus from Egypt to their conquest of Canaan.

Because there was no evidence for him outside the Bible, until a few decades ago a lot of historians were convinced that King David was a legendary figure like King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table. At the most, they believed he was a tribal chieftain whose exploits had been greatly exaggerated by the biblical writers.

Thanks to the work of archeologists, though, artifacts are being unearthed, artifacts that provide strong evidence for people and events mentioned in the Bible. Two years ago a university professor from the States published a list of fifty Old Testament characters that have been confirmed by archeology.

One of those Bible characters was King David. In 1993, archeologists found an engraved stone at an archeological site called Tel Dan that dates back to more than 800 years before Jesus. The engravings on this stone make a clear reference to the House of David.

Since then other artifacts have been dug up that refer to King David. Now only a handful of highly skeptical scholars still question whether or not he was a real person with a real kingdom. Artifacts buried in the sand have confirmed the truthfulness of Scripture's claims about David.

One Bible character that does not appear on the list of Bible characters confirmed by archeology is Joshua. Most archeologists and historians still say that Joshua and his exploits are nothing more than folklore created by the biblical authors.

However, back in the 1950's an archeologist named Kathleen Kenyon dug up the walls of ancient Jericho and found the kind of destruction that would have occurred if the Bible's account is true. She found fallen city walls; she found burned stores of grain; she found evidence of destruction by fire; she even found a section of the wall with dwellings in it that was still intact, suggestive of Rahab's dwelling.

Despite the evidence, though, Ms. Kenyon was still convinced that the stories of Joshua and the battle of Jericho are fiction because the supposed date of the battle didn't match her timeline of events. According to her timeline, the walls of Jericho were destroyed about 1500 BC, while Joshua and the Israelites didn't show up until about 1250 BC; and there is no evidence of destruction from that time period.

One thing Ms. Kenyon never considered, though, was the possibility that her timeline might be off by two or three hundred years. Of course, her timeline couldn't be wrong; so it must be the Bible that's wrong. You see, she had decided beforehand what she was looking for; and, guess what, she found it.

Like I said earlier, the study of history can be very subjective. We see the things we want to see and ignore the stuff that doesn't fit our theories. The evidence for the battle of Jericho is there for anyone who is willing to see it.

So history testifies to the truth of Scripture through the artifacts it has left behind. I've talked about the engraved stone that refers to the House of David and the walls of Jericho. I could go on and talk about a whole lot of other artifacts.

If you're interested in more, earlier this week I posted a link to a fascinating documentary on my Facebook page that looks at archeological evidence for Israel's sojourn in Egypt, their slavery and exodus, as well as their conquest of the Promised Land.

These artifacts do not prove that God acted in history. In order to believe that, you still need faith. Without faith it is impossible to please God. What these artifacts tell us, though, is that the stories of the Bible are rooted in verifiable history. They're not like stories that appear in other religious texts, stories that have no connection to actual events.

Facts Recorded in Ancient Sources

Another way that history testifies to the truthfulness of Scripture is through facts that are recorded in ancient sources, sources that are still available to us today.

Every so often TIME Magazine publishes a list of the most influential people in history. Without fail Jesus Christ appears near the top of that list. Despite the fact that Jesus is considered one of the most influential people of all time, there are still some people who deny that he even existed.

Listen to the opening paragraph of a blog on the website www.godlessgeeks.com. The blog is called *Did Jesus Really Exist?*

Like most people ... I had always assumed that Jesus Christ had really existed.... After examining the biblical, extra-biblical, and early Christian evidence, along with the myths of the time, I have concluded that there is no reliable evidence that Jesus actually existed — and significant evidence that he was purely mythical.

<http://www.godlessgeeks.com/JesusExist.htm#1>

I hardly need to tell you that this guy had his mind made up about Jesus before he looked at the evidence. When he finally got around to looking at

the evidence, he found exactly what he was looking for.

The reality is that the vast majority of serious historians who have looked at the evidence for Jesus, *including many who are agnostic and atheist*, are convinced that Jesus was a real person and a whole lot more.

When he was writing his book, *The Case for the Real Jesus*, Lee Strobel interviewed some of these historians; and he came up with five facts about Jesus that few serious historians question. These facts are based on their study of the New Testament and other ancient sources.

On their own these five facts might seem obvious and unremarkable to us; but when they are viewed together like we're going to do right now they testify to the greatest act of God in history: the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

The first fact is that Jesus was killed by crucifixion.

You and I already know that from the testimony of Scripture; but historians want evidence from outside the Bible; and they get it from at least five ancient sources, both Roman and Jewish, that refer to Jesus' cruel death on a cross.

Here they are in case you're interested:

- Tacitus
- Josephus
- Lucian of Samosata
- Mara Bar-Serapion
- The Jewish Talmud

Based on what these writers recorded, any historian with any kind of credibility believes not only that Jesus existed, but that he died on a Roman cross.

The second fact is that Jesus' disciples believed that he rose from the dead and appeared to them. Again, this is a no-brainer for you and me; but historians want evidence; and they find it both inside and outside the New Testament.

I hardly need to tell you that the New Testament is full of reports that the disciples saw Jesus alive after his death. In 1 Corinthians 15 the apostle Paul claimed that the risen Jesus appeared to each one of his disciples, to five hundred people at one time, to his half-brother James and finally to him.

If the New Testament evidence were all we had, it would be easy to write it off as legend; but we have more. We have the writings of early Christians who lived within a few decades of the apostles. Some of them were even taught by the apostles. These writers

all agree that the apostles believed that they saw the risen Christ.

In fact, they were so convinced of what they had seen that all twelve of Jesus' disciples chose to suffer for their faith; and eleven out of those twelve were executed for their faith. It's conceivable that one or two out of twelve might suffer and die for a myth, but not twelve out of twelve.

One historian, who is also an atheist, wrote this: "It may be taken as historically certain that Peter and the disciples had experiences after Jesus' death in which Jesus appeared to them as the risen Christ." (Gert Lüdemann cited in *The Case for the Real Jesus*.) This historian believes those experiences were something subjective, like dreams or visions. The important thing for us is that he's convinced that the disciples believed Jesus came back to life.

The third fact is that Saul of Tarsus, who had been a persecutor of Christians, was convinced that he had encountered the risen Christ, converted from Judaism to Christianity and became the apostle Paul.

Once again, you and I don't need to be convinced of that; but historians, whether they are believers or not, are convinced of the same. They are convinced not only by the things Paul wrote in his letters, but also by the things early Christian authors wrote about him.

What makes Paul's conversion remarkable is that he had everything to lose by giving up Judaism and nothing to gain by converting to Christianity. In Judaism he had power and respect. As a Christian he got some respect, but a whole lot more disrespect. In the end he lost his head.

The fourth fact is that Jesus' skeptical half-brother, James, converted to Christianity.

If your brother or mine claimed to be the Messiah, we would take him to a psychiatrist; and in Mark 3:21 we read that Jesus' family wanted to do the same with him. They came to seize him, we're told, because they thought he was out of his mind.

But there is indisputable evidence inside and outside the New Testament that at least one of Jesus' siblings, James, came to believe in him as the Messiah. In fact, sources outside the Bible tell us that James was executed for his faith in his brother sometime around the year AD 66.

The last fact that most serious historians accept is the fact that Jesus' tomb was empty. The reason historians believe this is not because of what they find in the ancient sources, but because of what they don't find.

You see, within a few weeks of Jesus' death, his disciples were preaching in public that he had risen from the dead. In order to prove them wrong, all their opponents had to do was produce the body or prove that it had been removed from the tomb; but nothing like that happened.

Instead, the enemies of Christianity attested to the fact that the tomb was empty. They accused the disciples of stealing the body, which one historian described as a lame explanation. This historian went on to ask,

“Are we supposed to believe they conspired to steal the body, pulled it off, and then were willing to suffer continuously and even die for what they knew was a lie? That’s such an absurd idea that scholars universally reject it today.” (Michael Licona cited in *The Case for the Real Jesus*, p. 124)

I could go on; but that’s enough. The facts we just looked at might seem obvious and unremarkable to us; but when we put them all together they demand an explanation.

Given the fact that Jesus died on the cross, how do we explain that the tomb was empty? How do we explain that the people closest to him were so convinced that they had seen him alive that they embraced suffering and death for their belief? That Saul of Tarsus an

enemy and persecutor of Christianity as well as James the skeptical half-brother of Jesus became convinced of the same?

These facts don't prove that Jesus rose from the dead. The only way to do that would be to travel back in time and stand at the sealed tomb the moment he burst forth. But these facts testify to the Bible's resurrection accounts by virtue of the fact that the only way to explain them, without ignoring or stretching anyone of them, is that God really raised Jesus from the dead.

The Story of Christianity's Survival and Power

So, history testifies to the truthfulness of Scripture through the artifacts it has left in the sand and through the facts that are found in ancient sources. There's one more way that history affirms the Bible; and that is through the story of Christianity's survival and ongoing power to change lives.

Throughout history, all kinds of people have attacked the Bible and Christianity. A few have predicted that the Bible would become a museum piece before long and Christianity would become extinct.

One of those people was the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche, the son of a Lutheran pastor. He declared that Christianity was bound to perish as

people gave up their superstitions and became enlightened.

Karl Marx, the originator of Marxism and a father of Communism, was another one. He was convinced that religion would soon be replaced by reason and science.

Nikita Khrushchev was the leader of the Soviet Union from 1953-1964. In 1963 he allegedly promised to parade the last Soviet Christian on television within ten years.

John Lennon made this prediction: “Christianity will go. It will vanish and shrink. I needn't argue about that; I'm right and I'll be proved right. We're more popular than Jesus now; I don't know which will go first—rock 'n' roll or Christianity.”

I agree that many if not all of our expressions of Christianity will someday cease to exist. In fact, I think it's a good thing when our religious institutions and denominations shut down after they've served their purposes. I generally don't shed tears when I hear about a church or ministry closing its doors.

Why? Because I believe Jesus Christ when he said, “I will build my church and the gates of hell will not prevail against it.”

Do we see evidence that Christ is building his kingdom? You bet we do.

Earlier I mentioned Friedrich Nietzsche. He predicted that Christianity was bound to perish as people became more and more enlightened. How many of you know who Friedrich Nietzsche was? Maybe a handful; but we all know who Jesus Christ was and is.

The majority of earth's population know his name. People continue to put their faith in him. While Christianity is losing its influence in the West, it's gaining influence in the East. For every Christian institution that closes its doors, the Spirit of God is starting something new down the road or around the world.

Here in the West, a lot of people fear the migration of people from other parts of the world with different religions. Often Christians get caught up in the fear. We're afraid they're going to take over, take away our freedom of religion and our way of life.

I'm not saying those things will never happen or that I don't have my own fears; but as Christians we have divine promises that should replace our fears with hope.

There are reports of Muslims converting to Christ by the hundreds and thousands. Based on Jesus'

promises, we can see them not as a threat, but as potential members of Christ's kingdom. Take heart. Jesus has overcome the world. He is building his kingdom and the gates of hell will not prevail.

Earlier I also mentioned Karl Marx, who predicted that religion would give way to reason and science. Reason and science have made huge strides since Marx was around; and they've improved our standard of living in big ways.

I'm a great believer in reason and science; but there are questions that reason can never answer; and there are needs that science can never meet. Only God can meet these needs; and he does it through his Son, Jesus Christ. That's why religion in general and Christianity in particular will never give way to them.

You probably know that Karl Marx was one of the founders of communism. Earlier I also mentioned Nikita Khrushchev who was a leader of communist Russia and promised to parade the last Russian Christian on TV.

One of the great ironies of history is that Communism is finished in Russia and around the world, while Christianity is growing in its wake. Seventy years of Communist rule could not eradicate Christian faith in Russia; and now Orthodox Christianity is considered its official religion.

The last person I mentioned earlier was John Lennon, lead singer of the Beatles. Last Wednesday was the fiftieth anniversary of their last performance in Canada. I have to say that the Beatles are still pretty popular; most people in our part of the world at least know who they were; but they are certainly not as popular as Jesus around the world.

I'm sure their music still sells; but the Bible is by far the number one best seller around the world each and every year; and Jesus is still building his church. I'm sorry John, but you were wrong. (Actually, I'm not sorry.)

CONCLUSION

For a book of fairy tales, legends and myths, the Bible sure gets a lot of support from history. History has left countless artifacts in the sand that tell us that the acts of God reported in the Bible are rooted in real history. Just in the past few decades archeologists have unearthed artifacts that confirm a lot of events and people that skeptical scholars have questioned, including the collapse of Jericho's walls and the reign of King David.

History has also given us written records of events that only make sense if we allow that God has acted in history. We looked at five facts about Jesus that even

agnostic and atheist historians believe. How do we explain those facts without ignoring or stretching any one of them? The easiest way to explain them is to say that God did what the Bible said he did: he raised Jesus from the dead. Of course, in order to believe that, you have to accept that he has real power over death.

Not only has history given us artifacts and records; it keeps on giving us accounts of Christianity's survival and ongoing power despite all the predictions of its demise.

When rumor got out that Mark Twain had died, he supposedly told a reporter that the report of his death had been greatly exaggerated. The same can be said about the predictions and reports of Christianity's demise. Yes, Christian institutions and denominations come and go; but the Word of the Lord stands forever.