

THE HISTORICAL RELIABILITY OF THE BIBLE?

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The Bible's Narrative Plot in a Nutshell

God creates the universe and humanity. Human free choice to rebel leads to alienation from God. God initiates a plan to bring us back to himself, through Abraham and his descendants—the people of Israel. He rescues them from slavery in Egypt in the time of Moses, gives them laws to follow in response, and promises a fertile land for them to live in with peace and prosperity contingent on their obedience to his Law. After 40 years of wilderness wanderings, they conquer part of the land under Joshua. Israel is led first by judges and then kings (over a united but later divided kingdom). Disobedience frequently leads to surrounding nations attacking Israel and even taking many of their people into exile (especially to Assyria and Babylon). But they are restored to the land, and are promised a deliverer who will rid the land once-and-for-all of foreign powers. Jesus of Nazareth, a first-century Jew in Israel, shows many signs of being that “Messiah,” but declares spiritual liberation to be more important than physical liberation. He works miracles, fulfills prophecies, teaches wisely, loves the unlovely but challenges the religious power brokers of his day. His movement seems to be extinguished, however, by his execution at the hands of Roman authorities. Nevertheless, his followers claim to see him alive again, begin to spread his message, worship him as God, and within one generation have established small house churches in most major parts of the empire. These followers increasingly distinguish themselves from all existing religious options, are increasingly persecuted for doing so, but improve the lives of people and the morals of societies around them and await Jesus’ “second coming” to right all the world’s wrongs, vindicate his followers, vanquish his enemies and usher in a recreated heavens and earth.

But Did These Things Happen? Working Backwards through the Events

The New Testament: 4 Gospels—biographies of Jesus, 1 book of the Acts of the Apostles, 21 letters, 1 apocalypse

There is an unbroken chain of evidence for *Jesus’ followers back to near 30 C.E.*—the most likely date of Jesus’ crucifixion.

Paul’s undisputed letters are dated to the 50s by almost all NT scholars. Galatians 1-2 allows us to date Paul’s conversion to at least 17 years earlier, and 1 Corinthians 15:1-7 shows that the bodily resurrection of Jesus was part of an early Christian confession of faith taught to new converts already by that time.

The *Book of Acts* contains dozens of names of people and places around the Roman empire that we know of from non-Christian Jewish, Greek, and Roman sources, and the details of Paul’s missionary journeys described in Acts correlate remarkably well with the scattered autobiographical remarks found in his letters.

Lengthy books chronicle the information we know about these details, study tours enable people to comb the key sites for themselves, and archeology uncovers more corroboration with each passing decade.

Historical fiction was largely unknown until a few centuries ago; in the ancient Mediterranean world, blatant anachronisms and/or numerous unknown names of people and places (or references to mythological characters from centuries or millennia earlier) signaled the presence of fiction. But this is not what we find in the New Testament.

General cultural features and numerous specific details support the historicity of *the Gospels’ teaching about Jesus*.

Circumstances favoring careful historical work by the Gospel writers include

Jesus the Jew—all the customs and issues match well the culture of early 1st-century Israel. Their theological convictions about Jesus as a heaven-sent teacher and his unique activities

An educational environment of rote memorization plus flexibility in retelling oral tradition. The literary genre of the Gospels (see Luke 1:1-4), and the use of previous written sources

The early (1st century) dates of their composition (cf. most other ancient biographies)

Further corroboration of numerous details found in the canonical Gospels include

Embarrassing, awkward material more likely jettisoned if no traditional constraints

The massive findings of archaeology in Israel which continue to mount virtually every year

Non-Christian testimony from Josephus, Talmud (Jewish); Suetonius, Tacitus, Pliny, Thallus (Roman); and Lucian, Celsus, Mara bar Serapion (Greek)

Quotations, allusions to Jesus' tradition in Christian writings predating the Gospels (esp. most of Paul's letters and probably the letter of James)

The Old Testament: Books of the Law, Historical Narrative, Prophecy, Wisdom and Poetic Literature

The farther back one proceeds historically, the less corroborating evidence one finds, but that is true almost everywhere in the study of world history. The only reason we have so much from the Ancient Near East to begin with is because of its remarkably dry climate and careful preservation of important documents.

Intertestamental Period: For Israel, Rome occupied the land from 63 B.C.E. onward; the Maccabean revolt led to a century of independence (164-63 B.C.E.), which was preceded by Greek and Syrian rule (331-164 B.C.E.) and Persian rule before that (539-331 B.C.E.). Written records (esp. Dead Sea Scrolls) abound from these cultures.

Return from Exile (under Persia) (539-424 B.C.E.): Corroborating references extend even to minor characters (e.g., Baruch, Sanballat). Persian, Greek chronicles refer to almost all the emperors recorded in the Bible at this time. Plus countless customs, artifacts and remains from everyday life have been preserved.

The Divided Monarchy and the Exile (approx. 930-540 B.C.E.): References outside the Bible to numerous kings of Israel appear (e.g., Jehoram, Omri, Hezekiah, Jehu), along with accounts of battles by foreign kings (e.g., Sennacherib, Nebuchadnezzar). Again, daily life, culture and customs all fit the relevant time periods.

The United Monarchy with Kings Saul, David and Solomon (approx. 1050-930 B.C.):

The oldest written inscription confirming any biblical character was found in 1993—referencing the “house of David” at Tel Dan (in the northernmost part of Israel).

Solomon's temple was patterned after several other Ancient Near Eastern models that have been discovered (just as the Bible says Israel wanted), but they differ from the styles of later centuries.

The Conquest of Canaan and the Period of the Judges (approx. 13th-11th centuries B.C.E.): Joshua describes dramatic victories; Joshua and Judges, all that remained unconquered. Archaeology overwhelmingly confirms both trends, despite loose ends. There is a sudden appearance of sites in Israel without pig bones in their garbage dumps, but plenty of other villages where they still remain.

The Exodus (approx. 13th century B.C.E.): Egyptian evidence points to a large group of foreigners, enslaved, construction workers, and the sudden departure of a large number of them, all after a change in Pharaoh. Also, the form of Deuteronomy matches (only) 2nd millennium B.C. covenant-treaty forms.

The Patriarchal Narratives and the Time of Slavery in Egypt (approx. 17th -13th centuries B.C.E): No corroborating references to names of key characters yet discovered, but customs all ring true where they can be tested (use of genealogical sources, marriage customs, nomadic behavior, even price of slaves).

From Creation to Abraham (primeval history): The “big bang” and intelligent design (quite different from “creation science”) both fit Genesis well, and traditions exist from every continent about a huge flood.

Conclusions: None of this proves every historical detail but it creates a climate favorable to belief. Much then depends on whether one reads with a “hermeneutics of suspicion” or of “consent.”

For Further Reading

- Introductory: Kaiser, Walter C., Jr., *The Old Testament Documents: Are They Reliable and Relevant?* (2001).
New International Version Archaeological Study Bible (2005).
 *Sheler, Jeffrey L. *Is the Bible True?* (1999).
- Intermediate: Arnold, Bill T. and Richard S. Hess, eds. *Ancient Israel's History: An Introduction to Issues and Sources* (2014).
 *Blomberg, Craig L. *The Historical Reliability of the New Testament* (2016).
 van Voorst, Robert E. *Jesus Outside the New Testament* (2000).
- Advanced: Hemer, Colin J. *The Book of Acts in the Setting of Hellenistic History*, ed. Conrad Gempf (1989).
 Keener, Craig S. *Acts*, vol. 1 (2012).
 *Kitchen, Kenneth A. *On the Reliability of the Old Testament* (2003).