

Gospel and History: An Uneasy Partnership

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For many believers, historical fact takes secondary place to present-day experience. Almost no conversion story will start with the words, "I was researching the historical reliability of the Bible when..." And while some stories may begin with these words as a description of the thing that *enabled* them to first investigate faith, no conversion story is complete without a moment of conviction, the realisation that Jesus Christ was not only God in *history* but in the present as well, and that He wanted to be involved in the life of the individual now investigating Him. Which is to say that history alone will not convert a person, however earnest the seeker.

Given this, we must ask the reverse question: can history alone cause a person to lose or reject faith? This is a complex question, as it raises all manner of issues about the unspoken hierarchy in which we place many aspects of intellectual and spiritual life. Even the words "intellectual" and "spiritual" will automatically fall into different places on that hierarchy for many. A non-Christian historian teaching at a University, for instance, will no doubt value "intellectual" much more than "spiritual". The "intellectual" will be considered as "that which is rational and verifiable" whereas the "spiritual" will belong in a domain of "intangible" and "unreliable". This, of course, is a self-fulfilling and circular worldview. The spiritual will almost never be historically verifiable, because it belongs in a domain that history cannot by its very nature deal with. History cannot be concerned with internalities because they are by nature subjective. It can concern itself with motives – ie. why Person A performed Action B – and spirituality may perhaps fall into the category of motivation. Yet that does nothing to prove whether or not the spiritual motivation is grounded in fact or is simply a "feeling". The account, for instance, of a battle between Israel and one of its enemies will not be able to describe the intervention of God's spirit within that conflict. Nor can it verify whether or not the prayers of the people led directly to that defeat. It can, perhaps, demonstrate that prayer coincided with a very unlikely victory. Yet unlikely victories happen often enough that they are not, by themselves, conclusive proof of miracles. This, of course, all means simply that belief in the spiritual, the supernatural or the miraculous will have to take place *apart from* historical endeavour. They occupy separate domains.

But there is overlap, of course, and it is this strange overlap with which this essay is concerned. The overlap, when it comes to something like the Gospels, is relatively simple. A modern believer may have been spiritually convicted of the lordship of Jesus Christ, but all this would be fairly immaterial if Jesus Christ himself had never existed, or if the basis of belief in Him were to be proven unreliable or even false. (Were it to be possible, for instance, to prove that Jesus did not actually die, or that belief in the resurrection only surfaced several hundred years after his death, then the spiritual belief might have to be brought into line with the testimony of history.) Given that the accounts of Jesus' life and birth stand up pretty well to scrutiny (notwithstanding scholarly opposition, which is only to be expected when looking at a topic of any great importance), this kind of straightforward "history-refutes-spirit" situation seems unlikely to

occur. An archaeologist friend of mine once said that a particular discrepancy within history was not going to make or break his faith; "Jesus' body might, though." The statement was an obvious joke: if they could not find Jesus' body within a generation of his death, at a time when the location of such a body would have very much served the interests of many, then they are unlikely to find it now, nearly two millennia later.

So what details of history should make or break our faith, if any? Here we come to a crucial question about the nature of faith. For some, faith is considered a safe haven from fact; it is neither strengthened nor weakened by the vagaries of history. Such faith is attractive to some and reprehensible to others. I am going to argue, from personal experience, that a middle ground is required. What I mean is this: that our faith should not be divorced from "fact", but should also be rigorous enough, strong enough on its own terms, to withstand the barrage of intellectual opposition.

First of all, we need to have a realistic sense of what matters history can or cannot resolve. Many regard a science like archaeology as highly precise, when in fact it is not. This is not to say that archaeology is utterly *unreliable*, rather that we need to have a realistic sense of its limitations. This matter has already been discussed cogently by a number of Biblical archaeologists, so I will not deal with it in any detail here. Nor is it in any sense my area of expertise. However, I must say that, as a layman, I have often been too easily disrupted in my faith by experts who profess more than they can reasonably profess. One of the first rules of archaeology is that "absence of evidence is not evidence of absence". When dealing with archaeology, we must remember that we are looking at what, by and large, mere chance has allowed to survive. When looking, for instance, at what documents have survived from the Roman era, there is often no rhyme or reason why a letter of no importance has remained while arguably essential documents have been seemingly lost forever. There are sometimes, however, other factors which make "absence of evidence" quite reasonable. It is unsurprising, for instance, that we have no remains from the Exodus, since nomadic groups are notoriously hard to trace in archaeological remains. Nor is the absence of temple or palace remains from the United Kingdom of Israel a real source of concern, given the almost complete destruction of Jerusalem by Babylon in the sixth century. When dealing with such "absence of evidence", it is only reasonable to say that we will have to look elsewhere for proof or disproof of belief.

Secondly, we need to acknowledge that history is never unbiased. A Christian will look at the lack of evidence for King Solomon's mini-empire and will say, "That does not trouble me. My faith is in Jesus Christ." A non-Christian will say, "See? Christianity is built upon false premises." Neither side is neutral. Lack of belief in Christianity does not make one unbiased towards Christianity. It is a sad fact, but many intellectuals who do not profess Christian faith are strongly opposed to faith in others. I have only met a few who, when faced with the opportunity to discredit faith, will choose not to do so. It is a sad indictment upon the state of our intellectual community, but there it is. The rise of the New Atheism is perhaps the most malicious strain of the anti-religious virus, but it is

there in much of everyday Western life, from simple mockery of Christians in comedy shows through to the privileging of certain “secular” disciplines over religious faith. Many historians have caught the virus too. There is a neutrality with which we can explore other questions of Ancient History, such as the question of how much historical “truth” can be found in Homer’s account of the Trojan War. But people do not live and die for their belief in Homer. Christian faith is not so easy to be neutral about.

Yet here is the question: when people live and die for their Christian faith, what is the basis of that faith? Or, to phrase the question another way, what are they living and dying *for*? I can guarantee that it is not the historicity of Solomon’s reign. People live and die for their faith in Jesus Christ.

So here is another question for us to address, and it just may be the most important question we can ask: if our faith in Jesus proves as close to ironclad as it can reasonably be, then how would it affect us if the Old Testament proved historically *unreliable*? We would, to start with, be faced with quite a deep paradox: the one in whom we have put our faith, Jesus Christ, would prove to have placed his faith in something that was false. For Jesus undoubtedly believed in the Old Testament, and saw himself as the fulfilment of all its promises. Given this, we would have a serious logical contradiction before us: that Jesus could be God, while also believing in a false religious system.

This is, of course, just an academic question. Much as many historians will like to profess that the Bible has been discredited, such discrediting requires as many leaps of faith as it takes to believe, and are frequently based on questionable assumptions. The reader, for instance, who sees in the creation narratives a flawed account that cannot possibly be squared with the findings of modern science, is assuming much about how that narrative was supposed to be read and what it would have meant to its original readers. Or the reader who declares the Chronicler’s account to be flawed because it leaves out details contained in the Kings account is assuming that history in those days was written as history is written today. We know that it is wrong in life to expect one historical account to contain every detail. We even know that slight variation in historical accounts is only to be expected. Besides, what we consider to be inconsistencies may simply be a matter of varying emphases. Luke, for instance, describes very different aspects of Jesus’ childhood to Matthew, yet their accounts can in fact be squared, once we realise the assumptions that we have made about the timing of certain events. Naturally, as a Christian I will be working on presupposition that the Gospels are true. Yet this is not a blind presupposition; it is based on a variety of details supporting each other. So, once I have decided that it is true, I will view apparent inconsistencies or problems in a different light to how I would view them if my mind were not yet made up. The fact that I operate under the presupposition that the Bible is true does make me biased, but it does not make me any more biased than the non-Christian who jumps upon the first inconsistency as proof of the whole system being flawed. Faith is not one massive game of Jenga, a contest between those trying to keep the structure aloft in spite of constant structural erosion and those who are trying to pull it apart from within, bit by bit. This is not how faith works, and here I use the word

“faith” to apply both to Christians and non-Christians alike, for all put their faith in something. When a revisionist historian “reconstructs” Biblical history to explain how an untrue event has come to be documented in such detail, they invariably bring into the mix various historical theories which have no clearer basis in truth than the Biblical account. In fact, such theories often have less basis. The Biblical view is documented in an ancient and well-preserved text. The non-Biblical view came from inside the head of a twentieth- or twenty-first-century historian, with no external verifiers besides the absence of contradicting evidence. This is not reliable. It only seems reliable because we – myself included – are naturally inclined to question the spiritual. And rightly so, because the spiritual is much more frightening than the “natural”. That does not make it any less real.

I would like to finish with a question: what kind of historical discovery would serve to destroy Christian faith? My friend posited Jesus’ body as the only one that would be compelling for him. I admire his faith. I am too easily shocked by those who present views of the Bible which make it seem to be a cobbled-together mix of contradictory and unreliable accounts. I need to remember that such views are no more dependable than the Christian faith, and no less biased. They always leave room for doubt, and thus also always leave room for belief.

In the end, history will not resolve the question for us. It remains vague enough that either side can always manipulate, or simply interpret, the evidence to support their particular position. Yet there is one way in which history is on the Christian’s side: our faith is unique for the way in which it is utterly grounded in history, in an event that few can successfully deny. Belief in Mohammed’s teachings, or the precepts of the Buddha or Confucius, will ultimately be philosophical questions. They will be resolved on matters of logical consistency or the reliability of their exponents. Aside from the attractiveness of his teachings, and the mythology surrounding his life, there is nothing about the Buddha himself to compel me to believe. He was, when all is said and done, a human, and the product of a worldview totally foreign to mine. The same is true, to an even greater extent, of Confucius. Mohammed made claims to have received truth from God, and it is impossible to gauge from history alone whether or not his claims were true. They can, of course, be tested by their own logic, and in this way they regularly come up short. Yet Christianity can be tested by its own logic, by the witness of its followers, *and* by the historical validity of the truths upon which it is based. Any attempts to discredit the Gospel records do little to change the fact that they remain some of the most reliable ancient documents that we have, for any topic or any event during that period of history.

Yet the real clincher has to be personal experience of Jesus Christ. Even if archaeologists are one day allowed to excavate Jerusalem right where Solomon’s temple and palace would have been, and they find evidence that astounds us all, even if palace records of the Queen of Sheba suddenly surface to prove that she did indeed pay tribute to Solomon, even if records of his marriage to Pharaoh’s daughter fall at our feet, none of this will prove that Jesus was the son of God, that he rose from the dead. And no historical fact is compelling unless it remains clearly relevant to us. It does not matter how important Jesus was in his time if

he has no impact on our lives today. And his death for our sins is only significant if we find ourselves to be sinners in need of redemption.

There is, after all, something that happens to everyone who truly believes in Jesus Christ. It can only be called the convicting power of the Holy Spirit. An historian observing someone undergoing conviction could describe all the externalities: a sermon preached, an individual starting to shake, or cry, or kneel, or both, then a prayer prayed. They might be able to describe a life transformed beyond that point. A psychologist might then step in to try and account for the transformation, yet their theories will only compel you if you accept their presuppositions: either that Jesus *is* real and active, or that he isn't. But I know what the individual will tell you: that they were cut to the heart, and knew that they needed Jesus as their saviour. This is not something an outsider can comment on. It is only something you can evaluate for yourself, when you experience it yourself. I have experienced it. I need to give it more credit than I do to archaeology and historical revisionism. In the end, all believers will be like the blind man healed in John's gospel. When asked what he knew about Jesus he replied, "Whether he is a sinner or not, I don't know. One thing I do know. I was blind but now I see!" (John 11:24). The modern Christian might say: "Whether there is compelling evidence of the Old Testament or not, I do not know. Why the Gospels share common, unidentified sources, I do not know. Whether archaeology will ever prove or disprove the Bible, I do not know. One thing I do know. I was blind but now I see."