



What Do You Expect?^(Part 3)

by Dale Fincher
www.soulation.org

"If the New Testament was a collection of secular writings, their authenticity would generally be regarded as beyond all doubt," said Bible scholar F. F. Bruce. For many people it isn't enough to take the accuracy of a holy book's transmission. Many people need to see that what was written is actually true and not fabricated.

In the last two Slices I have been discussing what we should expect to find if God had indeed arrived on the planet. In the last article, we discussed the Bible's accuracy in its transmission. Today, we'll look at its reliability in its mission.

How would someone know if the New Testament writers were actually telling the truth? There are many signposts that indicate the veracity of their message that even secular scholars apply to secular ancient manuscripts, from Plato to Thucydides. I shall consider three such signposts that all scholars allow for criteria.

The first signpost is an early manuscript. Myths take time to develop. If a manuscript is close to the event, it is virtually impossible to make a widespread myth out of it because the majority of people would know the facts.

The Pythagorean myth is a classic example. The information we have about Pythagoras was that he intelligently blended religion and science, that he had a secret brotherhood called the Pythagoreans, and that he lived around 600 B.C. Most other things told about him are either attributed to his brotherhood or are not found in the older manuscripts. However, a half a millennium after Pythagoras' life, several philosophers developed myths about Pythagoras: that he taught the transmigration of souls, that he was an influential traveler through the ancient world, and that he worked miracles. The tales and wonders of Pythagoras came centuries later and nobody could verify the outrageous stories.

Because the early writings of the New Testament are so close to the actual events (within 50 years), it is a signpost that the events are actually true.

The second signpost is multiple voices. The New Testament documents were not written by a single person. This weighs heavily in attesting to the authenticity of a testimony.

Suppose there was an auto accident at a large intersection near you. Let's say three witnesses testified to the event that happened and all three of them said strikingly similar things. Their testimonies would be regarded as extremely reliable in the eyes and ears of modern law.

The same is true of Jewish law. Where there were two or three witnesses to a confrontation, those witnesses had the authority to speak as one voice if something was or wasn't so.

In the New Testament, we have not three, but four writers testifying explicitly of the life of Jesus, his miracles, message, and resurrection. Not only this, but the Apostle Paul writes that over 500 saw Christ's ascension. This ensemble of witnesses can attest to the facts and weigh in as heavy evidence of reliability.

The third signpost is embarrassment. Nobody likes to be embarrassed and the ancient writers are no

different. People who invent stories that include themselves usually allow themselves to look good in the story. Even when children tell half-truths about which sibling started a skirmish, they put themselves in the most innocent light possible. For the New Testament writers to paint themselves badly would hurt their own credibility if they were fabricating a story.

But embarrassment is exactly what we find. Peter is a notorious embarrassment and his conversion is a sure sign that something dramatic changed him from the inside-out. We find Peter saying the goofiest things. When Jesus says he must die in Jerusalem, Peter jumps up and down and says it cannot be, though he had already accepted the fact that Jesus, as the Messiah, knew what he was talking about. When Jesus takes Peter to the Mount of Transfiguration, the voice of the Father speaks as Elijah and Moses appear on either side of Jesus in glory. Peter, overwhelmed, wants to pitch some tents. And, most famously, Peter's denying of Christ is a devastating pronouncement toward Peter's embarrassment. Yet the New Testament writers have no problem including these colorful details.

It was also embarrassing in the ancient world to have women share official testimony for a case. Yet, on the resurrection Sunday, the women are the first to find the empty tomb. If anyone were fabricating this resurrection story in the ancient world, the women never would have been included. Rather, influential, intelligent men would have found the tomb empty. This would have beefed up the case. However, most scholars conclude by their own criteria of textual criticism that the reason why the New Testament writers include the women finding the empty tomb first is because it actually happened.

These three signposts testify to the reliability of the New Testament. If these were not so evident we would need to turn to other explanations of why we should believe the testimony of the scripture writers (and there are many more such signposts). These signposts are evident and clear, and reflecting on Bruce's quotation, worthy of our very mindful and deliberate consideration.

The evidence presented here is another expectation we should have if God did indeed come in the person of Jesus Christ—an accurate and reliable testimony of information. In the next Slice we will consider how we should expect Him to come.

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