“Proving that Jesus Was the Christ” (Part 1)

Introduction

The Text

[19] For some days he [Saul/Paul] was with the disciples at Damascus. [20] And immediately he proclaimed Jesus in the synagogues, saying, “He is the Son of God.” [21] And all who heard him were amazed and said, “Is not this the man who made havoc in Jerusalem of those who called upon this name? And has he not come here for this purpose, to bring them bound before the chief priests?” [22] But Saul increased all the more in strength, and confounded the Jews who lived in Damascus by proving that Jesus was the Christ. (Acts 9:19–22)

Faith and Reason

A. If you’ve been around Mercy Hill for any time at all, you likely know that I am always anxious to expose and push back against this fallacious idea so common in Western society today, circulated by so many in our culture: namely, that faith is opposed to, or at odds with, the use of reason.

    1. In other words, in our day, it is assumed (falsely) that if you have faith (in Jesus, for example), it means you are forfeiting (or “crucifying”, if you prefer) your intellect.

        a. You are leaping blind in the dark.
        b. You are taking steps not towards the facts but away from them.

B. Christians are presented in our day as those who bury their head in the sand and believe whatever “God” tells them, however at odds it may be with the evidence.

    1. We are no better in their eyes than the little children who still believe in unicorns or the tooth fairy or Rudolph the red-nosed reindeer.
    2. We’re just grown-up versions of gullible children.

        a. And they laugh about us at the dinner table. We’re the butt of their jokes.
        b. Because what rational, enlightened, modern person would still believe in this man named Jesus who was born of a virgin, worked all these impossible miracles, capping it all off by rising from the dead where, after the fact, he floated up in the sky and went off into Never Neverland and that’s why—Oh how convenient—now you can’t see him anymore, he’s gone. But of course, the Christians say, “He’s here.”

            i. Give me a break! It sounds like a fairy tale. It reeks of ancient myth. It sounds like a joke. So they have a hearty chuckle at our expense.

C. And, you know, though I reject such a false dichotomy—faith shouldn’t be opposed to reason, it doesn’t have to be at odds with reason—I hate to say it: sometimes even Christians themselves do seem to treat it that way.

1. I do think that there are plenty of Christians who just kind of close their eyes and believe "for the Bible tells me so" without really knowing the fullness of what they believe and why they believe it, without really thinking through the reasons that underly their faith.

D. But, listen, the Bible nowhere tells us to blindly accept Jesus without evidence or good reason. Quite the opposite: much evidence and many good reasons are often being put forward.

    1. The assumption is you will assess the facts and, with the illumination of the Holy Spirit, come to see that such a thing is indeed rational and true.

        a. This is not to say that we make God bow to our reason, he is God, we are not. There will be things we won't be able to fully comprehend about who he is and how he works. And that's okay.
        b. But it is to say that we use our reason—we must use our reason—even as we come to faith. And God wants it to be so.

"Proving that Jesus Was the Christ"

A. That is precisely what we see with Paul here in our text. Did you notice?

    1. He's been recently converted on that road to Damascus.
    2. He's been commissioned by Jesus to "carry [his] name before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel" (Acts 9:15).
    3. And so he wastes no time in doing so. As we read in v. 20: "[I]mmediately he proclaimed Jesus in the synagogues, saying, 'He is the Son of God.'"

    4. But that is not all. He didn't stop there.

        a. He didn't merely keep repeating such a statement, beating them over the head with it, demanding that these people simply believe Jesus is the Son or else. No, no.
        b. Luke goes on to tell us that he carries on from that statement to provide good reasons for it. So v. 22: "Saul increased all the more in strength, and confounded the Jews who lived in Damascus by proving that Jesus was the Christ."

            i. He's confounding them with logic and sound rationale.
            ii. He's showing them the reasons for his faith, the reasons they too should believe.

B. The word translated "proving" here, in the original Greek it's sumbibazō. And it's defined in a number of ways:

    1. It can mean: to draw a conclusion in the face of evidence, to conclude, to infer.
    2. Similarly, it can mean: to present a logical conclusion, to demonstrate, to prove. That's obviously how our English took it here. Paul is "proving that Jesus was the Christ."

    3. But there is another potential layer of meaning to this word, and I find it particularly interesting. It can also mean: to bring together into a unit, to unite.

a. It's the word used when Paul talks about the church as a body composed of individual members all "held together" and "knit together" in Christ (cf. Eph. 4:16; Col. 2:2, 19).

C. And here's why I find this so intriguing. The picture we're given with this, then, is that Paul is laying out all these facts, all this evidence, and the one thing that keeps it all together, the one thing that makes sense of it all, the only coherent conclusion in the face of it, is that Jesus is the Christ. He is the Son of God. He is who the Christians claim he is.

1. He's come from heaven on a rescue mission.
2. He's died for our sin and risen for our justification.
3. And now lives forevermore to make intercession for us before a holy God.
4. And he'll return on the last day to judge the living and the dead and put all the wrong in this broken world aright.

Different Starting Points (for Paul and Us)

A. Speaking to the Jews in this synagogue, it is likely that what this "proving" meant for Paul here is that he's showing them how Jesus makes sense of and brings together all the seemingly disparate parts of the OT—the things they just couldn't quite work out in the Hebrew Scriptures, it all makes sense in the light of Christ. He's the key that unlocks the whole of the OT.

1. So one commentator, reflecting on this same Greek word, writes: "Luke described [Paul] as 'proving' that Jesus is the Christ. The Greek word means to join or put together and seems to picture his assembling Old Testament texts to demonstrate how Christ fulfilled them" (NAC).

B. In proving that Jesus was the Christ, Paul could start here with these Jews because he had common ground with them.

1. They both agreed the OT was God's Word.
2. They both were looking at the promises and the prophecies and all this—and anticipating the fulfillment of it all.

a. So he could start there with them. He could prove Jesus was the Christ by jumping straight to the Scriptures.

C. But in our day, in our culture, we don't have that kind of common ground. There's a lot of skepticism.

1. Most don't believe the Bible is God's Word.
2. Many don't really even believe in God, let alone Jesus.
3. Some would even deny that Jesus ever even existed at all.

D. So proving that Jesus is the Christ in our day is a bit more complicated, right?

1. Certainly, it still involves showing how all the OT points to and is held together in him.

2. But that's just one piece of a much more comprehensive case that needs to be made—if we're going to confound the unbeliever with solid evidence, if we're going to make it plain that the only conclusion that makes sense of all the facts is that Jesus is, in fact, the Christ, the Son of God, the Savior of the world, as Christians claim.

Making a Case

A. And I want you to be able to make the case. I want you to know the reasons for your faith.

    1. Not just so you can share with someone else.
    2. But so you, personally, can stand firm in this day of doubt and skepticism and not bend or buckle under the weight of it.

B. Do you know why you believe Jesus is the Christ? Can you give an account of it to others? Can you, as Paul does here: "prove" it to be so?

    1. That's what I'd like to try to help us with over the course of the next 4 weeks or so. I've got some 15 "proofs" I want to share with you.

C. Some of you know that a while back I was asked to debate with an atheist concerning the existence and significance of Jesus. A lot of what I'll be sharing with you over these weeks is material I prepared specifically for that debate.

    1. I spent weeks researching and gathering and putting things together. And I didn't really get to discuss much of any of it at the time.
    2. So I thought this little text in Acts 9 might be my opportunity to bring some of that out for you now.

        a. It is a mix of new material and things I've shared with you bit by bit through the years. So some it may sound familiar.
        b. But I've never put it all together in one coherent package and catalog like this.

            i. I hope it serves you well.
            ii. I encourage you to invite your unbelieving friends to come and engage this stuff with us.

A Note about Relevance: The Ground Beneath Your Feet

A. Before we get going in earnest here, I should also say: I recognize, that some of what I'll be sharing over the weeks may sound a bit heady and academic and, perhaps, a little boring or irrelevant to you.

    1. You come to church, not so much to hear about history and evidence and logic and this sort of thing, but to be encouraged in the gospel.
    2. But I am telling you that such things are more relevant to you than you may realize . . .

B. I would put it like this: these "proofs", this evidence, it's as relevant to your spiritual life this morning as the ground beneath your feet is relevant to your physical life.

1. How often do you think about the ground beneath your feet? Probably not all that often. You just take it for granted.

    a. Therefore, at first, a discussion about the ground may seem irrelevant to you. You're busy thinking of everything else that's going on here above the ground—my relationships, my finances, my work, my health, and all this.

    b. But, don't you see, everything up here that seems so relevant to you requires that the ground be stable beneath you.

        i. Though you may overlook the ground beneath you and dismiss it as irrelevant, it's deeply, fundamentally, perennially relevant.

2. All of this would become unmistakably plain to us if suddenly the ground started shaking, if one of those dreaded earthquakes they say we're due for, finally rears its head.

    a. Then all the other stuff, ironically, starts to seem irrelevant.
    b. And this is the one issue that needs your attention: "I need solid ground!"

C. I think you see my point. These arguments and reasons and "proofs" may not seem all that relevant to you now, but it's the stuff that undergirds everything else!

    1. If your faith begins to shake, if it's weak and feeble, who cares about being encouraged by this or that promise from the Bible. "I don't even know if I believe in the Bible, or God, or Jesus."

        a. So we want to try to get some things clear now. We want to stabilize your faith now, before the ground starts shaking, because it will.

D. You could say we're trying to make our faith "earthquake-proof."

    1. When building a home, everyone wants to get to the fun stuff—what will we paint it?; what kind of furniture should we put in?; what about the art and the decorations?!
    2. You want to skip past the earthquake-proofing and building codes and all this.

        a. But all this other stuff doesn't matter if the house comes down.

E. So, again, I've got 15 or so proofs we'll make our way through as I hope to show you why it's reasonable to believe that Jesus is the Christ.

    1. One proof alone can't do it.
    2. But, combined, the sheer force of the evidence becomes undeniably compelling!

        a. This morning, we'll try to tackle the first three . . .

Proof #1: Scholarly Consensus

"Proving that Jesus Was . . ."

A. Before we can really make the case that Jesus is the Christ, we must actually first establish that Jesus existed in the first place—that he's a real historical person.

    1. Such a thing would have been taken for granted in Paul's day. There was no question as to whether Jesus existed. Many of them saw him; they heard him teach; they were there in Jerusalem for the Passover when things went haywire and he was crucified.

    2. But, in our day, there are some who question this basic fact.

        a. Did Jesus of Nazareth even exist at all? How can we know? We're so far removed from the days and times in which it's claimed he lived.

            i. This, in fact, was the position of that atheist I debated back in August of last year: "Jesus didn't actually exist. They made him up. The whole Christian story is just a myth through and through."

B. So, obviously then, before I can show you that Jesus is the Christ, I need to show you that Jesus is.

They Agree on This!

A. And I think the place to begin here is with this idea of "Scholarly Consensus."

    1. Here's what I mean: So often, you can't really get the experts to agree on anything. But they agree, almost unanimously, on this: Jesus existed.

        a. Christian and non-Christian alike, they meet together on this point.

B. So biblical scholar F.F. Bruce notes: "Some writers may toy with the fancy of a 'Christ-myth,' but they do not do so on the ground of historical evidence. The historicity of Christ is as axiomatic for an unbiased historian as the historicity of Julius Caesar. It is not historians who propagate the 'Christ-myth' theories" (The New Testament Documents: Are They Reliable?, 123).

    1. In other words: if you're an honest historian you simply can't deny that Jesus existed. As we'll soon see, there's just too much evidence to support it.

C. Likewise, the Encyclopaedia Britannica, in its article on Jesus, says this: "[I]n ancient times even the opponents of Christianity never doubted the historicity of Jesus, which was disputed for the first time and on inadequate grounds by several authors at the end of the 18th, during the 19th, and at the beginning of the 20th centuries" (as quoted in Josh McDowell, The New Evidence That Demands a Verdict, 135).

    1. In other words: this whole idea that Jesus didn't exist at all is a relatively modern phenomenon and it's easily discredited. Jesus of Nazareth, whatever else he was, certainly

existed. He has simply exerted too much influence on the history of the world to be a complete and total fabrication.

D. I'm going to read a lengthy quote to you now from a prominent and well-known NT scholar named Bart Ehrman. He really puts the whole discussion to rest I think.

1. Dr. Ehrman is quite interesting. He once seems to have been a solid Christian—I have great books co-authored by him on my shelf at home.
2. But he's since turned away from the faith and now, still a NT scholar though of the liberal variety, he writes to discredit Christianity in many ways.

    a. He's written countless books, six of them New York Times bestsellers. The titles of some of these give you a sense of what he's about: Misquoting Jesus; God's Problem; Forged; How Jesus Became God.

        i. You get the idea. He's no friend of Christianity.

E. But, interestingly enough, one of his other works, from which I'm about to read, is entitled: Did Jesus Exist? The Historical Argument for Jesus of Nazareth. Here he argues against the mythicist and for the historical existence of Jesus.

1. Listen to what he writes in the opening pages: "[T]he view that Jesus existed is held by virtually every expert on the planet. That in itself is not proof, of course. Expert opinion is, at the end of the day, still opinion. But why would you not want to know what experts have to say? When you make a dental appointment, do you want your dentist to be an expert or not? If you build a house, do you want a professional architect or your next-door neighbor to draw up the plans? One might be tempted to say that in the case of the historical Jesus it is different since, after all, we are just talking about history; experts have no more access to the past than anyone else. That, however, is simply not true.

    . . . Serious historians of the early Christian movement—all of them—have spent many years preparing to be experts in their field. Just to read the ancient sources requires expertise in a range of ancient languages: Greek, Hebrew, Latin, and often Aramaic, Syriac, and Coptic, not to mention the modern languages of scholarship (for example, German and French). And that is just for starters. Expertise requires years of patiently examining ancient texts and a thorough grounding in the history and culture of Greek and Roman antiquity, the religions of the ancient Mediterranean world, both pagan and Jewish, knowledge of the history of the Christian church and the development of its social life and theology, and, well, lots of other things. It is striking that virtually everyone who has spent all the years needed to attain these qualifications is convinced that Jesus of Nazareth was a real historical figure. Again, this is not a piece of evidence, but if nothing else, it should give one pause.

    . . . Still, as is clear from the avalanche of sometimes outraged postings on all the relevant internet sites, there is simply no way to convince conspiracy theorists that the evidence for their position is too thin to be convincing and that the evidence for a traditional view is thoroughly persuasive. Anyone who chooses to believe something contrary to evidence that an overwhelming majority of people find overwhelmingly convincing—whether it involves the fact of the Holocaust, the landing on the moon, the assassination of presidents, or even a presidential place of birth—will not be convinced. Simply will not be convinced.

> And so, with this book, I do not expect to convince anyone in that boat. What I do hope is to convince genuine seekers who really want to know how we know that Jesus did exist, as virtually every scholar of antiquity, of biblical studies, of classics, and of Christian origins in this country and, in fact, in the Western world agrees. Many of these scholars have no vested interest in the matter. As it turns out, I myself do not either. I am not a Christian, and I have no interest in promoting a Christian cause or a Christian agenda. I am an agnostic with atheist leanings, and my life and views of the world would be approximately the same whether or not Jesus existed. My beliefs would vary little. The answer to the question of Jesus's historical existence will not make me more or less happy, content, hopeful, likable, rich, famous, or immortal.
>
> But as a historian I think evidence matters. And the past matters. And for anyone to whom both evidence and the past matter, a dispassionate consideration of the case makes it quite plain: Jesus did exist" (4-6). I love that!

F. I anticipate that I'll reference Ehrman quite a bit in these sermons. I think what he has to say on these matters is especially significant for us, particularly because he's not my friend.

1. He's not interested in making a case for Christianity at all. Quite the opposite.
2. And yet, still, he agrees with me. Not because he wants to, but because, in light of the facts, if he's going to be respectable scholar, he has to.

Proof #2: Extrabiblical (Non-Christian) Evidence

A. One of the reasons scholars have reached near unanimity in their affirmation of Jesus' historical existence is due to the fact that we don't just have evidence for Jesus' existence in the Bible. Other, non-Christians spoke about him as well—people who had nothing to gain from it; people who were even at odds with it.

B. So Christopher Klein, writing for the History Channel and quoting (wouldn't you know it!) Bart Ehrman here, says this: "The most detailed record of the life and death of Jesus comes from the four Gospels and other New Testament writings. [Quoting Ehrman:] 'These are all Christian and are obviously and understandably biased in what they report, and have to be evaluated very critically indeed to establish any historically reliable information. . . . But their central claims about Jesus as a historical figure—a Jew, with followers, executed on orders of the Roman governor of Judea, Pontius Pilate, during the reign of the Emperor Tiberius—are borne out by later sources with a completely different set of biases.'

[Klein concludes:] Within a few decades of his lifetime, Jesus was mentioned by Jewish and Roman historians in passages that corroborate portions of the New Testament that describe the life and death of Jesus" (https://www.history.com/news/was-jesus-real-historical-evidence).

C. Let's quickly dip into a couple of the more notable non-Christian extrabiblical sources that refer to Jesus (there are at least ten known non-Christian writers who mention Jesus within 150 years of his life [Geisler and Turek, I Don't Have Enough Faith to Be an Atheist, 222]).

Cornelius Tacitus (c. 56-120 AD)

A. The first comes from the Roman historian Cornelius Tacitus (c. 56-120 AD).

1. Moderns scholars widely regard him as "imperial Rome's greatest chronicler" (Dickson, A Doubter's Guide to Jesus, 23).
2. He, like Ehrman, was no friend of Christianity—in fact, he was openly hostile to it.
3. Richard Dawkins, a well-known atheist of our time, says of him: "The Roman Tacitus offers . . . convincing evidence for Jesus' existence, for the backhanded reason that Tacitus has nothing good to say about Christians."
4. He refers to Jesus and Christians in his work entitled Annals, in which he covers Rome's history from the years 14-68 AD. He wrote it near the end of his life, sometime around 115-117 AD.

B. Details about Jesus show up in his discussion concerning the Great Fire of Rome, which occurred in July of 64 AD. He tells of how it was thought that the mad emperor Nero had started the fire and so, in an effort to shift the blame, Nero sets Christians forward as his scapegoat, accusing them of arson, and punishing them in severe and devastating ways.

1. Here's what he says: "But neither human help, nor gifts from the emperor, nor all the ways of placating Heaven, could stifle scandal or dispel the belief that the fire [the Great Fire of 64 AD] had taken place by [his] order. Therefore, to scotch the rumour, Nero substituted as culprits, and punished with the utmost refinements of cruelty, a class of men, loathed for their vices, whom the crowd called Chrestians. Christus, the founder of the name, had undergone the death penalty in the reign of Tiberius, by sentence of the procurator Pontius Pilatus, and the pernicious superstition was checked for a moment, only to break out once more, not merely in Judaea, the home of the disease, but in the capital [Rome] itself, where all things horrible or shameful in the world collect and become fashionable.

   First, then, the confessed members of the sect were arrested; next, on their disclosures, vast numbers were convicted, not so much on the count of arson as for hatred of the human race. And derision accompanied their end: they were covered with wild beasts' skins and torn to death by dogs; or they were fastened on crosses, and, when daylight failed were burned to serve as lamps by night. Nero had offered his Gardens for the spectacle, and gave an exhibition in his Circus, mixing with the crowd in the clothes of a charioteer, or mounted on his chariot. Hence, in spite of a guilt which had earned the most exemplary punishment, there arose a sentiment of pity, due to the impression that they were being sacrifices not for the welfare of the state but to the ferocity of a single man" (15.44).

C. Let's make note of the many things we learn about Jesus and the early church here—all which, though coming to us from outside the NT, actually validate the things we already know to be true of Jesus and his followers from inside it:

1. First, Jesus was held by his followers to be the Christ, the Messiah, the Anointed One of God.
2. Second, Jesus was executed during the reign of Tiberius.
3. Third, it was the Roman procurator Pontius Pilate who sentenced him to death.
4. Fourth, all of this happened in Judea.
5. Fifth, even after his death, people still followed Jesus, and the "crowd" or "sect" of Christians formed more explicitly from there.
6. Sixth, already in 64 AD, just 30 or so years after Jesus' death, there was already a sizeable population of Christians in Rome. It was spreading rapidly and had expanded from Judea to Rome—some 1,430 miles in those few decades (i.e. from San Jose to Alberta, Canada—when you don't have cars and all this, that's a long way!).

7. Seventh, Christians were "loathed" for their faith persecuted unfairly because of it.
8. Eighth, at the core of their faith was something Tacitus refers to as a "pernicious superstition" which many believe, myself as well, likely refers to their claim that Jesus had risen from the dead.

    a. Pliny the Younger—a Roman governor in Asia Minor, living and writing around the same time as Tacitus (c. 61-112 AD)—refers to this same "superstition" which he calls a "depraved and excessive superstition," even a "contagious superstition"—because it was catching on throughout the empire, to the degree that temples were emptying and no one was buying sacrifices for the gods (Epistles 10.96).

        i. He goes even further it would seem, claiming that Christians already back in the first century AD were, as he says, "in the habit of meeting on a certain fixed day before it was light, and of singing in alternate verses a hymn to Christ as to a god."

            (1) They weren't just claiming that he had risen from the dead.
            (2) They were claiming, in light such things, that he is God, worthy of our worship!

D. So already at the beginning, in the early years of the church, the core of our faith is present:

    1. "Jesus has died and he's risen. He's the Christ and he's God. And that's why we're willing to follow him and speak of him to others, even if it means hardship will inevitably follow. If our Savior has defeated death, why should we be afraid of it, or you for that matter? We're not!"

E. We might as well be reading from one of the Gospels or the book of Acts, right? What Tacitus and Pliny are saying here is the same sort of thing we read about there.

    1. And, again, these are not friends of Christianity, they are enemies of it.

        a. In Pliny's case especially, he's trying to get rid of it, stomp it out. That's why he's writing that letter to the emperor (Trajan) I just referenced in the first place. "What do I do about these guys?"

Josephus (c. 37-100 AD)

A. The second source I'd point you to comes from a man by the name of Josephus (c. 37-100 AD).

    1. We've heard from the preeminent Roman historian of the time.
    2. Now we get to hear from the preeminent Jewish historian as well.

B. In his work entitled Jewish Antiquities (c. 93 AD), Jesus shows up twice. One is a bit suspect and scholars go different ways with it. I'll give you the second that is widely received.

    1. Speaking of the Jewish high priest at the time, Ananus, he writes this: "[Ananus] convened the judges of the Sanhedrin and brought before them a man named James, the brother of

Jesus who was called the Christ, and certain others. He accused them of having transgressed the law and delivered them up to be stoned" (20.200).

C. Notice a few things here—all of which, again, though coming to us from outside the NT record, verify the things we read within it.

1. First, Jesus, again, is here called by his followers "the Christ."
2. Second, Jesus had a brother named James (cf. Matt. 13:55; Mark 6:3).
3. Third, James was accused and stoned for his faith. And others were killed as well—reminding us, again, that Christians were despised and persecuted not just by the Gentile authorities, but by the Jewish authorities as well.

D. And this is what's so amazing to me: Here you have Jesus' brother, spreading the gospel and willing to die for it. This is his brother we're talking about!

1. If anyone would know who Jesus really was, it would be his brother—he grew up with him.
2. If anyone would be reluctant to worship Jesus as God and follow him with his life, it would be his brother. Have you ever heard of "sibling rivalry"?

3. And yet here's how James opens the letter he wrote that did make its way into our NT: "James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ . . ." (James 1:1).

    a. "Yes, he's my brother, but he's Christ and he's Lord . . . and I'm here to serve him!"

        i. If that doesn't prove the validity of Jesus' resurrection and the power of the Holy Spirit, then I don't know what will!

* * *

A. Even from a brief analysis of just two of these extrabiblical, non-Christian sources, we can quickly see: while we don't find here everything there is to know about Jesus and Christianity, of course, we do still find quite a bit.

1. And when it all seems to validate the very things the NT already lays out for us, it starts to lend credibility to the NT documents themselves, doesn't it?

    a. And that's where we turn next . . .

Proof #3: Clear Literary Form

Not Myth or Legend . . . but History!

A. With this now we begin to move towards the Bible—towards the "Christian sources," if you will.

1. And, as we do so, the first thing we have to see is that the records we have in the NT concerning Jesus and his life and ministry, they are clearly not written in the form of myth or legend, as some might claim.

2. On the contrary, they're written as history.

    a. Now, whether it's accurate, trustworthy history or not is something we shall have to pick up and deal more thoroughly with next time.
    b. But for now, we at least need to see that the authors of the Gospels and Acts and so forth, they are claiming to be after such a thing.

B. I only have time to give you just one example on this. Look at the way Luke begins his two-volume work Luke-Acts back in the opening verses of his gospel: " [1] Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile a narrative of the things that have been accomplished among us, [2] just as those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word have delivered them to us, [3] it seemed good to me also, having followed all things closely for some time past, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, [4] that you may have certainty concerning the things you have been taught" (Luke 1:1–4).

    1. Notice there, in essence, six steps in the progression of Luke's logic here:

        a. First, Jesus accomplished things among us.
        b. Second, there were eyewitnesses to these accomplishments.
        c. Third, these eyewitnesses delivered record of these things to us.
        d. Fourth, Luke followed, interviewed, and gathered these records.
        e. Fifth, he then proceeded to write an orderly account for us. Why?!

        f. Sixth, "[so] that you may have certainty concerning the things you have been taught." About what? About whom? . . . About Jesus!

            i. Listen, you don't need me to tell you: That's not how you start a myth. That's not how you begin a legend.

C. This is why, by the way, C.S. Lewis, the late renowned professor of medieval and renaissance literature at Cambridge University, wrote the following: "If he [the biblical critic] tells me that something in a Gospel is legend or romance, I want to know how many legends and romances he has read, how well his palate is trained in detecting them by the flavour; not how many years he has spent on that Gospel. . . . I have been reading poems, romances, vision literature, legends, and myths all my life. I know what they are like. I know that not one of them is like this. Of this [Gospel] text there are only two possible views. Either this is reportage . . . or else, some unknown [ancient] writer . . . without known predecessors or successors, suddenly anticipated the whole technique of modern novelistic, realistic narrative" (Christian Reflections, 154-55).

    1. This isn't legend.
    2. And the genre of realistic fiction didn't exist in the ancient world. So that's not what this is.

    3. So what is this? It's an attempt at recording history.

D. This is why historian and scholar John Dickson writes the following: "While forty to fifty years ago it was common to treat the Gospels as religiously valuable but historically questionable, today a consensus of secular scholarship affirms the Gospels as important historical writings. Jens Schröter of Humboldt University in Berlin is a recognized leader in the field, and no Christian apologist

[meaning: he is neither a Christian nor is he interested in promoting the Christian cause]. He sums up well the mood and trajectory of contemporary scholarship on Jesus and the Gospels:

'In recent research one can discern a clear tendency to grant the Gospels the status of historical sources, thus to view their Jesus narratives—beyond the faith convictions that undoubtedly come to expression in them—as also relevant in historical perspective. This signifies a turning point in Jesus research to the extent that they were denied this status for quite some time. The judgement that the Gospels are ultimately unfruitful for a historical presentation of the activity of Jesus due to their kerygmatic [i.e., "preachy"] character or their literary presentation can, however, no longer convince. Instead, they are perceived as narratives that are interwoven in diverse ways with the underlying events of the life and fate of Jesus of Nazareth.'

[Dickson concludes:] What Schröter puts in his restrained and scholastic . . . way can be restated simply: specialists now believe the Gospels provide a clear and invaluable window into a genuine first century life" (A Doubter's Guide to Jesus, 35-36). Namely, the life of Jesus!

Conclusion

What Does This Mean for Us?

A. I realize that we're only slowly stepping bit-by-bit towards a convincing case that Jesus really is the Christ, the Savior—that he is all that Christians and the Scriptures claim he is.

    1. Nevertheless, for the sake of application, let's assume we see the proofs, the evidence, and we're getting it. This is for real.

        a. What does all this mean for us?

B. Well, I'll tell you one thing it means:

    1. If Jesus really is the Son of God;
    2. if really did leave heaven and come down, entering into humanity, entering into history;
    3. If he really did live and die for his people . . . as even some of our non-Christian sources validate;
    4. if what we have in the Gospels isn't mixed with myth or fairytale but is, in fact, accurate reportage . . .

    5. . . . then one thing it means for certain is: You and I are so loved by God, more than we could ever have hoped or imagined we could be.

C. " [16] God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. [17] For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him" (John 3:16–17).

    1. Jesus did not enter into history to come against the human race.
    2. He entered into history to save the human race . . . because he loves us. That's why he's come.

D. The Bible on the whole is a love story. That's why it begins with a wedding and ends with a wedding.

1. Is it history? Sure.
2. But it's also a love story.

    a. He’s coming after you. He loves you.

E. Open your heart to that. Don’t push away from him, don’t push back on him.

    1. Put your faith in him. There are good reasons to!