
History and the Christian Faith

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History and the Christian Faith The Importance of History

Can we really know anything at all about the past? For example, can we really know if Nebuchadnezzar was king of Babylon in the sixth century B.C., or if Jesus of Nazareth was an actual historical person, or if Abraham Lincoln delivered the Gettysburg Address? Although these might sound like questions that would only interest professional historians, they're actually important for Christians too.

But why should Christians be concerned with such questions? Well, because the truth of our faith depends on certain events having actually happened in the past. As British theologian Alan Richardson stated:

The Christian faith is . . . an historical faith . . . it is bound up with certain happenings in the past, and if these happenings could be shown never to have occurred . . . then the . . . Christian faith . . . would be found to have been built on sand.{1}

Consider an example. Christians believe that Jesus died on the cross for the sins of the world. Now, in order for this belief to even possibly be true, the crucifixion of Jesus must have occurred in history. If the account of Jesus' death on the cross is merely legendary, or otherwise unhistorical, then the Christian proclamation that he died on the cross for our sins cannot be true. As T. A. Roberts observed:

The truth of Christianity is anchored in history: hence the . . . recognition that if some . . . of the events upon which Christianity has been traditionally thought to be based could be proved unhistorical, then the religious claims of Christianity would be seriously jeopardized.{2}

What actually happened in the past, therefore, is extremely significant for biblical Christianity. But this raises an important question: How can we really know what happened in the past? How can we know if the things we read about in our history books ever really happened? How can we know if Jesus really was crucified, as the Gospel writers say he was? We weren't there to personally observe these events. And (at least so far) there's no time machine by which we can visit the past and see for ourselves what really happened. The events of the past are gone. They're no longer directly available for study. So how can we ever really know what happened?

For the Christian, such questions confront us with the issue of whether genuine knowledge of the past is possible or whether we're forever doomed to be skeptical about the historical events recorded in the Bible. In the remainder of this article I hope to show that we should indeed be skeptical, particularly of the arguments of skeptics who say that we can know nothing of the past.

The Problem of the Unobservable Past

It shouldn't surprise us that the truth of Christianity depends on certain events having actually happened in the past. The Apostle Paul told the Corinthians: "if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith" (1 Cor. 15:14). For Paul, if the bodily resurrection of Jesus was not an actual historical event, then faith in Christ was useless. What happened in the past, therefore, is important for Christianity.

But some scholars insist that we can never really know what happened in the past. This view, called radical historical relativism, denies that real, or objective, knowledge of the past is possible. This poses a challenge for Christianity. As the Christian philosopher Ronald Nash observes, ". . . the skepticism about the past that must result from a total historical relativism would seriously weaken one of Christianity's major apologetic foundations."^{3}

But why would anyone be skeptical about our ability to know at least some objective truth about the past? One reason has to do with our inability to directly observe the past. The late Charles Beard noted that, unlike the chemist, the historian cannot directly observe the objects of his study. His only access to the past comes through records and artifacts that have survived to the present.^{4}

There is certainly some truth to this. But why does the historian's inability to directly observe the past mean that he can't have genuine knowledge of the past? Beard contrasts the historian with the chemist, implying that the latter does have objective knowledge of chemistry. But it's important to remember that individual chemists don't acquire all their knowledge through direct scientific observation. Indeed, much of it comes from reading journal articles by other chemists, articles that function much like the historical documents of the historian!^{5}

But can the chemist really gain objective knowledge by reading such articles? It appears so. Suppose a chemist begins working on a new problem based on the carefully established results of previous experiments. But suppose that he hasn't personally conducted all these experiments; he's merely read about them in scientific journals. Any knowledge not directly verified by the chemist would be indirect knowledge.^{6} But it's not completely lacking in objectivity for that reason.

While historical knowledge may fall short of absolute certainty (as most of our knowledge invariably does), this doesn't make it completely subjective or arbitrary. Further, since most of what we know doesn't seem to be based on direct observation, our inability to directly observe the past cannot (at least by itself) make genuine knowledge of history impossible. Ultimately, then, this argument for historical relativism is simply unconvincing.

The Problem of Personal Perspective

I recently spoke with a young man who told me that he gets his news from three different sources: CNN, FOX, and the BBC. When I asked him why, he told me that each station has its own particular perspective. He therefore listens to all three in order to (hopefully) arrive at a more objective understanding of what's really going on in the world.

Interestingly, a similar issue has been observed in the writing of history. Historical relativists argue that no historian can be completely unbiased and value-neutral in his description of the past. Instead, everything he writes, from the selection of historical facts to the connections he sees between those facts, is influenced by his personality, values, and even prejudices. Every work of history (including the historical books of the Bible) is said to be written from a unique viewpoint. It's relative to a particular author's perspective and, hence, cannot be objective.

How should Christians respond to this? Did the biblical writers reliably record what happened in the past? Or are their writings so influenced by their personalities and values that we can never know what really happened? Well, it's probably true that every work of history, like every story in a newspaper, is colored (at least to some extent) by the author's worldview. In this sense, absolute objectivity is impossible. But does this mean that historical relativism is true? Not according to Norman Geisler. He writes:

Perfect objectivity may be practically unattainable within the limited resources of the historian on most if not all topics. But . . . the inability to attain 100 percent objectivity is a long way from total relativity.{7}

While historians and reporters may write from a particular worldview perspective, it doesn't follow that they're completely incapable of at least some objectivity. Indeed, certain safeguards exist which actually help ensure this. Suppose a historian writes that king Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon did not capture Jerusalem in the sixth century B.C. His thesis can be challenged and corrected on the basis of the available historical and archaeological evidence which indicates that Nebuchadnezzar did do this. Similarly, if a newspaper runs a story which later turns out to be incorrect, it might be forced to print a retraction.

While complete objectivity in history may be impossible, a sufficient degree of objectivity can nonetheless be attained because the historian's work is subject to correction in light of the evidence. The problem of personal perspective, then, doesn't inevitably lead to total historical relativism. Therefore, objections to the historical reliability of the Bible that are based on this argument are not ultimately persuasive.

Problems with Historical Relativism

We've seen that historical relativism denies that we can know objective truth about the past. While this poses a challenge to biblical Christianity, the arguments offered in support of this position aren't very convincing. Not only are the supporting arguments unconvincing, however, the arguments against this position are devastating. Let's look at just

two.

First, there are many facts of history that virtually all historians agree on – regardless of their worldview. For example, what responsible historian would seriously deny that George Washington was the first president of the United States, or that Abraham Lincoln delivered the Gettysburg Address? As one historical relativist admitted, “there are basic facts which are the same for all historians.”{8} But consider what this means. If a Christian, a Buddhist, an atheist, and a Muslim can all agree on certain basic facts of history, then it would seem to follow that at least some objective knowledge of history is possible. But in that case, total historical relativism is false, for it denies that such knowledge is possible.

Another reason for rejecting historical relativism is that it makes it impossible to distinguish good history from poor history, or genuine history from propaganda. As Dr. Ronald Nash observes, “If hard relativism were true, any distinction between truth and error in history would disappear.”{9} Just think about what this would mean. There would be no real difference between history and historical fiction! Further, there would be no legitimate basis for criticizing obviously false historical theories. This reveals that something is wrong with historical relativism, for as Dr. Craig reminds us, “All historians distinguish good history from poor.” For example, he recalls how Immanuel Velikovsky attempted “to rewrite ancient history on the basis of world-wide catastrophes caused by extra-terrestrial forces . . . dismissing entire ancient kingdoms and languages as fictional.”{10}

How did historians react to such ideas? According to Edwin Yamauchi, who wrote a detailed critical analysis of the theory, most historians were “quite hostile” to Velikovsky’s work.{11} They were irritated by his callous disregard for the actual historical evidence. In a similar vein, one need only remember the tremendous critical response to some of Dan Brown’s more outrageous claims in *The Da Vinci Code*. It’s important to notice that when scholars criticize the theories of Velikovsky and Brown, they tacitly acknowledge “the objectivity of history.”{12} Their criticism shows that they view these theories as flawed because they don’t correspond to what really happened in the past.

Well, with such good reasons for rejecting historical relativism, we needn’t fear its threat to biblical Christianity.

Determining Truth in History

How can we determine what actually happened in the past? Is there any way to separate the “wheat” from the “chaff,” so to speak, when it comes to evaluating competing interpretations of a particular historical person or event? For example, if one writer claims Jesus was married, and another claims he wasn’t, how can we determine which of the claims is true?

Well as you’ve probably already guessed, the issue really comes down to the evidence. For information about Jesus, virtually all scholars agree that our most valuable evidence comes from the New Testament Gospels. Each of these documents can be reliably dated to the first century, and “the events they record are based on either direct or indirect eyewitness testimony.”{13}

They thus represent our earliest and best sources of information about Jesus.

But even if we limit our discussion to these sources, different scholars still reach different conclusions about Jesus' marital status. So again, how can we determine the truth? We might employ a model known as inference to the best explanation. Simply put, this model says that "the historian should accept the hypothesis that best explains all the evidence."^{14} Now admittedly, this isn't an exact science. But as Dr. Craig reminds us, "The goal of historical knowledge is to obtain probability, not mathematical certainty."^{15} To demand more than this of history is simply to make unreasonable demands. Even in a court of law, we must be content with proof beyond a reasonable doubt — not beyond all possible doubt.^{16}

Keeping these things in mind, does the evidence best support the hypothesis that Jesus was, or wasn't, married? If you're interested in such a discussion I would highly recommend Darrell Bock's recent book, *Breaking the Da Vinci Code*. After a careful examination of the evidence, he concludes that Jesus was definitely not married -- a conclusion shared by the vast majority of New Testament scholars.^{17}

Of course, I'm not trying to argue that this issue can be decisively settled by simply citing an authority (although I certainly agree with Dr. Bock's conclusion). My point is rather that we have a way of determining truth in history. By carefully evaluating the best available evidence, and by logically inferring the best explanation of that evidence, we can determine (sometimes with a high degree of probability) what actually happened in the past.

Christianity is a religion rooted in history. Not a history about which we can have no real understanding, but a history that we can know and be confident in believing.

Notes

- Alan Richardson, *Christian Apologetics* (London: SCM, 1947), 91, cited in Ronald H. Nash, *Christian Faith and Historical Understanding* (Dallas: Word Publishing/Probe Books, 1984), 12.
- T. A. Roberts, *History and Christian Apologetic* (London: SPCK, 1960), vii, cited in Nash, *Christian Faith and Historical Understanding*, 12.
- Nash, *Christian Faith and Historical Understanding*, 77-78.
- This information comes from Ronald Nash's discussion of Charles Beard's essay, "That Noble Dream," in Nash, *Christian Faith and Historical Understanding*, 84.
- William Lane Craig, *Reasonable Faith: Christian Truth and Apologetics* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 1994), 176.
- Nash, *Christian Faith and Historical Understanding*, 85.
- Norman Geisler, *Christian Apologetics* (Grand Rapids, Baker, 1976), 297, cited in Nash, *Christian Faith and Historical Understanding*, 88-89.
- E.H. Carr, *What is History?* (New York: Random House, 1953), 8, cited in Craig, *Reasonable Faith*, 185.

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- Nash, Christian Faith and Historical Understanding, 88.
 - Craig, Reasonable Faith, 186-87.
 - Edwin Yamauchi, "Immanuel Velikovsky's Catastrophic History," Journal of the American Scientific Affiliation 25 (1973): 134, cited in Craig, Reasonable Faith, 187.
 - Craig, Reasonable Faith, 187.
 - Lee Strobel, The Case for Christ, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1998), 25.
 - Craig, Reasonable Faith, 184.
 - Ibid.
 - Ibid.
 - Darrell L. Bock, Breaking the Da Vinci Code (Nashville: Nelson Books, 2004), 31-45. Also see my previous article, "Decoding The Da Vinci Code," at <http://www.probe.org/docs/davinci.html>.

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