

Historical Reliability of the Bible, a few notes

Introduction: The basis for religions and cults is a story; some basic hero, set of myths, or charismatic teacher upon which a movement is built. What is the basis for those who are Christians? Can we say that the Bible differs from any of these? Is the text historically reliable?

I. Old Testament as historical literature.

A. Archeological digs of ancient sites confirm biblical record of sites and people.

1. Abraham the Hebrew, Gen. 14:13, from the city of Ur. Hebrew is derived from the term, hapiru, meaning “those who cross over,” immigrants. Abraham was known as an immigrant, and the city of Ur was found to be an historical site, excavated by Wooley, 1922-24. The practice of a slave becoming one’s heir, Gen. 15:1-4, is seen in the Nuzi tablets, excavations at Kirkuk, Iraq, practices around 1500 BC. Other practices strange to us, the problem of a slave and her son (Hagar and Ishmael), someone selling his birthright (like Esau) are recorded in these tablets.
2. Names and peoples of the Old Testament were used by skeptics to impune the integrity of the text, until archeological digs found Sargon, Isaiah 20 (Khorsabad, 1843), Hittites (Turkey, 1906), and many other practices and names.

B. The records of other ancient peoples tell of their invasions against Israel and periodic domination of them, such as Shalmanezar III and Jehu (2 Kings 9-11), that of Sennacherib against Hezekiah (2 Kings 19).

C. You may refer to many texts or articles on biblical archeology to find more information on Babylon, Ninevah, etc.

II. New Testament as historical literature.

A. Many resources may be consulted on the sites of Nazareth, Jerusalem, Jericho, and the cities addressed in the book of Revelation.

B. Dates in the New Testament.

1. Luke’s dating of the birth of Jesus, during the governorship of Quirinius, about two years before the death of Herod the Great, gives a fine focus to the dating, about 4 BCE. Quirinius was likely given some authority over Judea a few years before it became a Roman province proper. The discussions you will find over this are quite interesting and a bit steep.
2. The appearance of Paul before Gallio, the proconsul of Asia, Acts. 18:12, ca. AD 49. Gallio is well attested as being in office at this time and made a visit to Corinth which would have made the local officials defer the rabble rousing accusations and hearing to him.

C. Jesus is well attested as an actual figure of history, from sources not friendly to Christians.

1. Babylonian Talmud (Jewish oral law and commentary, ca. 700 CE): On the eve of the Passover Jesus was hung, although stoning had been demanded.
2. Josephus, a Jew, worked with the Romans at the time of the war with the Jews, 70 CE, wrote of Jesus in “Antiquities of the Jews:” And there arose about this time Jesus, a wise man, if indeed we should call him a man. . . . This man was the Christ. And when Pilate had condemned him to the cross . . . he appeared to them on the third day alive . . . and even now the tribe of Christians, so named for him, have not died out
3. Tacitus (Roman historian, c. 56 – c. 117) refers to the Christians blamed for burning Rome, saying “Christus the founder of the name, had undergone the death penalty in the reign of Tiberius, by sentence of the procurator Pontius Pilate.”

III. These and other resources are evidence we can examine and be secure in the conclusion that the Bible is a book which is historically reliable, not a book of mere myth or conjecture.

Short list of resources

Published works

Halley, H. H. Halley's Bible Handbook. 24th ed. Zondervan Publishing: 1965.

Harrison, Everett F. A Short Life of Christ. Eerdmans Publishing. Grand Rapids: 1977.

Pfeiffer, Charles, editor. The Biblical World. Baker Book House. Grand Rapids, MI: 1966.

Pryor, Neale. You Can Trust Your Bible. Quality Publications. Abilene, TX: 1980.

Internet resources

F. F. Bruce on the reliability of the writings of Luke.

<http://www.worldinvisible.com/library/ffbruce/ntdocrli/ntdocc07.htm>

An interesting debate on the date of Jesus' birth, about Quirinius. "On an objection about Luke, Quirinius, and Herods: " <http://www.christian-thinktank.com/quirinius.html>

Much, much more is available both in published works and on the Internet.