



THE BEREIA PAGE

“Examining . . . to see if these things are so” ~ Acts 17.11

Reflections

“The Matthean Jesus asks his audience the question, ‘What do you think about the Messiah?’ (Matt. 22:42). In many ways that is the quintessential question that the Jesus of canonical testimony raises for all readers, be they Jewish or Gentile, ancient or modern. In effect, people are asked, ‘Do you believe that Jesus is the Messiah?’ The answer to that question is answered affirmatively by people from Peter, to Nathanael, to Martha. Readers of all types are then invited to follow their example and to believe the scripture that ‘the Messiah will suffer and rise from the dead’ (Luke 24:46) and to experience the promise that ‘by believing [in the Messiah] you may have life in his name’ (John 20:31).” ~ Michael F. Bird, *Jesus is the Christ: The Messianic Testimony of the Gospels* (IVP Academic, 2012), 67

“It is lamentable that many continue to perceive philosophy as a useless pursuit. You see, one does not have the option of having a philosophy. It may be better or poorer, but a philosophy will exist. No movement can be powerful which is philosophically uncertain.” ~ Carroll D. Osburn, *The Peaceable Kingdom: Essays Favoring Non-Sectarian Christianity* (Restoration Perspectives, 1993), 3

Defending Jesus: Starting with History

David Anguish

N. T. Wright once observed that in our time,

the people whom ordinary Christians meet, to whom they must address the gospel, have been told over and over and over by the media, on the basis of some recent book or other, that the Jesus of the Gospels is historically incredible and that Christianity is therefore based on a mistake (Wright 1999, 18).

Wright is correct, it is not uncommon to read, in social media threads and elsewhere, skeptical comments about Jesus’s existence or that he was only an insightful teacher, prophet, sage, healer, or revolutionary, not God-among-us and the mediator of human salvation. Furthermore, many who make such statements profess to hold a form of Christian faith (see e.g., the thesis in Hick 1977, ix; and the “Introduction” in Funk 1997, 1–38).

As the document we know as 1 John shows, the apostle would have been familiar with this type of criticism, if not its specific forms. He had opponents he called “antichrists” (ἀντίχριστοι, *antichristoi*), people who were against Christ and had rejected what had always been taught about him (1 John 2.18, 22; 4.3). They refused to accept that Jesus Christ was the Son of God who had come in the flesh (1 John 4.2–3, 15), a thesis John assumed multiple times (cf. 1.3, 7; 2.1, 22–23; 3.8, 23; 4.9–10, 14; 5.1, 5–6, 9–10, 12–13, 20). And, yes, at least some of those skeptics were former members of the Christian community (cf. 2.19, 26).

But John did not just *repeat* the traditional confession. He first reaffirmed that it was grounded in historical events that were subject to verification or, if the evidence required, falsification:

That which was from the beginning, which *we have heard*, which *we have seen with our eyes*, which *we looked upon and have touched with our hands*, concerning the word of life—the life was *made manifest*, and we have *seen* it, and *testify* to it and *proclaim* to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and was *made manifest to us*—that which *we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you* (1 John 1.1–3a) (I have previously elaborated on this text [here](#), [here](#), and [here](#)).

John’s approach aligns with Paul’s, as illustrated in Acts 26. In his apologetic (ἀπολογέομαι, *apologeomai*; vv. 1, 24) for his preaching, Paul referred Agrippa II to events the king was able to

“In its simplest terms, a worldview is a set of beliefs about the most important issues in life.... Implicit in all this is the additional point that these beliefs must cohere in some way and form a system.... A worldview, then, is a conceptual scheme by which we consciously or unconsciously place or fit everything we believe and by which we interpret and judge reality.”
 ~ Ronald H. Nash, *Worldviews in Conflict: Choosing Christianity in a World of Ideas* (Zondervan Publishing House, 1992), 16

“‘God lets the Devil have a long rope these days,’ said a friend of mine, a doctor of divinity, to his mother. ‘Yes,’ said the old lady ‘but he keeps hold of the end of it himself.’” ~ Leslie D. Weatherhead, *The Will of God* (Abingdon, 1944), 44

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verify, including Jewish controversies, Paul’s Jewish background, and his efforts to eradicate the way of Christ (vv. 3–5, 9–12). After reviewing his call and mission, he said, “For *the king knows about these things*, and to him I speak boldly. For I am persuaded that *none of these things has escaped his notice, for this has not been done in a corner*” (v. 26) (I previously elaborated on this text [here](#)).

We need to stress this point for, as Wright goes on to say after the quotation cited above, the approach of some believers today amounts to “say[ing] that the church’s teaching will do for us, thank you very much, so we do not need to ask historical questions.” But, he continues, “you cannot say that to a serious and enquiring person who engages you in conversation on a train or who wanders into a church one Sunday and asks what it is all about” (Wright 1999, 18).

At a time when we routinely are told that historical studies are only records of individual (subjective) judgments and therefore no one can ever know what actually happened (see Dixon 1996, 126–142), we must make an effort to establish that the truth of the Christian faith is grounded in the historical reality of the described events. To again quote Wright,

If Christianity is not rooted in things that actually happened in first-century Palestine, we might as well be Buddhists, Marxists or almost anything else. And if Jesus never existed, or if he was quite different from what the Gospels and the church’s worship affirms him to have been, then we are indeed living in cloud-cuckoo land (Wright 1999, 18).

So, as we set out to make a case for belief in Jesus, we must not get ahead of ourselves and fail to engage with the historical skepticism many now espouse. And as we address it, we must keep in mind two important principles. First, we must embrace and affirm the point made by Charles Anderson:

It cannot be stated too strongly that Christianity is an historical religion, and that it is so intimately tied to history that if the historical credibility of its sources were to be proven false, it would at once collapse as a possible claimant for our loyalty (Anderson 1972, 55).

Second, we must engage honestly with the world’s marketplace of ideas. In the words of Colin Brown,

as a Christian I have no business operating with double standards. Because my faith is tied to history, I have to use the best historical tools available for studying history. The rules of the game do not allow me to relax the standards when it comes to matters of faith (Brown 1987, 14–15).

The faith of many in our world will depend on us taking history so seriously.

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