

Notes for the Ekklesia Meeting

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Why Jesus?

by Dan Trygg

“Men of Israel, listen to these words: Jesus the Nazarene, a Man *attested to you by God* with miracles and wonders and signs which God performed through Him in your midst, just as you yourselves know-- ²³ this Man, delivered over *by the predetermined plan and foreknowledge of God*, you nailed to a cross by the hands of godless men and put Him to death. ²⁴ But God raised Him up again, putting an end to the agony of death, since it was impossible for Him to be held in its power. ³² ...This Jesus God raised up again, to which we are all witnesses.“

Acts 2:22-24,32

“O foolish people and slow of heart to believe in *all that the prophets have spoken!* ²⁶ Was it not *necessary for the Messiah to suffer these things* and to enter into His glory? ²⁷ Then beginning with Moses and with all the prophets, He explained to them the things concerning Himself in all the Scriptures.”

Luke 24:25-27

I was talking with someone today, and they were saying that they believed in God, but they didn't know if they believed that Jesus was God. Why is Jesus necessary? How do we know that the information given to us by the New Testament writers is true? How important is it to have faith in Jesus?

After talking for a few minutes, it became clear that a good portion of this person's doubts had to do with “**How can we know that the Bible stories are true?** Did they really happen, or did someone just make them up?” That is a fair question, a very important question to come to terms with in one's mind. It really comes down to an examination of “How can I verify *anything*? **How can I know *any* event happened, ...especially if I was not there to see it for myself.**” I mean, there are people who are skeptical of almost everything that they themselves have not seen, experienced or can understand. Some even doubt that the world is a globe, or that we ever landed on the moon. Those are extreme cases, but they bring up the question, “How can a reasonable person know if something is true?”

An entire discipline in philosophy has studied and debated this question for centuries. **Epistemology is the study of knowledge and justified belief.** It deals with examining the strengths and limits of certain approaches to find truth. It examines and evaluates sources, and discusses **what would be sufficient to “prove” that something is in fact true**, or to establish truth beyond a reasonable doubt. To really come to grips with what it would take to deal with “the doubts”, a person needs to understand and appreciate some of the issues brought up by these “experts in evidence”.

Before looking for “evidence” of some kind, we need to first ask, “What is the *nature* of the biblical record? What does it *claim* to be?” Is it just a collection of religious poetry, stories or myths that are only meant as a backdrop to teach certain beliefs, life-lessons or to promote certain moral behavior? Is the Bible comparable to Aesop's fables, or to the Bhagavad Gita? **Does it purport to be the musings of people about God, or does it actually claim to be a record of God's actions and communications with people in real-time history?** Of course, there *are* different kinds of literature in the Bible. Some of it *is* more expressive, like poetry (Psalms), and it does contain collections of wise sayings (Proverbs or Ecclesiastes). **By and large, however, the Bible claims to be a record of historical events.** It is these events, God's communications *with* and activity *among* humankind, that give any credence or unique authority to any of the more expressive, literary portions of the Bible. **This is what makes Judaism and Christianity unique among world religions.** They are historical. **They are based entirely upon historical events.** If those events did not happen, then the entire religious belief system falls to the ground. Either God led Israel out of Egypt through Moses, or He didn't. Or, either Jesus did miracles, and rose from the dead, or He didn't. **All truth-claims stand or fall based upon whether the historical events described actually took place.**

Make no mistake, **there are truth claims made by the Bible**, regarding who God is, what He has done and will do. **There are also very significant truth claims made by Jesus about who He is, and why He came.** The Bible is full of the teachings and writings of prophets and apostles, and others, who claim to have had special authority and credibility because of their encounters and communications with the Living God. Their claims are substantiated by the acts of God in history, through fulfilled prophecies, miraculous signs or other clear examples of Divine judgment or deliverance. For example, **Jesus claimed to be more than the son of God. He claimed to be God the Son.** He claimed to have existed before His human birth (Jn. 8:58), and claimed to have come “from above”, that is, “not from this world” (Jn. 8:23). He claimed that He and the Father are “one [thing]” (Jn. 10:30). Even **His listeners understood that He was uniquely “calling God His own Father, making Himself equal with God”** (Jn. 5:18). In response to their threats and umbrage, Jesus told them that God was giving Him the ability to do miracles, so that they would marvel and understand that He was speaking the truth. He went on to say that He Himself would judge all humankind. This position of authority was His specifically so that “all may honor the Son *even as* they honor the Father” (Jn. 5:22,23). He would also be the one to raise the dead. All who are in the tombs will come out, at the

sound of *His* voice (Jn. 5:28). **He also clearly taught, repeatedly, that *it was necessary for Him to go to Jerusalem, to suffer, be killed by the authorities, and that He would rise from the dead on the third day*** (Matt. 16:21; 17:12; Lk. 17:25; 22:15). ***Were these the ravings of a lunatic, or the clear acknowledgment of a predetermined plan of God?***

Speaking of “predetermined plan”, do you know that **one of the most compelling evidences for the truth of Jesus’ claims is the incredibly detailed preparation of God in history through progressive revelation and fulfilled prophecy.** This was so thoroughly set forth in the OT that Jesus could marvel at His followers and say, “O foolish people and slow of heart to believe in *all that the prophets have spoken!*”²⁶ Was it not *necessary for the Messiah to suffer these things* and to enter into His glory?²⁷ Then beginning with Moses and with all the prophets, He explained to them the things concerning Himself in all the Scriptures” (Lk. 24:25-27). In other words, Jesus was acknowledging that **there was such a thorough preparation in OT teaching, symbols, and even specific prophetic declarations that almost any open-minded person should easily be able to understand not only God’s plan, but also to easily recognize the Messiah when He showed up on the scene. *There is no way to fake these, or claim that they had been manipulated by later generations.*** In the Dead Sea scrolls, we have actual OT texts which predate Christianity that show that our Bibles have not inserted prophetic texts where they did not belong. **These prophecies and types predate Jesus’ birth by centuries.** Yet, what they reveal is that a male child, the “seed of the woman” would eventually “crush the head of the serpent”. He would be of Abraham’s seed, from the tribe of Judah, from the lineage of David, born in Bethlehem, yet be the one, “whose goings forth are from long ago, from the days of eternity” (Mic. 5:2). Isaiah wrote of a child who would be born to the house of David, who would be called Mighty God, Eternal Father (9:6). He also prophesied in great detail that God’s Servant would be despised and rejected, would bear *our* sins, and suffer for *our* iniquities. Even though He was guiltless, He would bear the death stroke that we deserved. This prophecy even mentions that He would be buried in a rich man’s tomb. ***It says that this was God’s plan, ...that His Servant should suffer as a guilt offering for everyone else*** (Isa. 53). No wonder Jesus said that “*it was necessary for the Messiah to suffer!*”!! This is only a small sampling of over 300 prophecies about the Christ. One even predicted that He would show up on the scene in 26 A.D., and then, after three and a half years, He would suddenly be “cut off” (Dan.9:25,26). **Who else could it be but Jesus?**

Getting back to the reliability of the NT record, **how can we know that Jesus actually said these things, or that the events actually occurred as reported?** How do we know that the NT we have today does not contain errors or additions that were inserted later? **First of all, dealing with the reliability of the documents themselves,** the level of investigation and examination has been so far-reaching and thorough that **there is no credible reason any more to suggest that the documents behind our NT are in question. No other piece of ancient literature is established by near the number and quality of manuscripts, nor the closeness in time to the original documents.** Not even close. We have manuscript copies that date within 35 years for the writing of the Gospel of John, and within 25 years from the Gospel of Matthew. **These early manuscript dates mean that these gospels were written, and widely distributed, within the lifetime of those who were eyewitnesses of Jesus’ life and ministry.** And our manuscript evidence comes within just a few years of that. In addition, **almost the entire NT was quoted by early church fathers, men who were second-generation believers.** The testimony of their writings shows that the NT manuscripts were the same during their lifetimes as they are now. Furthermore, **early translations into other languages give us a snapshot of what the content must have been that they were translating.** Again, no substantial differences can be observed. ***All in all, there are over 24,600 manuscript portions of the NT, over 38 times as many as for any other piece of ancient literature!*** **The gospels were written by eyewitnesses to the events, or those who interviewed eyewitnesses.** They have been examined and cross checked in every conceivable way, and yet they have always been shown to be free of historical inaccuracies. ***There has never been any archaeological discovery that has shown that the Bible was in error!***

The Christian movement was born into controversy and persecution. From the earliest days there were many attempts to discredit or expose any mistruths presented by early Christians. **The church survived all those attacks, because it was founded on sound evidence. Take the resurrection of Jesus, for example.** There are ***at least 12 resurrection appearances*** described in the NT. They happened ***at different times and places.*** They involved ***over 519 different eyewitnesses!*** Many saw the risen Jesus ***on several occasions.*** These witnesses ***were not expecting Him to rise again.*** In fact, ***several had to be convinced against their preconceived beliefs.*** **Other corroborating evidence** includes the empty tomb; the condition of the grave clothes left in Jesus’ tomb; the drastic change in the disciples; the existence of the Christian church; the coming of the Holy Spirit; and the testimony of Christians throughout history. **These all make sense if Jesus’ rose. What else would adequately explain all of these events?**