

IS THE MESSAGE OF THE FIRST CHRISTIANS TRUE?

Introduction – The Christian message of Jesus should be examined in the same way you would any historical figure. In 218 B.C., Hannibal is said to have crossed the Alps with his army to attack the Romans. How do we know this remarkable event actually occurred? The primary source for the history of Hannibal is Polybius, a Greek historian who wrote about the rise of the early Roman Empire prior to 146 B.C. He wrote his historical account almost 100 years after Hannibal’s crossing of the Alps. The earliest manuscript copy of his work dates to about 1000 A.D., which is almost 1,200 years later.

- A. Some assert we cannot know what the first Christians believed since we do not have original autographed copies of the Apostles’ writings. They claim that others changed the Jesus story to what we now have in the New Testament.
1. The four gospel accounts agree on the central events of Jesus’ life, which includes his crucifixion and resurrection. The gospels may have been written later than some of Paul’s letters that were sent twenty years after Jesus’ ascension.
 1 Corinthians 15:1-8
 Galatians 1:1-4; 13-14
 Romans 1:1-4
 2. These events were remembered by those who witnessed them in the context of a Middle Eastern oral society. Today the average Middle Easterner memorizes many things, including the Koran. They are focused on accuracy of memory, not creativity. Do not assume that ancients had bad memories like modern Americans, who live in a print/media culture. (John H. Walton and D. Brent Sandy, The Lost World of Scripture: Ancient Literary Culture and Biblical Authority, IVP Academic Press, 2013)
 3. Compared to other ancient writings, the New Testament has many early copies.

Ancient Authors	Originally Written	Earliest Copies	Time Between	Number of Copies
New Testament	50-100 A.D.	130 A.D.	30 years	5,600
Plato	427-347 B.C.	1100 A.D.	1,457 years	7
Herodotus	480-425 B.C.	1100 A.D.	1,525 years	1,300
Julius Caesar	100-44 B.C.	900 A.D.	944 years	10
Demosthenes	383-322 B.C.	900 A.D.	1,222 years	200
Livy	59 B.C.-17 A.D.	400 A.D.	383 years	20
Pliny	61-113 A.D.	850 A.D.	737 years	7

- B. Some claim that the writers of the New Testament made up the story of Jesus so they could appeal to people’s hope for immortality.

1. If you were going to make up a story that would appeal to a First century audience, then you would not have included the fact Jesus was crucified and resurrected.
1 Corinthians 1:22-24
Acts 17:32
 2. There were numerous eyewitnesses to the key events of Jesus' life. Those who wrote the gospels used good historical research methods.
Luke 1:1-4
2 Peter 1:16-19
 3. The factual evidence about Jesus includes an empty tomb.
Matthew 28:1-15
 4. The factual evidence about Jesus includes numerous appearances after his resurrection.
1 Corinthians 15:3-8
 5. One only has to ask the question: "What possible benefit was there in making up this story about Jesus?" The original Apostles and messengers were reduced to poverty, persecuted, and many were cruelly executed for their preaching.
- C. What alternative theories have been offered that attempt to interpret the facts about Jesus, especially his resurrection?
1. The body of Jesus was stolen by the followers of Jesus to create the story.
 2. The appearances of Jesus were psychological illusions experienced by distressed disciples.
 3. The Passover Plot by Hugh J. Schonfield, written in 1965 and made into a movie in 1976, offers one of the most creative explanations. He claims that Jesus was slipped a sedative while on the cross and went into a coma. Because he appeared dead, Joseph of Arimathea took the body to bury, but he nursed Jesus back to health. Then Jesus appeared alive to his disciples and others later, which was all planned by Jesus in advance to fulfill the Jewish hope of a Messiah.
 - a. Schonfield believes John's gospel is more accurate than the other three.
John 19:31-34
John 20:6-8
 - b. There is no Old Testament expectation that the Messiah would be resurrected.
 - c. This assumes conspiracy and deception could create the Jesus movement.
 4. The New Testament account has the best explanation of all the factual evidence in comparison to the other theories.
- D. Is there independent confirmation by nonbelievers or any physical evidence?
1. Josephus, the Jewish historian who wrote near the end of the First century, and other authors confirm the central facts of the New Testament message of Jesus. (This was presented in last week's notes.)
 2. The Shroud of Turin is said to be the burial cloth of Jesus which contains a photographic negative embedded in the cloth in an inexplicable way. All the

evidence points to the possibility this is true, except carbon dating of a small sample from the cloth.

Conclusion – To ignore the strong historical evidence for Jesus being crucified and raised from the dead would betray a skepticism about all of ancient history. I believe there is more factual evidence for Jesus than for Hannibal. Yet no one seriously questions the account of Hannibal crossing the Alps. Historical reconstruction is dependent on oral and written sources that may be over 1,000 years removed from the events.

Pinchas Lapide (1922-1997 A.D.), an Orthodox rabbi, Israeli historian, and Israeli diplomat from 1951-1969, wrote a book in 1983 entitled The Resurrection of Jesus – a Jewish Perspective. "...the resurrection belongs to the category of the truly real and effective occurrences, for without a fact of history there is no act of true faith" (p. 92). "If the defeated and depressed group of disciples overnight could change into a victorious movement of faith, based on autosuggestion or self-deception without a fundamental faith experience – then this would be a much greater miracle than the resurrection of Jesus" (p. 126).

Reference – The Historical Reliability of the Gospels, Craig L. Blomberg, 2nd edition, IVP Press