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From many quarters, students of biblical studies and theology are told that neither the NT in general nor the Gospels in particular contain historically reliable material. It is stated that the NT books, including the Gospels, are theological documents, and that this theological purpose precludes the possibility of accurate historical data.

This was the position of the Tübingen School’s work on Jesus and the early Church, which was conducted from the presupposition of historical scepticism, arguing that it was neither possible nor desirable to validate the historical aspects. The Tübingen School was a product of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century rationalism, which refused to entertain even the possibility of the miraculous and anything else that human reason found difficult to accept. In addition, the prevailing spirit of scholarship was predisposed towards the fragmentation of texts rather than to holism (seeing and accepting them as complete wholes). It is these presuppositions that have dominated much of OT and NT scholarship throughout much of the twentieth century, and they have done so more often by way of assumption, presumption and assertion than through genuine historical argumentation and investigation. Source and tradition criticism both owe much in their development to Enlightenment and rationalist thought, and such presuppositions have dominated much of the two disciplines, though they are not essential to them. Historical scepticism also underlay the development of tradition and form criticism and, through form criticism, redaction criticism as well. Yet these disciplines, once separated from such presuppositions, are far more useful than when married to them. That this is so is evidenced by the widely differing results that have been arrived at when trained historians and classicists have studied the NT.

The legacy of the Tübingen School’s historically sceptical presuppositions has greatly influenced modern NT studies in many ways, not least in the area of historicity. One example is the theologian Rudolf Bultmann, a major figure in the development of form-critical analysis, who declared concerning Jesus: ‘I do indeed think that we can now know almost nothing concerning the life and personality of Jesus, since the early Christian sources show no interest in either, are moreover fragmentary and often legendary, and other sources about Jesus do not exist.’

Another example is useful. Norman Perrin, a leading scholar in the development of redaction criticism, asserted: The gospel form was created to serve the purpose of the early Church, but historical reminiscence was not one of those purposes. So, for example, when we read an account of Jesus giving instruction to his disciples, we are not hearing the voice of the earthly Jesus addressing Galilean disciples in a Palestinian situation but that of the risen Lord addressing Christian missionaries in a Hellenistic world. He then proceeded to make this sweeping claim which so many have taken as axiomatic: ‘So far as we can tell today, there is no single pericope anywhere in the gospels, the present purpose of which is to preserve a historical reminiscence of the earthly Jesus, although there may be some which do in fact come near to doing so because a reminiscence, especially of an aspect of teaching such as a parable, could be used to serve the purposes of the Church or the evangelists.

Whilst an extreme form of historical scepticism continues to be advocated and applied by the Jesus Seminar, a more positive approach has been adopted by what has become termed the third quest of the historical Jesus. Whilst the
writers of the third quest have rightly sought to place Jesus firmly within the Jewish milieu, their use of historical criteria has often been accompanied by a resistance to accepting the Gospels as substantially historically reliable. This is exemplified in the work of E.P. Sanders, in his two books on Jesus. In the earlier book, Sanders, in what is presented as a resolutely historical investigation with no theological presuppositions (an impossibility in itself), finds little truly reliable historical material concerning Jesus. In his more recent and more popular book, he begins with eleven statements about Jesus which he believes are virtually beyond dispute and adds to them four further statements about the aftermath of Jesus' life.

But is there really so little about Jesus in the Gospels? It is arguable that none of these scholars are historians, and an increasing number, not only amongst evangelical scholars, contend that their results are based more on theological and philosophical considerations than on any historical ones. Yet claims for the authority of their historical declarations are made and many scholars present their positions as widely accepted, even axiomatic.

My contention is that historical questions should be asked historically. This might seem obvious but, I believe, when it comes to historical questions in biblical studies or theology, it is often overlooked, perhaps even ignored; and this axiom is equally true for the evangelical scholar as it is for the liberal one, or for anyone of any theological persuasion. The discipline of historical research has a broadly agreed methodology which, when adhered to, provides checks and balances which can improve the historical study of the NT or any literary corpus. In studies into the historical reliability of the NT in general, and the historical Jesus in particular, it has often been literary, theological or philosophical considerations, or combinations of these, which have predominated. But rather than allow any one or combination of these disciplines to take precedence over the others, we must agree with Tom Wright that they should be used together in what he calls a 'creative synthesis.' What this means is that the historical study of the NT or the life of Jesus cannot take place in isolation from the literary and theological and, we must add, philosophical disciplines.

Therefore, it is important that the nature of history and historical methodology is understood and practised, not least because this is the one of the four disciplines that is often bypassed.

Whenever the issue of the historical reliability of any literary corpus is investigated, the first matter the investigator must be aware of is the nature of history itself. What is meant by the term 'history'? Then, second, what is the historian's method? And third, what is meant when a document is pronounced 'historically reliable'?

'History'

The word 'history' in English has two nuances: it can refer to events that actually happened, and as such denotes the actual course of past events, or it can denote an account of past events. The historian thus studies history (in the former sense) and writes history (in the latter sense). As to the word 'historiography', it is used to describe either the study of what historians do, or history writing itself.

The interest of the historian, then, is in past events, but since the term 'history' is equivocal, some historians make a distinction between 'events' and 'facts'. According to this technical distinction, The term event is used to denote something which has happened in the past, irrespective of anyone's apprehension of it. Fact is used to denote what the historian knows of something which has happened in the past.
Historians have only indirect contact with the events they are investigating. Such contact as exists does so in the form of `tracks' from the past. Even with events to which they are eye-witnesses, historians never have access to everything that took place. No witness, whether oral or written, is capable of conveying a complete, photo-like description of an event. Rather, it is in the nature of all witnesses to have selected, altered, interpreted and rationalized what they have experienced. The `event' is far greater than the `fact' can encompass, so the secular historian Arthur Marwick notes that the past is so rich, and so enormous, that no historian, even if dealing with a relatively short period in time, could set down everything that happened in that time.

It is clear, therefore, that there can be no exact correspondence between the historical event and the historical fact. Colin Brown writes: `Like scientific theory, historical construction is not a literal description of what is observed ... it is not exactly a reconstruction of reality. It is like a model or a series of models.' And it is vital that we recognize that it is in the nature of these facts that they necessarily involve interpretation of the events they record.

### Historical method

How, then, does the historian construct a model of the past? Since contact with the event is indirect, models of the past are dependent on historical evidence of various kinds. These tracks form the basis of any reconstruction, and, since the historical events are not directly accessible, the historian works by inferences which are drawn from a widely diverse range of information. As with scientific investigation, the historian's explanations are not propositional statements regarding directly observable events, but are hypotheses which are put forward to account for the extant data. As hypotheses, they may be tested by seeing whether they adequately explain the data, while at the same time agreeing with other accepted knowledge. As such, this process is neither purely inductive nor deductive, but requires imagination on the historian's part. The evidence available can never be complete; in most cases it is, to greater or lesser degrees, fragmentary, thus requiring harmonization, which plays an important part in all historical reconstruction. This is the method by which historians seek to harmonize apparently conflicting data. The nature of the conflict may well be due to the incompleteness of the evidence, and so the historian's task is to ascertain whether the sources do in fact conflict. Only when the harmonization becomes more incredible than accepting the error in the texts should the verdict `unhistorical' be passed. If the text is generally accurate where verifiable, then the greater the likelihood that harmonization will be a useful tool; the less accurate the text, the less credence harmonization will have. Though the adoption of this procedure is often frowned upon by theologians, it is nevertheless a standard tool of historical method.

As the knowledge of the past is almost always indirect, the historian's knowledge is inevitably limited by the extant sources available. Obviously, not all historians have access to all the extant evidence, which can sometimes help to explain some of the differences between historians' finished works. This needs to be remembered, for example, in Gospel studies. So, when a historian comes to the study of any period, movement or person, the first job is to collect all the evidence available. This will include data from other disciplines (such as archaeology), which have their own techniques and canons of interpretation. This is what Van Harvey means when he calls history a field-encompassing field. To the best of my knowledge, Bultmann and Perrin never mention such vital issues for the question of historicity as the textual and manuscript evidence or archaeology. Such an observation raises serious methodological questions and therefore doubts over their historical conclusions.
with the evidence amassed, the historian must then assess it. By their very nature, these tracks/sources are not identical with the past event(s) to which they bear witness. It is not simply the case that the historian has to be selective in what is drawn out from the sources, but that the sources themselves have been selective in what they have recorded.

The evidence is first classified according to whether it is a primary or a secondary source. A primary source came into existence during the actual period under investigation; a secondary source is the (or any) interpretation of the events, written later by someone looking back upon a period in the past.

The first point to be established with any primary source is its authenticity, so that its value and reliability can be determined. Marwick lists five issues which must be addressed:

1. What type of source is it?
2. What person or group created the source?
3. How and for what purpose did the source come into existence? Was it written/made with the intention of conveying reliable information or to prove a point?
4. How far is the author of the source in a good position to provide first-hand information on the particular subject being investigated?
5. The historian has to be sure that he/she has really understood the document as contemporaries would have, so two other areas require consideration: (a) textual matters, and (b) the problems arising from archaic and foreign languages.

As for the secondary sources, the historian has to be critical of these too, using critical judgement in assessing the extent to which they can be accepted and used for the present study.

It is often assumed that primary sources are always more reliable than secondary ones, but this is not necessarily the case. Primary sources can be as tendentious, if not more so, than secondary works, whilst secondary sources are often better able to assess the event or person and their significance more fully with the benefit of hindsight and with a greater appreciation of their relationship to and effect on others. They also benefit from the work of earlier historians. Both primary and secondary sources, then, require careful examination and critical assessment.

As far as the historical Jesus is concerned, the four Gospels fall into the category of secondary sources, though it must be recognized that the pre-Gospel tradition from which they drew intimately links them with the teaching of Jesus through the pre- and post-Easter traditions (transmitters of the traditions). Both the more conservative F.P. Bruce and the more liberal E.P. Sanders regard the Gospels as primary sources, but this is technically not the case. However, the pre- and post-Easter traditions include, according to Luke 1:2, 'eyewitnesses' and 'ministers of the word'. The explicit statements of intent by Luke and John in particular (Lk. 1:1-4; Acts 1:1; Jn. 20:31) cannot be dismissed lightly by the historian and must be rigorously tested by every means available – a procedure seldom followed by historical sceptics. By generic association (their common genre), Mark and Matthew make similar, though implicit, claims. Whatever title we eventually use to describe the genre of the Gospels, what cannot be denied is that they are each ostensibly 'historical' in form and content, focusing on the figure of Jesus, his teaching and deeds, his death, resurrection and abiding significance, though they do this in a way different from the way modern biographies and histories would. Added to this is the virtually unanimous early Christian testimony which associates the Gospels with Matthew, Mark, Luke and John (e.g. Eusebius’s Ecclesiastical History 3.39.4,16 and Irenaeus’s Against Heresies 3.1.1-2).
When coupled with, for example, Justin Martyr’s reference to the Gospels as the ‘reminiscences’ of the apostles (e.g. Dialogue with Trypho 100.4), they show us the views of second-century Christians as to their authorship and content. Such statements cannot be summarily dismissed, but require careful consideration.

But if the Gospels of Matthew and John are accepted in any way as eye-witness accounts, or if early dates can be established for any or all of the Gospels, then their classification as either primary or secondary sources for the historical Jesus would need to be reassessed. However, the consensus of scholarly opinion would not so regard or date the Gospels. But this is not the end of the matter, for the Gospels and, it must be added, the NT letters and Revelation are primary sources for the life and beliefs of the early Church.

In all this, it must be emphasized that whichever classification we accept for any part of the NT, both primary and secondary sources are equally capable of distortion or historical reliability. For each book, then, the matter must not be decided a priori but through rigorously applying to it historical method.

Literary sources, both primary and secondary, can be further classified as intentional and unintentional sources. Intentional documents represent what can be called ‘prefabricated history’, though H.E.W. Turner points out that what for the original writer was a finished product becomes merely the raw material of his/her successors in the field, sources which require checking with available primary sources and comparison with other similar end-products. In contrast, the purpose of unintentional documents was contemporary and practical, their value being in their unwitting testimony to a matter of interest to later historians, and because of their unintentional nature the likelihood of distortion is greatly lessened, though they nevertheless need to be tested against available knowledge for errors.

Turner sounds a necessary warning when he states that it is important not to confuse the criteria of intention and reliability. An intentional document may be highly tendentious, though this does not preclude the possibility of its preserving genuine information. Therefore, no document should simply be assumed to be reliable without independent scrutiny.

Unintentional documents often require a greater degree of adaptation, but many historians prize highly the information they contain. In some fields, the major sources of evidence are unintentional, and it is this unself-conscious character that will normally give them considerable value as sources. Yet they too must be carefully scrutinized and checked, as they may be tendentious. Even when this is shown to be the case, the historian must be aware of the possibility that historical information may still be gleaned from them.

Historians, therefore, need to be sceptical towards their sources. For example, Harvey sees the scepticism of received reports as ‘a necessary attitude for the critical historian’. He sees the historian as necessarily possessing a ‘radical autonomy’ which requires the judging of sources, which are themselves made up of the judgements and inferences of others. Thus the historian’s conclusions, like theirs, are made up of judgements and inferences. Citing F.H. Bradley, Harvey points out that judgements are not random inventions or isolated occurrences of thought, but they presuppose other judgements, beliefs and opinions. What witnesses think is in large part filtered through the prism of their own individual modes of perception and conception, which are influenced by the thought of the culture of which they are a part. The historian’s task, therefore, is to assess these judgements and inferences, in order to establish not only their meaning, but also their truth.
If sources were left uncriticized, the historian would become merely the transmitter of tradition. In this regard, R.G. Collingwood writes:

If anyone else, no matter who, even a very learned historian, or an eyewitness, or a person in the confidence of the man who did it himself, hands him on a plate a ready-made answer to his question, all he can do is reject it; not because he thinks his informant is trying to deceive him, or is himself deceived, but because if he accepts it he is giving up his autonomy as an historian and allowing someone else to do for him what, if he is a scientific thinker, he can only do for himself.56

Even the evangelical Church historian David Bebbington states that the historian is one who ‘develops a sceptical turn of mind’, but he does qualify this by saying, ‘History demands a critical mind’.59

This is a vital qualification. Historians must indeed be critical of their sources, even sceptical, as understood above, but in the areas of theology and biblical studies, this has all too often resulted in a general methodological historical scepticism such as that found in Bultmann and others already noted. This latter form of scepticism, in Howard Marshall’s words, ‘is thoroughly unrealistic – as [the sceptical historian] would realize if he attempted to apply it to all the ordinary statements made to him by other people in the course of everyday life’.60 Tom Wright helpfully speaks of ‘critical-realism’,61 which recognizes that historical knowledge is possible, and this is so as much for Jesus and the early Church as for any other historical figures and movements. The conservative/evangelical scholar (historian and/or theologian) ought to be prepared to adopt historical criticism only to a point, refusing to apply to the text the attitude of wholesale scepticism and questioning, even doubt, that Harvey, for example, suggests should be done.62 Marshall continues with the observation that it is one thing to interrogate a text minutely, but quite another to disbelieve every statement that it makes until it can be proved to be true – that is, the text is taken to be unreliable unless proved reliable:

If we have a narrative that purports to be historical from a writer whose general content is known to be reliable, it is more reasonable to accept it as reliable until satisfactory evidence is produced against it. In the absence of contrary evidence belief is reasonable.63

In context, Marshall is dealing specifically with the NT as an historical source, but this argument is valid for all historical records. The historian’s approach is not to be one of methodological scepticism on all matters purporting to be historical, but to be critical. The Cambridge historian G.R. Elton summarizes matters thus: ‘Excessive scepticism must therefore be guarded against as much as childlike trust, especially as both reactions (two sides of the coin of insufficient thought) are liable to be called forth by the historian’s private, and sometimes unconscious, attitudes.’64

Gottz and Blomberg discuss this position in an important article on the burden of proof. Despite the enormous volume of evidence which supports the general trustworthiness of the Gospels and, more widely, the NT, many scholars still refuse to accept much as genuinely historical because they are committed, a priori, to a historically sceptical stance on the issue of the burden of proof. For example, it is frequently assumed that each portion of the Gospels is unhistorical unless overwhelming evidence overturns such a view. But this method inverts standard historical procedure, applying more rigorous criteria to the biblical material than students of ancient history apply to other historical material. Once an historian or document has been demonstrated to be reliable where verifiable, once apparent errors or contradictions have received plausible solutions, the appropriate approach is to give that writer the benefit of the doubt in areas where verification is not possible, especially where there is a high degree of probability that the author was concerned to
record reliably historical events and the methods for doing so were available to him. In the case of the Gospels, this brings in their stated aims (Lk. 1:1-4; Jn. 20:31) and the techniques for transmission of tradition which were operative in the first century. To this must be added the testimony of the NT that it is explicitly concerned with transmitting the tradition of Jesus.

Neither external nor internal testimony can prove the accuracy of most of the details of the Gospels, letters and Revelation, for the necessary comparative data are lacking. But the coherence and consistency of material that cannot be tested with that which can, does inspire confidence in the remaining portions of the text. The burden of proof, therefore, lies with those who would disprove historical reliability, not vice versa. This conclusion is to overturn what has been the supposed methodology for the larger part of this century, but I believe it is a historically correct methodology.

The historian will, then, take a high view of the historicity of some accounts and documents and a low view of others, depending on the evaluation of the evidence itself. Colin Brown likens the work of the historian to that of the jurist who, after hearing and examining the evidence, believes that one witness is competent and trustworthy whereas another is not. In Harvey’s words: “The historian confers authority upon a witness. He reserves the right to judge who or what will be called an authority, and he makes this judgment only after he has subjected the so-called witness to a rigorous cross-examination.”

However, this does not mean that the historian can impose an interpretation upon the evidence which is alien to it. Recognizing the subjective judgment of the historian is not to deny the possibility of ‘objective’ history. Historians have to ask questions of the sources, but some scholars believe that in this very act of questioning they artificially limit the choice of material - so that what is looked for in the evidence is what is found. They claim that the evidence is never in a position to play freely upon the enquiring mind. Elton recognizes that this sounds like ‘a convincing indictment’, but states that in practice this does not happen. He acknowledges that the historian must make an actual choice of the main area to be studied and the line of approach to be used, but after this the historian

becomes the servant of his evidence of which he will, or should, ask no questions until he has absorbed what it says. At least, his questions remain general, varied, flexible: he opens his mind to the evidence both passively (listening) and actively (asking). The mind will soon react with questions, but these are the questions suggested by the evidence, and though different men may find different questions arising from the same evidence the differences are only to a very limited extent dictated by themselves.

So,

the evidence is to control the writer of history and his questions quite as much as he controls it, and its control comes first in time.

No historian, therefore, is entitled to know the conclusions before specific and detailed study of the relevant historical evidence.

What relation has the historian’s work to the event he/she has sought to record? Alan Richardson correctly observed that historical judgements are inferences drawn from the extant evidence, since the event is not observable to the historian. The corollary of this is that the events are not demonstrable: so likewise the historical facts are also incapable of proof. Does this mean, then, that historical knowledge is impossible, or just uncertain?

Historical knowledge is always only probable, to a greater or lesser degree, never certain. But as David Bebbington observes, “There are matters, like the
existence of Caesar and Pompey, that for all practical purposes we can take for
granted; yet even these matters are technically not certainties. They are strong
probabilities." Proof of anything is beyond the power of historical knowledge.
But it is clear that there are many pieces of historical knowledge that are
asserted only on the basis of the barest probability, and it is necessary for
every historian to recognize that only a few tracks of historical evidence are
available in the form of extant evidences. Elton remarks: "Even allowing four
generations to a century, we have information about only some two hundred
gen erations, and for the vast majority of them our information is extremely
patchy." To this can be added Daniel Fuller's comments that

"neither the fact that much historical knowledge is missing nor the fact
that much historical knowledge wavers in the twilight zone of conjecture
and minimal probability means that all historical knowledge is
problematical and must be less certain than knowledge gained by
immediate sense perception. There are certain things in history ... that
are as certain as the ground we are standing on."

Due to such 'problems' of historical knowledge, some philosophers of history
have claimed that historical knowledge is simply not possible. It may be
available in an ideal and theoretical manner since there is something real to
be known, but in practice it can never be, due to the interposition of the
historian's personality and inability to re-enact the event. To such Elton says:
"It must ... be reasserted that these uncertainties by no means cover the
ground: a great deal of history, simple and basic as well as more complex,
is knowable and known beyond the doubt of anyone qualified to judge."
The historian is not reduced to either despair or methodological
doubt/scepticism to the extent that the possibility of genuine historical
knowledge is denied, and that a qualifier has to be appended to every historical
pronouncement, such as 'probably' or 'even possibly'. In reality, many
historical facts have been established beyond any reasonable doubt. Other
facts may have to be arranged in a scale of relative probability due to the
paucity of evidence and difficulties in interpreting them. Marshall concludes:
"To say ... that history cannot produce reliable knowledge of the past is to be
pedantic and unrealistic."

The aim of the historian, then, is to produce a model of past events, and for
this model a certain objective validity can be claimed. Later discoveries may
uncover new evidence which will lead to a modification or even abandonment
of the former model in favour of a new one. Nevertheless, in either situation,
objectivity, as far as it is possible, is the aim of the historian, and, even if it is
recognized that it is ultimately unattainable, the study of history will never give
up its search for it.

In 1824, Leopold von Rankc wrote:

To history has been assigned the office of judging the past, of instructing
the present for the benefit of future ages. To such high office this work
[his own] does not aspire; it wants only to show what actually happened
(wie es eigentlich gewesen ist).

Historical relativists have questioned whether Ranke's goal is realistic, and
this has often taken two main lines. First, it is urged that it is naive to suppose
that history is a matter of presenting 'all the facts' and leaving them 'speak for
themselves'. Second, we are reminded that the historian never has access to
all the facts, but that selection is inevitably involved. History, it is maintained,
is relative to the historian who reflects a particular culture, as well as
particular interests and standpoints. But such writers have exaggerated the
extent to which Ranke required the historian to suppress his own subjectivity.
Harvey comments:

When Ranke ... called for rigorous objectivity on the part of the historian he did not mean that the historian should not be interested or open: he meant rather that the historian should have a respect for the past as it really was and not as the historian wished it might have been, and that he should refrain from the rhetoric of praise or blame.

In the context in which it was written, Ranke’s statement is not one of presumption but of modesty. It is a declaration that the historian’s prime objective is to get at the truth as it happened. He did not believe that the paucity of the past prevented history from speaking to the present. As Richardson noted, ‘Detachment is the cardinal virtue of the historian. Facts were to be rescued from the conflict of opinion.’

If all this means that the aim of the historian is rigid accuracy, then, in agreement with Marshall, it must be claimed that this remains the aim of any contemporary historian worthy of the name. History written to serve the interests of a particular theory, and twisting the evidence accordingly, is not history. However, historians who are concerned to be objective will strive, as far as they are able, to be conscious of their own presuppositions and to make due allowance for them. But it must never be forgotten that history does reflect, albeit in a limited sense, what actually happened.

A further point needs to be noted concerning von Ranke. There exists a widespread assumption that it is only since his time (1795-1856) that anything worthy of the description of historiography has existed. Any history prior to this period has to be treated with scepticism and as of an inferior quality to its modern counterpart. Merkley, however, describes this as “modern-scholarly chauvinism”, whilst Tom Wright labels it ‘cultural imperialism of the Enlightenment’ — for there can be no real doubt that ancient historians were as capable as historians today, both in theory and practice, of accurate historiography.

The historian’s aim, then, is to produce a model for which objectivity, as far as it is possible, is the goal. To arrive at this model, historians are not relegated to mere subjectivism, but employ critical historical methods to assess the extant evidence. These include study of the languages of the original texts and authors (which may be different), saturating themselves in the culture of the period being studied, understanding the methods available to the authors of the existing sources and their reliability, and a familiarity with historiographical work by others on the subject and related areas of study. Elton succinctly summarizes the role of the historian: ‘Criticizing the evidence means two things: establishing its genuineness, and assessing its proper significance.’

Miracles and history: a long interlude

Before proceeding to the final point, I wish to make some remarks on miracles and history. For many, the historicity of the NT in general, and the Gospels in particular, is impugned because of the presence of miracle stories and the supernatural. Like history, the issue of miracles is an interdisciplinary matter, involving science, philosophy, theology and history. It is so enormous a field that only brief indicators can be given here, where the emphasis will lie primarily with the historical question.

Since the time of the British philosopher David Hume (1711–76), many philosophers, philosophers of history and science, scientists and theologians have come to believe that the historian’s purpose is not just to record historical events but to explain them in terms of what are accepted as the laws governing all occurrences of the kind in question. Historical explanation is thus
nomological", proceeding by appeal to well-accredited laws of human or natural behaviour, thereby making historical understanding entirely dependent on scientific understanding. This is also called 'philosophical naturalism', that is, "The natural causal fabric of physical reality within the boundaries of space and time is all there is, was, or ever will be. The supernatural doesn't exist except, perhaps, as a belief in people's minds," thereby making what is explicable to the natural sciences the means of assessing whether something could have happened or not. In short, science, it is widely assumed, has proved the impossibility of the supernatural intervention of God because the natural, physical laws of the universe have proved them impossible. This belief, however, owes more to an Enlightenment understanding of science than modern scientific theory. The mechanistic view of the universe which dominated for so long and continues to pervade the popular understanding of science as consisting of immutable laws is no longer held by modern science. Science does not operate within the sphere of 'facts' as popularly understood, but of hypotheses which seek to explain the observable universe. Further, the proper domain of science is the repeatable, the predictable and the verifiable, and miracles, by definition, are unique, non-repeatable events, and therefore lie outside its scope. Further, if there is a God such as is affirmed by the Jewish-Christian tradition, then miracles are a natural corollary of his existence. Whether or not such a God exists also lies beyond the competency of science.

Building on what he says concerning the importance of eye-witnesses, Merkley distinguishes between the testimony of eye-witnesses and whether or not they are able to explain what they have witnessed. He writes: 'For the actual occurrence of the event we depend absolutely on testimony of people who were there — and who may be lying to us. The facticity of the event owes nothing to the plausibility (to us) of any explanation that the alleged witness may offer. His credentials as a witness come down to these two: (a) was he there? and (b) would he lie to us (or could he have been deceived?).' Merkley insists that historians tell the past, not explain it. For this they depend on prior tellers of the past, and ultimately upon original witnesses — who may or may not have had explanations, but who certainly had something to tell. Whether or not we accept what we are told along this chain of recitations turns not on the cogency of the explanations, but on the credentials of the witnesses.' Later he continues:

If we are persuaded that our witness would not lie to us, we have no "right of disbelief", deriving from our knowledge of what routinely happens in life, to interpose between his testimony and ours. If we absolutely cannot believe that there is a kind of reality in the world which could contain the alleged event that he claims to witness to, then we must reject his witness: he is deceived, or he is lying to us. If we absolutely will not accept what he says, we are interposing another kind of authority between ourselves and his alleged authority as an historical witness. But, we cannot in this case claim to be rejecting him on historical grounds. The statement that "things like that don't occur in this world" is not an historical judgment.

In section 10 of his Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding, David Hume argued for the probability that a natural rather than supernatural explanation always exists for any purported miracle, adducing four main reasons for this. First, no miracle has ever had a sufficiently large number of reliable witnesses to support it. Second, people generally crave the miraculous and are thereby predisposed to accepting it. Third, alleged miracles only occur amongst primitive peoples. Finally, as miracles are claimed in all religions, they in fact negate each other, since their doctrines are irreconcilable. These arguments have been challenged ever since Hume announced them. Blomberg answers each of these points. The first, even if true, does not prove the inadequacy of
any given testimony for a miracle, and good cases have been made for affirming that the witnesses of the Gospel miracles do offer adequate testimony. Claim two is often true, but simply means that the historian needs to be extra careful in the assessment of such testimony. Three and four, as absolutes, are manifestly false, as is shown by the observation that many educated men and women today believe in miracles, and further, as Sir Norman Anderson has shown, no religion apart from Christianity stands or falls with a claim that its founder physically rose from the dead.

The Gospel miracle stories are often compared with those in other ancient religious and philosophical traditions, all of which are regarded as equally suspect. The testimony on behalf of other ancient miracles is usually not as strong, as consistent or as religiously significant as it is in the Gospels. Nevertheless, there is no reason to deny altogether the possibility of the miraculous in certain other ancient settings. Bruce noted that, in general, the Gospel miracles were “in character” – that is to say, they are the kinds of works that might be expected from such a Person as the Gospels represent Jesus to be. Not even in the earliest Gospel strata ‘can we find a non-supernatural Jesus, and we need not be surprised if supernatural works are attributed to Him. If we reject from the start the idea of a supernatural Jesus, then we shall reject His miracles, too; if, on the other hand, we accept the Gospel picture of Him, the miracles will cease to be an insuperable stumbling-block.’ He then added: ‘No doubt, the historian will be more exacting in his examination of the evidence where miracles are in question. To this can be added Harvey’s distinction between the Gospel miracles and legendary accounts of miracles:

... The tradition of Jesus’ miracles has too many unusual features to be conveniently ascribed to conventional legend-mongering. Moreover many of them contain details of precise reporting which is quite unlike the usual run of legends and is difficult to explain unless it derives from some historical recollection; and the gospels themselves ... show a remarkable restraint in their narratives which contrasts strangely with that delight in the miraculous for its own sake which normally characterizes the growth of legend.

Supernatural categories, therefore, cannot be rejected a priori; instead, each claimed miracle has to be investigated on its own merits. The resurrection, which, according to Paul in 1 Corinthians 15:1-8, 17-19, forms the historic sine qua non of Christian faith, has to be investigated in the same way as any other putative historical event, and the literature on that is enormous. Blomberg writes:

If the resurrection of Jesus really happened, then none of the gospel miracles is in principle incredible. This is not because God can do anything supernatural, no matter how eccentric or arbitrary. Christian belief in God’s omnipotence does not include ascribing to him the power to do that which is logically contradictory (e.g. making the legendary stone so big that he can’t move it) or that which is against his nature (e.g. doing evil). But it is precisely in this way that the gospel miracles differ from so many of their counterparts in other religious and philosophical traditions – they all fit together in a consistent pattern, revealing Jesus as sent by his Father to usher in the kingdom of God and make known God’s will and ways on earth. This revelation in turn meshes with the main details of the rest of Christ’s teaching and ministry.

William Lane Craig applies the seven factors set out by C. Behan McCullagh which historians typically use in testing an historical hypothesis and applies them to the resurrection. These are:

1. The hypothesis, together with other true statements, must imply further
statements describing present, observable data.
2. The hypothesis must have greater *explanatory scope* (that is, imply a
greater variety of observable data) than rival hypotheses.
3. The hypothesis must have greater *explanatory power* (that is, make the
observable data more probable) than rival hypotheses.
4. The hypothesis must be more *plausible* (that is, be implied by a greater
variety of accepted truths, and its negation implied by fewer accepted
truths) than rival hypotheses.
5. The hypothesis must be less *ad hoc* (that is, include fewer new
suppositions about the past not already implied by existing knowledge)
than rival hypotheses.
6. The hypothesis must be *disconfirmed by fewer accepted beliefs* (that is,
when conjoined with accepted truths, imply fewer false statements) than
rival hypotheses.
7. The hypothesis must so exceed its rivals in fulfilling conditions 2–6 that
there is little chance of a rival hypothesis, after further investigation,
exceeding it in meeting these conditions.

Whilst McCullagh actually considers the question of Jesus’ resurrection as of
greater explanatory scope and power than other hypotheses, he nevertheless
rejects it for being less plausible and more *ad hoc*. However, Craig argues that
once the philosophical prejudice against the miraculous is abandoned, the
resurrection becomes as plausible an explanation as any of its rivals, and
further observes that it is only *ad hoc* because the only new supposition that
is needed is that God exists, which, in actual fact, is not a new supposition for
those who do not believe in a closed universe, namely theists. In defence of
this latter position, Craig notes that scientific hypotheses regularly include the
supposition of new, unobservable entities such as quarks, strings, gravitons
and black holes, without such theories being considered *ad hoc*. Why should
the supposition of God’s existence be any different?

The credibility of the miracle stories is a matter of historical evidence. Not only
do all the Gospel strata report that Jesus performed miracles, but many parts
of both the OT and the NT make claims that miracles happened, and this is
confirmed by later Christian apologists and other non-Christian writers who
had no axe to grind. To this can be added the observation that adopting
several of the criteria of form criticism, specifically dissimilarity and multiple
attestation, gives further reason to accept the reliability of the accounts of
miracles. F.F. Bruce wrote: ‘If these miracles are related by authors who can
be shown on other grounds to be trustworthy, then they are worthy of at least
serious attention by the historian.’ Philips Long concurs when he writes that
for those who do not embrace the assumption of the impossibility of divine
intervention, ‘I would suggest that where the larger discourse unit implies a
historical purpose (and in the absence of other indicators), the burden of proof
rests on those who would deny the historicity of a given text within the larger
unit, whatever fabulous or miraculous elements it might contain.’ Long
concludes: ‘while the historical-critical method (as traditionally practiced)
systematically and insistently excludes the notion of divine intervention, the
method itself, if applied in the context of a theistic set of background beliefs,
need not exclude talk of divine intervention’. Further, ‘unless theists are badly
mistaken in their theism, then surely it is the denial of any place for God in
the historical process that is the mark of bad history.

We can, therefore, endorse William Craig’s conclusion:

*It seems to me ... that the lesson to be learned from the classical debate
over miracles, a lesson that has been reinforced by contemporary
scientific and philosophical thought, is that the presupposition of the*
impossibility of miracles should, contrary to the assumption of nineteenth
and for the most part twentieth century biblical criticism, play no role in
determining the historicity of any event. While many scholars still
operate under such an assumption, there seems now to be a growing
recognition that such a presupposition is illegitimate. The presupposition
against the possibility of miracles survives in theology only as a
hangover from an earlier Deist age and ought to be once for all
abandoned. 60

What does ‘historically reliable’ mean?

When a document or a literary corpus is pronounced ‘historically reliable’, it
does not mean that the facts therein are identical to the historical events, but
that there is a sufficient correlation between the event and the fact that the
latter may be proclaimed as a true model of what actually took place. One
particular interpretation of past events may be accepted over against another
on the basis that it best accounts for all the evidence available. The historian
records what he/she considers significant and memorable, excising all else as
superfluous. The nature of history as fact involves the fusion of the tracks
of historical events with the historian’s own interpretation of those tracks.
The historian is an interpreter, because the facts are his/her interpretation.
History is interpretation, so there is scope for acceptable disagreement
between historians, 54 thus making it not just likely but even desirable that we
have a number of written histories about any given person, event or movement,
recognizing that different does not mean unreliable. The implications of this
for the four Gospels will be immediately clear!

For many scholars, by far the most serious problem for the general historical
reliability of the Gospels in particular is the divergences in the accounts of the
same events. Some of these differences can be explained by the different
interpretations given to the events by the evangelists, and, as we have just
noted, to possess a number of interpretations is something to be desired.
Other divergences can be understood by discovering the author’s intentions,
whilst still others are due to different conventions between modern historians
and biographers and their ancient counterparts, the four evangelists among
them. 55 However, in Gospel studies the emphasis is frequently placed on the
divergences, with scant recognition being paid to the agreements between the
different accounts. That parallel passages have more in common in most cases
is borne out by the general observation that scholarship is still happy to speak
of the ‘Synoptic’ Gospels. Further, the German classical historian,
Hans Stier, commenting on the resurrection narratives, regarded the limited
divergence in parallel passages as not contradicting but testifying to their
reliability. He wrote:

the sources for the resurrection of Jesus, with their relatively big
contradictions over details, present for the historian for this very reason
a criterion of extraordinary credibility. For if that were the fabrication of
a congregation or of a similar group of people, then the tale would be
consistently and obviously complete. For that reason every historian is
especially sceptical at that moment when an extraordinary happening is
only reported in accounts which are completely free of contradictions.

The practice of the historical-critical method might, on occasion, lead to the
conclusion that the most viable solution to a difficulty lies in pronouncing a
particular narrative or report unhistorical. This may be due to the literary
form of the record (such as hyperbole, poetry, parable, myth or arctology—
purported narratives of divine men in antiquity), but such a conclusion must
be the result of a careful and meticulous study of the text and not be
brought to the text a priori. However, many scholars will prefer the
option of suspending their judgement until further evidence comes to light.
Further, the presence of an error at one point does not necessarily call into question the reliability of the whole. It is always a possibility that the interpreter is demanding more from the source than it ever intended to provide. There will also be cases of apparent historical error which cannot be explained away with the knowledge available.

An historian will never expect any two records of the same events to be identical without suspecting them of either collusion or copying (literary dependence). Records are written with whatever purpose the author(s) had in mind (the author's Tendenz, hence Tendenzkritik/tendency criticism). These need to be discerned by the historian so that they are not misrepresented. Authors may have used different sources (the realm of source criticism), or different interpretations of the same sources. They may reflect differences of emphasis (redaction) and have adopted different styles in order to record the events (form criticism). The exact kind of source also has to be determined and the whole document must be interpreted accordingly (the question of genre). Simply because their methods of presentation and even, perhaps, their final presentation include or exclude details recorded elsewhere, explicate or condense certain incidents or sayings, or emphasize or play down one or other aspect of the events they are seeking to record, will not give sufficient grounds for deeming them unreliable. The Gospels, like all literary documents, must be read within the conventions and methods of their own time. Failure to do this is to make the cardinal error of anachronism. Each source must be treated on its own terms, and this requires the historian to examine them minutely with all the methods of historical criticism available, and without trying false harmonizations or imposing false, anachronistic and alien criteria on them.

**Conclusion**

The 27 books which comprise the NT are historical documents in two ways. Firstly, they were written in the first century AD and they have survived. This makes them automatically the focus of interest for historians and historical research. Secondly, they are historical because they both implicitly and explicitly make historical claims. Implicitly, they continue the belief of the OT that God, the Creator, is real and intervenes within human history. In the NT this is nowhere more clearly evident than in the doctrine of the incarnation (e.g. Jn. 1:1-5, 14, 18). Explicitly, the writers of many of the books make historical claims. For example, not only does Luke tell us his intention to write an orderly account so that Theophilus may know the certainty of the things he has been taught (Lk. 1:1-4; cf. Acts 1:1), but he also explicitly sets his Gospel within the context of world history (Lk. 2:1-2; 3:1). The events recorded in Luke’s second volume take place within the ancient Mediterranean world, which lends it, more than any other NT book, to external corroboration. The NT firmly locates the origins of Christian faith in the historical figure of Jesus of Nazareth, and at the same time provides the primary sources for our knowledge of the life and faith of the earliest Christian communities. As we have contended, then, we must study the NT with whatever disciplines are appropriate – theological, literary, philosophical and historical, and each of these have their own methods which need to be both properly understood and properly applied. For too long, historical judgements and pronouncements have been made by non-historians, judgements which have had little or no basis in legitimate historical methodology. The purpose of this paper, then, has been to introduce historical methodology and to indicate its application and usefulness to the study of the NT.

A correct understanding and proper use of historical methodology can contribute much to the study of the NT and brings important checks and balances to some of the scholarly excesses, for example, the much publicized
Jesus Seminar, which rejects all but 20 per cent of the Gospels' teaching of Jesus as having any kind of historical value. More positively, it helps us appreciate the integrity and reliability of the NT writers. It further grounds the belief of orthodox Christian faith that God has been, is and will continue to be present in human history and that he has decisively entered into it in the person of Jesus.

Though the canonical Gospels, Acts, letters and Revelation are each very different, they are all, nevertheless, concerned to set out both the story of Jesus of Nazareth and their authors' understanding of the significance of his works and words for their lives and the lives of the individuals and churches to which they were writing. History and theology are inseparably intertwined. They are, therefore, two complementary ways of approaching the NT books. The NT writers inform us about both the 'past' story of Jesus and the 'present' significance they attach to him for their continuing faith and witness. In the words of John 20:31: 'these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in his name'.

1. I shall argue that this is unacceptable. Equally unacceptable is the fundamentalist approach to the NT which uncritically accepts everything in a literalistic manner, refusing to admit tensions between different biblical authors and tending towards the over-application of harmonization, even when this, for example, leads to Harold Lindsell's now famous example of six denials of Jesus by Peter, *Battle for the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976), quoted and examined by C.L. Blomberg, 'The legitimacy and limits of harmonization', in D.A. Carson and J.D. Woodbridge (eds), *Hermeneutics, Authority and Canon* (Leicester: IVP, 1986), p. 148. However, this fundamentalist position has made little impact on the academic disciplines of biblical studies and theology and so does not come under discussion here.

2. On the Tübingen School, see H. Harris, *The Tübingen School* (repr. Leicester: Apollos, 1990; first edn 1975). The 'Tübingen School' needs to be clearly distinguished as a school of thought which took its lead from F.C. Baur, who taught at the University of Tübingen in the mid-nineteenth century. He was characterized by a strongly anti-supernaturalistic interpretation of history, tendency criticism in the interpretation of biblical writings which set in opposition to each other the Jewish Christian church led by Peter and the Hellenistic Gentile church led by Paul, and the application of an idealist philosophy of history. As such, the Tübingen School must be distinguished from the scholars who have been based at the university since that time who have not shared the same negative and sceptical presuppositions, notable amongst whom today are Martin Hengel, Otto Betz, Peter Stuhlmacher and Rainer Riesner.


Bultmann sought to apply this presupposition in his important The History of the Synoptic Tradition (Oxford: Blackwells, 1972). For a discussion of form criticism, see, for example, Craig Blomberg on 'Form criticism', in J.B. Green, S. McKnight and I.H. Marshall (eds), Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels (hereafter DJG), (Leicester: IVP, 1992), pp. 243–50.

N. Perrin, Rediscovering the Teaching of Jesus (London: SCM, 1967), pp. 15–16. cf. pp. 24, 221. See also Perrin's What is Redaction Criticism? (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1969). Like form criticism, redaction criticism is a most valuable tool for biblical scholarship, but it is often the accompanying historical scepticism that cannot be accepted. For a positive and critical appraisal of redaction criticism, see G.R. Osborne, 'Redaction criticism', in DJG, pp. 662–9. It is, therefore, not form or redaction criticism per se that is being criticized here, but the historical scepticism that has so often accompanied their use, and this has become a deeply rooted presupposition in so many investigations into the historicity of the NT, not least through the advocacy of Bultmann and his followers.

Useful summaries of the Jesus Seminar, along with criticism of it, can be found in Ben Witherington III, The Jesus Quest: The Third Search for the Jew of Nazareth (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1995), pp. 42–57 and passim; Michael J. Wilkins and J.P. Moreland (eds), Jesus Under Fire: Modern Scholarship Reinterprets the Historical Jesus (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1996), which examines and answers other modern interpretations of Jesus as well as that of the Jesus Seminar.

E.P. Sanders, Jesus and Judaism (London: SCM, 1985), and idem, The Historical Figure of Jesus (London: Penguin, 1993).

Canadian historian Paul Merkley draws attention to the double standard which historically sceptical theologians often adopt when they apply different historical criteria to the NT than they do to, for example, non-biblical events such as Caesar's crossing the Rubicon: 'Gospels as historical testimony': pp. 319–22.


Brown, 'History and the believer', p. 169.

Ibid. See especially p. 208 n. 78: 'In a valid deduction the conclusion is related to the premises in such a way that, if the premises are true, the
conclusion must also be true. In induction inferences are drawn from a number of cases which point to a general conclusion.


23 Roberts, *History*, p. 3


26 See F.F. Bruce, *Jesus and Christian Origins Outside the NT* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1984 edn), p. 203, and Sanders, *Historical Figure of Jesus*, p. 49. Even those who argue that the Pauline letters (meaning the undisputed Pauline letters) are the primary sources for the Jesus tradition are technically incorrect, though Paul’s letters are, in all probability, the earliest sources we have for the historical Jesus. Such a position was expressed by M.D. Goulder in a BBC television interview broadcast over Easter 1996.

27 Merkley, *Gospels as historical testimony*: pp. 332–3, places the highest importance on the reliability of eye-witness accounts. See also pp. 323–5, where Merkley examines eye-witness testimony to the empty tomb.

28 Marshall, *Luke*, p. 41, notes that Luke’s construction of the phrase ‘eyewitnesses and ministers of the word’ indicates ‘that one class of people, who were both eyewitnesses and servants of the word, is meant, and we are probably to see the apostles as being comprehended within the group’.

29 This generic identity was recognized by the Tübingen Gospel Symposium in 1982. Here, Graham Stanton argued that ‘if Mark is evangelion, so is Matthew’, who almost certainly did not create a new literary genre. Howard Marshall observed that though there existed an alternative pattern for Luke and Matthew to follow, namely Q, the important thing was ‘that neither Luke nor Matthew followed its pattern’, though both writers incorporated Q material ‘in a pattern that is based on Mk.’ James Dunn asserted that in spite of its differences from the Synoptics, ‘John is far closer to them than to any other ancient writing (as the Symposium has shown)’. When the evangelist could have presented his work comprised solely of discourses or sayings of the Redeemer, like the Gnostic Gospel of Thomas, *Thomas the Contender* and *Pistis Sophia*, he rather chose, and chose deliberately, to retain the developed discourse material within the framework of a Gospel as laid down by Mark’. See respectively G.N. Stanton, *Matthew as a creative interpreter*, p. 287. I.H. Marshall, *Luke and his “Gospel”*, pp. 292–3, and J.D.G. Dunn, *Let John be John*, pp. 338–9, all in Peter Stuhlmacher (ed.), *Das Evangelium und die Evangelien* (WUNT 28; Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1983). This volume has subsequently been translated as a whole into English as *The Gospel and the Gospels* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991).

30 Merkley, *Gospels as historical testimony*, p. 324 n. 7, accepts the traditional ascriptions to the Gospels, adding, ‘Any challenge to these traditional attributions must be strong enough to override the unanimous tradition of the early Church, for which there is documentary support too strong to admit of serious doubt.’


Turner, Historiography, p. 11.


Harvey, The Historian and the Believer, p. 41.

Ibid., pp. 39–42.


D. Bebbington, Patterns in History (Leicester: IVP, 1979), p. 4. He also notes: ‘History . . . entails investigation, questioning, inquiry: the word history is derived from the Greek for “inquiry”.’


Wright, New Testament, pp. 32–46. Critical realism is a way of describing the process of “knowing” that acknowledges the reality of the thing known, as something other than the knower (hence “realism”), while also fully acknowledging that the only access we have to this reality lies along the spiralling path of appropriate dialogue or conversation between the knower and the thing known (hence “critical”) (p. 35, italics his). Here, any hard-and-fast distinctions between objective and subjective are rightly abandoned.

Harvey, The Historian and the Believer, pp. 39–42.

Marshall, ‘Historical criticism’, p. 134 (italics original). Many of the recent studies on Luke’s two volumes, the Gospel and Acts, have concentrated almost exclusively on the theology, a position which mirrors that at the beginning of the century, when W.M. Ramsey, at first a historical sceptic, visited the locations mentioned by Luke and discovered his accuracy on the minutest of details. Since then many scholars have followed him, though often more cautiously, in recognizing that Luke is both a theologian and an historian. See Marshall’s book and note its subtitle, Luke: Historian and Theologian, especially ch. 3, ‘Luke the historian’, which outlines the work of Ramsey and others such as F.F. Bruce. Historically, then, because Luke–Acts has been found to be reliable in so many ways where verifiable, it is legitimate to expect it to be reliable unless it can be demonstrated otherwise. This conclusion has been given added credence by the work of the late Colin Hemer, The Book of Acts in the Setting of Hellenistic History (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1989), and the Tyndale House, six-volume project, The Book of Acts in its First Century Setting, published by Paternoster-Eerdmans, from 1993.


The study of the reliability of techniques used for the transmission of oral tradition is an important area of research which increases the probability that the Gospels and other NT writers were able to memorize accurately and pass on the teaching of Jesus and other early Christian teachers. On this see R. Riesner, Jesus als Lehrer (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1981), accessible summaries of which can be found in the articles by R. Riesner, 'Teacher', pp. 807-11; C.L. Blomberg, 'Form criticism', pp. 243-50, and his 'Gospels (historical reliability)', pp. 291-7 (which also includes a summary of Goetz and Blomberg's argument); and P.H. Davids, 'Tradition criticism', pp. 831-4, all in J.G. Also see K.E. Bailey, 'Informal controlled oral tradition and the Synoptic Gospels', Themelios 20.2 (January 1995): pp. 4-11. A wide-ranging series of essays has been collected together by Henry Wansbrough (ed.), Jesus and the Oral Gospel Tradition (JSNTSS 64: Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1991). See also Birger Gerhardsson, 'The path of the gospel tradition', in Stuhlmacher (ed.), The Gospel and the Gospels, pp. 75-96.

Within the NT itself there are many explicit references to the use of traditions and their transmission. F.F. Bruce, for example, has noted that Paul's references to the tradition of Christ comprise three elements: (1) a summary of the Christian message, expressed as a confession of faith, with particular focus on Christ's death and resurrection, e.g. 1 Cor. 15; (2) various words and deeds of Christ, e.g. the institution of the Lord's Supper in 1 Cor. 11:23-36; (3) ethical and procedural rules for Christians, as in 1 Thes. 4:1-2; F.F. Bruce, Tradition Old and New (Exeter: Paternoster, 1970), pp. 29-38. Some examples will suffice. In 1 Cor. 11:23 Paul writes: 'I received (paralambano) from the Lord (apo tou kyriou) what I also delivered (paradidomi) to you.' What is important here is the use of the terminology of tradition, namely paralambano, 'to receive', and paradidomi, 'to deliver'. Col. 2:6-7 reads: 'As ... you received (paralambano) Christ Jesus the Lord, so live in him, rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught ...' Amongst many others, see also 1 Tim. 6:20:

2 Tim. 1:14, 2:2; 1 Jn. 1:1-3; Jude 3.
Harvey, The Historian and the Believer, p. 42.
Elton, Practice, pp. 82-4.
Bebbington, Patterns, p. 9.
Elton, Practice, p. 41.
Elton, Practice, p. 107.
See Brown's discussion of this in 'History and the believer', p. 177.
Harvey, The Historian and the Believer, p. 183.
Richardson, History, p. 173.
Merkley, 'Gospels as historical testimony', p. 324; see also p. 326.
Wright, New Testament, p. 84. Wright characterizes this 'modern' view as believing that 'writers in the ancient world were ignorant about these matters, freely making things up, weaving fantasy and legend together and calling it history'. Such a view is not held by historians of the ancient world and classicists!
See the discussions by Michael Grant, *The Ancient Historians* (London: Duckworth, repr. 1995, originally 1970), which includes examinations of Josephus and Eusebius, and Hemer, *The Book of Acts* ch. 3. 'Ancient historiography', pp. 63–100. Hemer summarizes the importance of eight points for ancient historiography (p. 100): (1) the existence of a distinctive and rigorous theory of historiography; (2) the stress on eyewitness participation; (3) the importance of interviewing eyewitnesses; (4) the limitation of coverage to material where the writer has privileged access to evidence of guaranteed quality; (5) the stress on travel to the scene of events; (6) the prospect then (and for us) of checking details with contemporary documents; (7) the occasional insistence on the use of sources for speeches; and (8) the vigour of the concept of "truth" in history "as it actually happened".


See Merkley’s discussion in *Gospels as historical testimony*: pp. 328–9. On p. 234, Merkley describes ‘most academic-philosophical agonizing’ which seeks to provide ‘explanations’ as a red herring. See, too, Gerhard Maier, *The End of the Historical-Critical Method* (ET. Concordia, 1977), p. 16: ‘as long as one makes analogous classification a precondition for acceptance, much in the world of the Bible remains without foundation. But how can the pure historian without further ado reject something just because it happens only once? What can be experienced and what has analogues can certainly not be declared synonymous.’ Merkley, ‘Gospels as historical testimony’, p. 334, adds: ‘Every historical event is an event that happened only once. What we need to know is: what happened.’ He exemplifies the danger of this on p. 333, citing Voltaire, *The Philosophy of History* (1766) (New York, 1965), pp. 151–2, who ‘condemned Herodotus as the “father of lies” because of the “absurd” stories that Herodotus told about the behaviour of people in the ancient past. In particular, Herodotus’ story that in ancient Babylon fathers required their daughters to serve as temple prostitutes for one night as part of an initiation rite, Voltaire rejected as “a calumny on the human race”’. M.J. Wilkins and J.P. Moreland, ‘Introduction: The furor surrounding Jesus’, in Wilkins and Moreland (eds), *Jesus Under Fire*, p. 8. See the whole of the helpful discussion of irrational faith, world-views and philosophical naturalism on pp. 7–10.

Norman Geisler has written that ‘belief in miracles does not destroy the integrity of scientific methodology; only its sovereignty. It says in effect that science does not have sovereign claim to explain all events as natural, but only those that are regular, repeatable, and/or predictable’; N.L. Geisler, *Miracles and Modern Thought* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982), p. 58. Cited by C.L. Blomberg, *The Historical Reliability of the Gospels* (Leicester: IVP, 1987), p. 75.

The subject of world-views is ably and succinctly discussed by Wilkins and Moreland in *Jesus Under Fire*, pp. 1–15.

Colin A. Russell, Professor of Science and Religion at the Open University, has written a most helpful book on the compatibility of the relationship between science and faith: *Cross-currents. Interactions between Science and Faith* (Leicester: IVP, 1985). At the time of the controversy over the historical scepticism of the then Bishop of Durham, fourteen scientists (six of whom were Fellows of the Royal Society) wrote to The Times stating that ‘it is not logically valid to use science as an argument against...

This concludes with a useful bibliography of books representing a wide variety of views.

Merkley, 'Gospels as historical testimony'; pp. 332–3. Italics his.


Blomberg, Historical Reliability, p. 77, citing J.N.D. Anderson, Christianity and World Religions (Leicester: IVP, 1984). On the first point, Merkley, 'Gospels as historical testimony', p. 334, states that 'contrary to popular assumption, the authority of historical testimony does not tend to vary with the distance in time between ourselves and the witnesses; nor does it necessarily increase as the number of witnesses increases'. On points two and three, A.E. Harvey, Jesus and the Constraints of History (London: Duckworth, 1982), has shown that scientific arguments were adopted in antiquity and that the ancients were no more credulous than moderns (pp. 101–2). He concludes on p. 110: 'The gospel miracle stories in general ... show an extraordinary restraint in the accumulation of any kind of detail', and 'one can say that the miracle stories in the gospels are unlike anything else in ancient literature in that they avoid either of the tendencies to heighten the miraculous element or to sensationalize and elaborate the accounts which we find in any comparable accounts'. He also adds: 'To a degree that is rare in the writings of antiquity, we can say, to use a modern phrase, that they tell the story straight.' Also on points two and three, Merkley, 'Gospels as historical testimony', p. 332, remarks that the contemporaries of the Gospel writers fully understood that virgins do not conceive and bear sons, being 'not an iota more or less free than we are to disbelieve this claim'; therefore, they believed it because they were persuaded of the authority of the witnesses to accept what they otherwise knew to be impossible. 'Such a fact as this contradicted the "facts of life", for them no less than for us. All the undoubted advance that the sciences have made in describing the processes involved in the conception of new human lives neither adds to nor subtracts from the simplicity of the issue involved. There are today devout gynaecologists who confess without reservation the dogma of the virgin birth, and there are masses of scientific illiterates who reject it.'

Blomberg, 'Gospels (historical reliability)', in DJG, p. 297. See also Blomberg's fuller treatment of parallels to the Gospel miracles in other literature in Historical Reliability, pp. 81–92.

Bruce, New Testament Documents, p. 62. Here we can add C.S. Lewis's statement that 'the accounts of the "miracles" in first-century Palestine are either lies, or legends, or history. And if all, or the most important, of them are lies or legends then the claim which Christianity has been making for the last two thousand years is simply false', Miracles (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1947), p. 97.

Harvey, Constraints, p. 100.


Craig, 'Did Jesus rise?', pp. 163–4.

So B.L. Blackburn, 'Miracles and miracle stories', in *DJG*, pp. 556–8, who provides a good, accessible overview of miracles that repays study (pp. 549–60).

Early Christian apologists referred to Jesus' miracles as events beyond dispute by Christianity's opponents: e.g. Quadratus, in his *Apologia* addressed to the Emperor Hadrian in AD 133, cited by Eusebius in his *Ecclesiastical History* 4.3; whilst outside Christianity, Jesus was also known as a miracle-worker in Josephus (Antiquities 18.63–64) and an exorcist and healer in the magical papyri (PGM 4.3019–30) and within later Jewish circles (e.g. Tosephta Hullin 2.22–23).

So argues Blomberg, *Historical Reliability*, pp. 92–5, who adds (p. 94) the warning that evidence for the general reliability of the miracle accounts does not prove the authenticity of every individual miracle. A good collection of such individual studies is provided in *Gospel Perspectives* 6, *The Miracles of Jesus*. Craig, 'Did Jesus rise?', pp. 162–3, applies seven of the criteria for authenticity to the resurrection of Jesus and concludes that the historicity of this event passes the same tests for authenticity used by the Jesus Seminar for establishing Jesus' authentic sayings.

Bruce, *New Testament Documents*, p. 62. He adds (p. 67): 'Historical research is by no means excluded, for the whole point of the gospel is that in Christ the power and grace of God entered into human history to bring about the world's redemption.'

V. Philips Long, *The Art of Biblical History* (Foundations of Contemporary Interpretation 5; Leicester: Apollos, 1994), pp. 114–15. In this he is in agreement with Blomberg, *Historical Reliability*, p. 240: 'Once one accepts that the gospels reflect attempts to write reliable history or biography, however theological or stylized its presentation may be, then one must immediately recognize an important presupposition which guides most historians in their work. Unless there is good reason for believing otherwise one will assume that a given detail in the work of a particular historian is factual. This method places the burden of proof squarely on the person who would doubt the reliability of a given portion of the text.'


Richard A. Burridge, *What are the Gospels? A Comparison with Graeco-Roman Biography* (NTSMS 70; Cambridge: CUP, 1992), provides a most helpful overview of the methods used by ancient Graeco-Roman biographers. See esp. chs 5–9, and particularly his discussion in each of those chapters of "external features" — mode of representation, size, structure, scale, literary units, use of sources and methods of characterization — and "internal features", perhaps most relevant here being the author's intention and purpose which determined both the selection and final presentation of his material.

Hans E. Stier, *Moderne Exegese und historische Wissenschaft*, p. 152

Perhaps the best example of this in the NT is the census under Quirinius referred to in Lk. 2:2; see the discussion in B. Witherington III, ‘The birth of Jesus’, in DJG, pp. 67–8. H. Schürmann, Das Lukasevangelium I (Freiburg, 1969), pp. 98–101, provides a survey of the debate, warning against the easy option of accepting Luke’s inaccuracy, believing that only the discovery of new historical material can lead to a solution of the problem. He is cited by Marshall, Luke, p. 69 n. 5.

Bloch, Historian’s Craft, p. 114.

That the Gospels are not modern biographies has long been noted, but it has been overlooked by too many writers. Until recently, the conclusion that seemed to answer the data available was that the Gospels are unique but also bear similarities to Graeco-Roman biographies. See G. Stanton, Jesus of Nazareth in New Testament Preaching (Cambridge: CUP, 1974), ch. 5 ‘The Gospels and ancient biographical writing’, pp. 117–36; R.A. Guelich, ‘The Gospel genre’, in Das Evangelium und die Evangelien, pp. 183–219; L.W. Hurtado, ‘Gospel genre’, in DJG, pp. 276–82; D.E. Aune, The New Testament in its Literary Environment (Cambridge: James Clarke, 1987), ch 1–4. However, more recently Burridge, What are the Gospels?, has impressively and convincingly argued that the Gospels are not unique but are Graeco-Roman biographies and that they form a sub-genre of Bios Iesou (pp. 243–7). Burridge prefers the designation ‘bios’ over ‘biography’ (pp. 62–3), as the latter carries too many modern connotations and assumptions, and concludes that ‘the time has come to go on from the use of the adjective “biographical”, for the gospels are bioi’ (p. 243).

Burridge, a classically trained scholar, provides us with an excellent example of the interdisciplinary approach that is required to answer the issue of genre and other historical, biblical and theological issues, as he brings together Gospel studies, literary theory and the literature of the Graeco-Roman world, and in so doing avoids the pitfall of anachronism, e.g. ‘the gospels must be compared with literature of their own day’ (p. 53), and ‘genre must always be set in its historical context. Study of the historical context will include analysis of which genres were actually available at the time’ (p. 48). He also provides a most useful overview of the Gospel genre debate with his ‘Historical survey’, ch. 1, pp. 3–25, as well as an ‘Evaluation of recent debate’, ch. 4, pp. 82–106.

I.e. the forms of their histories – e.g. chronological or thematic, or their degree of selectivity, concentrating perhaps on only several central figures in the story to the exclusion of others.

Blomberg, ‘Gospels (historical reliability)’, DJG, p. 294: ‘Ancient biographers and historians did not feel constrained to write from detached and so-called objective viewpoints. They did not give equal treatment to all periods of an individual’s life. They felt free to write in topical as well as chronological sequence. They were highly selective in the material they included, choosing that which reinforced the morals they wished to inculcate. In an era which knew neither quotation marks nor plagiarism, speakers’ words were abbreviated, explained, paraphrased and contemporized in whatever ways individual authors deemed beneficial for their audiences. All of these features occur in the Gospels, and none of them detracts from the Evangelists’ integrity. At the same time, little if any material was recorded solely out of historical interest; interpreters must recognize theological motives as central to each text.’

identification of the correct genre for the Gospels affects the ‘quest for the historical Jesus’, in that ‘because this is a Life of an historical person written within the lifetime of his contemporaries, there are limits on free composition’. The creativity of the evangelists has been explored by those who have argued that the early Church failed to distinguish the oracles of early Christian prophets from the teaching of Jesus: e.g. M.E. Boring, *Sayings of the Risen Jesus* (Cambridge: CUP, 1982), and *idem*, ‘Christian prophecy and the sayings of Jesus: the state of the question’, NTS 29 (1983): pp. 104–12. See, more cautiously, G.F. Hawthorne, ‘The role of Christian prophets in the Gospel tradition’, in G.F. Hawthorne and O. Betz (eds), *Tradition and Interpretation in the NT* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), pp. 119–33. This position has been all but laid to rest by the work of David Hill, *New Testament Prophecy* (Marshall, Morgan & Scott, 1979), and David E. Aune, *Prophecy in Early Christianity and the Ancient Mediterranean World* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983). See also J.D.G. Dunn, ‘Prophetic “I” sayings and the Jesus tradition: the importance of testing prophetic utterances within early Christianity’, NTS 24 (1978): pp. 175–98. The only NT examples that record words of the risen Christ appear in the context of Rev. 2–3, where he is clearly distinguished from the earthly Jesus. The only examples of words of Christian prophets are in Acts 11:28 and 21:10–11 and clearly attribute the Lord’s message to a human speaker, Agabus. In 1 Cor. 14:29, Paul makes clear that no prophecy could be accepted that did not conform to the previously revealed word of God, so even if some sayings crept into the tradition from certain prophets, they would not have been likely to have distorted the original gospel message, as is often alleged. The lack of sayings attributed to Jesus on topics of later Church controversy (e.g. circumcision, speaking in tongues, the Gentile mission and circumcision, etc.) further supports the view that Christian prophecy was not confused with the teachings of the historical Jesus, as is further borne out by Paul’s comments in 1 Cor. 7:10, 12 and 25.


For explicit references to historicity, see also Mt. 1:23, “Emmanuel” – which means, “God with us”; Mk. 1:9, ‘At that time Jesus came ...’; Jn. 21:25; 1 Cor. 11:23–26; 15:3–7, 12–14; Heb. 5:7–9; 1 Jn. 1:1–3; Rev. 5:12, “Worthy is the Lamb who was slain ...”.

The vital importance of this subject is well stated by Wilkins and Moreland, *Jesus Under Fire*, pp. 5–10, who highlight the importance of truth and reason for religious belief, concluding (p. 10): ‘In sum, it matters much that our religious beliefs are both true and reasonable. Moreover, there are simply no sufficient reasons for not believing in the supernatural, and there are in fact a number of good reasons ... for believing in the supernatural’ (italics added).