

Five days later the high priest Ananias went down to Caesarea with some of the elders and a lawyer named Tertullus, and they brought their charges against Paul before the governor. When Paul was called in, Tertullus presented his case before Felix.  
Acts 24.1-2.

And so the story of Paul goes on. Now under Roman arrest, largely for his own safety because the Jews would have killed him, Paul was sent to the Roman governor of Palestine, Felix. Tertullus, the smooth lawyer hired by the Jewish authorities, made a flattering speech to Felix, vv2-4... Then he put the knife in, vv5-8... Paul then made his own defence, vv10-16...

It's all very gripping stuff, isn't it? But you must have asked yourself, 'Yes, but is it *true*? Did this all really happen?' Just the other day a man asked me the same question about the *gospels*. 'It's hard enough to believe in the Feeding of the 5000. But did it actually *happen*?' he asked. 'Surely these events were written down years later, and they have become exaggerated and altered by Chinese whispers', he said.

My heart groans when I hear this, because usually it's at the level of a clever-dick 4<sup>th</sup> former trying to make a fool of the Scripture Master. On the other hand, there are many people in the pews who genuinely ask that question. It's part of our trying to come to terms with the extraordinary claims of the Bible and of who Jesus really was. It is human nature to try to 'rationalise' things like feeding 5000. In our attempt to make sense of these miracles, we try to make them ordinary. The trouble with that is that we then make *Jesus* ordinary. So, it only *appeared* that Jesus was walking on water; there were stones hidden just under the water. And the feeding of the 5000 is really only a parable to tell us that if everyone were to

give their modest five loaves and two fish; if we all put in our little bit, then the whole world would be fed. Now that's all very dandy, but it isn't actually what the Bible says.

Another way to rationalise the Bible is to say that the accounts have become exaggerated in the telling; Chinese whispers, as I said. When I was at university it was accepted by all scholars that we could not know the Jesus of history from the NT. All we could know was the Christ of the Church. The Gospels were not eye-witness accounts, but legends to inspire the Christians a generation later.

My short answer to anyone who wants to know if the NT actually happened is, 'Read this book: Prof Richard Bauckham of St Andrews' *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*. It's hard going, but it won the Michael Ramsey Prize. If people are that bothered, they should read this book. I cannot summarise it now, but I want to say enough to give you confidence in scripture as God's Word.

Plato's *Republic* was written c400 BC. The earliest MS is dated AD 900, 1300 years later. The earliest MS of Caesar's *Gallic Wars* is 1000 years after the event, and all we know of that war was what Caesar wrote about himself - a bit biased! Yet no-one doubts that what Caesar wrote actually happened. The earliest MS of the NT, a fragment of *John* is dated about AD 125 only c75 years after *John* was written.

You may remember Bp John Robinson, the liberal author of the notorious 1960s book, *Honest to God*. For all his trendiness, he was a fine NT scholar, and he dated the four gospels to before AD 65 at the very latest, only 30 years after Christ's death. And in oral societies where things are handed

down by mouth, we should not assume that they were not accurate. People's memories are better than you think. I can remember striking things my parents and teachers said 40 years ago. Can't you? It wasn't uncommon for classically educated people to know yards and yards of Homer and Virgil off by heart in Greek and Latin. How do actors remember their lines? How do concert pianists play whole concertos without the music?

Jews would never, never eat meat with blood in it. So they could never misremember Jesus saying, 'This is my blood, drink it'. And if Jesus didn't feed 5000 the way the Bible says, wouldn't there have been 5000 to say he hadn't? the gospels were written within 30 years; there were many people living who could have contradicted the accounts. He had enough enemies to kill him. Many would have loved to have come forward to say that it didn't happen like this. And if the gospels are written to impress a later generation of Christians, why include all that stuff which shews the leading apostles, especially Peter, in such a terrible light? You surely would not make up a story about Peter, the chief apostle, denying Jesus. If you were trying to convert Jews, you would not make up the fact that the first witnesses of the Resurrection, the absolute key event, were *women*. No Jew accepted a woman as a credible witness. Why make by Chinese whispers your story harder to believe?

Behind all this thinking is the assumption that the gospel writers were either gormless, inaccurate, or plain dishonest. Luke, who wrote the gospel and *Acts*, was not gormless. He was a doctor. Turn to p1025, *Lk* 1.1-4... He wants to be *accurate*. Let's take these writers at their word till proved otherwise.

For generations scholars believed that King David was not a real person. He was like King Arthur, because we knew of him only in the Bible ... until 1993 when a fragment was found with the words 'house of David' inscribed. Turn to p473, *Ezra* 1.1-4... In the British Museum you will see the tiny Cyrus Cylinder which confirms this: 'I returned [to them] their dwellings', ie returned them to their homeland. In 1961 in the theatre at Caesarea was found an inscription with the name 'Pontius Pilate'. We know about the High Priest Ananias from Josephus, the Jewish historian who detested Christians. We know about the Governor Felix from Josephus and the Roman historian Tacitus.

Who knows what else is out there in the sands waiting to be discovered, to confirm the truth of the Bible? The discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls in 1947 was beyond imagining. Another good book is Ian Wilson's *The Bible is History*.

I could go on and on. The stuff in the Bible is better accounted for than any other ancient book. The reason I am saying all this is not to give you a first-year undergraduate lecture, but to encourage you to take the Bible seriously, as inspired by the Holy Spirit and written accurately by people of integrity. You need to know that the things recorded here actually happened; that it is not fable and legend. This is not King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table. Jesus actually said and did these things. His words and deeds were cherished and accurately recorded. Read Bauckham's book. Luke's record in *Acts* is accurate. The evidence points to their truthfulness. So if Jesus is who the Bible says he is, how long will people try to dodge his claim on their lives as their Saviour and Lord?