

The New Testament in Historical Context

The Four Evangelists are Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. Matthew and John were also among the Twelve Disciples or Apostles of Jesus during His time on earth. The Synoptic Gospels refer to the books of Matthew, Mark and Luke, speaking mostly of the same accounts from the life of Jesus with Matthew and John's accounts usually from firsthand experiences as a "living history."

Mark was a follower or disciple of Peter, so his accounts were surely framed by Peter's accounts of the teachings of Jesus as one of the 12 chosen Apostles that literally walked with Jesus. From a blog dated August 22, 2018, by Jim Warner Wallace, "The repeated and unanimous testimony of the early Church describes Mark's Gospel as an accurate record of Peter's teaching, captured faithfully by Mark acting as Peter's scribe. Like Peter (and modestly at times Tim), *Paul Uses Scribes*."

Luke was a close friend of Paul, the latter a principal author of the New Testament. Many accounts place Luke as a trusted follower of Paul day in and day out for two years. In the early days of the church, no one planted more churches than Paul. While not one of the Twelve Disciples, Paul wrote up to 13 books of the New Testament according to many sources. Hence, many consider Paul as the second most important entity after Jesus in the early growth of Christianity. Plus, he lived during Jesus's time on earth as well.

From *The Reason for God* from Pastor Tim Keller, "When they read Luke, which claims to be an eyewitness account (See Luke 1:1-4), they take it as history." Luke 1:1-4 (KJV) states,

1. Forasmuch as many have taken in hand to set forth in order a declaration of those things which are most surely believed among us,
2. Even as they delivered them unto us, which from the beginning were eyewitnesses, and ministers of the word,
3. It seemed good to me also, having had perfect understanding of all things from the very first, to write I unto thee in order, most excellent Theophilus,
4. That thou mightiest know the certainty of those things, wherein thou hast been instructed.

History that passes down from one generation to another can lose some authenticity over time and many generations. Firsthand accounts like Luke's, when combined with so many other firsthand accounts, let alone many more secondhand accounts from the Disciples whose lived during the time Jesus lived on earth is the definition of "historical context."

Again, from Pastor Keller's book, *The Reason for God*. "In his landmark book, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*, Richard Bauckham marshals much historical evidence to demonstrate that at the time the gospels were written there were numerous living witnesses to Jesus' life and events. Indeed, the respected writer and scholar, Richard Baulkham, takes an added layer of scientific approaches in his consideration of historical context history and the resulting truths."

From www.coldcasechristianity.com on how ancient eyewitness testimony became the New Testament gospel record, "Unlike spontaneous, unprepared witnesses of a crime, the Disciples

were desperately attentive to the words and actions of Jesus, and I imagine their attention to detail became even more focused with each miraculous event. For this reason, authors of the gospels became excellent eyewitnesses and recognized importance of their testimony very early.” The Bible has many references to eyewitness testimonies, including the following:

- 1 Peter 5:1, “Therefore I exhort the elders which are among you, who am also an elder, and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, and also a partaker also of the glory that is to be revealed...”
- 2 Peter 1:16-17, “for we did not follow cleverly devised tales when we made it known to you the power and coming of Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of His majesty...”
- 1 John 1:33 “What was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life - and the life was manifested, and we have seen it and testify and proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and was manifested to us...”

Collectively, Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, Paul and Peter are the primary authors of the New Testament. All of them, but particularly Paul, tell of eyewitness accounts from so many others.

Many, including Bauckham and the literary critic and esteemed author, C.S. Lewis, make a great case on the nature of many of the stories in the Bible, namely that they were not like fiction written at the time. Pastor Keller states about Lewis’ interpretation, “Lewis meant that ancient fiction was nothing like modern fiction. Modern fiction is realistic. It contains details and dialogue and reads like an eyewitness account. This generation of fiction, however, only developed within the past 300 years. In ancient times, romances, epics or legends were high and remote – details were sparse.” Of course, stories from the bible are the opposite as they are full of details.

Furthermore, as referenced in *The Reason for God* by Pastor Keller, “Richard Bauckham has compiled a great deal of research by psychologists on the marks of recollective memory. Recollective memory is selective – it fixes on unique and consequential events. It retains irrelevant details (as Lewis observes). It takes the limited vantage point of a participant rather than that of an omniscient narrator and shows signs of frequent rehearsal.”

Conclusion

Unlike the Old Testament where Jesus was prospective or so much relied on prophecy, the New Testament preserves the words of individuals who knew Jesus personally or who followed Him after His resurrection. Hence, the New Testament is the go-to resource to help us come closer to the Savior’s expectations in us as we gain understanding of His mortal ministry.

Again, the majority of the New Testament is written within the time (and context) of lived history in the time that Jesus walked the planet with his disciples, preached to so many more including large crowds, including as many as 5,000 or more at the Sermon on the Mount.

With so many witnesses from the time Jesus lived on earth with us and shortly thereafter, we can be affirmed and reaffirmed in the teachings of Jesus as we strive to *Act Godly...Measured by Asking, "What Would Jesus Do?"*

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