

The New Testament is Archaeologically Verifiable



The Accuracy of Luke

Sir William Ramsay, an English historian and prolific writer, was a product of a mid-19th century education and, as a result, held a pervasive anti-Biblical bias. He believed the historical accounts in the book of Acts had been written, not in the time of the apostolic Church, but in the mid-second century. If this were true, Acts could not have been written by Luke, the traveling companion of the apostle Paul. The Gospel of Luke and the Book of Acts would, therefore, be less than an accurate record of history. But Luke claimed to have been with Paul as the two men trudged over the cobblestone roads of the Roman Empire. He claimed to write as one who watched as Paul was used by God to bring a young convert back to life after a fatal fall (Acts 20:8-12). In spite of this claim, Ramsay was skeptical of Luke and the historical record of Acts, and he set out to disprove it.

As a result, Ramsay began a detailed study of the archaeological evidence, and he came to a disconcerting conclusion: the historical and archaeological evidence supported the fact that Luke not only wrote the Book of Acts in the first century, (during the time of the apostles), but also wrote an accurate account of history. Rather than Luke being a historical fraud, Ramsay concluded that:

“(There are) reasons for placing the author of Acts among the historians of the first rank” (Sir William Ramsay, St. Paul the Traveller and the Roman Citizen, Hodder & Stoughton, London, 1925, p. 4).

Luke is Confirmed by the Historical Evidence

Ramsay became convinced of Luke’s reliability because Luke wrote about the work of the early Church as it existed within the context of secular events and personalities of the day. In Luke’s Gospel account we are introduced to Pontius Pilate, Herod the Great, Augustus and other political players. In Acts we meet an even larger group, including Sergius Paulus, Gallio, Felix, Festus and Herod Agrippa I and II. Luke not only writes about these people, but he mentions details, (sometimes relatively minute details), about these folks:

“One of the most remarkable tokens of (Luke’s) accuracy is his sure familiarity with the proper titles of all the notable persons who are mentioned . . . Cyprus, for example, which was an imperial province until 22 BC, became a senatorial province in that year, and was therefore governed no longer by an imperial legate but by a proconsul. And so, when Paul and Barnabas arrived in Cyprus about AD 47, it was the proconsul Sergius Paullus whom they met . . .” (F.F. Bruce, The New Testament Documents: Are They Reliable?, InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove, Illinois, 1973, p. 82).

Luke's narrative is confirmed by the minute and particular detail with which he writes about the offices and titles of officials of the Roman Empire. In every case he gets it right, as confirmed by archaeological discoveries many centuries later. As Ramsay discovered, this level of accuracy requires that the author be well versed in the intricacies of the politics of the day. As a point of comparison, few of us would do as well if we were quizzed about the exact official titles of national and international political figures that surround us today.

In the past, critics have claimed that Luke was in error in several places in his narrative of the life of Jesus and the Acts of the Apostles. Yet again and again, Luke has been proved reliable by the archeological evidence. Let's take a look at some areas of doubt that have been eliminated through archeology.

Was There a Census and Was Quirinius Governor?

Critics used to argue that there was no recorded census at the time mentioned in the Bible, that there was also no record of a governor in Syria named Quirinius, and no tradition that required people to return to their ancestral home for purposes of recording their numbers (these details are mentioned in Luke 2:1-3). But archeological findings have now revealed that the Romans regularly recorded the enrollment of taxpayers and that they held censuses every 14 years (beginning with Augustus Caesar). In addition to this, An inscription found in Antioch tells of Quirinius being governor of Syria around 7 B.C. (evidently he was governor twice!) And a papyrus found in Egypt says the following concerning the administration of a census (confirming the tradition recorded in the Bible):

“Because of the approaching census it is necessary that all those residing for any cause away from their home should at once prepare to return to their own governments in order that they may complete the family registration of the enrollment...”



Quirinius Inscription

Was There Ever a Guy Named Lysanias?

Although Luke mentions this leader in Luke 3:1, for years the only Lysanias known to ancient historians was a man who was killed in 36 B.C. Many critics again chose to doubt that Luke was either accurate or telling the truth. But in recent years, an inscription was found near Damascus which speaks of “Freedman of Lysanias the tetrarch” and it is dated between 14 and 29 A.D.! This discovery once again confirmed Luke's account.

What About “The Pavement” (Gabbatha)

Taking a short detour from Luke, the Gospel of John does mention a court called “the Pavement” (or “Gabbatha”) in John 19:13. For centuries there was no record of this court and no archeological support. As a

result, critics were hesitant to accept this place as anything more than a myth and evidence that the Bible is not an accurate historical account. But William F Albright (in “The Archeology of Palestine”) demonstrated that the Biblical account was trustworthy. Archeology revealed that the “the Pavement” was the court of the Tower of Antonia, destroyed in 66-70 A.D. during the siege of Jerusalem. It was unfortunately buried when the city was rebuilt in the time of Hadrian and was not discovered until very recently! But the discovery did eventually confirm the New Testament reliability.

Did Pontius Pilate Really Exist?

Few who have read the New Testament accounts of the trial of Jesus can forget the name Pontius Pilate. All four gospel accounts make reference to Pilate and he is also a prominent figure in the Gospel of Luke. But critics doubted his true existence for years. In fact, for approximately two thousand years, the only references to Pilate were found in such writings as Josephus and Tacitus. But aside from an occasional reference to Pilate in certain written records, there were no inscriptions or stone monuments that documented his life. But in 1961, all that changed. In that year, Pilate moved from a figure who was known solely from ancient literature, to a figure who was attested by archaeology.



Pontus Pilate Rock

The Roman officials who controlled Judea during Jesus’ time most likely made their headquarters in the ancient town of Caesarea, (this is evidenced in two references by Josephus to Pilate’s military and political activity in that city). Located in Caesarea was a large Roman theater where archeologists found a two-foot by three-foot slab of rock with an inscription bearing the name of Pontius Pilate. A stronger piece of evidence for the New Testament’s accuracy would be difficult to find. Now known appropriately as “The Pilate Inscription,” this stone slab documents that Pilate was the Roman official governing Judea, and even uses his more complete name of Pontius Pilate, as found in Luke 3:1!

Was Jesus Really Crucified as Described by Luke?

For years, critics believed that the story of Jesus’ crucifixion had several flaws, to say the least. First, it was believed that nails were not used to secure victims to the actual cross, but that ropes were used instead for this purpose. Second, it had been suggested that victims of crucifixion were not given a decent burial. Certain scholars even believed that the account of Jesus’ burial in the tomb of Joseph of Arimathea was contrived, since crucifixion victims like Jesus were thrown into common graves alongside other condemned prisoners. But in 1968, Vassilios Tzaferis found the first indisputable remains of a crucifixion victim, named Yohanan Ben Ha’galgol. Yohanan had a spike driven into both feet, and nails driven between the lower bones of the arms. Furthermore, Yohanan appeared to have had his legs broken, which also dovetails with the New Testament account of Roman crucifixion. In addition to this, the burial of the crucified victim found by Tzaferis proves that, at least on certain occasions, crucifixion victims were given a proper Jewish burial.

Was Iconium a City in Phrygia?

In Acts 14:6, this city is said to exist in Phrygia, but for many years archeologists believed that Luke was mistaken. They found no evidence of the city at all. They believed that Lystra and Derbe were in Phrygia, but had concluded that Iconium was not in Phrygia based on the writings of Romans such as Cicero who indicated that Iconium was in Lycaonia. But in 1910, Sir William Ramsay found a monument which showed that Iconium was indeed a Phrygian city, and later discoveries continued to confirm this!

Is There Even Such a Word As “Politarchs”?

In Acts 17:6, Luke uses this supposedly Greek term to describe “rulers of the city”. But because no such term has ever been found in classical Greek literature, it was assumed that Luke was wrong to refer to such an office. But nineteen inscriptions have now been found that make use of this title, and five of these are in reference to Thessalonica (the very city Luke was claiming to have heard the term)!

Was Sergius Paulus Really the Proconsul of Cyprus?

In Acts 13, Luke documented Paul’s journey into Seleucia, then Cyprus, and Salamis, then Paphos. In Paphos, Paul and his companions encountered a proconsul named Sergius Paulus. Critics claimed that Luke was wrong about this man, maintaining that the area around Cyprus would not have been ruled by a proconsul. Since Cyprus was an imperial province, it would have been put under a “propraetor” not a proconsul. In addition, there was no evidence that a Sergius Paulus ever really existed. But later archeological discoveries put the matter to rest. First, at Soli on the north coast of Cyprus, an inscription was uncovered that mentioned Paulus, who was a proconsul. In addition to this find, another Latin inscription has been discovered that refers to a Lucius Sergius Paulus who was “one of the curators of the Banks of the Tiber during the reign of Claudius.” Sir William Ramsay eventually came to argue that this man became the proconsul of Cyprus, and should be connected with Acts 13. Finally, a fragmentary Greek inscription hailing from Kythraia in northern Cyprus has been discovered that refers to a Quintus Sergius Paulus as a proconsul during the reign of Claudius. Luke got it right all along.



Sergius Paulus Inscription

What About Gallio, the Supposed Proconsul of Achaia?

Acts chapter 18 records that a man named Gallio was proconsul of Achaia during the time of Paul’s visit there. But critics were also skeptical about this, doubting that such a man ever existed based on the lack of physical evidence and a solid record of his existence. But in 1905, a doctoral student in Paris was sifting through a collection of inscriptions that had been collected from the Greek city of Delphi. In these various inscriptions, he found four different fragments that, when put together, formed a large portion of a letter from the Emperor Claudius. The letter from the emperor was written to none other than Gallio, the proconsul of Achaia. In the years following this discovery, the letter has been dated to 52AD, placing Gallio’s proconsulship in early A.D. 51, and Paul’s arrival in Corinth in the winter of 49/50AD!

In addition to all of this, there are many other details recorded in the Gospel of Luke that support the fact that he was a detailed and incredibly accurate historian. Check out some of the specifics:

- He includes a correct description of two ways to gain Roman citizenship
- (Acts 22:28)
- He includes an accurate explanation of provincial penal procedure
- (Acts 24:1-9)
- He includes a true depiction of invoking one's Roman citizenship, including the legal formula, *de quibus cognoscere volebam* (Acts 25:18)
- He includes a true description of being in Roman custody and the conditions of being imprisoned at one's own expense (Acts 28:16 and Acts 28:30-31)

There are literally dozens of additional confirmations of historical data given in Luke's writings. With so many confirmations, and no discrepancies, it is fair to say Luke's writings have earned respect as historical documents that show accuracy and scrutiny for detail.

Luke Got It Right

It is clear from what HAS been discovered that Luke got his history right. We can't squirm about what we DON'T have. We need, instead, to focus on what we DO have. We can trust the history that has been recorded by Luke, and this accounts for perhaps the largest portion of the Biblical narrative!

"It may be stated categorically that no archaeological discovery has ever controverted a Biblical reference."
(Nelson Glueck, the noted Jewish archaeologist)

Don't Be Surprised

It shouldn't surprise us that Luke would be doubted. Let's face it, he tells a story of a personal God who visited this world in the form of a man. He tells of a loving God who calls us to a holy life. He tells us about a God who wants us to change what we worship and who we serve. History that calls us to change is never a popularly accepted recollection of events. So it shouldn't surprise us that many of the Gospel events, people and places were originally doubted until archeologists simply had no choice but to acknowledge the physical evidence.

Jesus Really Did Visit Us

And While critics have eventually come to respect the writings of Luke, many would still deny the identity of Luke's central character, Jesus Christ. But Archeologists and historians have uncovered a number of non-Christian and even non-Jewish sources which match the historical pictures of Jesus and the Church he founded that are given by the Gospels:

The existence of Jesus Christ as recorded by Josephus, Suetonius, Thallus, Pliny the Younger, the Talmud, and Lucian.

The Roman historian, Cornelius Tacitus, records that Jesus Christ is the man from whom Christians derive their name when he wrote about Nero's burning of Rome.

Furthermore, from Pliny the Younger's letter to Emperor Trajan (dated A.D. 112), we learn of some of the beliefs and practices of the early church, which correspond with the New Testament.

Additionally, ancient manuscripts from Suetonius, Lucian, Mara Car-Serapion, Emperor Trajan, Emperor Hadrian, other Jewish sources (like the Talmud), and heretical sources (such as works from Gnostic writers)

support the historical facts given in the New Testament. Many other ancient texts match the same picture of history given by the New Testament.

Christian Documents Pass the Test

The Gospels pass the external test of archeology, Jewish writings, Gentile writings, government records, and many other informants that we can't even cover in this short article. The Gospels have shown with incredible accuracy that whenever there is information that can be verified by other sources, these sources confirm the truth of scripture. Men such as Sir William Ramsay have been convinced of the accurateness and trustworthiness of the Bible as a result of these findings. There is no doubt that archaeology proves the accuracy of the Bible and confirms the Bible as an inspired revelation from God.

Keep in mind that the New Testament does not necessarily claim to be a systematic representation of first-century history. It is not, per se, merely a history book. It does claim, however, that the historical facts related in the text are accurate, with no margin of error (2 Timothy 3:16-17; Acts 1:1-3). It is safe to say that, due to this extraordinary claim, the New Testament has been scrutinized more intensely than any other text in existence (with the possible exception of its companion volume, the Old Testament). But the overwhelming result of this close examination is an enormous collection of amazing archaeological evidence that testifies to the truthfulness of the various historical references in the New Testament. Over and over, biblical references that can be checked, prove to be historically accurate in every detail:

You may press the words of Luke in a degree beyond any other historian's, and they stand the keenest scrutiny and the hardest treatment, provided always that the critic knows the subject and does not go beyond the limits of science justice (Sir William Ramsay, 1915).

Almost 3,000 years ago, the sweet singer of Israel, in his description of God's Word, put it perfectly:

Psalm 119:160

"The entirety of Your word is truth"