

THE NEW TESTAMENT DOCUMENTS – ARE THEY RELIABLE?

Professor FF Bruce wrote the book, *The New Testament Documents – Are they Reliable?*

This book has been widely distributed and is influential. The edition I am working with is the 1982 revised edition published by the Intervarsity Press.

Page 7, We should be more concerned with God's revealing himself in the gospel's Jesus than in checking the gospels to be history but at the same time the two issues are related.

Bruce is admitting that he is biased so let that be a warning to us. Besides a God who tells us to hate sins but to love those who commit them is not an honest God. When we hate wrongdoing what we hate is the evil CHARACTER of the person doing the wrong. It is not really the wrong itself that we hate but what it says about the person. To hate sin is to hate the sinner. Some revelation! And besides there are countless books of Christian scripture though these are not accepted by the majority. What about the Book of Mormon? What about the Book of Abraham? What about the Third and Last Testament of Jesus Christ by John Reeve? What about the Word of the Lord? Why should we give the gospels a bias? Why should we have the prejudice and bigotry to do that?

Page 12, Bruce says it matters if the documents are reliable or not because Christianity is more than just a code of ethics but claims that God became man to save mankind by dying and rising again.

This is saying that ethics is less important than dogma. Again it's another typical Christian bias. It contradicts page 7. Page 7 says that it is more important to think about the picture of God given by Jesus in the gospels than in checking the gospels for truthfulness. Then we read here that we need to historically test the gospels to be sure that they are being truthful that God became man to die and rise again to save us.

Page 17, Bruce holds that Mark and Luke were written before the destruction of Jerusalem and its temple in 70 AD and Matthew shortly after that because of the way they speak about the disaster.

Such arguments are worthless.

Cleverly, Bruce does not tell us exactly what he means or how he comes to this conclusion. It is thought by many scholars that since Mark and Luke link the disaster to the end of the world and the final world war that this error shows that they were written before 70AD for the prediction failed. But they could have written after the disaster and still have seen the disaster as the start of a conflagration that would destroy the world. We know they were wrong to link the destruction of Jerusalem with the end of the world for we are still here.

Bruce knows nobody can expect us to believe in Jesus when what Mark and Luke wrote was put into Jesus' mouth meaning Jesus far from being God or saviour was a prophet who misled people.

Matthew still could have believed the same thing as Mark and Luke but didn't write it down properly so why assume Matthew came after them just because of the way he spoke of the disaster?

We know the gospels say that Jesus predicted the disaster and it could have been lucky guesswork and there was such trouble after 70AD both for the Jews and the Church that the prophecies could still have been written after the event and still expected the end of the world.

On page 48 he states that Papias wrote in the second century that everybody tried to translate the logia of Matthew as best he could from the Aramaic.

This does not help those who want to hold that Matthew was written by then because it shows nobody was taking control over the translations and letting anything suffice. You don't want people doing their best for translating. Its not good enough.

Page 20, agrees with the approach of many that because the New Testament makes extreme and astonishing claims about Jesus that it is only right to demand very good evidence for its authenticity.

Outlandish claims do require very high quality evidence. Bruce says the evidence for the authenticity of the New Testament is better than that for many other works of the time but that is no help. The evidence is not extraordinary and nobody agrees

on how to interpret the evidence. The fact remains it is not as good as the evidence for say writings from the 19th century and Bruce knows that. He knows he is trying to deceive us.

It has been observed that the New Testament gets harsher examination and more sceptical and critical attention than it would if it were merely secular. It is treated as to be automatically suspicious just because of the religious content and claims. Is that fair? It seems not! But all we are doing is respecting the rule that magic style claims that you cannot expect the world at large to agree with unlike the existence of Christopher Columbus just need not suspicion but more attention. That by default means more criticism but also more acceptance where appropriate.

Page 32, Bruce rejects the scholarly consensus that the heretic Marcion who just had a version like Luke's gospel for a gospel and some of the epistles of Paul in his list of scriptural books was the first to create a canon of scripture for the Church had a list in those days.

The Church might have tended to focus on certain books in or before that period but that does not make its selection a canon. It might have just been a model that was useful for working within until an official and proper canon was decided on and disputed books like James and the Shepherd of Hermas were either accepted or eliminated. Many did consider books canonical that have been rejected from the decisive New Testament canon.

Page 48, the poetic nature of the teaching of Jesus in the gospels with its rhyming seems to indicate that the gospel writers memorised his teaching from him and wrote it down.

Maybe it was written that way for future generations to learn it better? Jesus making his disciples memorise when they could and would have used notebooks for they were busy men is a foolish suggestion. The gospel of Thomas has heretical sayings of Jesus in an easy to remember format and no Christian Church says that means there is something to this gospel.

Page 57, the writer of the fourth gospel, that of John, says, "This is the disciple that bears witness to these things and we know his testimony is true."

Bruce approves of this quotation but it is dishonest for any author to write like this. He is using the "we" to support what he says and the truth is they can't help at all for we don't know who they are. Why are they hiding? The quotation shows that the fourth gospel was written by a liar.

Page 58, the John gospel does not call John the Baptist anything but John unlike the rest. This means that John the apostle wrote the gospel. Anybody else would have stated what John he meant be it the Baptist or the apostle. He would do it to prevent confusion. If a well-known John, another John, who must have been the apostle, wrote the gospel this confusion wouldn't happen.

First the gospel is anonymous. If it was that clear that John the apostle wrote the gospel then why didn't he write down his name? Why be anonymous?

Second, John the Baptist was well known so if anybody was in the habit of just calling him John then why wouldn't they do so in the gospel? Not everybody would have called him John the Baptist just like not everybody called Jesus, Jesus the Christ.

Happily page 59 tells us that the John gospel is the only one that says it was a direct report from an eyewitness.

The other gospels then would say if they were direct reports so they are not. They have no right to be believed because you need direct reports for something so serious. Though John claiming to be an eyewitness report does not mean it is, it is better for it to claim to be one. The book that does not claim it has no hope.

Page 78-79, the resurrection of Jesus was a real event because to suggest that Jesus didn't really die but left the tomb alive and went to see his disciples does not explain the rising of the Church. Some suggest the disciples hallucinated his appearing. The Jewish authorities failed to debunk the resurrection so the best explanation of the data we have got is that Jesus did rise and appear.

One possibility is that an earthquake moved the stone and somebody else removed the body or Jesus got out when nobody was looking and when the women at the tomb turned their backs. Perhaps Jesus never met his disciples again but an impostor pretended to be him raised from the dead. There are countless ways to explain the data without accusing the New Testament of lying so it is dishonest of Christianity to go on as if there were not and as if a resurrection was the only explanation.

The view that the authorities couldn't disprove the resurrection and they should have been able to find the body of Jesus

alive or dead had it been stolen so he must have risen (page 80) is nonsense. We don't know the circumstances. The gospel accounts are very short and brief. Christians tell lies all the time to verify the resurrection because they know that when Satan is able to appear to people he might have faked the resurrection appearances. They know that apparitions are common enough and no explanation has been found and that apparitions contradict one another. People nearly dying see a being of light in near death experiences that tells them not to judge themselves as sinners but treats their wrong doing as a learning experience rather than as doing evil or committing sin. Because of such considerations, Christians need to believe in a body that miraculously vanished from a tomb in the act of being raised from the dead.

Bruce does not have the decency to be honest for he says that the apostles waited until fifty days had passed before they mentioned the resurrection to outsiders (page 79) meaning the body would have been unrecognisable or even dumped in Syria by then. The gospel of Luke says the resurrection was not proclaimed until Jesus was raised fifty days. Nothing in the New Testament contradicts this. It is too much to believe that the resurrection rumour could have been contained and nobody let it slip. It is too perfect. There are lies in the New Testament.

Bruce says, in unison with the Matthew gospel, that to prevent the disciples saying Jesus rose when his body went missing, the Jewish leaders decided to pretend that the disciples stole the body and they bribed soldiers to spread the rumour. Now that tactic would force the disciples to say that Jesus rose. The Jews would have been asking for trouble. The Jews would have told the soldiers to wait to hear what the disciples would say first. This wasn't done. Had it been done the bribe wouldn't have been given until the disciples started saying Jesus rose. But it was given to the soldiers that very Sunday morning. If the Jews and soldiers fabricated testimony that the disciples stole then why didn't they silence the disciples by arresting them for grave robbing? They would have had to in order to make their story ring true.

Page 82, Jesus really could do miracles for even his critics said he did miracles but by sorcery, Celsus was one person that said that. Celsus is another fine proof that Christians depend on the ancient scholars who wrote what they want to hear rather than the more intelligent scholars who disagreed with the Christian ones. They do that for history and truth must be sacrificed for the sustenance of their bigoted faith.

It was easier to say that about the miracles than try to debunk them. People were eager to believe in miracles and sorcery. Then as today sceptics or those who know the real truth about the alleged miracles and how they are frauds don't get much of a hearing. Naturally, Jesus' critics might have preferred to look for theological or philosophical disproofs that Jesus' miracles came from God and blamed magic and the Devil. It does not mean they thought the miracles really were genuine. Perhaps they thought Satan was helping Jesus with his tricks and influencing people to believe in them as miracles. Satan could use natural forces to make people make mistakes or misremember things so that when their testimony is heard it might be thought they really have seen something miraculous. To a conjurer, Jesus' miracles might be just tricks. But to a believing Jew they were just tricks but Satan was using his invisible influence to make believers fail to see that and recognise them as miracles.

It does not mean they knew what they were talking about when they accepted the miracles for everybody was gullible in that respect.

Christians always say that the New Testament gospels have all the marks of reliable historical documents. Yet if any other work of history, alleged or real, speaks of miracles that are not accepted by Christians they refuse to believe. They say the works are unreliable. They dispute the miracles mentioned by Josephus and they claim that his alleged mention of the resurrection of Jesus was authentically written by him and true. Their claim that the New Testament is credible despite having so many miracle stories about Jesus in it speaks of the Christian preference for what they want to believe rather than what can be believed. The Christians cannot come up with any documents that claim to be historical and which have loads of miracles in them as well and which are known to be authentic and accurate. They have nothing to compare the gospels with. Without that comparison they are only saying the gospels are true for they want to believe in them. They don't have the right to claim that the gospels are historically plausible on emotional grounds. Honest people don't act like that with historical documents and don't treat their feelings that something is true as evidence that it is true.

Page 83, Jesus did not like the kind of faith that believed in him because of his miracles as indicated in John 2:23-25 and John 6:26.

So he expected to be honoured as Messiah, Son of God and mouthpiece of God just because he said he was these things? Would God really do miracles through a prophet when they are not meant to be the signs that justify belief? John let it slip that he made Jesus' miracles up for it leaves him accusing Jesus of encouraging the wrong kind of faith.

So is the New Testament reliable?

Bruce's argument for it fails at every major point so there is no reason to trust the New Testament. His evidences are not evidences but speculation.

The New Testament Documents – are they Reliable? FF Bruce, Intersity Press, Leicester, 2000
Jesus and Early Christianity in the Gospels, Daniel J Grolin, George Ronald, Oxford, 2002