

HOW USEFUL TO HISTORIANS ARE THE GOSPELS?

The Christians try to argue that dismissing as a historian, anything in a text or whatever, that speaks of the supernatural, for example, angels appearing at Jesus' tomb, is a fallacy called uniformitarianism. This fallacy is the error, The Present is the Key to the Past. The fact remains that sometimes it is all you have. And there is a right way to use it. It is better than saying nothing. Us having computers today means you don't argue that the Egyptians used computers to achieve their wonders of construction. And the fact remains that the Christians themselves use it when it is magic or witches or something they don't want to believe in. Either you accept all miracle tales which have no clear disproof which means that the resurrection of Jesus is nothing special and is just another miracle. Or you argue the tales are truly what people thought but are indications that mistakes have happened. So you say, "People believed Jesus rose. I don't know if he did."

In historical research, you look at primary sources which mean sources that were written during the event. A good example of that is letters or diaries. Anything coming after that is a secondary source. The best secondary sources will be close to the event and written by people who were there. Hearsay and legend are barely sources and nobody will agree on the kernels of truth, if any, they contain.

Prize quotes from From Doubting Jesus' Resurrection by Kris Komarnitsky.

Wolfhart Pannenberg: "A single judgment of a sober historian easily outweighs a majority vote, in my opinion. Historical judgment must remain a matter of argument. A majority vote may express the dominant mood of a group, possibly its prejudices, but is not very helpful in judging claims to historical truth or authenticity."

Jan Vansina explains why the Gospels, and the oral traditions that lie behind them, are not independent sources in this sense: ... We cannot assume that the testimony of two different informants from the same community or even society is really independent. This is very important. In history, proof is given only when two independent sources confirm the same event or situation, but...it is not possible to do this with oral tradition wherever a corpus exists and information flows are unstemmed (i.e., in most cases). Feedback and contamination is the norm...No one will consider the three synoptic Gospels as independent sources, even though they have different authors...they stemmed from one single oral milieu, from one corpus in one community. Once this is realized, it is easy to see that it also applies to John, the fourth Gospel...

The Gospels are an understandable exception to what classical historians normally deal with, because classical historians rarely if ever deal with the written records of a highly revered religious figure who had very little contemporary significance to anyone but his followers when he was alive and to his worshippers after his death and where the entire written record comes only from those who worshipped him. Because of this, using the myth growth rates observed in other ancient records as a baseline to say what should be observed in the Gospels is a mistaken approach.

Bart Ehrman writes in Did Jesus Exist? - "Technically, we cannot prove a single thing historically. All we can do is give enough evidence (of kinds I will mention in a moment) to convince enough people (hopefully nearly everyone) about a certain historical claim" (page 38).

Historians can say if a source or evidence says somebody rose from the dead and it's a good source or good evidence. But that does not mean they can conclude the resurrection happened. It is a comment on the evidence - and evidence does not necessarily demand a conclusion. History does not find the evidence that Jesus was alive after the crucifixion satisfactory. I am deliberately being neutral. If Jesus was alive resurrection might be one possible reason for that. But we don't have sensible grounds for simply being able to say he was alive. A historian saying Jesus rose and history says so is going too far and failing to be neutral and impartial.

Christianity is not primarily about how to treat others but about believing what God has said be it on history or whatever. There is more history and doctrine in the religion than moral rules. Just as it would be a sin to misrepresent what a historian says so it is a sin to reject history that is given to you by God. The focus in Christianity is "factual" claims not morality.

Every historian must regard good sources as good but not perfect sources. He thinks they will have errors some of which will never be discovered. A historian who treats the Bible as infallible and without error is not a historian. The Bible actually is the enemy of history for claiming to have no errors and so is the Koran.

Strauss argued that the gospels should be looked at as works of theology. Even if they are history they are not about the history but the religious message. I reject that approach. The gospels are intended to teach religious theological history. They attempt to make history religious and theological. They think God reveals through history. God speaks of himself say through the historical fact of the resurrection of Jesus. But is the resurrection really a historical fact? Strauss had no right to treat the gospels as theology just because they do history badly.

Many educated Christians lie that history shows that Jesus rose from the dead. It does not. Strictly speaking it shows that people claimed not that he did but that they believed he did. But back to the Christian notion that the resurrection is as good as fact of history as anything else.