Preacher's Pen points

Are the Gospels Historically Accurate?

Jon Meacham, managing editor of Newsweek and Episcopalian by faith wrote the cover story of the February 16th issue of the magazine entitled "Who Killed Jesus?" In discussing the impact of the movie, "The Passion of the Christ" on the issue of anti-Semitism, Meacham clearly revealed his view of the Gospels in this statement: *"But the Bible can be a problematic source. Though countless believers take it as the immutable word of God, Scripture is not always a faithful record of historical events; the Bible is the product of human authors who were writing in particular times and places with particular points to make and visions to advance."*

In an online interview on the Newsweek website, he reiterated his view that the Gospels did not present *"an exact record of historic events"* and that *"many of the Biblical writers had theological points to make with their stories and were understandably influenced by the circumstances of their times. This is not to say that scripture was not divinely inspired or revealed to the authors, but it is to say that to read the Bible as if every word were literally true is to misread the Bible—a view held by many, many Christian denominations and theologians and believers."*

I am aghast at how blithely journalists like Meacham reject the historical accuracy of the Gospel accounts. Meacham's article is just one of several media presentations that I've seen that question the historical reliability of the NT documents and give alternative explanations of what really happened. Offering nothing more than their own assertions, they confidently aver that anyone who believes that the gospels are literally true are misreading the gospels. I disagree. The evidence of the gospels themselves suggests that one is reading a factual report of Jesus' life and not a doctored up version to meet the self-serving purposes of the writers.

The Gospel's Original Claims

I would be the first to admit that the gospels were intended to do more than merely report events in the life of Jesus. It is clear that they were intended to lead the reader to faith in Jesus as God's Son and the Jewish Messiah (See John 20:30-31). However, this stated purpose does not in any way suggest that the material reported to lead one to faith is inaccurate, or not literally true. In fact, one may reasonably wonder how the apostles could have expected one to embrace Jesus as God's Son on the basis of inaccurate information about Him? What useful purpose would have been served to mislead or deceive the reader while at the same time seeking to make him a disciple who would adhere to Jesus' teaching to always tell the truth! (Mt. 5:37). When Luke wrote his gospel, he made it abundantly clear to Theophilus that he had *"followed everything carefully from the beginning"* in order that he might know *"the exact truth"* about the things he had been taught (Luke 1:1-4). How could Theophilus have known the exact truth if Luke's gospel was not a literal report of what occurred?

In view then of these considerations, I see no reason to doubt that the gospels are authentic and accurate reports of Jesus life. Meacham prefers to leave the life of Jesus clouded in mystery affirming that *"there is only mystery if one believes that the Bible is not exactly an ancient Middle Eastern Associated Press pool report; that is, if one does not take the Bible to be literally true in its historical details, then there is room for critical analysis and informed reconstruction of these ancient events using what sources we can find."* However, Meacham acknowledges that there is another point of view: *If you believe the Bible is literally true in its historical details, then the debate is over, the conversation done."* I couldn't have said it better myself!

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