

I have been trying to explain (without complete success) that the Bible, in the view of some scholars starting in the early 19th century, could contain “true” stories that “didn’t happen” – or at least didn’t happen as they are narrated. One important point I want to make about this claim: I am **not** saying that I personally hold this view. I’m not saying I think these stories are necessarily “true” as far as I’m concerned. I’m saying that the idea is that these stories were designed to convey truths, rather than objective history lessons.

I talk about that in my book Jesus: Apocalyptic Prophet of the New Millenium, and try to demonstrate the point by giving a couple of particular examples. The first example will take two posts for me to cover.

What, though, is the evidence (that there could be true stories in the Bible that didn’t happen)? Or is this simply a theory cranked up by biblical scholars with too much time on their hands and not enough sense simply to let the texts of the Bible speak for themselves?

In fact there is evidence, lots of evidence, and of various kinds. Rather than go through all the evidence – a task that would take about twenty volumes of detailed, and possibly not altogether scintillating, demonstration – I’ve decided to give just a couple of examples to show what happens more widely throughout the Gospels. The evidence presupposes a certain canon of logic, namely, that two contradictory accounts of the same event cannot both be historically accurate. If you disagree with this logic, then the proof will not be persuasive. But then again, you’ll also never be able to figure out what happened in the past, since you’ll think that every contradictory account is true.

My examples, then, have to do with accounts about Jesus that appear to be contradictory in some of their details. Let me stress that my point is not that the basic events that are narrated didn’t happen. Since these particular accounts deal with the birth of Jesus and his death, I think we can assume they are historically accurate in the most general terms: Jesus was born and he did die! My point, though, is that the Gospel writers have given us accounts that are contradictory in their details. These contradictions make it impossible for us to think that the stories are completely accurate. Moreover, it is precisely these contradictions that can (sometimes) point us to the “truths” that the writers wanted to convey. We’ll begin with the end of Jesus’ story, the accounts of his death.

“True” Stories that Didn’t Happen (at least as narrated): Jesus’ Death in John

I’ll begin with an example that strikes me as particularly clear. It involves just a couple of details concerning Jesus’ crucifixion. The issue relates to a very simple question: ...

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