

I am in the midst of a thread talking about how historians can use sources such as the Gospels to know what actually happened in Jesus' life. These books were not *meant* to provide disinterested historical information about the past, but were quite intentionally slanted accounts meant to encourage and shape faith in Jesus. They nonetheless do contain important historical information. How does the historian determine what is historical and what is legendary in them?

Yesterday I gave some of the basics - a few "rules of thumb" that historians use. Now I get to the harder question of how to reconstruct the life of Jesus based on these kinds of sources. Again, this is taken from my book on the historical Jesus, from 1999. I haven't changed my views of these matters in all these years!

Specific Criteria and Their Rationale

Over the course of the past fifty years, historians have worked hard to develop methods for uncovering historically reliable information about the life of Jesus. I need to say up front that this is a hotly debated area of research, with some very smart and competent historians (and quite a few less than competent ones) expressing divergent views both about what criteria to use and about what conclusions to draw, once they agree on the criteria.

Here I'd like to sketch several of the methodological principles that have emerged from these debates. As you will see, there is a real logic behind each of them, and the logic needs to be understood for the criterion itself not to seem hopelessly arbitrary. In particular, it might help to use an analogy: in many respects, the historian is like a prosecuting attorney. He or she is trying to make a case and is expected to bear the burden of proof. As in a court of law, certain kinds of evidence are acknowledged as admissible, and witnesses must be carefully scrutinized. How then can we go about it?

Piling on the Testimony: The Criterion of Independent Attestation.

In any court trial, it is better ...

To see the rest of what I have to say, you will need to belong to the Blog. Blog membership has advantages, like, say, knowledge and insight. Who doesn't want them? Surely **you** do. So join the blog!!

You need to be logged in to see this part of the content. Please [Login](#) to access.



[The Trickiest Criterion for Determining What Happened in the Life of Jesus](#)
[Rules of Thumb for Reconstructing the History behind the Gospels](#)