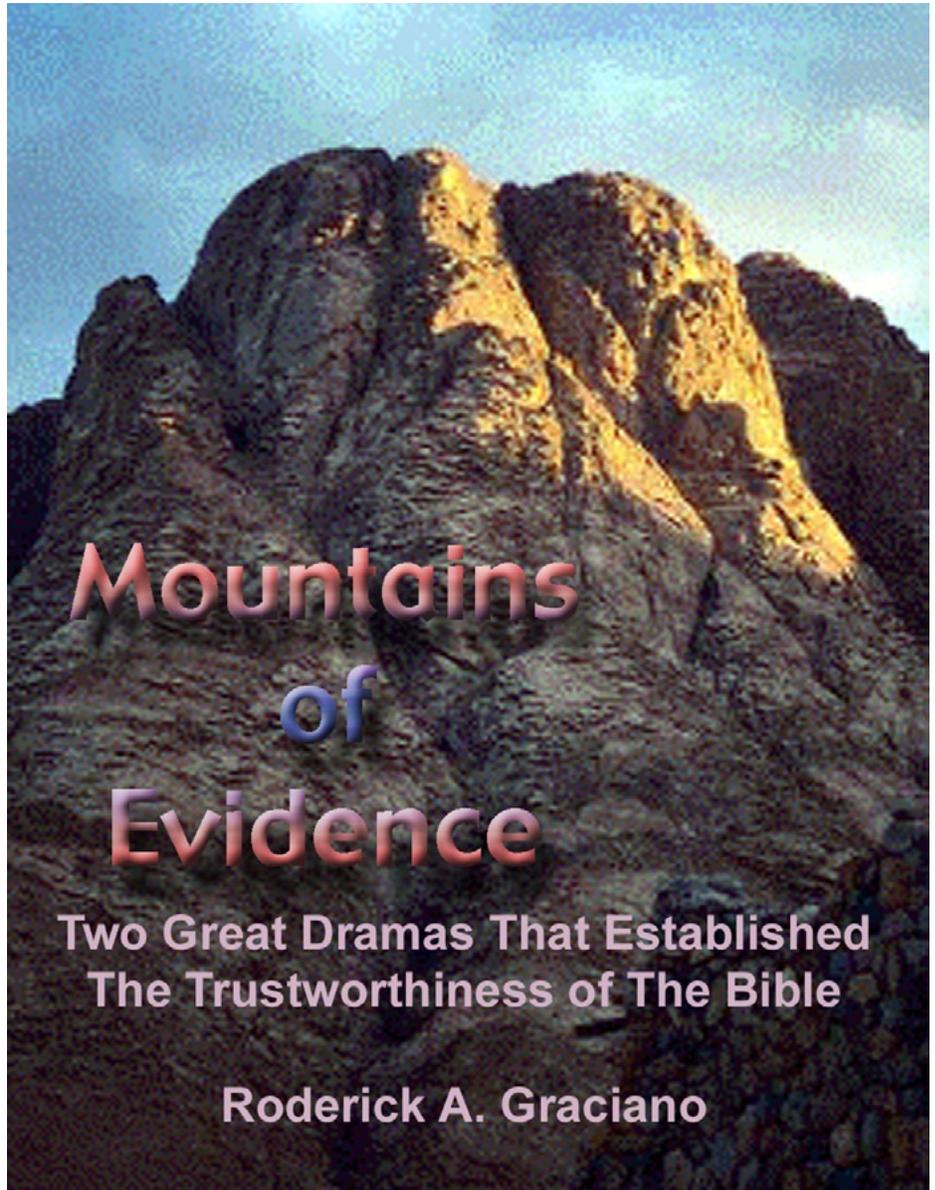




©1996-2007 Timothy Ministries. Reproduction of any part of this document in works for which readers will be charged is strictly prohibited without the explicit permission of Timothy Ministries. PERMISSION IS HEREBY GRANTED to quote from this document in noncommercial works so long the following notice is included with the quoted material: ©1996-2007 Timothy Ministries, www.tmin.org, used by permission.

What has
enabled
the story
of
Jesus
Christ
of
Nazareth
to persist
for so
long?



Secularists have increasingly come to think of faith as *hope without a basis*. A recent letter to the Editors of Newsweek asserted that “faith is by definition, belief in the absence of evidence” (Newsweek, LETTERS, Oct. 7). The writer failed to see the illogic in his statement, since “faith” and “belief” are synonyms, but more importantly, he failed to check his dictionary. Authoritative dictionaries do not say that faith is “confidence in the absence of evidence,” but rather “confidence in the absence of *proof*.” The distinction is vital. Proof replaces faith, for when proof comes, faith is no longer necessary. Faith never replaces evidence, however, but depends upon it—unless it is

what we call *blind faith*. Blind faith is what the Newsweek letter-writer apparently had in mind, but that is not the kind of faith that the Bible and historical Christianity have taught. The Bible has always called for intelligent faith, a belief that is reasonably founded on evidence. (Please see Addendum.)

Perhaps the best example of such a reasonable faith is a jury's belief in the guilt or innocence of a defendant. Though the jurors were not present at the crime in question, they put their faith in the testimony of witnesses and other material evidence in order to establish the facts. It's true that in the courtroom there is ample opportunity for bias and prejudice to obstruct a proper interpretation of the evidence, but once in a while a trial occurs in which the number of corroborating witnesses is so overwhelming, that prejudices must be set aside and the only reasonable verdict rendered. The Bible came into existence in the presence of just such an overwhelming number of corroborating witnesses.

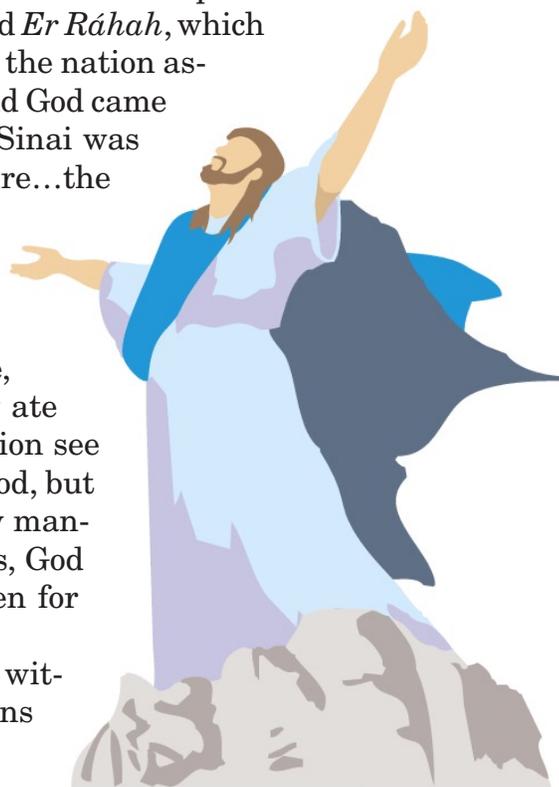
The Birth of the Bible

The Pentateuch, the first section of the Bible, originated around 1400 BC, when God, the Creator of heaven and earth, appeared in a body-like form on Mt. Sinai and dictated His laws to Moses. Those laws together with their pertinent history, make up the core of the first five books of the Bible, known collectively as the Pentateuch. There are two important things for us to realize about this birth of the Bible. The first is that it occurred in the full view of an entire nation of people, and the second is that those people were as wary of deception and religious charlatanry as we are today.

Two Million Witnesses

The story of an entire nation witnessing the birth of the Bible is one of the greatest dramas of all time. The nation was of course Israel, that great throng that marched out of Egypt under the leadership of Moses. It included an army of "six hundred thousand men...besides women and children" (Exodus 12.37). Scholars estimate the total number of Israelites leaving Egypt at about two million. This multitude marched all the way from the area of the Suez to Mt. Sinai in the southern Sinai peninsula. Mt. Sinai is probably *Jebel Musa*, a granite mountain that peaks at 9,000 feet above sea level, and dominates a plain below, called *Er Ráhah*, which is wide enough to accommodate a host of two million. When the nation assembled there, Moses went up on a ridge of the mountain and God came "down on Mount Sinai in the sight of all the people...Mt. Sinai was covered with smoke, because the Lord descended on it in fire...the whole mountain trembled violently...then Moses spoke and the voice of God answered him" (Ex. 19.11,18,19). The next day, "Moses and Aaron, Nadab and Abihu, and the seventy elders of Israel went up and saw the God of Israel. Under His feet was something like a pavement made of sapphire, clear as the sky itself...the Israelites...saw God, and they ate and drank" (Ex. 24.9-11). Thus, not only did the entire nation see the fiery manifestation and hear the thundering voice of God, but a select 74 witnesses ascended the ridge to view the bodily manifestation of God up close for an extended visit. Afterwards, God was able to say to the frightened Israelites, "You have seen for yourselves that I have spoken to you from heaven..."

This biblical manifestation of God before millions of witnesses contrasts sharply with the supposed divine revelations to Joseph Smith and Mohammed. Joseph Smith's Mormonism and Mohammed's



Islam must be accepted on *blind faith*, because no one but the self-proclaimed prophets saw the appearances of angels, the discovery of the golden plates or the first recitation of the Qur'an. Not so in the case of the revelation to Moses. God gave His revelation to Moses in full view of the entire nation with the express purpose of giving the Israelites a basis for their faith. The Lord had said to Moses, "I am going to come to you in a dense cloud, so that the people will hear me speaking with you and will *always put their trust in you*." In other words, God gave the first five books of the Bible to Moses, and gave them in such a way that the nation of Israel would never doubt that Moses' writings had divine authority.

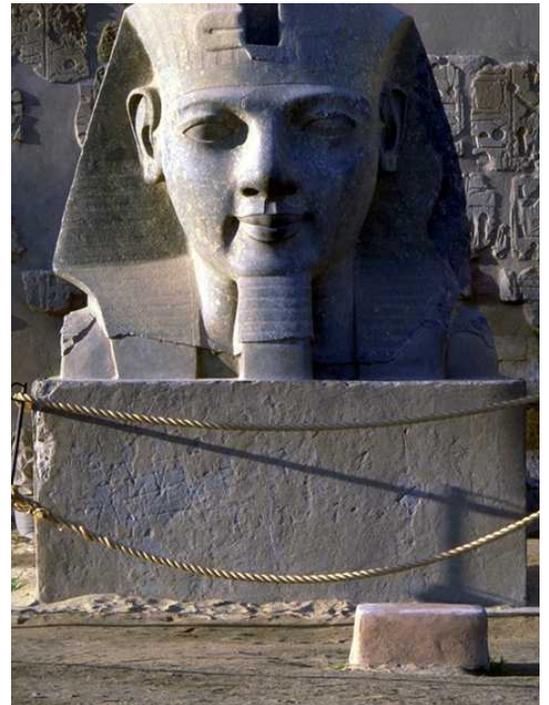
Skepticism Then and Now

This was very important, since the people of that era were as wary of deception as we are. With the growth of skepticism toward religion in our day, the media tends to depict the culture in which Judaism and Christianity were born as naïve and gullible. This assessment is not based on history so much as upon inferences convenient to infidelity. It's true that the late bronze age fostered bizarre beliefs that we consider superstitious today, but that does not mean that its cultures were devoid of critical thinkers. No doubt there were credulous simpletons in the pagan middle east, but there are probably just as many in our own culture watching Carl Sagan today. The ancient peoples of the middle east were quite good at observation and reasoning, as evidenced by their proverbs and their grasp of antithetical truth. They hated to be deceived, as illustrated in the stories of Isaac (Genesis 26.9), Jacob (Gen. 29.25), and Laban (Gen. 31.26), as well as by the 9th commandment (Exodus 20.16). They were not scientific incompetents, but had a well developed technology as proven by the pyramids and their treasures.

They also resisted new religious claims as illustrated by Pharaoh's endless demands for proof before allowing the Israelites to follow their God out of Egypt, and by the Israelite's systematic testing of prophecies (Deuteronomy 18.22). Perhaps the pivotal difference between ancient cultures and ours is that their world-view and their science embraced spiritual realities, and not just the material ones that ours does. The early Semitic peoples demanded evidence for extraordinary propositions, but they knew that spiritual claims as well as material ones could be tested empirically. That is why God's dramatic attestation of the revelation to Moses was so important in establishing the Israelite's confidence in the Pentateuch.

The Pentateuch Test

This utter confidence in the first five books of the Bible served the nation well, because it allowed the Pentateuch to become the ultimate test for any books that followed. All the revelations that came through later prophets had to conform in principle and doctrine to the original five books or be deemed fakes. While God often confirmed the words of the later prophets with miracles, the people had to bear in mind that miracles themselves could be faked. There were only two ways to have absolute confidence in a new revelation: God had to appear in the overwhelming way He did at Mt. Sinai, or the new revelation had to agree with the Mt. Sinai scriptures. A Sinai-class theophany could not be faked, and neither could



as He did at Sinai, the Israelites became accustomed to putting every new teaching or revelation to the litmus test of the Pentateuch. When spiritualism appeared in Israel, for example, and mediums started promoting necromancy as a path to truth, the prophet Isaiah demanded that they be put to the test of the Mosaic revelation: “To the law and to the testimony! If they do not speak according to this word, they have no light...” (Isaiah 8.20).

Objection, Your Honor!

What if all the witnesses died in the wilderness?

Even a skeptic can appreciate the wisdom in God’s plan to safeguard His progressive revelation: God appears before 2 million witnesses and gives them 5 books, His appearance gives those 5 books unquestioned authority, and all books that follow have to conform in principle and doctrine or be rejected. The system should work—unless there’s a break in the chain of witnesses. What if the supposed two million witnesses at Mt. Sinai all conveniently died as they wandered in the wilderness? What if some self-proclaimed prophet just walked out of the desert one day, and made up the whole story of the Exodus and God’s appearance on Mt. Sinai? Thankfully, the Israelite enslavement in Egypt, the Exodus and the subsequent Israelite invasion of Canaan (Palestine) are well established historical facts.¹ The supernatural details of these events are more difficult to corroborate however, and for those we do rely on the witnesses. Sadly many of those witnesses did die as they wandered in the wilderness for forty years. The original army of 600,000 men, aged 20 years and older, were afraid to invade Canaan even after God’s spectacular assurances of victory. Consequently, God sentenced those men to die of hardships in the desert (Numbers 14.26-30). That’s why we owe so much to the teenagers who were at Mt. Sinai. The teenagers at Mt. Sinai were old enough to intelligently observe the Exodus events, including the theophany at the mountain, and young enough to outlive the wilderness wanderings and serve as God’s witnesses to the new generations of Israelites born in Canaan. When the Israelites finally settled in the land that is now Israel, the population included hundreds of thousands of senior citizens who could lucidly corroborate the miracles of the Exodus. The elders of every town and village were people who had seen God descend upon Mt. Sinai and had heard Him give His laws to Moses. Israelite children coming of age in the first several decades after the conquest could ask their parents and grandparents if the things written in the books of Moses had really happened, and their parents and grandparents could reply, “Yes, I saw it all happen with my own eyes.” Any young man concerned that his grandpa was telling tall tales, could walk to the next town and ask any of the old men there the same questions and get the same assurances.

“Yes, I saw it all happen with my own eyes.”



What if the Sinai theophany was just a volcano?

We must admit that something dramatic happened at Sinai, and that the entire nation of Israel saw it and heard it. Isn’t it possible, however, given the biblical description of smoke and fire on the mountain, that the people just witnessed a volcanic eruption and superstitiously attributed it to a divine visitation? After all, Polynesians used to believe that the fire goddess, Pele, inhabited

¹ In ancient times, the divine deliverance from Egypt was so axiomatic that it became the basis of oaths in Israel (Jeremiah 23.7).

the crater of Kilauea Volcano on the island of Hawaii, and caused it to erupt by her jealous rages.

I suppose that one might chalk up the Sinai theophany to volcanic activity if not for two things: first, volcanoes are noisy but they don't speak distinctly, and secondly, the revelation at Sinai was not an isolated event, but came at the climax of a series of divine manifestations. When God spoke from Mt. Sinai to the entire nation assembled on the plain below, they distinctly heard the words recorded in Exodus 20, that we call the Decalogue or the Ten Commandments. The people were so shaken by God's voice and its accompanying unearthly phenomena that they begged Moses, "Speak to us yourself and we will listen. But do not have God speak to us [anymore] or we will die." That was the point at which God relented, and replied, "You have seen for yourselves that I have spoken to you from heaven," now, don't make any other gods! (Cf. Deuteronomy 5.22-29.) Volcanoes don't communicate so well. More importantly, however, we must realize that the Israelites were already well acquainted with God by the time they got to Mt. Sinai. He had already brought down the ten plagues upon the nation of Egypt, plagues that struck down the Egyptians and their possessions, but did not harm the Israelites in their midst. God had already parted the sea at Moses' request. God had miraculously given the road-weary Israelites manna and quail to eat and water from a rock. And from the time they had left Egypt, God had led them in a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of *fire* by night. Volcanic fire doesn't travel like that. No, the Israelites knew very well that there was something more than a whole lot of shaking going on. They knew that they were in the thundering, surround-sound theater of the Living God, and to their joyous surprise, they lived to tell about it. The Exodus survivors corroborated by the hundreds of thousands that God had spoken to them and to Moses.

A Nation's Final Authority

This overwhelming corroboration of the Exodus events and the divine revelation of the Pentateuch entered so profoundly into the Israelite psyche, that the authenticity of these first five books of the Bible was never questioned while Israel remained a nation. Even when the Israelites strayed after other gods, they never denied Moses' authority nor the authenticity of his books. The revelation given at Sinai was held by the Jews to be their ultimate authority, right up until AD 73 when the Roman legions destroyed Israel as a political entity. Thankfully, by then another mountain of evidence had taken its place in history to confirm the revelation on Mt. Sinai for the world at large.

The Pentateuch Prediction

Long before the Roman destruction of Israel, Moses had predicted in the Pentateuch that a Savior would come into the world. This Savior, Moses wrote, would have a prophetic personality like his own, would speak with divine authority, and destroy Satan (Deut. 18.18,19; Genesis 3.15). Furthermore, by the sacrificial system detailed in the Pentateuch, Moses taught that mankind's salvation would come through a substitutionary death (Hebrews 9.22). Moses recorded how he himself, by a prophetic action, had illustrated the defeat of Satan and death by lifting up a symbolic substitute for sin on a wooden pole (John 3.14). Centuries later, when the nation of Israel groaned under the oppression of Rome, the people longed for the Savior that Pentateuch had promised. Suddenly, a motley group of Galileans, visiting Jerusalem for the holidays, began loudly proclaiming that Moses' Messiah had in fact come, atoned for the sins of the world, and victoriously ascended to heaven. The proof of all this, they said, was that this Savior, Jesus of Nazareth, had died and risen back to life.

A Man Raised Himself From The Dead? Yeah, right...

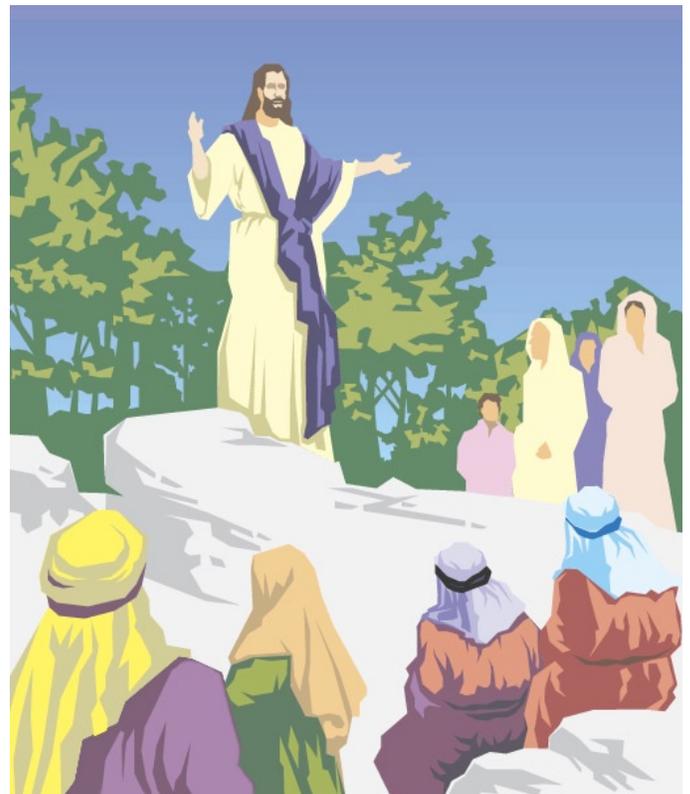
Now suppose that you and I, just for laughs, started a rumor that a man had died, raised *himself* back to life again, and then ascended to heaven. Would anyone listen? Perhaps if we were quite earnest and made sure our stories matched, someone might take us seriously enough to investigate. Then what? We'd have to come up with some kind of proof that our resurrection-man had existed, and had died. Perhaps we could clip out an obituary that roughly

matched our story, but it would have to be one about a missing body. If we obtained such an obituary and claimed that we'd seen this man come back to life, we'd probably be investigated by the local police as the latest ones to have had contact with a missing body. Sooner or later, we'd decide it was time to call off the hoax before we had to hire a lawyer. Perhaps someone would expose our hoax by demonstrating that we had never really seen their dearly departed Uncle Harry. Needless to say, a fraudulent story about a man conquering death is not going to capture the local headlines for very long. The story of the Galilean witnesses, however, has been capturing media attention for the last 2,000 years! What has enabled the story of Jesus Christ of Nazareth to persist for so long?

Consider the differences between the story of Jesus and our fraudulent Uncle Harry story. Jesus was not an obscure figure. Several nations knew of His existence during his lifetime. His three-year, public preaching and healing career stirred up enough controversy that princes, priests and paupers in Judea and the surrounding countries had all heard of Him. Likewise, the representatives of multiple nations witnessed His public execution at Jerusalem. No one had to come up with an obituary; the death of Jesus was public knowledge. To this day, daring pulp writers who claim that Jesus of Nazareth never existed or that He wasn't executed, are not taken seriously by historians. The life of Jesus and his execution under Pontius Pilate are historical facts. But what about the radical part of the story, the part that says he came bodily back to life? How has that claim persisted through history?

The Other Mountain

The answer to this question has a lot to do with the power of Jesus' message (Romans 1.16), but that's not the focus of this article. Our present interest is in the power of overwhelming evidence, and that was the launching pad of the subsequently world-wide belief in Christ's resurrection. Unlike Uncle Harry in our fraudulent story, Jesus didn't disappear immediately after his resurrection. Jesus spent another forty days with His followers, teaching them and assuring them of His personal conquest of death (Acts 1.1-3). Now, if the resurrected Jesus had only appeared to one or two witnesses, His resurrection probably would have been chalked up to the wishful delusions of a couple of grieving friends, and the story would have dropped out of the local news pretty quickly. It's a little harder to refute the witness of hundreds of people though, particularly when over 500 people saw the resurrected Christ *at the same time* (1 Corinthians 15.6)! That's overwhelming evidence for the resurrection of a dead man!



The first people to see Jesus, after his body had lain dead for three days and come back to life, were two women, both named Mary. In that awesome encounter, Jesus said to them, "Go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me" (Matthew 28.10). The Gospel of Matthew tells us that "then the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain where Jesus had told them to go" (28.16). The Gospel writers do not tell us the name of the mountain in Galilee where Jesus appeared to His followers (they probably didn't want a shrine built there), nor do they say explicitly that this is where the multitude saw Him all at once. It's the most likely place mentioned in the Gospels for such an event, however. A mountainside, like a lakeside,

can form a natural amphitheater where many people can see and hear a teacher at once. It was in such a post-resurrection audience that Jesus convincingly taught His followers that everything Moses had written was true, and could be trusted, regardless of popular opinion. Furthermore, as Jesus taught the eleven remaining apostles in the hearing of the fledgling Christian community, He thereby instilled in those first Christians a confidence in what the apostles would soon write. It was the overwhelming testimony of that first Christian community that gave the first-century world confidence in the apostle's message and in the New Testament born from their writings. From that beginning, unbroken generations of Christians have safely carried the intact testimony from the mountain of Galilee down to us. It's no wonder that present-day lawyers, versed in the rules of evidence, appreciate the integrity of the apostolic writings. In his book, *Basic Christianity*, John R. W. Stott quotes one such lawyer, Sir Edward Clarke, K.C.:

As a lawyer I have made a prolonged study of the evidence for the events of the first Easter Day. To me the evidence is conclusive, and over and over again in the High Court I have secured the verdict on evidence not nearly so compelling. Inference follows on evidence, and a truthful witness is always artless and disdains effect. The Gospel evidence for the resurrection is of this class, and as a lawyer I accept it unreservedly as the testimony of truthful men to facts they were able to substantiate.

Indeed, the well-substantiated events at Mt. Sinai and at the other mountain in Galilee provide us with the basis to explicitly trust the Old Testament and the New.

Christian Faith and Cold Reason

Does all of this imply that Christian faith is nothing more than a conclusion arrived at by studying facts with cold reason? Unfortunately not. Reason can lead us to an intellectual assent of the facts, but Christian faith is faith in a person, not just in a set of facts. Christian faith is a relational faith, and it has as much to do with the will as with the intellect. Your intellect may tell you that a tightrope walker can carry you across a chasm, but your will may well keep you from trusting the tightrope walker in practice. So it is with Christian faith. Your intellect may tell you that Jesus is the Son of God who paid the price for your sins with His substitutionary death on the cross, but you may still be unwilling to trust Him with your life and destiny. The intellectual foundation is important, though. As Clark Pinnock has said, "The heart cannot delight in what the mind rejects as false." The dramatic events at Mt. Sinai and at the other mountain in Galilee provide us with mountains of evidence that the writings of Moses and of Christ's apostles are true. If our mind will embrace that proposition, then we can consider taking the next step, which is to delight with our heart in the Person that Moses and the apostles wrote about, Jesus Christ. As one of the witnesses from Galilee wrote, "to all who received [Jesus Christ], to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God" (John 1.12). Ω

Addendum

Three Arenas

For the Quest for Truth

ARENA	THE LAB	HISTORY	THE MIND
EXAMPLES	Math, Technical Experiments	Courtroom Trials, Historical Religions	Mysticism, Some Philosophy
INITIAL OBJECTIVE	PROOF	EVIDENCE	PERSONAL SATISFACTION
FINAL RESULTS	KNOWLEDGE 	INTELLIGENT FAITH 	BLIND FAITH 