

How Can We Know Things About The Past?

Description

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I've been asked how we can know that Jesus really existed. I'll start by addressing how we can know anything about the past since the principles are the same for both issues. Also, while some might want to deny the existence of the historical man Jesus, most wouldn't deny the existence of every historical reality. After we establish the principles by which we can know about the past in general, we'll see that merely applying those principles consistently unavoidably leads to knowing that Jesus really existed.

So, to start: there really was a past. Sure, it's possible to deny it and to say that the entire universe was created just 1 second ago with everything already in motion and every person already having their memories and thought processes, etc. This sort of theory is an evidence-proof theory since there is no piece of evidence that could be produced to prove to a believer in it that it's wrong (they could always explain that evidence as having been created the way it is only 1 second ago), and there's no piece of evidence indicating that it's true. To say that it's evidence-proof isn't a positive thing. It's the same as saying it isn't subject to evidence & it just has no relationship to evidence since it has abandoned evidence altogether. If we abandon the need for evidence, we could believe literally anything imaginable. This would certainly expand your horizons, but it wouldn't get you any closer to truth. It reminds of the saying, "It's good to be open minded, but not so open that your brains fall out!"

Okay, so what if we actually care about evidence? Can we know anything about the past then? Answer: Yes! Absolutely! There are so many examples that could be given to illustrate how we can know about the past, but one that I really like is tree rings. I think it's a great example because everyone knows at least a little about trees, and they illustrate the point so well. You may have never cut a tree down yourself, but you've surely seen a stump. And sometime in your childhood someone probably explained to you that trees grow a new ring each year, so you can count the rings of a stump and know how old the tree was when it was cut down. And this is no myth; it's a well-established fact that you can verify for yourself in a number of different ways. The long way is to plant trees yourself, keep record of when you planted them, then cut them down years later and count the rings. But again! that's the long way & one that needlessly kills trees. Another way is to get a tool called an increment borer and take a core sample from a tree, count the rings, and then come back to the same tree a year later, take another sample, and count the rings again. You'll find there's one more ring. But really, it isn't like this hasn't been studied before. You can just look it up online or read a science book. Humans have learned a lot about trees over the years and the fact that tree rings are produced through annual cycles of growth and thus record the age of a tree is one of the most basic and well-established tree facts.

Now, here's the cool part. Say you cut down a tree, or take a sample from a tree, or even just look at a stump - you can count the rings and immediately know something about the past. Let's say you count 68 rings. You now know something about the past going back decades. You didn't have to be there to gain this knowledge; not at the beginning of the tree's life, nor during the intervening years. You are able to know something about the past just by observing something in the present. This is a key principle. Everything we know about the past is from observations we make in the present. Since the way things currently are has been shaped over time, we are able to learn about the past by studying our present reality. Today, you may walk into a forest that you've never been in before and cut down a tree that you've never before seen and, by counting its rings, you can know about its history over decades.

In fact, there's a lot more you can learn from tree rings than just the age of a tree. If you look at the rings of a tree, you'll notice that not all tree rings are the same. Some are thicker, some are thinner, etc. The nature of a tree ring reflects the growing conditions the tree experienced in that year. Some years are warmer or wetter so the tree was able to grow more and thus have a wider ring while other years may have been colder or drier and the tree would not have been able to grow as much, resulting in a more narrow ring. The result of this is that periods of years leave distinct patterns in tree rings. For example, the years 1989-1994 might leave the pattern: wide, narrow, narrow, narrow, wide, wide, whereas the years 2000-2005 might leave the pattern: narrow, wide, wide, narrow, narrow, wide.

Say you have two living trees beside each other. They are the same species, but one is much larger and thus much older than the other. You take one core sample from each. Let's say the young tree is 25 years old while the older tree is 90 years old. You'll notice that the outermost rings of the older tree match the rings of the younger tree. Obviously, this is because they have both experienced the same conditions over those years, and thus they've produced the same ring patterns. But then let's say you see a stump a few yards away. You count the rings and find it was 40 years old when it was cut down. Next, you get an idea - you decide to compare the ring pattern of this stump with the ring pattern of the 90 year old tree. You find that the 30 outermost rings of the stump match the 30 innermost rings of the tree. This would let you know that the stump is of a tree that started growing 10 years before the 90 year old tree and that it was cut down when the 90 year old tree was 30 years old, which would be 60 years before the time you're making these observations. Notice how by comparing these tree rings, you are able to know the exact years of the life of a tree that was cut down 60 years ago. And really, this is just scratching the surface of tree ring knowledge. There's a whole field of science devoted to dating via tree rings. It's called dendrochronology and it has established unbroken lines of tree ring patterns extending back thousands of years. Who would have thought there is so much we can know about the past just by looking at tree rings?

And, of course, this is just one way among many to learn something about the past. Another is language. Have you ever noticed that kids today talk and write differently than kids did 20 years ago, or 20 years before that? Yeah, language changes over time and it's possible to trace these changes. If you know enough about the development of English, for example, and then you come across a writing that you've never seen before, you can probably tell just by the language at least what century it came from. There's also clothing styles changing decade by decade, century upon century, and art, and pottery, and literature, and architecture, and the list goes on. The fact is things change over time and it's possible to trace an incredible amount of these

changes. We thus have many independent lines of evidence about the past, but they all paint one harmonious, complex, picture. All the evidence shows us that World War 2 preceded the Cold War and World War 1 preceded World War 2, and the Enlightenment came before that, and the Protestant Reformation before that, and the Dark ages before that, etc. It's as though there's one giant web of interconnected evidence regarding past. It tells the story of world history extending back thousands of years. Every piece of evidence you find has its place, and the better you know the web, the easier it is to place a new piece. In that sense, it's kinda like a puzzle: the more pieces you place, the more you can see the picture as a whole, and the easier it is to place the remaining pieces.

In future posts, we'll explore some of the evidence showing that Jesus was a real historical person who lived in Palestine in the first century CE. Perhaps the most important thing to understand as a foundation for this endeavor is that we have with us in this present moment a multitude of facts that are what they are because of how they have been shaped through their past. The nature of these facts is what tells about the past, and the fact is, some of these present facts inform us of a historical person — Jesus of Nazareth — who walked the streets of Galilee and Judea 2000 years ago teaching about the Kingdom of God.