

Maier's "In the Fullness of Time"

By Rebecca Lee

I am going to write a paper on Paul L. Maier's *In the Fullness of Time: A Historian Looks at Christmas, Easter, and the Early Church*. *In the Fullness of Time* was published in 1997 by Kregel Publications. My aim in writing this paper is threefold. First, I hope to summarize the three sections of Maier's book, and also explain how he proceeds to tell readers about the first Christmas, Easter, and Christians. Next, I will take specific examples from the book and explain how Maier uses secular sources to help readers better understand the Biblical stories that they grew up knowing. Finally, I will tell how the reading of *In the Fullness of Time* has helped me better understand biblical history, how it tested my faith, and how it will help me be a better witness of my faith.

Abstract

Paul Maier's intent in writing this book is to demonstrate how secular history correlates and strengthens the biblical accounts. In his preface, Maier writes: "I hope that these findings will illuminate a story that can never be embellished, but whose details can be fleshed out and clarified by little-known data and fresh insights" (xiii). Maier shows the readers how archeology, linguistics, literature, geography, meteorology, climatology, politics, economics, sociology and many other fields all help us to better understand biblical truths.

In the Fullness of Time is a compilation of Maier's original works: *The First Christmas*, *The First Easter*, and *The First Christians*. *The First Christmas* starts out by describing the politics and land at the time of the announcement of Jesus' birth. Maier

then goes into depth about the actual date and place of the “First Christmas.” Next, the reader is shown what history says about the shepherds, the Magi, the great star, the evil King Herod, and the journeys that Mary, Joseph, and baby Jesus had to take. Maier finishes off the first section of his trilogy by giving deeper insights into Joseph, Mary, and the newborn Son of God.

The First Easter starts out by introducing the reader to Jesus’ ministry. Then the reader walks along with Jesus through his betrayal, arrest, and hearings. Maier then delves into Jesus’ death and resurrection. In the last two chapters of his second book, Maier gives examples of common doubts and skepticism about Jesus’ resurrection, and then he proceeds to refute this criticism with strong evidence.

The final book entitled *The First Christians* recounts Pentecost and the spread of Christianity. Maier discusses the spread of the Word to the apostles (through the Great Commission), to Jerusalem (through Pentecost), and to Samaria (through the Dispersion.) The final chapters of the book tell about the work of some of Christianity’s greatest missionaries: namely Peter, Paul, and many others who helped the early spread of the Word.

Analysis

Throughout his book, Maier gives many concrete examples from ancient history and archeological findings that help to prove the validity of the Bible. I will now choose a few specific examples, and evaluate how Maier goes about proving biblical accounts using secular truths. The following examples are not the only convincing arguments that

Maier has, they just happen to cover subjects that jumped out at me as being particularly fascinating.

Many liberal theologians and non-Christians doubt that Mary and Joseph ever had to travel from Nazareth to Bethlehem the town of David. They claim that Luke, who gives the account of the journey, must have stretched the truth. Some believe that Rome never required its people to return to their original homelands for such a census. “But this view has been disproved by the discovery of a Roman census edict from 104 AD in neighboring Egypt, in which taxpayers who were living elsewhere were ordered to return to their original homes for registration” (4). If citizens of Egypt were required to make such journeys, it is not hard to believe that Mary and Joseph also had to make such a voyage.

Another common taunt against Christianity is that if Jesus was such a great man, why does his name not appear in sources outside of the Bible? Maier teaches us that there are pieces of literature, besides the Bible, that do talk about Jesus. Maier makes a point that Roman authors such as Tacitus, Suetonius, Pliny, and Jewish historian Josephus, all make references to Jesus that correlate with what the Bible says.

Maier helps the reader to refute unbelievers who accuse the writers of the Bible of inventing fanciful tales and writing them down as truths. For example, some believe that the story of Passion Week is just a legend with made up characters. A discovery made less than eleven years ago helps us prove that the personalities and events of Passion Week are authentic. In November 1990, there was a discovery of an ossuary bearing the name of “Joseph, son of Caiaphas.” Inside were the first remains ever discovered of a

biblical personality. How could the people in the story of Passion Week be fictitious if we have discovered bones of one of the key players in Jesus' trials?

Many critics have challenged the figures in *Acts* that describe the growth of the early Christian church. They say that it is not possible for a movement of 120 followers to grow to having over 8000 followers in just a short amount of time, as Luke records these facts. Evidence from a purely pagan source, helps Christians to prove the validity of Luke's statistics. Cornelius Tacitus, one of Rome's most respected historians, wrote the following statement in 64 AD:

. . . . The originator of the name, Christus, had been executed in the reign of Tiberius by the governor of Judea, Pontius Pilot. . . . First, the self-acknowledged members of the sect were arrested. Then, on their information, a vast multitude was condemned. . . (219).

Maier goes on to use this evidence to prove that Luke's figures in *Acts* are legitimate by stating that there had to be a great religious explosion in Jerusalem, for there to be a "vast multitude" of Christians available for persecution only thirty-one years later in Rome. The spread of Christianity had to have the incredible ignition described by Luke for there to be a "vast multitude" of Christians in a town that was 1,500 miles from where Pentecost took place. These facts help Christians to prove to a non-believer that the apostles who recorded the accounts of the early church were not just merely creating imaginative stories, but were instead recording the truth.

Maier does a great job of showing the reader how God, through Christianity, took on the Roman Empire, the mightiest force on earth at the time. Maier is also very good at making the transition from this fact to the fact that Christianity, still today, can defeat the mightiest force in the world today – unbelief. In my opinion, Maier does a very fine job

of carrying out his objective of demonstrating how secular history correlates and strengthens the biblical accounts.

Application

Reading *In the Fullness of Time* has really increased my understanding of biblical history. I learned many new bits of information about Jesus' life that I never knew before. Since these bits of information are not found in the Bible, I know that they are not all 100 percent reliable, and that they are not important when it comes to my salvation. However, these little-known facts are very beneficial in that they help me to understand what was happening at the time of the biblical stories that I learned as a little child. Using the archeological findings and other pieces of ancient history that Maier points out has helped me to feel like I understand the "why's" and "how's" of the Christmas and Easter stories.

Reading this book has actually turned out to be a test of my faith. I say that because some of the opposing viewpoints that were brought to light seemed somewhat believable to me, since I too am a sinner. I also did not enjoy hearing that some of the Gospel accounts do not match up exactly. In a sense, I felt that I had more of a child-like faith before reading this book. However, I realize that to be able to help refute criticism of God's Word, I need to know what attacks are being made against it. I am very glad that I read this book because it has helped me to know the non-believer's side of the story, so that I can fight back. Maier did a very good job of giving historical proof to refute false accusations against the infallibility of Scripture. In the end, however, I do not

think that any human logic can convince someone to believe in the truths of the Bible. This can only be done by faith alone.

In conclusion, I am very glad that I was asked to read *In the Fullness of Time* for New Testament Survey class. It was a very enjoyable book to read and it was also very educational. I feel that I am better equipped to face a world of unbelievers, now that I have some concrete logic to use against their skepticism. As I said earlier, only faith can bring someone to God, however, in a world that wants to see proof, it is a good that I now can show others how history also proves the validity of the Bible. Maier does a great job of taking three major events in the history of the Christian church, and showing the reader how God had it arranged that they would all occur “in the fullness of time.”