

Render Unto Caesar

By Bob Manning

It was a brisk spring day and the mist had lifted from the mountains around Lake Geneva. I had visited the Reformation Wall with its carvings of the great protestant reformers and had climbed the seemingly endless spiral staircase which took me up into the clouds, to the pinnacle of St Peters Cathedral, where Calvin had preached.

It was a Sunday and I was just wandering around enjoying a brief respite from a schedule of meetings and company visits. I walked over to a small footbridge and noticed a plaque, green oxides etched across its face. Inscribed in three languages were the words, *Julius Caesar Crossed the Rhone here on his way to the Gallic War in 58 BC*. And I still get goose bumps today when I think that I was standing on ground that had once been shaken by the tread of thousands of helmeted Roman soldiers. Caesar's own accounts of his conquests in ancient Gaul (*Commentaries of the Gallic War*) are still revered today as an historical, political and military masterpiece and here was I standing on the very spot where some of the action had taken place.

And you know – no one ever questions the historicity – the historical actuality – of what is described in this text, which among other things, has become a text book for Latin scholars down through the centuries – even I studied it at high school. *Caesar's Gallic War* is accepted without question as:

- The genuine writings of Julius Caesar
- A true account of what took place

Scholars refer to this as the *historicity* of the document – its historical integrity

Thucydides was also a soldier politician and historian. He lived 500 years before Julius Caesar – in ancient Greece – and in eight volumes he describes the military and political struggles he witnessed during what historians call *The Peloponnesian Wars* (between Sparta and Athens). This work also has been widely influential. It is for example, still required reading at the *US Naval War College* in Rhode Island, and is even credited with providing a template for the development of Biblical chronology during the Reformation.

And the historicity of *Thucydides* is not for a moment questioned by mainstream historical academia, even though the events it describes took place two and a half thousand years ago.

And then we come to the New Testament, a set of writings whose historicity has been called into question almost continually over the past one hundred years. What would devotees of *Caesar's Gallic War* or *Thucydides*, make of the New Testament, as a record of events it claims to be describing? Would they take it seriously as an historical document? Would they say it was the work of amateur fraudsters? Or the outpourings of people traumatised by grief and disappointment, describing what they thought *should* have been? Or would they rank it up there with *Caesar* and *Thucydides*?

One of the critical tests that scholars use to establish the historicity of ancient texts is a ranking process against two criteria.

- The time elapsed between the original and the earliest known manuscript
- The number of these early manuscripts known to exist.

Now these are the hurdles set by the world of academia – they are not part of some Christian doctrine. But let's use the world's measuring stick anyhow to test our scriptures. This is how such a grid would look:

Documents	Number of Manuscripts	Earliest date from Original
	High = Strong	Low = Strong
Caesar's Gallic Wars	9	900 Yrs
History of Thucydides	8	1300 Yrs
New Testament	4000	350 Yrs

Isn't it strange that unlike the New Testament, the historicity of *Caesar* and *Thucydides* is never questioned? And even though the New Testament documents test far more strongly, scholars both inside and outside the Church, have been trying to tear it apart for the past hundred years.

I apologise if this feels like a classroom exercise, but it is important for us to have a robust answer to the question, *Can I believe what is written in the Bible?* One final point and we are done.

The most subtle challenge to the Scriptures, comes from within the church itself. Some scholars tell us, "*Well of course the scriptures are the genuine article, but the events and narratives ought not to be taken literally, they are really illustrations whereby we are afforded insight into some higher spiritual truth*".

Now I know that we can not base a doctrine on one proof text, and I would not encourage you to do so. But I will share with you my own personal response to that line of teaching.

John concludes his Gospel with the words "*Jesus did many other things as well*" (John 21:25). John is telling us quite unambiguously that Jesus actually *did* the things he described in his Gospel – it is a literal account. And in the previous chapter, John tells us the purposes of his narratives "*Jesus performed many other signs....which are not written in this book. But these things are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God and that believing you may have life in his name*" (John 20:30-31). Now if John has lied to us about Jesus actually doing the things attributed to Him, then what else might he have lied about? This is risky territory.

So *can we believe what is written in the Bible?* I do – and I hope that what I have written here may be of some assistance to you if ever you find yourself grappling with this same question.