

## The Reliability of the Gospels - 3

# Evidence from Archaeology

One method for confirming the reliability of the gospel accounts is to compare them with archaeology. Surely, we can simply look at the gospels, find a corresponding archaeological dig and compare the two.

Sadly, it isn't as simple as this, particularly as many incidents in the gospels would leave no trace. The feeding of the five thousand, for example, would leave only footprints and crumbs, and these would not be preserved for archaeologists to discover. Archaeology finds the remains of buildings and inscriptions. Unless an event is commemorated in an inscription it is unlikely that any traces would be preserved (the one exception is a battle where one might find arrowheads – but there are no battles in the New Testament).

### Consistent Evidence

However, there are elements of the Gospels that can be confirmed or discredited by archaeology. There are accounts which give a good description of some place where an event took place, there are references to known individuals and there are descriptions of customs and lifestyle at the time of Jesus. This brings a second problem, which is that archaeologists have not yet discovered everything that could be found and some things never will be found.

Nevertheless, Israel is one of the most excavated countries in the world, and there is a considerable amount of evidence from the time of Jesus. What is interesting is that none of it contra-

dicts the Bible picture; everything found so far confirms the idea that the Gospels are accurate records. As one scholar has said: *“The critics of the 19th century have been completely overturned by the archaeologists of the 20th century”*.

### Real Places

Let's look at some examples. The first is a place mentioned in the Gospel of John which has been found by archaeologists.

*Now there is in Jerusalem by the Sheep Gate a pool, in Aramaic called Bethesda, which has five roofed colonnades (John 5:2).*

This is part of a passage which describes a healing miracle that Jesus carried out near this pool. The description of the pool is very similar to that of pagan healing sanctuaries dedicated to the Greek god Asclepius. In the nineteenth century critics used to hold this up to ridicule as a major error made by John. After all, who would build a pagan healing sanctuary right next to the temple in Jerusalem? Then the pool was found. It has been excavated several times, and the solid conclusion is that it was a healing sanctuary with five colonnades.

The critics held onto their theory for a long time. Through the first half of the twentieth century commentaries on John's gospel were written which indicated the supposed allegorical meaning of the building and assured the reader that the place never really

existed. For a whole century after the discovery of the remains by archaeologists, the sceptical critics continued to ignore the evidence and declare that the Gospels were wrong. Most scholars at last accept the very close correspondence between the New Testament and the archaeology of the period, but many sceptics still use the writings of the earlier critics in an attempt to attack Christianity.

It is notable that John's Gospel mentions a wide range of places in Jerusalem, places like Gabbatha or Lithostratos (John 19:13), Golgotha (John 19:17), the pool of Siloam (John 9:7,11) and the Temple precincts (e.g. John 10:23). These have all been found by archaeologists.

## Real Lives

Some of the people in the Gospels are also known from archaeology. An inscription in Caesarea records the dedication of a temple to the Emperor Tiberius by Pontius Pilate the governor. An ossuary (a box containing the bones of dead people) found in Jerusalem belonged to Caiaphas, the High Priest, and probably contained his bones, along with bones from other members of his family. The tomb of Herod the Great, king at the time of Jesus' birth has also been found, but so far his coffin has not been discovered.

But the most striking results of archaeology are the illumination of tiny points of lifestyle. For example, consider the miracle of turning of water into wine in Cana.

*Now there were six stone water jars there for the Jewish rites of purification, each holding twenty or thirty gallons (John 2:6).*



The significant point here is an incidental detail: the water jars were made of stone. This was not common practice in the ancient world. Water jars were overwhelmingly made of earthenware. However, in Judea and Galilee this was not the case. Under the Law of Moses, if an earthenware jar became unclean it could not be used again and had to be broken; a stone jar only had to be washed clean and could then be used again. Thus stone jars were used instead. This fact is clear from excavations in Judea and Galilee; here alone jars were made of stone. The details of the Gospels are correct.

This is important because the Jewish War of 66–73 AD destroyed the communities in Judea and Galilee. After 70 AD the inhabitants were Gentiles who did not speak Aramaic and did not follow the Jewish law. The lifestyle changed and nothing of the old way of life was remembered. The details of life are recorded accurately in spite of this.

The correspondence between archaeology and the Gospels is startlingly good. It tells us that the Gospel writers had an accurate knowledge of life and events in Judea and Galilee at the time of Jesus, and that they wrote those details into their records. This is good evidence for the reliability of the Gospels.

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