

The Reliability of the Gospels - 9

'Irrelevant' Details

The Gospels contain many specific pieces of information which would be hard to invent, but which would be easy for early readers to check for accuracy. This leads us towards the conclusion that the Gospels were not invented. Certainly, the 'apocryphal Gospels' (those not in the standard New Testament, which were added later) do not have this kind of tiny detail.

And here's another reason why those details, and even whole accounts in the gospels, were not invented: There would have been no reason to invent them!

Invented for a Purpose?

The critics of the 19th and early 20th Centuries asserted that the Gospels were written in the Second Century by communities within the early church, and that the accounts in them were invented to meet the needs of the community then. These theories came tumbling down when archaeologists showed the extreme accuracy of the descriptions in the Gospels, and scholars discovered very early manuscripts of them. But there is another reason for rejecting this idea, which is that the Gospels are clearly not written to reflect the agenda of the early church.

We know what were the main issues in the early church, because we have letters which discuss those subjects. The main concerns in the early church included (among other things): the relationship between Christians from Jewish and pagan backgrounds; the connection between faith and works in

salvation; understanding the return of Jesus and the final resurrection; problems of disunity within the church; eating food which had been offered to idols; and the authority of the Apostles.



These issues are not tackled in the gospels at all, so why invent incidents and teachings that would have no relevance to future controversies? They weren't invented; the detailed accounts are just what happened.

Inconvenient Truths

We can go even further. The Gospels not only contain information which was irrelevant to the early church, they contain material which the early church would have found difficult to understand or even controversial. There are accounts in the Gospels which would have been counter-productive as far as the the early church was concerned. These would never be included in invented accounts.

❖ *"Why do you call me good? No one is good except God alone" (Mark 10:18).* Here Jesus is clearly

denying the claim to be good. This is not difficult to explain – he was, after all, tempted to sin – but it needs explaining. The opponents of Jesus would find this to be convenient ammunition to throw at Christians. There would be no reason to include it in the Gospel unless the saying, and the events around it, really happened.

- ❖ *“And he did not do many mighty works there, because of their unbelief” (Matthew 13:58).* This admits that Jesus felt restricted by his hearers’ lack of faith.
- ❖ *“For not even his brothers believed in him” (John 7:5).* This admits that Jesus did not convince his brothers that he spoke from God.

The presence of passages like these can only be explained if those accounts are an accurate representation of what actually happened. No disciple would invent them; they are potentially counter-productive to the message of the Gospel.

Personal Challenges

On top of this, there are passages which would have been embarrassing to major figures in the early church. For example, the disciples failed to understand that Jesus would rise from the dead (e.g. Mark 9:32) and they squabbled among themselves (e.g. Matthew 20:23–24).

We have already seen that Jesus’ brothers didn’t believe in him during his ministry (John 7:5). This would have been a problem for James, who became the leader of the council of

Apostles and thus the most senior figure in the early church. The only reason that one might include something like this is because it was true – it really happened.

Similarly, all the Gospels contain descriptions of the failings of Peter. Peter argued with Jesus about predictions of Jesus’ death and resurrection and consequently received a severe rebuke from him (Matthew 16:21–23). Indeed, while Jesus was being examined by the Jerusalem authorities after his arrest, Peter denied that he had been one of his disciples (Luke 22:54–60).

These are not minor things. They would very definitely not bring credit to the Apostles. Yet they are in the text. The only reason that one can imagine that the Apostles would allow such statements to stand in the Gospels is that they contain accurate accounts of things that actually occurred.

The Gospels weren’t invented to meet the needs of the early church. They were written to provide a reliable record of events that actually happened. They are honest to the point where they criticise the important people in the early church, and to the point where they include events and statements which would have been irrelevant to the early Christian community or even embarrassing to it.

The Gospels are honest and reliable records.

For more evidence about the reliability of the Bible records, and the Gospels in particular, visit:

www.biblethink.org.uk

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