

The Reliability of the Gospels - 1

Introduction

Consider these two views about the Gospels.

- ❖ They are eyewitness documents written by people who were there at the time and who gave an accurate account of what they saw and heard, or
- ❖ They are documents written long after the event by a group of people who had only a vague idea of what had happened but who used their imagination, and those of other people, to produce an essentially fictional account.

Traditionally the Gospels were viewed as very accurate eyewitness records. However, in the 19th century, sceptical scholars theorised that they were written in the second century by communities of Christians after they had been passed on through generations of oral transmission. They claimed the records were altered by the community that passed them on and sometimes were completely invented.

This critical idea was not based on evidence, but on supposition. Nevertheless, it has proved attractive to modern sceptics, and is often found in popular culture and even among some academic scholars.

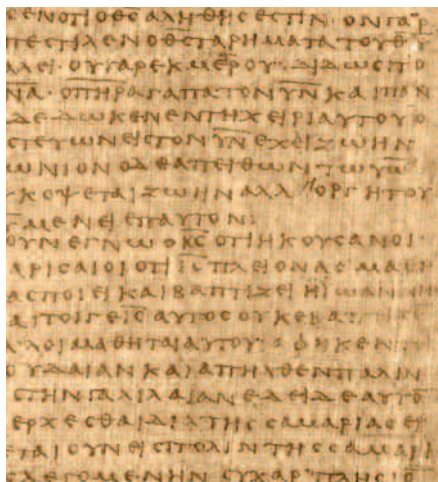
The evidence points in a quite different direction. This series of articles examines the evidence and will lead to the conclusion that the Gospels are, indeed, eyewitness records which give a very reliable and accurate record of what Jesus did and said.

External Evidence

Let's think about what kind of evidence exists. There is direct evidence of accuracy which comes from making a comparison of the accounts in the Gospels with evidence gathered from external sources. One can compare the details of places, people, events and customs written in the Gospels with what archaeologists have excavated. One can also compare the language in which the Gospels are written with what one knows of the place and time where the events took place. This kind of evidence is known as external evidence.

Internal Evidence

There is also internal evidence, which comes from the text of the Gospels themselves. This helps us to identify whether they are just fictitious inventions or genuine eyewitness accounts.



Fictional accounts tend to have particular characteristics which are not shared with eyewitness evidence. In fictional accounts there are few details and those details which exist usually have a direct bearing on the main plot and characters in the narrative. Eyewitness accounts tend to be detailed and to contain incidental details.

Topical, Honest Content

Accounts which were made up by the early Christian community would be expected to deal with the topics that the early church considered important; they would not deal with out-of-date issues. Of course we know what was of interest in the early church from the letters of Paul, Peter, James, John and Jude; later we have the writings of other early church leaders. It is interesting that these are very different from the words and teaching of Jesus.

Fictional accounts made up in communities founded by the Apostles, which produced traditions based on their memory, would have a certain bias. No matter how garbled, they would not contain material which showed these Apostles in a bad light. The denials of Peter, the constant bickering of the disciples and their failure to understand Jesus' teaching would hardly have appeared in a fictional account.

Undesigned Coincidences

Sometimes, insignificant details included in one account match insignificant details in other accounts, to show some fact which is incidental to the real narrative. This is described as an "undesigned coincidence". Undesigned coincidences are very difficult to invent, even in the work of a single

writer. They are features of detailed and accurate accounts of real-life events such as court proceedings or detailed diaries. The Gospels contain these in great quantity (and they are found throughout the rest of the Bible as well).

Eyewitness Accounts

It is clear that the real Gospels really are eyewitness accounts. In general, they contain detailed accounts, although there are places where a sequence of events is summarised for brevity rather than recounted in detail. They contain details which are not part of the main narrative and sometimes they are critical of the Apostles or contain statements which would have been completely irrelevant in the early church.

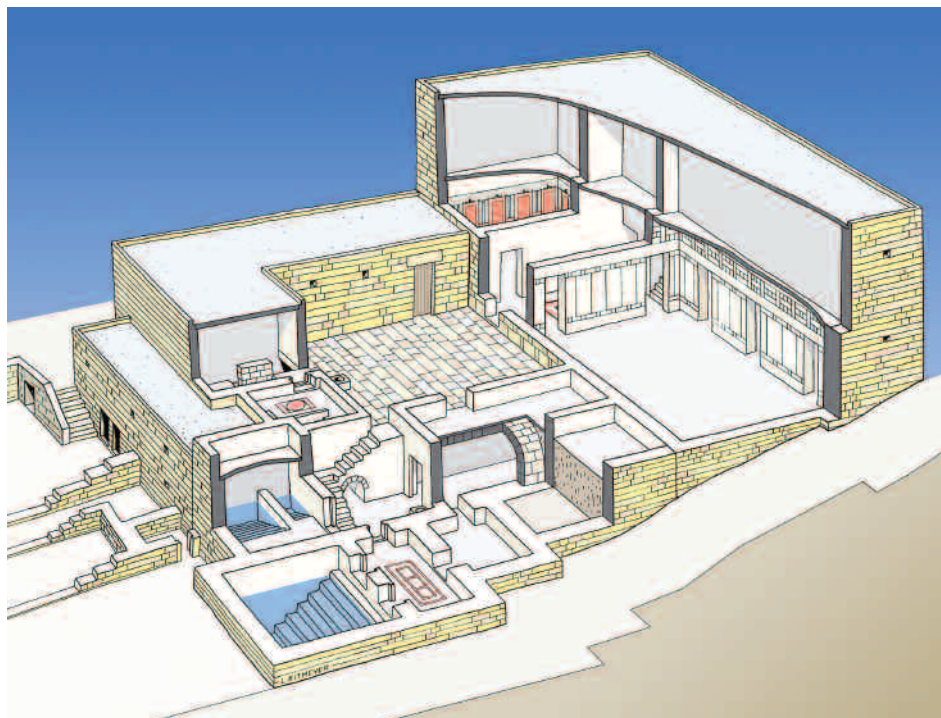
These are hallmarks of eyewitness accounts and are very unlikely things to find in fictionalised or traditional accounts. Coupled with the external evidence, internal evidence that the Gospels are factual is very strong.

A Worked Example

After his arrest Jesus was taken to the house of Caiaphas the high priest (*Matthew 26:57; Mark 14:53*). Peter also went into the house and remained in the courtyard, where he denied that he had known Jesus.

Now as Peter was below in the courtyard, one of the servant girls of the high priest came. And when she saw Peter warming himself, she looked at him and said, "You also were with Jesus of Nazareth" (Mark 14:66, 67).

This account contains several items of evidence. The fact that Peter was



Plan of palatial mansion, Jerusalem (1st Century).
Courtesy of Ritmeyer Archaeological Design: <http://store.ritmeyer.com>

below in the courtyard suggests that Jesus was upstairs. We know from elsewhere in the Gospel that the room he was in contained various priests and scribes, some guards and potential witnesses. This suggests it was a large upper guestroom.

The room in which the Last Supper was held was also a large upper guestroom (*Mark 14:15; Luke 22:12*). This shows an unmentioned detail of the architecture of the houses of wealthy men in Jerusalem at the time of Jesus; they tended to have large upstairs guestrooms. The correspondence of this tiny detail is an undesigned coincidence, and it is confirmed by archaeology. Various houses from the period, excavated in Jerusalem, had

large upstairs rooms. You can see this in the detailed diagram above.

The denial of Jesus by Peter is a narrative which would have been embarrassing to Peter, the Apostle most closely associated with Mark's Gospel. It is unlikely that this would have been allowed to stand in a fictional account; it is only there because it really happened.

Thus we have several reasons for accepting the reliability of these two verses in the Gospel of Mark (and of course the parallel verses in other Gospels). And there is much, much more.

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