

The Reliability of the Gospels - 8

Specifics: Time, Place, Person

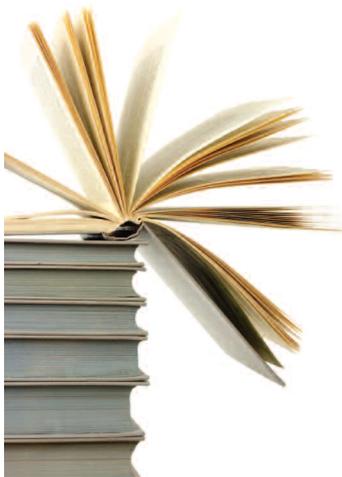
The reliability of the Gospels is important to real Christianity, because the Gospels are the main source from which we can learn about the teaching of Jesus and the events of his life.

The external evidence of archaeology, linguistic fossils, undesigned coincidences and the analysis of the names used in the New Testament are all good witnesses to the reliability and accuracy of the Gospel records. In the previous article we saw that the Gospels were written early, in the living memory of many eyewitnesses both friendly and hostile.

To this we can add the internal evidence of specific times, places and people.

If it Were Fiction

There are two possible ways that one might write a Gospel. Either the Gospels are the records of eyewitnesses or they are fictional accounts. If



someone is trying to write a fictional account and pass it off as eyewitness testimony, then it would be prudent to avoid detail in one's descriptions of people, places or events. Readers might well know the people or places better than the writer, and might actually have been present at the time that the event is supposed to have taken place.

This would mean that the account would be exposed as inaccurate or incorrect, and the credibility of the Gospel would be completely undermined.

Additionally, people writing fictional accounts tend not to include irrelevant material. If one were making up a story about a football match it is unlikely that one would include the fact that the referee received a call from his son on his mobile phone in the interval, or that one of the news cameramen was wearing odd socks.

These might be noticed by someone writing a factual account, but it would be unlikely that such details would be invented. In fictional accounts, people like to write such that there are no loose ends.

In the Detail

The accounts in the Gospels and Acts are full of apparently inconsequential details. For example, the description of John the Baptist tells us that:

Now John himself was clothed in camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist; and his food was locusts and wild honey (Matthew 3:4).

This is not a part of the story; if one leaves it out the account is essentially unchanged. However, the details might have been noticed by someone who had actually seen John. If they were invented, then the person would notice the fact.

Zacchaeus climbed a sycamore tree (Luke 19:4); there was no need to specify the kind of tree and someone who knew Jericho well might know whether the road in that area had any sycamore trees near it.

At the miracle where Jesus turned water into wine, John tells us that there were “six stone water jars” (John 2:6). This level of detail was unnecessary, but it is included.

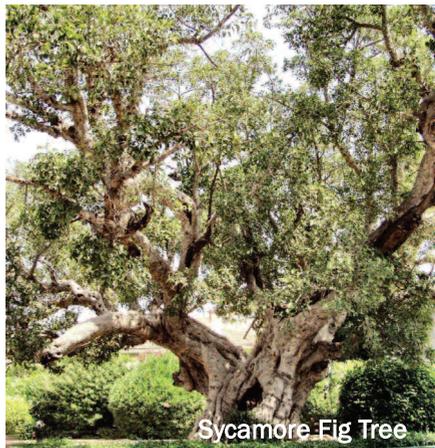
No Contradictions

The account of the raising of the widow of Nain’s son gives a very strong set of details. Luke 7:11 tells us that the miracle took place in a named town, the town of Nain. Verse 12 adds to this by telling us that Jesus performed the miracle near the city gate, and that it was at a funeral. This identifies a very specific place and time. The people of the city would have remembered whether a miracle took place at a funeral or not, and would have said so, loudly, when they read the Gospel.

Finally, we read that the event was newsworthy:

And this report about him went throughout all Judea and all the surrounding region (Luke 7:17).

The point here is that the number of people who would have heard of the miracle was very great. This was an event that would have been known of by hundreds or thousands of people, at least in outline.



All that a sceptical reader would have needed to do in order to discover whether the miracle had really happened as it was described in the Gospel would have been to find an inhabitant of Galilee or Judea at about the right time and ask whether they had heard of it. If two or three people all said that they had never heard of the event, then there would be considerable doubt as to whether it had ever happened. If people from Nain said that the miracle had never occurred, then the Gospel would be completely discredited.

Reliable Records

The point about the Gospels is that there are many tests for accuracy. Besides the external tests of archaeology, linguistic fossils and the frequencies of names, there are internal tests such as the presence of detail in the text, much of it irrelevant. The evidence fits together to show that the Gospels really are the reliable accounts of eyewitnesses.

John Thorpe