

The Reliability of the Gospels - 6

Names

The reliability of the Gospels is vitally important to real Christianity. If the Gospels are a reliable record of the words and deeds of Jesus, then we can trust that teaching. If they are not, then we have very little idea of who Jesus really was, and what he said.

In this series, we have seen that the finds of archaeology and the linguistic features of the Gospels are consistent with the factual accuracy of the Gospels. We looked at undesigned coincidences and found that even tiny details have been preserved accurately in the Gospels. This article is about another check based on the frequency of use of different names in the New Testament.

Name Changes

The names we choose for our children change with time and place. In 2014 the most popular names given to newly born boys in England included Oliver, Jack and Henry. In 1914 the names Arthur, Frederick and Albert were popular; these names are far less popular in the modern day. The same is true for baby girls. None of the ten most popular girls' names in 1914 is in the top ten names for 2014. Names like Elsie, Edith, Doris and Florence are hardly used in modern-day England.

Not only does the popularity of names change from decade to decade, it changes from place to place. The most popular names in Wales are slightly different from those in England, for example.

The same thing was true in the ancient world. We can gain an idea of

the frequency with which different names were used by looking at ancient literature and the inscriptions in tombs.



The Israeli scholar Tal Ilan has produced a database of the names of Jewish people in the Roman Empire between 330 BC and 200 AD. In 2006 the British scholar Richard Bauckham published a digest of this data in his book "Jesus and the Eyewitnesses". Ilan's database for Judea, Samaria and Galilee uses inscriptions in tombs, Jewish literature, the Dead Sea Scrolls, the works of Flavius Josephus and the New Testament as sources. In total some 2,600 individuals were identified, sharing 447 different names. The top ten names are listed in the table opposite.

Rank	Name in New Testament	English Form	Total frequency	In the Gospels and Acts
1	Simon/Simeon	Simon	243	8
2	Joseph/Joses	Joseph	218	6
3	Lazarus/Eleazar	Lazarus	166	1
4	Judas/Judah	Judas	164	5
5	Yohanan/John	John	122	5
6	Jesus/Joshua	Jesus	99	2
7	Hananiah/Ananias	Ananias	82	2
8	Jonathan	Jonathan	71	–
9	Matthias/Matthew	Matthew	62	2
10	Menahem/Manaen	Manaen	42	1

In Gospel Times

The most commonly used Jewish name in the time of Jesus was Simon. 243 people with the name Simon or Simeon appear in all the sources put together, and eight in the New Testament (excluding Simon the Sorcerer who was a Samaritan and possibly a non-Jew).

The frequency of use of names in the New Testament approximately follows the frequency of names used in general. The correspondence is not exact; we would not expect it to be so and if it had been exact we might suspect a deliberate pattern. The correspondence is what we would expect for an essentially random selection of names from those in the area at the time.

Why This Matters

The point here is that there are two possible models for the writing of the Gospels. Either they were written by eyewitnesses to the events they describe, and with considerable accuracy, or they were written much later by people who used literary imagination to fill out the narrative handed down by

tradition (or even invented episodes completely). The point is that if the stories were invented, or not handed down accurately, then we would not expect the names of people in them to have a representative distribution.

The Gospels were mainly written in the Greek-speaking areas of the Roman Empire. The frequencies of names in those areas were quite different from the frequencies in Palestine. A comparison of the frequencies of names in the New Testament with those used in Egypt, for example, shows no match.

Further Evidence

But there is more evidence. Where a name was in frequent use, there is a need to identify different people with the same name from one another. There are several ways of doing this.

Sometimes the name of the father was used, so we have Simon bar Jonas, or Simon “son of Jonas” (John 21:15–16). Sometimes a nickname was used, so Simon the disciple was known as Simon Peter (Matthew 4:18). Sometimes the place from which they came is used – the man called Simon who carried Jesus’

cross is referred to as Simon of Cyrene (Matthew 27:32).

In the Gospels, the people with common names tend to have these extra identifiers while those with rarer names did not. Jesus was a common name in Israel (the sixth most popular name); Jesus is therefore known as Jesus of Nazareth. But in Nazareth he is not identified in this way. Everyone in Nazareth called Jesus, and there would be quite a few of these, was Jesus of Nazareth. So in that town Jesus is known as “the carpenter’s son” (Matthew 13:55) or “the carpenter” (Mark 6:3).

The way that names are used in the Gospels gives great confidence in the accuracy of the record. The names in the area covered by the Gospels had different frequencies from names in other parts of the Roman Empire. The name of the Jewish people in the Gospels has exactly the correct profile for Judea and Galilee between 1 and 70 AD.

Names are often difficult to remember; we all know of occasions where we have forgotten the name of someone we know quite well, and there are films and television programmes which we enjoyed, and where we could repeat the plot in considerable detail, but where we have forgotten the names of even the principal characters. The fact that the names are correct in the Gospels shows that they were not invented later on, and are not the result of a long chain of verbal tradition.

What we have in the Gospels is an accurate record of events that really happened.

John Thorpe

God’s Way – Or Ours?

God brought His people from
Egypt
To be a people unto Him,
From a hopeless situation
And a future dark and dim.

For they were a wayward people
With a flesh so prone to sin,
Many times they overcame it,
Many times they did give in.

Despite this, God forgave them,
His forgiveness always nigh,
For He sought only to save them,
Not willing that any should die.

This story is the same for us:
God’s way, or ours? Let’s decide.
Learn the lessons in His word,
And strive to stay by God’s side.

Peggy Rawson

