

The Reliability of the Gospels - 11

Conclusion: Reliable Records

In this series, we have seen considerable evidence that the Gospels are a reliable record of the events that they describe. This evidence was broken into two main kinds, internal and external. The internal evidence relies on nothing outside the Bible, but can be seen entirely from the text itself. The external evidence involves comparing the Gospel records with the records of archaeology, ancient writers and other material from the time of the Gospels.

External Evidence

Among the external evidence was the following:

Archaeology and History: The detail of daily life, the times, places and sometimes people which appear in the Gospel narratives can be matched with details of the same things discovered by archaeologists or contained in ancient writings. Some refer to the minutiae of life: stone water jars (John) and tiled roofs (Luke). Others involve an understanding of the working of government in the Roman empire, details of geography or the names of prominent men. The Gospels show both kinds of evidence in considerable quantity.

Linguistic Fossils: The Gospels contain a number of Aramaic phrases, and Aramaic or Hebrew forms are often present in the Greek in which the Gospels were written. It would be virtually impossible for someone living in the Gentile world, which after 70 AD included the areas of Judea and Galilee, to invent a text with such a Hebraic linguistic form.

Undesigned Coincidences: These are tiny, apparently irrelevant details in one Gospel which match similar details in other Gospels to reveal a sub-narrative which does not appear in the main story. Undesigned coincidences only appear in records which are accurate representations of real events; they are extremely difficult to include in a fictional or inaccurate account. The presence of a large number of undesigned coincidences in the Gospels (with possibly still more to be found) indicates that they contain exactly such an accurate record. Not only that, but they indicate that the manuscripts were copied accurately after the Gospels were written.

The Frequency Distribution of Names: Names change with the decades and a picture of precisely what proportion of people would have each name would be very difficult to remember, or to discover from scratch without modern methods of analysis. Despite this, an analysis of the names in the New Testament shows that they have precisely the kind of distribution that we would expect from a true account, accurately remembered.

Internal Evidence

Detail in the Account: The writer of a fictional account who wished to pass off his work as a true record would avoid details of customs, people, places and times as these could easily be tested against accurate accounts or the memory of witnesses. A writer recalling an actual event, however, might very well include such detail as

part of the memory of what happened. The Gospels are full of such details; Zacchaeus climbed a sycamore tree (Luke 19:4), while Jesus made clay to heal the blind man (John 9:6-7). Details like this are completely absent from such apocryphal gospels as the Gospel of Thomas, or are flagrantly wrong in others, such as the Gospel of Peter or of Barnabas.

Inclusion of Irrelevant Material:

This is material which doesn't contribute to the account involved. Some is seemingly irrelevant to the story being told, such as the detail that the fragrance of the oil with which the feet of Jesus were anointed filled the house (John 12:3). Some is irrelevant to the early Christian community, such as the fact that Jesus paid the temple tax after sending Peter to find a coin in the mouth of a fish. Some might even be counter-productive, such as the fact that Jesus was accused of being mad (John 10:20), or that he ate with sinners (e.g. Luke 15:1-2). Someone writing a fictional account would be unlikely to include detail which does not bear on the story; and to include detail which would detract from the message of the account would be very odd unless the account was an accurate record of something that really happened.

The Presence of Embarrassing Material:

The Gospels were written either by the Apostles or people close to them, who would look up to them and see them as important spiritual leaders. They would not invent accounts which showed the Apostles in a poor light. But the Gospels contain many such details. The disciples failed to understand Jesus' message (Mark 9:32) and squabbled with one another as to who was most important among them (Luke 22:24). Peter denied Jesus



(Mark 14:66-72), the other disciples forsook him and fled (Matthew 26:56), and Jesus' brothers (who included James and Judas who later became prominent in the church and wrote letters found in the New Testament) didn't believe him (John 7:5). This shows an honest and accurate account of real events rather than a work of fiction.

Inspiration

We have seen evidence for the reliability of the Gospel accounts. Jesus said and did what the Gospels record. The accounts are accurate, and as the tests were carried out on modern texts, the originals must have been copied with considerable accuracy.

What we haven't considered is evidence of inspiration, that the Gospels contain a message from God. This can be shown by fulfilled prophecy (for example the Olivet prophecy of Matthew 24, Mark 13 and Luke 21) or by the fact that Jesus rose from the dead.

When we consider also how the Old and New testaments are interlinked, we can see that the whole Bible is God's word.

John Thorpe

(Concluded)

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