

The Reliability of the Gospels; Land of Palestine & Its People

I will finish the lecture on the historicity of the Gospels by reminding you why we can trust these books. We can trust these books because people had a trained memory in the ancient world, because there were standards for history writing that didn't allow fabrications, because people did keep written records, because Jesus spoke in memorable ways (poetry and parables), and because memorable events emblazon themselves on our minds so that we cannot forget them. Furthermore there are little signs in the Gospels themselves that show that Jesus' words were preserved very faithfully by the church. For example, in I Corinthians 7 there is a section that troubles people. Paul says about divorce, "The Lord says...", then, "Not I, but the Lord...", and then he says, "The Lord says, not me but the Lord." He's not saying that Jesus' words count more whereas when he's talking, he's just Paul and therefore his words don't matter. Rather, when he says "The Lord says...", he means, "I am quoting Jesus," and when he says, "Not the Lord but I," he means, "It's me, the apostle." The words have equal authority.

Another illustration of the great care with which people preserved the words of Christ is in Acts 7. When Jesus spoke He mostly called Himself "Son of Man" rather than "I." The phrase "Son of Man" appears well over a hundred times in the Gospels but outside the Gospels, I think it only appears one time. In Acts 7, when Stephen is about to die, he says "I saw the Son of Man." If the church had made up the phrase "Son of Man" we would expect it to appear all over the place. But when we read the Gospels, Jesus is the only person that uses the phrase "Son of Man"; Peter never calls Him "Son of Man"; James never calls Him "Son of Man"; Pilate never calls Him "Son of Man." They're very careful to say that this is the way Jesus talked about Himself when He was alive. Nobody else talked about Him that way, but that's the way He talked, so we're going to use His words. Those are two little signs that people were very careful with the words of Christ and that the Gospels are reliable.

Another support for the historicity of the Gospels is the phenomena of living witnesses. If Jesus' story got out through the Gospel of Luke, or Matthew, or Mark to the city of Capernaum, or some other city where Jesus performed a miracle, and if the story were not true, people would know it. They would know if there had been a man named Jairus whose daughter was raised from the dead ("Jairus? There's never been anybody named Jairus who lived in this town!"), or a widow whose only son was raised ("There's never been a widow whose son was raised!"). The Gospels would be ruined, wouldn't they? Their credibility would be completely undermined. Probably close to a million people lived in Palestine at that time and many thousands of them could verify or disprove the Gospel stories. The Gospels would not have been accepted as widely as they were if they could easily be undercut by reporting things that everybody knew to be false.

Finally, the people who lived as disciples of Christ gave their lives for the truth of these stories. People do not give their lives for what they know to be a lie. Therefore, the Gospels claim to be historically reliable.

Even a secular historian would have to admit that there was a man named Jesus of Nazareth, who had a popular ministry, gathered crowds to Himself, got in trouble with the authorities, and was crucified. The Gospels tell the rest of the story. There are many ways to confirm the rest of that story. I've given you some of them from the culture of the day. I have not even mentioned the area of archeology. There are hundreds and hundreds of archeological proofs for the historicity of the Gospel accounts. We read that Jesus healed somebody by the Pool of Siloam, or that a certain event took place by Solomon's Colonnade; you can go see the Pool of Siloam, or the ruins of Solomon's Colonnade to this day. We read that Jesus stopped by a well, Jacob's well, near a mountain, and talked to a woman; there is indeed

a well there and it is near a mountain. So we can give an answer to a secular person, to a university trained person and say, “There is reason to believe that this is true.” All we’re doing when we say the Gospels are historically reliable is clearing the ground for an additional conversation. We’re not going to argue anybody into the kingdom by saying, “The accounts are reliable so you ought to be a Christian.” All we’re doing is getting people to give us a hearing. If somebody says, “It’s all a bunch of lies, and fabrications, and dreams,” you can say, “Not so fast!” There are serious reasons to believe that these things rest on solid historical grounds, reasons that even a secular person ought to notice and pause over. In the final analysis only the Holy Spirit can persuade so you need to ask God to bless your conversation, but at least you can make it clear to a secular person that they can’t throw the Gospel stories out as a bunch of fables.

Now I would like to move on to the next topic, the land and the people of Israel. From the years 5 BC to 70 AD the land of Israel was small, divided, occupied by foreign powers, and poor. It consisted of Galilee, Samaria and Judea. Judea proper was thirty by fifty miles. There are only two states in America, Rhode Island and Delaware, that are slightly larger than Judea. If you’ve ever been to those two, you can drive across them in about 30 minutes. The whole land of Samaria and Galilee was maybe a hundred miles long and in some places only thirty or forty miles wide, barely the size of the state of Connecticut (Samaritans, not Jews, lived in Samaria, and Galilee had many Greek and Roman people). It was a very small land and around the time of the death and resurrection of Jesus, or around the time of Herod the Great, it was divided into several parts, so that even as small as it was, there were small sub-districts that determined one’s life even more.

If you traveled to Israel, what would it be like? It is dry, but not totally dry, somewhat like the state of Colorado. Rainfall in the northern parts of Israel might be twenty to twenty-five inches per year. In Nazareth, where Jesus grew up, maybe twenty to twenty-two inches of rain fell per year. Down in Jerusalem, more like fifteen inches and in other parts of the land, as little as ten or eight or even six inches of rain fell per year. In the Dead Sea area where John the Baptist had his ministry there is nothing but waste lands and salt flats for dozens of miles. The hills look like some of the hills in Colorado—bare, not being used for anything, with occasional trees dotting the side of the mountain. That is the way the forests are. In the Old Testament you might read of a battle in a particular forest—how can there be a battle in a forest? The “forest” might have a tree about every fifty feet because that is all the water could sustain. This explains some of the references in the Bible to water as something precious.

Israel is also small, smaller than the state of Maryland, with several zones very close together. The coastal zone in Israel is flat and fertile; you can grow a lot. Then a few miles east there are mountains and a little farther you are in a high central plateau (Jerusalem is about 2,500 feet high). Go a bit farther and all of a sudden you go way down, to Jericho; in a span of about fifteen miles you go almost a mile down, 4,000 feet down to the lowest spot on earth, the Dead Sea, a complete desert waste land.

We can also talk about the human geography, the population of Israel. When you read the early Gospel accounts you notice statements like “the report of Jesus spread rapidly through the land.” One reason that could happen is that the land was densely populated. Some people think that it was perhaps the most densely populated part of the entire Roman Empire. That’s why the disciples could go two by two with no provisions of food, because villages were just two or three miles apart and large towns often just about five or ten miles apart at the most (by large towns, I mean several thousand people, not a million). There were probably about four or five million Jewish people living in the ancient world. Of those, only about one-tenth (500,000) lived in Palestine, which means that about half of the people who lived in Palestine were not Jews at all, they were Gentiles (Greek, Roman, Scythian, Parthian, Mede, or whatever the case might be). It was a land that was more Jewish than anything else but that had a very

large number of people of other cultures. Probably almost everybody in Israel could speak Greek, and almost everybody who could write could also probably write Greek.

Earlier I stated that more than half of all tomb inscriptions in the city of Jerusalem were in Greek, not in Hebrew or Aramaic, which is what you might have expected there. The average person in Israel was very religious or very interested in religion, but not necessarily very devout, a bit like the people in America today. If you live in Saudi Arabia or if you live in Qatar, maybe even if you live in Australia, you might say America is a Christian country. But if you live in America, you might say everybody knows about Christianity, almost everybody has been in a church at some time, and over half the people in America are church members, but they are members in the sense that that's the church they choose *not* to attend, that's the church they're *not* loyal to. A lot of Jews were like that, saying "Judaism? That's the religion I *don't* observe, that's the one whose laws I break." Probably the great majority of people fit in that category.

Let's talk in more detail about the types of people in the land. The high priests were those who governed the land; they were the ones who actually executed Jesus. They were very much under the thumb of Rome. There was a Roman procurator named Gratus who wanted to make sure that he had control of the land through the indigenous leadership, such as the high priests, but the high priest didn't like Gratus and did not do what he said. So he said, "Fine, I'll get another one," and he ran through a string of about six high priests, a new one each year for about five years, until finally he got one that he liked and kept him for a number of years. The high priests were the people that the Romans used to exercise control. They were political animals. They were rich and they were powerful. They were not the spiritual leaders of the land. It is no accident that once the high priests arrived on the scene, Jesus died shortly after.

The people who were viewed as leaders were the scribes and the Pharisees. A scribe might not always be a Pharisee, and vice versa. There was a lot of overlap, but they were not identical. Then there were the people who admired the scribes and the Pharisees, especially the Pharisees. They thought well of them and maybe were interested in modeling their lives after them a bit. A scribe was a writer, a teacher, a quasi-professional teacher. Scribes were not paid, but did their work free, for God, like Sunday school teachers or choir members; they did it for the love of the work, for the love of the cause, for the love of the Lord. The priests were paid, well-paid. The priests and the high priest inherited their positions, but the high priest had to buy his position as well. The Pharisees also did it for the cause.

There were probably 6,000 Pharisees living in the land of Israel in Jesus' day. If there were a million people living there, that means that six-tenths of one percent (less than one percent) were Pharisees. But they had a lot more influence than you would imagine because they were held in very high esteem due to their holiness. In the Gospel of Matthew Jesus stated, "Your righteousness must exceed that of the scribes and the Pharisees." When we hear that today we think, "That's easy! They were just a bunch of hypocritical sinners, right? Anybody could be more righteous than a scribe or a Pharisee because they were completely unrighteous!" But how do you think the original audience heard Jesus' words? They were probably frightened. The average person would say, "More righteous than a scribe? More righteous than a Pharisee? That's impossible!" The Pharisees dedicated their lives, I quote, "in an attempt to transfer concretely to the covenant people the purity revealed by God through Scripture and tradition. Their goal was to take the revelation of God and to ponder it and apply it to the right course of action for themselves and others in every conceivable situation." They tried to imagine everything. For example, they frequently discussed the correct way to observe the Sabbath. Israel was a farming land, and they wanted to be sure that no farm work (harvesting, plowing, etc.) was done on the Sabbath, even by accident. They considered all the ways people might break that law without intending to. For example, they said that on the Sabbath you shouldn't spit on the ground, not because it was unhygienic, not

because it was rude, but because if your spit hit a piece of ground that was kind of loose and fertile there might be a seed there and the seed might germinate and grow, in which case you would be plowing, by spitting and making an indentation, and sowing on the Sabbath. Therefore, you could spit any day of the week, any other time, anywhere you wanted, but not on the ground on the Sabbath.

The Pharisees told tailors to sew their needles into their outer garments at night when they finished their work. If when they got home there was something that needed mending, rather than just whipping out the needle and mending it, they would pause and ask themselves, “Is it Friday night?” If the sun had already set on Friday, the sixth day of the week, the Sabbath would have already begun and working would be a violation of the Sabbath. Sewing the needle into the garment would train them to ask whether the Sabbath had begun.

In a book called the *Mishnah* there are about forty pages of rules like this, to keep people from violating the Sabbath. The Pharisees were attempting to give the law of God a “concrete application.” They were also orthodox, staunchly resisting the influx of Greek and Roman deities (as in the city of Beth Shan that I was telling you about). They preserved their culture. They also thought they were maintaining the middle road between the concepts of divine grace and human merit. According to the Pharisees, the right way to think about the life of covenantal obedience was to realize that God gives you enough grace to have a good impulse in you. You also have a bad impulse in you but if you follow that good impulse plus right teaching (God’s law), you can live a life pleasing to Him. They thought this was a balanced view of sovereign power and human responsibility. So their lives were dedicated to the written law of Moses and the customs (the oral tradition, so called) that helped them interpret the law into situations of their own day.

They believed in eternal life, that the soul is imperishable. They believed that God rewards those who do good and punishes those who do evil. They believed that one should live simply and generously. They believed that if you really wanted to, you could keep the rules. In many ways they were noble people. But in the final analysis, they were far more dedicated to their rules than they were to God and they had a great deal of confidence in their own ability to please God. Can you see why people might admire the Pharisees and why there might have been thousands of people who patterned their lives after them? Can you also see why they might have opposed Jesus? They are the Jewish party that shows up the most in the Gospels. Pharisees fasted twice a week, drinking only water, from sunup to sundown, to prove that their life derived its energy from God—quite amazing men! They showed exactly how far legalism can take you.

In the literature of the time there is no identifiable group that had a clear picture of God’s grace. The Pharisees were about as close as you would get. There is no party that we would feel very much in agreement with. The Pharisees sound most like Reformed Christians at times in their zeal and their willingness to resist false influences, but when you press a little farther, you find out that they are legalists in two senses of the word. One, they think of the covenant life, the life of obedience to God, as a matter of following the rules. Two, they ultimately did believe that if you performed more good deeds than bad deeds God would reward you. Of course you have to love God, they didn’t deny that, but basically if you follow that good impulse, then God will reward you. Your effort is vital; God gives, but your cooperation with God is what saves you.

The next group of people in Israel were the Sadducees. The Sadducees claimed to be orthodox, to adhere to biblical authority. They claimed to be dedicated to a literal interpretation, whereas the Pharisees didn’t make this claim. The Sadducees said, “We’re the ones who literally follow the Word of God. Those Pharisees are always adding their own rules and running with them. We’re the ones who are truly

faithful.” However, the Sadducees were virtually deists. If the Pharisees tried to keep a balance between divine gift and human responsibility, the Sadducees said, “God gave us the law and He left and now it’s up to us.” They also were anti-supernaturalists—they did not believe in angels, demons, the resurrection from the dead, the afterlife, reward or punishment. They believed that if you followed the law of Moses you would get your reward in this life and that was the end. So it is no surprise that the Sadducees were tightly connected with the high priests and the ruling elite. They wanted to get their reward in this life and they actually thought that is what the Bible had in mind. They were priestly, aristocratic, and wealthy. They were also unpopular.

There were other groups such as the Zealots and the Essenes but they don’t figure that much in the pages of the Bible. Perhaps more important for our understanding of life in the day of Jesus is to get a grasp of the Roman governors and the way they governed. The first and most Roman we should know about is Herod the Great, king during the days of Jesus’ birth (Herod died very shortly thereafter). He was the builder of the new temple and many other works. If you went to Israel today a lot of the ruins you would see would have been erected by Herod the Great. He was an energetic warrior and a statesman, renowned and feared in his youth for his tremendous skills. Once before he fully took control of his kingship he was taking a bath with no one in attendance, and his armor, sword, and dagger were thirty or forty feet away against the wall. Four of his sworn enemies stumbled into the same bath, fully armed. Not only did they not attack him, they ran out as fast as they could, because they knew that the four of them fully armed were no match for Herod with no armor and no weapons! He was a man who earned the name Herod the Great in terms of his skill and wisdom.

Herod was a shrewd politician and a rousing orator. Before battle, he could speak for a full hour, working the soldiers into a frenzy so they could attack their enemies with great success. Things went wrong later in his life. He dedicated his life to maintaining his power and as he got older, he was willing to do anything to maintain this power. He had several wives and he had his favorite wife killed because he thought she was disloyal to him (the truth is that in some ways she was). He also killed three of his sons because he thought they were plotting against him; he ordered the slaying of one of them in the last week of his life when he knew he was dying. There was a familiar saying, “It is better to be Herod’s pig than Herod’s son.” (The word ‘pig’ and the word ‘son’ sound very similar in Greek) This was a double or triple insult. Jews don’t eat pigs (pork), so the saying implies that Herod isn’t a very faithful Jew because he does have pigs around. Maybe he sneaks a little bacon on the side once in a while—he doesn’t do it often, but he does kill his sons pretty often so it’s better to be his pig than his son.

He knew that people hated him and wanted to take his life. During the last few months of his life he had 200 of the leading men of Judea locked up in a hippodrome, a place where horse races take place (‘hippos’ means ‘horse,’ ‘dromos’ means ‘race course’) and ordered that they be executed the moment he died. In this way he could be certain that the 200 men, as well as their families and friends, would not seek his death but would hope he lived. It also ensured that when he died people would mourn. Knowing that people hated him because of his violence and heavy taxation, this was a way to obtain “a vicarious mourning.” He said, “So shall all Judea and every household weep for me whether they will it or not.” They would weep when he died because their leaders would be slain. Some people have wondered about the veracity of the Gospel narratives’ claim that Herod the Great ordered all the children of Bethlehem under the age of two to be killed. Is there any ruler in the world that would do such a thing? Yes, Herod the Great. It is perfectly in keeping with his character. He would do anything to see the death of his adversaries.

The most prominent of Herod the Great’s sons, Herod Agrippa, was the ruler that is most often mentioned in the Gospel stories. This was the Herod who had John the Baptist killed and who threatened

Jesus. He was a little bit like his father, but was also known for his immorality with women. If somebody suited his eye he might snatch her; it was precisely for this that he earned the condemnation of John the Baptist. Herod had married a woman whom he was forbidden to marry and he eventually killed John for his opposition to the marriage. He had him killed after his wife's beautiful young daughter danced for him and requested the beheading of John; that fits perfectly with Herod Agrippa's historical character.

The people who ruled Palestine for the Romans were known as procurators. Pilate was a procurator. Gratus (mentioned earlier) was also a procurator. They were about as high as you could go and still be a middle class civil servant. They had several thousand soldiers at their disposal in the city of Jerusalem and during the high holidays such as Passover there would be thousands of extra troops brought in to control the crowds. The main goal was always to control the crowds. Sometimes they did this by trying to make life as easy and simple as possible and other times by showing that they had power to do whatever they wanted. In the year 26 AD, Pontius Pilate decided that it was time for him to show his authority so he brought Roman standards and armor bearing the image of the emperor into the temple district in Jerusalem. He did this in the middle of the night and waited to see what the Jews would do. Since the emperor claimed to be divine, the Jews protested that Pilate had brought images of false gods into the temple district. A vast number of Jews came to Herod's palace and petitioned that they be removed. When he ordered them to disperse they would not move. After a couple of days, he brought in some troops dressed as ordinary people and warned the Jews for the last time to move. When they refused, the soldiers threw off their cloaks, and drew their swords. Pilate ordered the Jews to disperse or be cut in pieces. Virtually to a man, the Jews knelt to the ground, pulled back their hoods and exposed their necks, saying as plainly as you can by your actions, "Go ahead and kill us. We will not compromise our faith and our zeal for the glory of God." Pilate was so shaken that he ordered the images to be removed. He didn't always accommodate though; there are more than enough stories of times when he killed people just because he wanted to.

Not all the Roman rulers were that bad, however. About the year 40 AD, there was a Roman ruler named Gaius or Caligula. Caligula was emperor for about four years, from 38 to 42 AD. He was a vain man who insisted on his own authority and wanted people to worship him even while he was king. In the city of Alexandria there was a dispute between the Alexandrians (we would call them the Egyptians) and some Jews. It looked like the Jews were in the right, as some Jews had been killed for no good reason and their property had been seized. A great Jew named Philo came to present his case to Gaius and show that his cause was right and just. A man from Alexandria also went to present his case and he spoke first: "Gaius, the rightness or the wrongness of the cause of the Jews is completely irrelevant. I want you to know that the Jews are disloyal to you and therefore, whether their cause is right or not, they deserve nothing from you. You know they're disloyal to you because they do not bow to your image, nor worship you, nor say prayers to you." It was true. It was also true, however, that a series of Roman emperors knew that the Jews were monotheistic but they wanted to respect monotheism and keep the peace as best they could. Therefore they had said the Jews did not need to worship the images of Caesar, nor pray or bow to him. But Caligula (or Gaius) was a little bit off and was a megalomaniac, so he said to the Alexandrian, "You're right. I'm not even going to hear the Jewish delegation. I don't care about the justice of their cause. Furthermore, I insist that the Jews begin to worship me at once."

He sent a message to Petronius, the Roman governor of Egypt, who was also the overlord of Judea at the time and had authority over Pilate's successor. Caligula instructed Petronius to install his image in Jerusalem and use whatever force was necessary to make the Jews worship him. Petronius set out to obey but as word got out a delegation of Jews came to Alexandria and bowed before Petronius, asking for understanding. They said, "We'll die before we follow this. Furthermore, we'll refuse to plant or

harvest crops so we and all of Judea will starve to death. We're willing to destroy the whole land before bowing down to this image of Caligula." Petronius was impressed by their fearlessness but also by the justice of their cause. He wrote back to Caligula, saying, "You've made a mistake; don't force them to do it. They're a peace loving people who pay their taxes to you loyally; don't make them do this."

Meanwhile, Herod Agrippa, the son of Herod the Great (the one who took a wife that he shouldn't have taken and later had John the Baptist killed), was in Rome at the time, and learned of Gaius' ruling. He was a friend (of sorts) with Gaius. Herod was not all bad and he did care about the Jewish people. So without telling Gaius why, he prepared a sumptuous feast for Gaius. The feast had everything that Gaius liked and it lasted so long that Gaius became embarrassed and finally said, "Thank you for this feast, Herod Agrippa, how can I ever repay you?" Herod replied, "You cannot repay me. I love you and want to honor you." The feast continued for another day. Gaius again was embarrassed, and felt he had to do something in return, but Agrippa said, "You cannot do a thing. I simply love you and want to show my appreciation for you." The third day he said the same thing. Finally Agrippa said, "If you really want to do something for me, don't install that image in Jerusalem; order that it be removed." Of course Gaius had said three times "I'll do anything" and so he had to do it.

In the meantime, however, Gaius decided that Petronius couldn't sincerely believe that the Jews should be honored in this way and therefore he must have been paid off by the Jews. So he sent a decree to Petronius, saying that the initial decree had been cancelled but that Petronius must fall on his sword. In God's providence, the boat that carried that decree was becalmed for many weeks. During that time (almost two months), Gaius was assassinated. Everybody knew about his ridiculous attempt to have the images installed in Jerusalem and thought it was foolish. Many people also knew about his order to Petronius to fall on his sword. The moment Gaius' reign ended another message was sent by ship to Petronius, saying, "Don't fall on your sword." Nobody knew which ship would get there first and, of course, they probably anticipated that Petronius would die. But that ship was not becalmed and so the order that said "Don't fall on your sword," got there first, a few days before the one that said "Fall on your sword."

I tell this story for three reasons. First, it's a great story. Second, it's a true story, illustrating the way in which many governors didn't really care about the well being of the Jews. It's not a simple picture, though. Some rulers did show concern for them sometimes, like Petronius or even Herod Agrippa, who was immoral but could also do good. (Even today, we don't always admire our political leaders, but they can do things that are wise, good, and deserving of respect, even if their lives aren't perfect.) Third, it is a lovely story, showing through the becalming of the boat the way in which God takes care of justice in beautiful and timely ways.