

# The Case for Christianity

## Lesson 2B – Are the Scriptures Trustworthy?

### “Can They Be Corroborated”

*“The word god is for me nothing more than the expression and product of human weaknesses, the Bible a collection of honorable, but still primitive legends which are nevertheless pretty childish. No interpretation no matter how subtle can (for me) change this.”*

—Albert Einstein, father of modern physics, as quoted from his Gutkind Letter (January 3, 1954) in James Randerson, “Childish superstition: Einstein’s letter makes view of religion relatively clear.”

*“Is there an intelligent man or woman now in the world who believes in the Garden of Eden story? If there is, strike here (tapping his forehead) and you will hear an echo. Something is for rent.”*

—Robert Green Ingersoll, the nineteenth-century American political leader known as “The Great Agnostic.” Lectures of Col. R. G. Ingersoll, Latest (Valde Books, 2009), Kindle edition, Kindle location 1319.

*“I think that the people who think God wrote a book called the Bible are just childish.”*

—Bill Maher, comedian, television host, and political commentator.

### What Supporting Evidence Do We Have That the Gospels Are True?

Christian Scripture is not merely a collection of proverbs or commandments related to moral living, although the New Testament certainly contains these elements. The Bible is a claim about history. Like other eyewitness accounts, the Bible tells us that something happened in the past in a particular way, at a particular time, with a particular result. If the accounts are true, they are not merely “legends” or “childish” stories, even though they may contain miraculous elements that are difficult for skeptics to accept.

If this is true, what supporting evidence do we have that can corroborate the claims made in the New Testament? After all, historical events typically leave a trail of corroborating evidence. Evidence that can be examined and referenced in order to reconstruct an accurate picture of events long ago.

As it turns out, there is corroborating evidence that supports the claims made in the gospels. Some of this corroboration is **internal** (evidences from within the gospel documents that are consistent with the claims of the text), and some is **external** (evidences that are independent of the gospel documents yet verify the claims of the text). In this lesson, we will examine some of the characteristics of scripture that demonstrate **internal** corroboration.

### Internal Corroboration - the Gospel Writers Provided Unintentional Eyewitness Support

When an event occurs, no single witness is likely to have seen every detail, so we must often piece together accounts, allowing the observations of one eyewitness to fill in the gaps that may exist in the observations of another eyewitness. True, reliable eyewitness accounts are never completely parallel and identical. Instead, they are different pieces of the same puzzle, unintentionally supporting and complementing each other to provide all the details related to what really happened.

When we read through the Gospels, comparing those places where two or more gospel writers are describing the same event, the level of inadvertent support that each writer provides for the other is impressive. The accounts fit together just the way one would expect from independent eyewitnesses. When one gospel eyewitness described an event and left out a detail that raised a question, this question was unintentionally answered by another gospel writer (who, by the way, often left out a detail that was provided by the first gospel writer).

## The Calling of the Disciples

**Mathew 4:18-22 (ESV)** <sup>18</sup> While walking by the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon (who is called Peter) and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea, for they were fishermen. <sup>19</sup> And he said to them, "Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men." <sup>20</sup> Immediately they left their nets and followed him. <sup>21</sup> And going on from there he saw two other brothers, James the son of Zebedee and John his brother, in the boat with Zebedee their father, mending their nets, and he called them. <sup>22</sup> Immediately they left the boat and their father and followed him.

That's it? Jesus walks up and says, "Follow Me," and they drop everything "immediately"? Who would do that? How did they even know who Jesus was or if anything about Him was worthy of that kind of dedication?

However, when we consider information from additional eyewitness testimony from Luke, it all makes more sense.

**Luke 5: 1-11 (ESV)** <sup>1</sup> On one occasion, while the crowd was pressing in on him to hear the word of God, he was standing by the lake of Gennesaret, <sup>2</sup> and he saw two boats by the lake, but the fishermen had gone out of them and were washing their nets. <sup>3</sup> Getting into one of the boats, which was Simon's, he asked him to put out a little from the land. And he sat down and taught the people from the boat. <sup>4</sup> And when he had finished speaking, he said to Simon, "Put out into the deep and let down your nets for a catch." <sup>5</sup> And Simon answered, "Master, we toiled all night and took nothing! But at your word I will let down the nets." <sup>6</sup> And when they had done this, they enclosed a large number of fish, and their nets were breaking. <sup>7</sup> They signaled to their partners in the other boat to come and help them. And they came and filled both the boats, so that they began to sink. <sup>8</sup> But when Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus' knees, saying, "Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord." <sup>9</sup> For he and all who were with him were astonished at the catch of fish that they had taken, <sup>10</sup> and so also were James and John, sons of Zebedee, who were partners with Simon. And Jesus said to Simon, "Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching men." <sup>11</sup> And when they had brought their boats to land, they left everything and followed him.

The disciples didn't just jump in with Jesus on a whim after all. Matthew was interested in describing how the disciples were called, but Luke was interested in providing a bit more detail. When the testimony of all the witnesses is considered in unison, we get the complete picture.

### The Striking of Jesus

Another example of unintentional eyewitness support can be found in the description of Jesus's beating. In Mathew chapter 26, we are given a picture of Jesus being examined before the chief priests and members of the Jewish council. Matthew tells us that the chief priests and the members of the council struck Jesus and slapped Him when he "blasphemed" by identifying Himself as the "Son of Man":

**Mathew 26: 67-68 (ESV)** <sup>67</sup> Then they spit in his face and struck him. And some slapped him, <sup>68</sup> saying, "Prophecy to us, you Christ! Who is it that struck you?"

This question posed by members of the council seems odd. Jesus's attackers were standing right in front of Him; why would they ask Him, "Who is the one who hit You?" It doesn't seem like much of a challenge, given that Jesus could look at His attackers and identify them easily.

However, Luke provides additional testimony that clarifies the situation.

**Luke 22: 63-65 (ESV)** <sup>63</sup> Now the men who were holding Jesus in custody were mocking him as they beat him. <sup>64</sup> They also blindfolded him and kept asking him, "Prophecy! Who is it that struck you?" <sup>65</sup> And they said many other things against him, blaspheming him.

*Additional  
Examples of  
"Undesigned  
Coincidences in  
the Gospels..."*

**Question: Matthew 8: 16** Why did they wait until evening to bring those who needed healing?

**Answer: Mark 1: 21; Luke 4: 31** Because it was the Sabbath.

**Question: Matthew 14: 1– 2** Why did Herod tell his servants that he thought Jesus was John the Baptist, raised from the dead?

**Answer: Luke 8: 3; Acts 13: 1** Many of Jesus's followers were from Herod's household.

**Question: Luke 23: 1– 4** Why didn't Pilate find a charge against Jesus even though Jesus claimed to be a King?

**Answer: John 18: 33– 38** Jesus told Pilate that his kingdom was not of this world.

Once again, one gospel eyewitness unintentionally supports another in what we would call an “undesigned coincidence”. Mathew’s narrative makes sense once we read in Luke’s account that Jesus was blindfolded.

### **Feeding the Five Thousand**

Perhaps the finest example of unintentional support is found in an episode described in all four gospels: the miracle of the “feeding of the five thousand.” Mark’s account of this miracle raises a question when considered without input from the other gospel writers. Mark wrote that just prior to this event, Jesus sent out the disciples to preach repentance in the local towns and villages. When they returned, they found themselves surrounded by a multitude of people:

**Mark 6:30-44 (ESV)** <sup>30</sup> *The apostles returned to Jesus and told him all that they had done and taught.* <sup>31</sup> *And he said to them, "Come away by yourselves to a desolate place and rest a while." For many were coming and going, and they had no leisure even to eat.* <sup>32</sup> *And they went away in the boat to a desolate place by themselves.* <sup>33</sup> *Now many saw them going and recognized them, and they ran there on foot from all the towns and got there ahead of them.* <sup>34</sup> *When he went ashore he saw a great crowd, and he had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd. And he began to teach them many things.* <sup>35</sup> *And when it grew late, his disciples came to him and said, "This is a desolate place, and the hour is now late." <sup>36</sup> Send them away to go into the surrounding countryside and villages and buy themselves something to eat."* <sup>37</sup> *But he answered them, "You give them something to eat." And they said to him, "Shall we go and buy two hundred denarii worth of bread and give it to them to eat?"* <sup>38</sup> *And he said to them, "How many loaves do you have? Go and see." And when they had found out, they said, "Five, and two fish."* <sup>39</sup> *Then he commanded them all to sit down in groups on the green grass.* <sup>40</sup> *So they sat down in groups, by hundreds and by fifties.* <sup>41</sup> *And taking the five loaves and the two fish he looked up to heaven and said a blessing and broke the loaves and gave them to the disciples to set before the people. And he divided the two fish among them all.* <sup>42</sup> *And they all ate and were satisfied.* <sup>43</sup> *And they took up twelve baskets full of broken pieces and of the fish.* <sup>44</sup> *And those who ate the loaves were five thousand men.*

According to Mark, many people were coming and going in the area, even before Jesus and His disciples became the focal point of this crowd. Why was this crowd in the area in the first place? Mark never said. The question Mark’s account raised isn’t answered until we hear John’s testimony:

**John 6:1-13 (ESV)** <sup>1</sup> *After this Jesus went away to the other side of the Sea of Galilee, which is the Sea of Tiberias.* <sup>2</sup> *And a large crowd was following him, because they saw the signs that he was doing on the sick.* <sup>3</sup> *Jesus went up on the mountain, and there he sat down with his disciples.* <sup>4</sup> *Now the Passover, the feast of the Jews, was at hand.* <sup>5</sup> *Lifting up his eyes, then, and seeing that a large crowd was coming toward him, Jesus said to Philip, "Where are we to buy bread, so that these people may eat?"* <sup>6</sup> *He said this to test him, for he himself knew what he would do.* <sup>7</sup> *Philip answered him, "Two hundred denarii worth of bread would not be enough for each of them to get a little."* <sup>8</sup> *One of his disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, said to him, <sup>9</sup> "There is a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish, but what are they for so many?"* <sup>10</sup> *Jesus said, "Have the people sit down." Now there was much grass in the place. So the men sat down, about five thousand in number.* <sup>11</sup> *Jesus then took the loaves, and when he had given thanks, he distributed them to those who were seated. So also the fish, as much as they wanted.* <sup>12</sup> *And when they had eaten their fill, he told his disciples, "Gather up the leftover fragments, that nothing may be lost."* <sup>13</sup> *So they gathered them up and filled twelve baskets with fragments from the five barley loaves left by those who had eaten.*

John answered the question raised by Mark. The large crowd was the result of two circumstances: First, John alone told us that the people searched for Jesus because they knew He had been performing miraculous healings. Second, John alone said that it was nearly Passover, the holy Jewish holiday that caused thousands to travel through this area to arrive at Jerusalem for the celebration.

### *Corroboration of Location*

The gospel writers were evidently extremely familiar with the locations they wrote about. While late non-canonical forgeries written from outside the area of Palestine seldom mention any city other than Jerusalem (the one famous city that everyone knew was in Israel), the gospel writers alone included the specific names of lesser first-century towns and villages. The gospel writers mentioned or described Aenon, Arimathea, Bethphage, Caesarea Philippi, Cana, Chorazin, Dalmanutha, Emmaus, Ephraim, Magadan, Nain, Salim, and Sychar. Some of these villages are so obscure that only people familiar with the area would even know they existed.

While Mark mentioned the crowd, only John told us why it was there in the first place. But in unintentionally answering the question raised by Mark, John raised an unanswered question of his own. John's account mentioned Philip and Andrew specifically. Andrew and Philip are not major characters in the Gospels; the gospel writers seldom mention them, especially when compared with Peter, John, and James. For this reason, their appearance here raises a couple of questions. Why did Jesus ask Philip where they ought to go to buy bread? Why did Andrew get involved in the answer? In addition to this, John also mentioned a detail that was not found in Mark's briefer account. John said that the disciples fed the crowd "barley loaves." John also repeated Mark's testimony that there was "much grass" in the area. In order to make sense of the questions John raised and the role of the grass and the barley, we turn to Luke's account:

## THE CORROBORATION OF LANGUAGE

The gospel writers did more than correctly cite the popular names of first-century Palestinian Jews. They also appear to have written in a style that was similar to those who lived at that time. Nonbiblical scraps of papyrus and pottery from the first century provide us with samples of the form of Greek that was popular in the ancient Middle East. The Greek used by the gospel writers is very similar to the vernacular "common" Greek that was used by others who lived in this region at this time in history. (For more details, refer to *The New Testament Documents: Are They Reliable?* by F. F. Bruce.)

**Luke 9:10-17 (ESV)** <sup>10</sup> On their return the apostles told him all that they had done. And he took them and withdrew apart to a town called Bethsaida. <sup>11</sup> When the crowds learned it, they followed him, and he welcomed them and spoke to them of the kingdom of God and cured those who had need of healing. <sup>12</sup> Now the day began to wear away, and the twelve came and said to him, "Send the crowd away to go into the surrounding villages and countryside to find lodging and get provisions, for we are here in a desolate place." <sup>13</sup> But he said to them, "You give them something to eat." They said, "We have no more than five loaves and two fish—unless we are to go and buy food for all these people." <sup>14</sup> For there were about five thousand men. And he said to his disciples, "Have them sit down in groups of about fifty each." <sup>15</sup> And they did so, and had them all sit down. <sup>16</sup> And taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven and said a blessing over them. Then he broke the loaves and gave them to the disciples to set before the crowd. <sup>17</sup> And they all ate and were satisfied. And what was left over was picked up, twelve baskets of broken pieces.

Luke is the only one who tells us that this event occurred when Jesus withdrew to the city of Bethsaida. This revelation unlocks the mystery of Philip and Andrew's prominence in John's testimony; they were both from Bethsaida (according to **John 1: 44 (ESV)** <sup>44</sup> Now Philip was from Bethsaida, the city of Andrew and Peter). We learned this detail not from Luke (who told us that the miracle occurred in Bethsaida) but from John (who mentioned it without any connection to the miracle).

Jesus asked Philip about sources for the bread because He knew that Philip was from this part of the country. Philip and Andrew naturally tried their best to respond, given that they were uniquely qualified to answer Jesus's question. What about the grass and barley? Why were these details included in the narrative?

As it turns out, the Passover occurred at a time (in April) that followed five of the rainiest months for the area of Bethsaida. In addition to this, the Passover occurred

at the end of the barley harvest. \* (For more information, refer to *Oded Borowski, Agriculture in Iron Age Israel: The Evidence from Archaeology and the Bible* (Boston: American Schools of Oriental Research, May 1987), 7.)

These meaningless details are just what we would expect to hear from eyewitnesses who were simply describing what they saw, including details that don't really matter in the larger narrative.

## Corroboration from the Inside Out - The Gospel Writers Referenced Names Correctly

The gospel writers are believed to have written from a number of geographic locations. Mark probably wrote from Rome, Matthew may have written from Judea, Luke from either Antioch or Rome, and John from Ephesus. Skeptics have argued that these accounts were not written by people who had firsthand knowledge of the life and ministry of Jesus but were simply inventions written generations later by people who weren't all that familiar with the locations they were describing.

All of the gospel writers described a large number of people as they wrote out their testimonies, and often identified these individuals by name. As it turns out, these names provide us with important clues to help us determine if the writers of the Gospels were actually familiar with life in first-century Palestine.

Richard Bauckham (*\*author of "Jesus and the Eyewitnesses"*), examined the work of Tal Ilan (*\* an Israeli-born historian, notably of women's history in Judaism, lexicographer and professor of Jewish Studies at the Freie University in Berlin*) and used Ilan's data when investigating the biblical use of names. Ilan assembled a lexicon of all the recorded names used by the Jews of Palestine between 330 BC and AD 200. She examined the writings of Josephus, the texts of the New Testament, documents from the Judean desert and Masada, and the earliest rabbinic works of the period. She even examined ossuary (funeral-tomb) inscriptions from Jerusalem. Ilan included the New Testament writings in her study as well.

She discovered that the most popular men's names in Palestine (in the time span that encompassed the gospel accounts) were Simon and Joseph. The most popular women's names were Mary and Salome. You may recognize these names from the gospel accounts. As it turns out, when Bauckham examined all the names discovered by Ilan, he found that the New Testament narratives reflect nearly the same percentages found in all the documents Ilan examined:

\* (For more information, refer to Bauckham, Jesus and the Eyewitnesses, Kindle location 1113) \*(For more information, refer to Tal Ilan, Lexicon of Jewish Names in Late Antiquity: Palestine 330 BCE– 200 CE (Philadelphia: Coronet Books, 2002)

| <b>Popularity of Names Cited in<br/>Palestinian Literature of the Time</b>  | <b>Popularity of Names Cited by<br/>the New Testament Authors</b> |
|---|---|
| 15.6% of the men had the name of Simon or Joseph  | 18.2% of the men had the name Simon or Joseph                     |
| 41.5% of the men had one of the nine most popular names   | 40.3% of the men had one of the nine most popular names           |
| 7.9% of the men had a name no one else had  | 3.9% of the men had a name no one else had                        |
| 28.6% of the women had the name Mary of Salome  | 38.9% of the women had the name Mary or Salome                    |
| 49.7% of the women had one of the nine most popular names   | 61.1% of the women had one of the most popular names              |
| 9.6% of the women had a name no one else had  | 2.5% of the women had a name no one else had                      |
| <p>The most popular names found in the Gospels just happen to be the most popular names found in Palestine in the first century. This is even more striking when you compare the ancient popular Palestinian Jewish names with the ancient popular Egyptian Jewish names:</p> |   |
| <b>Top Jewish Men's Names in Palestine</b>  | <b>Top Jewish Men's Names in Egypt</b>                            |
| Simon   | Eleazar   |
| Joseph  | Sabbataius  |
| Eleazar   | Joseph  |
| Judah   | Dositheus   |
| Yohanan   | Pappus  |
| Joshua  | Ptolemaius  |

If the gospel writers were simply guessing about the names they were using in their accounts, they happened to guess with remarkable accuracy. Many of the popular Jewish names in Palestine were different from the popular

names in Egypt, Syria, or Rome. The use of these names by the gospel writers is consistent with their claim that they were writing on the basis of true eyewitness familiarity.

The manner in which the gospel writers described details (unintentionally supporting one another) and the approach the gospel writers took when they referred to people (using the names and descriptors we would expect in first-century Palestine) corroborate their testimonies internally. The gospel accounts appear authentic from the “inside out.” The words of the Gospels themselves are consistent with what we would expect from eyewitnesses.

#### **Questions for Discussion:**

1. In previous generations, the Bible was more commonly viewed as an authoritative body of scripture, Holy and inspired by God. Increasingly though, it is being viewed as a work of total fiction, akin to legends and collections of childish stories. If someone told you they believed the Bible was nothing more than “folklore”, how would you respond? What could you say that would rebut such a claim?
2. We are fortunate to have been given four separate eyewitness accounts of the life of Christ. How does having multiple gospel accounts serve to increase our confidence in the accuracy and reliability of New Testament scripture?
3. When you see how the four Gospel accounts complement one another, each providing some unique aspect of events in the life of Christ, does it impress you how well they fit together and support each other? If they were complete works of fiction, do you believe it would be difficult for four separate authors to create a fictional biography of a fictitious person and be able to harmonize all four accounts in a cohesive manner? If so, why?
4. Each generation tends to exhibit unique cultural tendencies. One such example can be seen in the choice of names given to children that are born in different eras. Have you witnessed changes in common names given to children born today versus when you were born?
5. How difficult do you believe it would be for you to write a fictional novel set in the 1700’s, populated with a large number of characters, and be able to assign names to those characters that would be historically appropriate and statistically accurate for the time period you were covering?
6. Does it help to bolster your faith that the names of New Testament characters are statistically accurate and in harmony with the names researchers have discovered were used in Palestine during the life of Christ? If so, why?