

Matthew Lecture 2: Reliability Part 2 and Miracles Part 1

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Session 2

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Abstract

In this lecture, Dr. Craig Keener defends the historical reliability of the Gospels by highlighting their early Judean and Galilean linguistic traits, such as Aramaic idioms and cultural metaphors that predate the later church. He argues that the Gospel writers had access to living eyewitnesses and preserved authentic historical memories, rather than inventing legendary myths. Additionally, Keener addresses Western skepticism toward miracle reports by presenting extensive global eyewitness accounts and medically documented cases of healings and resuscitations, suggesting that the supernatural elements of the Gospels are grounded in credible historical reporting.

Outline

I. Distinctively Early Traits in the Gospels (Aramaic Metaphors and Idioms)

- A. The linguistic transition from Aramaic to Greek occurred very early in the Jerusalem church, where bilingualism was common.
- B. Sayings of Jesus preserve early Aramaic rhythms and Galilean/Judean ways of speaking that do not reflect the environment of the later Greek-speaking church.
- C. Key cultural and linguistic examples in the text:
 - 1. Hyperbolic sayings on ethics (e.g., lust as adultery) parallel early Rabbinic schools rather than Greek styles.
 - 2. Standard introduction formulas for parables ("to what shall I compare" and "is like").
 - 3. The Lord's Prayer's opening petitions align closely with traditional Jewish prayers of the period.
 - 4. Debates between Pharisaic schools (e.g., divorce questions and cup-cleansing) reflect issues specific to Jesus' generation.
 - 5. The title "Son of Man" represents a literal translation of the Aramaic/Hebrew Bar-nish/Ben Adam, which is grammatically unnatural in Greek.
 - 6. Culturally specific metaphors: "moving mountains" for the virtually impossible, and a "camel passing through a needle's eye" (using the largest local animal in Judea, contrasting with the Babylonian "elephant").

II. Eyewitness Testimony and Gospel Reliability

- A. Church leaders during the mid-first century (e.g., Peter, John, and James the brother of Jesus) were living eyewitnesses with immense authority.
- B. The integrity of these witnesses is verified by their willingness to suffer and die for their testimonies rather than for a known fabrication.
- C. The prominent inclusion of women's testimony to the resurrection serves as strong historical evidence, as women's testimony was devalued in ancient Jewish and Roman law.
- D. Luke's historical methodology (Luke 1:1-4):
 - 1. Luke pursued the Hellenistic ideal of carefully investigating sources and consulting eyewitnesses.
 - 2. The "we" passages in Acts indicate Luke's active presence as a travel companion of Paul.
 - 3. Paul's two-year custody in Judea gave Luke ample opportunity to interview key eyewitnesses (including James and Philip the evangelist).
 - 4. Luke appeals to "common knowledge" within the church, confirming that his readers were already familiar with these basic historical accounts.
- E. Internal evidence of early dating: The absence of sayings addressing major subsequent church controversies, such as Gentile circumcision.
- F. Minor variations between Gospels (e.g., Luke specifying the "right" hand was withered) are typical of ancient biographers and indicate independent preservation of memory.

III. The Canonical Gospels vs. "Lost" and Apocryphal/Gnostic Gospels

- A. Unanimous acceptance of the four canonical Gospels across the early Roman Empire by the second century, with the sole eccentric exception of Marcion.
- B. Apocryphal gospels are late second- and third-century fictional novels that lack accurate geographical, historical, and linguistic details of first-century Judea.
- C. Gnostic gospels (such as the Gospel of Thomas) are later collections of sayings carrying second-century Gnostic theology.
- D. Hypothetical source documents (such as Q) are academic reconstructions, not physically "lost" documents.
- E. The "Secret Gospel of Mark" is widely recognized as a twentieth-century forgery containing modern anachronisms and signs of a forger's tremor.

IV. Miracle Reports and Western Skepticism

- A. Miracle accounts are central to the Gospel narratives, comprising roughly one-third of the Gospel of Mark and twenty percent of the Book of Acts.
- B. Western intellectual skepticism originated during the Enlightenment (e.g., David Friedrich Strauss), claiming eyewitnesses never report dramatic miracles.
- C. Contradicting this premise, Strauss's own contemporary, Edward Morica, was medically healed of a diagnosed spinal condition under the ministry of Johann Christoph Blumhart.
- D. Methodological principle: Direct eyewitness testimony from credible observers must carry greater historical weight than retrospective, non-eyewitness skepticism.

V. Contemporary Medical and Eyewitness Miracle Documentation

A. Restorations of Sight and Hearing:

1. Dr. Rex Gardner documented the instant healing of a deaf girl suffering from irreversible auditory nerve damage.
2. Mozambican deaf and blind healings published in the Southern Medical Journal (2010) and studied by Candy Gunther Brown (Harvard University Press, 2012).
3. Lisa Larios: Teenager healed of a terminal, degenerative bone disease, with subsequent X-rays showing bone restoration.
4. Greg Spencer: Legally blind from macular degeneration, Spencer's sight was restored, as confirmed by follow-up evaluations by the Social Security Administration.

B. Structural and Organ Healings:

1. Bruce Van Natta: Crushed small intestine grew from 25 cm back to functional length (attested by pre- and post-radiology reports).
2. Carl Cockerell: Severe ankle fracture completely healed within eight days, as verified by separate, consecutive radiology reports.

C. Raising from the Dead / Resuscitation Accounts:

1. Historical instances (e.g., John Wesley's journal, 1742, documenting the revival of Mr. Myrick).
2. Medical professional testimonies:
 - a. Cardiologist Dr. Chauncey Crandall: Patient Jeff Markin flatlined for 40 minutes, resuscitated after prayer with no brain damage.
 - b. Dr. Sean George: Flatlined for 55 minutes, fully recovered with no brain damage and returned to his medical practice.
3. Global empirical reports:
 - a. India: A dying/dead child's revival sparked a massive people movement among the Nishi tribal population.
 - b. Mumbai: A boy named Vikram revived after drowning and being pronounced dead at a hospital, without hypothermic protective factors.
 - c. Philippines: A woman pronounced dead from liver cancer in 1984 revived in the morgue after 1 hour and 45 minutes; her severe abdominal swelling vanished.
 - d. Congo and Cameroon: Deacons Jeanne Mabilia (a trained midwife) and Papa Albert Besweswe documented instances of stillborn resuscitations and recoveries of children dead for several hours.