

Dr. Craig Keener, Matthew, Session 2, Reliability of the Gospels, Miracles 6-min. Video Overview

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Let's talk about the four Gospels. To billions of people, they're sacred scripture. To others, they're ancient mythology.

But either way, they are without a doubt some of the most influential and debated texts in all of human history. So, what happens if we just, for a moment, set aside the question of faith and look at them as historical documents? Well, that's what we're going to do. Let's investigate.

This really is the central question, isn't it? When we read the stories of Jesus of Nazareth, what are we actually looking at? Are these legends that just kind of grew and evolved over time, or are they rooted in real historical events reported by people who were actually there? It's a debate that's been raging for centuries. To dig into the history side of that argument, we're going to lean on the work of Dr. Craig Keener. He's a really prominent New Testament scholar.

Now, to be clear, our goal here isn't to settle the debate for good, but to really understand the specific evidence he puts forward for why we should take the gospels seriously as historical documents. So where do we even begin? Well, Keener's first line of evidence doesn't come from some new archaeological dig. Nope.

It comes from clues that are hidden in plain sight, right inside the text itself. You could almost call them linguistic and cultural fingerprints. Okay, so this is where it gets really interesting.

The gospels we have are written in Greek, but Keener argues they are absolutely packed with what are called Aramaisms. These are phrases and ways of speaking that are totally normal in Aramaic, but they sound clunky and a little weird in Greek. It's like when you translate something literally, and it doesn't quite capture the original feel.

This strongly suggests that the stories were first told in Aramaic, which, you know, just happens to be the language that Jesus and his followers actually spoke. Here is a fantastic example of what I mean. Back in ancient Babylon, if you wanted to describe something that was completely impossible, you might use a metaphor like this: getting an elephant through the eye of a needle.

Makes sense, right? But then you look at the gospels, and the saying uses a camel. Now, why the switch? Well, as Keener points out, in 1st-century Judea, the biggest, most massive animal anyone would ever see was a camel, not an elephant. He argues that this one tiny detail- camel instead of elephant- is like a geographical pin drop.

It grounds the text in a very specific time and a very specific place. It suggests it's not just some generic myth, but a local, culturally specific saying. And this isn't just a one-off thing.

Keener points to a whole pattern of these fingerprints. There's the title Son of Man, which, again, is kind of strange in Greek but super common in Aramaic. Or the metaphor of moving mountains.

He even shows how the theological debates in the gospels mirror the exact arguments that were happening between specific Jewish schools of thought right around Jesus' lifetime. Okay, so if the text itself feels like it's from that time and place, the next question is obvious. Who were the sources? Where did these stories come from? And that brings us to Keener's second major point, the eyewitness factor.

Now here's the crucial part. The earliest Christian writings we have, things like the letters from the Apostle Paul, identify the leaders of this new movement as the very people who had been there from the beginning. We're talking about Peter, John, even Jesus' own brother, James.

Keener's point is that they're authority. The reason people listened to them wasn't that they had some new philosophy. It was because they could say, "We were there."

"We saw it." And get this, at least one of the gospel writers, Luke, explicitly lays out his method for us. Right at the top of his account, he says, hey, I've gathered other sources.

I've interviewed the original eyewitnesses. I've carefully investigated everything and now I'm writing it all down in an orderly account. Keener argues that Luke is basically presenting his credentials, positioning himself as a careful historian of his day.

Then there's something that Keener calls a criterion of embarrassment. All four gospels agree that the first people to witness the resurrected Jesus were women. Now in that first-century Roman and Jewish culture, a woman's testimony was considered legally unreliable.

It held almost no weight in a court of law. So if you were just making up a story to try and convince people, why on earth would you make women your star witnesses? Keener argues you wouldn't. The only reason to include such a countercultural detail is that that's what the eyewitnesses claimed actually happened.

Okay, but let's be real. All of this evidence hits a massive roadblock for most of us today. The miracles.

Stories about healing the blind, raising the dead. I mean, doesn't that just scream mythology? This is the biggest objection, and Keener tackles it head-on. So the classic skeptical view has always been that miracle stories are just legends that get bigger and more exaggerated over time, long after the people who were there are gone.

But here's where Keener's research makes a really radical counter-argument. He claims that that whole assumption is actually contradicted by a massive, global phenomenon happening right now. Modern, credible eyewitness claims of medically inexplicable healings.

And how massive is his research on this? Well, he compiled his findings into a two-volume work. It's 1,100 pages long, just documenting both ancient and modern claims. And listen, this isn't just about vague stories.

Keener points to cases with actual medical documentation. We're talking about a 2010 study in the Southern Medical Journal on hearing restoration in Mozambique, with audiologist tests confirming the change. Or radiology reports showing an adult's small intestine more than doubling in length.

Or a legally blind man whose vision was restored, confirmed by his doctors. Keener's point is simple. Credible eyewitness claims to medically inexplicable events are not just an ancient thing.

They're still happening. So, after all of that, where does this leave us? Let's just step back for a second and recap the main pillars of Dr. Keener's case for the historical reliability of the Gospels. First, you've got the internal clues.

The language, the culture, those little fingerprints that plant the stories firmly in 1st-century Judea. Second, there's the eyewitness factor. The argument that the stories came directly from the people who lived through them.

And third, you have this really challenging modern parallel. The idea that the biggest objection, miracles, might not be as easy to dismiss as we thought thanks to modern, documented claims. And this brings us to a final, pretty provocative question.

We aren't here to give you the answer, but Keener's research really forces us to ask it. If events that seem to defy normal medical explanation are still being reported by credible eyewitnesses today, with documentation, how should that affect the way we read ancient historical texts, like the Gospels, that report very similar things? It's definitely a question worth thinking about.