

Are the New Testament Gospels reliable? What evidence is there that they are inspired? Does even asking these questions amount to a rejection of God's word?

During Paul's second missionary journey as described in Acts 16 and 17, converts from Berea proved to be more "noble-minded" than those in Thessalonica because "they received the word with all readiness of mind, and searched the Scriptures daily, whether these things were so" (Acts 17:11). The Scriptures here referred to are what we now call the Old Testament or Hebrew Bible. The passage in Acts implies that the Bereans accepted Paul's message only after they investigated his claim that the gospel about Jesus was supported by—and shed light upon—the Hebrew Scriptures (cf. Acts 17:2-3). The Bereans are commended for checking the holy writings for themselves, even though doing so must have meant a delay in accepting the gospel. Apparently, faith does not always mean belief that is unquestioning and immediate, although for the Bereans it did mean eager attention to the subject and openness to being persuaded.

Judging from Acts 17:11 it cannot be an offense simply to raise the question of evidence for and against Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, since the gospel delivered from Paul's lips to the Bereans' ears had no less claim to being the word of God than do the texts of the Gospels. For example, readers might look for historical information concerning the places, public figures, customs, and religious attitudes the Gospels describe. An analysis of that kind will yield a mixed result, proving mostly favorable to the Gospels and yet revealing certain historical problems or at least perplexing questions, as well.

Some believers see evidence for the gospels in the fulfillment by Jesus of Old Testament prophecies. Nevertheless, we lack testimony to these events other than by New Testament writers anxious to portray Jesus as the one who fulfilled the predictions of the prophets. Is there information other than the somewhat dissonant accounts of Matthew and Luke that Jesus was born in Bethlehem, in spite of his being known as "Jesus of Nazareth"? Can we verify that soldiers cast lots over Jesus' clothing or that other events took place as the evangelists relate them? Believers who take offense at such questions show that their offer of fulfillments as evidence is less than genuine; if we are not permitted to question New Testament writings in any way then evidence from prophecy is irrelevant.

Fulfillment of prophecy can, I believe, provide objective evidence for the truth of the Gospels, but our historical distance from the events of Jesus' earthly life means that the argument requires more than simply matching verses. The topic is complex enough to require its own treatment at a later time. To approach a discussion of Messianic prophecy by taking for granted either the evangelists' reliability or unreliability is not to do the subject justice.

Considering other types of evidence related to the Gospels, it would be dangerous to exclude the raw spiritual impact of these documents. Readers who are struck by the power of the Jesus story ought not to ignore it. What about those who are less impressed but maintain an open mind? Much remains for them to consider, a part of which it emerges when we dig more deeply into the subjective impression the Gospels make upon believers.

To be continued . . .