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## Is the New Testament reliable?

In July 2000 ABC News anchor Peter Jennings was in Israel broadcasting a television special on Jesus Christ. His program, “The Search for Jesus,” explored the question of whether the Jesus of the New Testament was historically accurate. Jennings featured opinions on the Gospel accounts from DePaul professor John Dominic Crossan, three of Crossan’s colleagues from the Jesus Seminar, and two other Bible scholars. (The Jesus Seminar is a group of scholars who debate Jesus’ recorded words and actions and then use red, pink, gray, or black beads to cast votes indicating how trustworthy they believe statements in the Gospels are.)<sup>1</sup>

Some of the comments were stunning. There on national TV Dr. Crossan not only cast doubt on more than 80 percent of Jesus’ sayings but also denied Jesus’ claims to divinity, his miracles, and his resurrection. Jennings clearly was intrigued by the image of Jesus presented by Crossan.

While Jennings may have an undiscerning eye when it comes to theology, he knows what makes for a good news program. And searching for true Bible history is always news, which is why every year *Time* and *Newsweek* go on a cover story quest for Mary, Jesus, Moses, or Abraham. Or—who knows?—maybe this year it will be “Bob: The Untold Story of the Missing 13th Disciple.”

This is entertainment, and so the investigation will never end nor yield answers, as that would eliminate future programming. Instead, those with radically different views are thrown together like an episode of *Survivor*, hopelessly convoluting the issue rather than bringing clarity.

A serious investigation of the issues related to the historical Jesus cannot be conducted through sound-bite analysis. And we're prepared to admit that neither is a magazine article.

But Jennings's report did focus on one issue that ought to be given some serious thought. Crossan implied that the original accounts of Jesus were embellished by oral tradition and were not written down until after the apostles were dead. Thus they are largely unreliable and fail to give us an accurate picture of the real Jesus. How are we to know if this is really true?

A serious investigation of the issues related to the historical Jesus cannot be conducted through sound-bite analysis. In this magazine we have tried to go beyond the sound bites and examine the evidence. But we're prepared to admit that a magazine article can only summarize scholars' conclusions. Yet, these summaries are sufficient to show that sound bites about Jesus frequently do more to distort historical truth than enlighten. There actually is considerable scholarly consensus regarding the Jesus of the New Testament.

## LOST IN TRANSLATION

So, what does the evidence show? We begin with two simple questions: When were the original documents of the New Testament written? And who wrote them?

The importance of these questions should be obvious. If the accounts of Jesus were written after the eyewitnesses were dead, no one could verify their accuracy. But if the New Testament accounts were written while the original apostles were still alive, then their authenticity could be established. Peter could say of a forgery in his name, "Hey, I didn't write that." And Matthew, Mark, Luke, or John could respond to questions or challenges aimed at their accounts of Jesus.

The New Testament writers claimed to be rendering eyewitness accounts of Jesus. The apostle Peter stated it this way in one letter: "We were not making up clever stories when we told you about the power of our Lord Jesus Christ and his coming again. We have seen his majestic splendor with our own eyes" (2 Peter 1:16).

# ANCIENT GREEK DOCUMENT COMPARISON (PARTIAL & COMPLETE MANUSCRIPTS)<sup>9</sup>

AUTHOR	BOOK	WRITTEN	EARLIEST COPIES	GAP FROM ORIGINAL	NUMBER OF COPIES
Homer	<i>Iliad</i>	800 B.C.	c.400 b.c.	400 yrs.	643
Herodotus	<i>History</i>	480–425 B.C.	c.900 a.d.	1,350 yrs.	8
Thucydides	<i>History</i>	460–400 B.C.	c.900 a.d.	1,300 yrs.	8
Plato		400 B.C.	c.900 a.d.	1,300 yrs.	7
Demosthenes		300 B.C.	c.1100 a.d.	1,400 yrs.	200
Caesar	<i>Galic Wars</i>	100–44 B.C.	c.900 a.d.	1,000 yrs.	10
Livy	<i>History of Rome</i>	59 B.C.–A.D.17	part—4th cent. most—10th cent.	400 yrs. 1,000 yrs.	1 partial 19 copies
Tacitus	<i>Annals</i>	A.D. 100	c.1100 a.d.	1,000 yrs.	20
Pliny Secundus	<i>Natural History</i>	A.D. 61–113	c.850 a.d.	750 yrs.	7
New Testament		A.D. 50–100	fragment—c.114 books—c.200 most—c.250 complete—c.325	+ 50 yrs. 100 yrs. 150 yrs. 225 yrs.	5,366

A major part of the New Testament is the apostle Paul’s 13 letters to young churches and individuals. Paul’s letters, dated between the mid 40s and the mid 60s (12 to 33 years after Christ), constitute the earliest witnesses to Jesus’ life and teaching. Will Durant wrote of the historical importance of Paul’s letters, “The Christian evidence for Christ begins with the letters ascribed to Saint Paul. . . . No one has questioned the existence of Paul, or his repeated meetings with Peter, James, and John; and Paul enviously admits that these men had known Christ in the flesh.”<sup>2</sup>

## BUT IS IT TRUE?

In books, magazines, and TV documentaries, the Jesus Seminar suggests the Gospels were written as late as a.d. 130 to 150 by unknown authors. If those later dates are correct, there would be a gap

of approximately 100 years from Christ’s death (scholars put Jesus’ death between a.d. 30 and 33). And since all the eyewitnesses would have been dead, the Gospels could only have been written by unknown, fraudulent authors.

So, what evidence do we have concerning when the Gospel accounts of Jesus were really written? The consensus of most scholars is that the Gospels were written by the apostles during the first century. They cite several reasons that we will review later in this article. For now, however, note that three primary forms of evidence appear to build a solid case for their conclusions:

- early documents from heretics such as Marcion and the school of Valentinus citing New Testament books, themes, and passages (see “Mona Lisa’s Smirk”)

- numerous writings of early Christian sources, such as Clement of Rome, Ignatius, and Polycarp
- discovered copies of Gospel fragments carbon-dated as early as a.d. 117

Biblical archaeologist William Albright concluded on the basis of his research that all the New Testament books were written while most of the apostles were still alive. He wrote, "We can already say emphatically that there is no longer any solid basis for dating any book after about A.D. 80, two full generations before the date of between A.D. 130 and 150 given by the more radical New Testament critics of today."<sup>3</sup> Elsewhere Albright put the writing of the entire New Testament at "very probably sometime between about 50 A.D. and 75 A.D."<sup>4</sup>

The notoriously skeptical scholar John A. T. Robinson dates the New Testament earlier than even most conservative scholars. In *Redating the New Testament* Robinson asserts that most of the New Testament was written between a.d. 40 and 65. That puts its writing as early as seven years after Christ lived.<sup>5</sup> If that is true, any historical errors would have been immediately exposed by both eyewitnesses and the enemies of Christianity.

So let's look at the trail of clues that takes us from the original documents to our New Testament copies today.

## WHO NEEDS KINKO'S?

The original writings of the apostles were revered. Churches studied them, shared them, carefully preserved them and stored them away like buried treasure.

But, alas, Roman confiscations, the passage of 2,000 years, and the second law of thermodynamics have taken their toll. So, today, what do we have of those original writings? Nothing. The original manuscripts are all gone (though each week Bible scholars,

no doubt, tune in to *Antiques Roadshow* hoping one might emerge).

Yet the New Testament is not alone in this fate; no other comparable document from ancient history exists today either. Historians aren't troubled by the lack of original manuscripts if they have reliable copies to examine. But are there ancient copies of the New Testament available, and if so, are they faithful to the originals?

As the number of churches multiplied, hundreds of copies were carefully made under the supervision of church leaders. Every letter was meticulously penned in ink on parchment or papyrus. And so, today, scholars can study the surviving copies (and the copies of copies, and the copies of copies of copies—you get it), to determine authenticity and arrive at a very close approximation of the original documents.

In fact, scholars studying ancient literature have devised the science of textual criticism to examine documents such as *The Odyssey*, comparing them with other ancient documents to determine their accuracy. More recently, military historian Charles Sanders augmented textual criticism by devising a three-part test that looks at not only the faithfulness of the copy but also the credibility of the authors. His tests are these:

1. The bibliographical test
2. The internal evidence test
3. The external evidence test<sup>6</sup>

Let's see what happens when we apply these tests to the early New Testament manuscripts.

"Luke is a historian of the first rank. . . . This author should be placed along with the very greatest historians. . . . Luke's history is unsurpassed in trustworthiness."

Sir William Ramsey,  
Archaeologist

# BIBLIOGRAPHICAL TEST

This test compares a document with other ancient history from the same period. It asks:

- How many copies of the original document are in existence?
- How large of a time gap is there between the original writings and the earliest copies?
- How well does a document compare with other ancient history?

## THE DISCOVERY OF CODEX SINAITICUS

In 1844 the German scholar Constantine Tischendorf was searching for New Testament manuscripts. By accident, he noticed a basket filled with old pages in the library of the monastery of St. Catherine at Mount Sinai. The German scholar was both elated and shocked. He had never seen Greek manuscripts that old. Tischendorf asked the librarian about them and was horrified to learn that the pages had been discarded to be used as fuel. Two basketloads of such papers had already been burned!

Tischendorf's enthusiasm made the monks wary, and they would not show him any more manuscripts. However, they did allow Tischendorf to take the 43 pages he had discovered.

Fifteen years later, Tischendorf returned to the Sinai monastery, this time with help from the Russian Tsar Alexander II. Once he was there, a monk took Tischendorf to his room and pulled down a cloth-wrapped manuscript that had been stored on a shelf with cups and dishes. Tischendorf immediately recognized the valuable remaining portions of the manuscripts he had seen earlier.

The monastery agreed to present the manuscript to the tsar of Russia as protector of the Greek Church. In 1833 the Soviet Union sold the manuscript to the British Museum for £100,000.

Codex Sinaiticus is one of the earliest complete manuscripts of the New Testament we have, and it is among the most important. Some speculate that it is one of the 50 Bibles the emperor Constantine commissioned Eusebius to prepare in the early fourth century. Codex Sinaiticus has been of enormous help to scholars in verifying the accuracy of the New Testament.

Imagine if we had only two or three copies of the original New Testament manuscripts. The sampling would be so small that we couldn't possibly verify accuracy.

On the other hand, if we had hundreds or even thousands, we could easily weed out the errors of poorly transmitted documents.

So, how well does the New Testament compare with other ancient writings with regard to both the number of copies and the time gap from the originals? More than 5,000 manuscripts of the New Testament exist today in the original Greek language.

When counting translations into other languages, the number is a staggering 24,000—dating from the 2<sup>ND</sup> to 4<sup>TH</sup> centuries.

Compare that with the second-best-documented ancient historical manuscript, Homer's *Iliad*, with 643 copies.<sup>7</sup> And remember that most ancient historical works have far fewer existing manuscripts than that one does (usually fewer than 10). New Testament scholar Bruce Metzger remarked, "In contrast with these figures [of other ancient manuscripts], the textual critic of the New Testament is embarrassed by the wealth of his material."<sup>8</sup>

## TIME GAP

Not only is the number of manuscripts significant, but so is the time gap between when the original was written and the date of the copy. Over the course of a thousand years of copying, there's no telling what a text could evolve into—I wonder what Jesus meant by "blessed are the cheesemakers." But over a hundred years, that's a different story.

German critic Ferdinand Christian Baur (1792–1860) once contended that John's Gospel was not written until about a.d. 160;

therefore, it could not have been written by John. This, if true, would have not only undermined John's writings but cast suspicion on the entire New Testament as well. But then, when a cache of New Testament papyri fragments were discovered in Egypt, among them was a fragment of the Gospel of John (specifically, P<sup>52</sup>: John 18:31-33) dated to roughly 25 years after John wrote the original.

Metzger explained, "Just as Robinson Crusoe, seeing but a single footprint in the sand, concluded that another human being, with two feet, was present on the island with him, so P<sup>52</sup> [the label of the fragment] proves the existence and use of the Fourth Gospel during the first half of the second century in a provincial town along the Nile far removed from its traditional place of composition (Ephesus in Asia Minor)."<sup>10</sup>

Find after find, archeology has unearthed copies of major portions of the New Testament dated to within 150 years of the originals.<sup>11</sup> Most other ancient documents have time gaps of from 400 to 1,400 years. For example, Aristotle's *Poetics* was written about 343 b.c., yet the earliest copy is dated a.d. 1100, with only five copies in existence. And yet no one is going in search of the historical Plato, claiming he was actually a fireman and not a philosopher.

In fact, there is a nearly complete copy of the Bible called, Codex Vaticanus, that was written only about 250 to 300 years after the apostles' original writing. The oldest known complete copy of the New Testament in ancient uncial script is named, Codex Sinaiticus, now housed at the British Museum.

Like Codex Vaticanus, it is dated from the fourth century. Vaticanus and Sinaiticus, going back to early in Christian history, are like other early biblical manuscripts in that they differ minimally from each other and give us a very good picture of what the original documents must have said.

Even critical scholar John A. T. Robinson has admitted, "The wealth of manuscripts, and above all the narrow interval of time between the writing and the earliest extant copies, make it by far the best attested text of any ancient writing in the world."<sup>12</sup>

Professor of law John Warwick Montgomery affirmed, "To be skeptical of the resultant text of the New Testament books is to allow all of classical antiquity to slip into obscurity, for no documents of the ancient period are as well attested bibliographically as the New Testament."<sup>13</sup>

The point is this: If the New Testament records were made and circulated so closely to the actual events, their portrayal of Jesus is most likely accurate. But external evidence is not the only way to answer the question of reliability; scholars also use internal evidence to answer this question.

## INTERNAL EVIDENCE TEST

Like good detectives, historians verify reliability by looking at internal clues. Such clues reveal motives of the authors and their willingness to disclose details and other features that could be verified. The key internal clues these scholars use to test for reliability are the following:

- consistency of eyewitness reports
- details of names, places, and events
- letters to individuals or small groups
- features embarrassing to the authors
- the presence of irrelevant or counter-productive material
- lack of relevant material<sup>14</sup>

Let's take as an example the movie *Friday Night Lights*. It purports to be based on historical events, but like so many movies loosely based on actual events, it leaves you constantly questioning, "Did things really happen that way?" So, how would you determine its historical reliability?

One clue would be the presence of irrelevant material. Let's say that in the middle of the film the coach, for no apparent reason, gets a phone call informing him that his mother has brain cancer. The event has nothing to do with the plot and is never mentioned again. The only explanation for the presence of this irrelevant fact would be that it actually happened and that the director had a desire to be historically accurate.

Another example, same movie. Following the flow of the drama, we want the Permian Panthers to win the state championship. But they don't. This feels counterproductive to the drama, and immediately we know it's there because in real life Permian lost the game. The presence of counterproductive material is also a clue to historical accuracy.

Finally, the use of actual towns and familiar landmarks such as the Houston Astrodome leads us to take as history those elements of the story, because they're too easy to corroborate or falsify.

These are but a few examples of how internal evidence leads either toward or away from the conclusion that a document is historically reliable. We'll look briefly at the internal evidence for the historicity of the New Testament.

## WHAT'S IN THERE

Several aspects of the New Testament help us determine its reliability based on its own content and qualities.

*Consistency.* Phony documents either leave out eyewitness reports or are inconsistent. So outright contradiction among the Gospels would prove that they contain errors. But at the same time, if each Gospel said exactly the same thing, it would raise suspicions of collusion. It would be like co-conspirators trying to agree on every detail of their scheme. Too much consistency is as doubtful as too little.

Eyewitnesses to a crime or an accident generally get the big events right but see it from different perspectives. Likewise, the four Gospels describe the events of Jesus' life from different perspectives. Yet, regardless of these perspectives, Bible scholars are amazed at the consistency of their accounts and the clear picture of Jesus and his teaching they put together with their complementary reports.

*Details.* Historians love details in a document because they make it easy to verify reliability. Paul's letters are filled with details. And the Gospels abound with them. For example, both Luke's Gospel and his Book of Acts were written to a nobleman named Theophilus, who was undoubtedly a well-known individual at the time.

If these writings had been mere inventions of the apostles, phony names, places, and events would have quickly been spotted by their enemies, the Jewish and Roman leaders. This would have become the Watergate of the first century. Yet many of the New Testament details have been proved true by independent verification. Classical historian Colin Hemer, for example, "identifies 84 facts in the last 16 chapters of Acts that have been confirmed by Archaeological research."<sup>15</sup>

In the previous few centuries, skeptical Bible scholars attacked both Luke's authorship and its dating, asserting that it was written in the second century by an unknown author. Archaeologist Sir William Ramsey was convinced they were right, and he began to investigate. After extensive research, the archaeologist reversed his opinion. Ramsey conceded, "Luke is a historian of the first rank. . . . This author should be placed along with the very greatest historians. . . . Luke's history is unsurpassed in respect of its trustworthiness."<sup>16</sup>



Acts chronicles Paul's missionary voyages, listing places he visited, people he saw, messages he delivered, and persecution he suffered. Could all these details have been faked? Roman historian A. N. Sherwin-White wrote, "For Acts the confirmation of historicity is overwhelming. . . . Any attempt to reject its basic historicity must now appear absurd. Roman historians have long taken it for granted."<sup>17</sup>

From the Gospel accounts to Paul's letters, the New Testament authors openly described details, even citing the names of individuals who were alive at the time. Historians have verified at least thirty of these names.<sup>18</sup>

*Letters to small groups.* Most forged texts are from documents both general and public in nature, like this magazine article (no doubt countless forgeries are already circulating on the black market). Historical expert Louis Gottschalk notes that personal letters intended for small audiences have a high probability of being reliable.<sup>19</sup> Which category do the New Testament documents fall into?

Well, some of them were clearly intended to be circulated widely. Yet large portions of the New Testament consist of personal letters written to small groups and individuals. These documents, at least, would not be considered prime candidates for falsification.

*Embarrassing features.* Most writers don't want to publicly embarrass themselves. Historians have therefore observed that documents containing embarrassing revelations about the authors are generally to be trusted. What did the New Testament authors say about themselves?

Surprisingly, the authors of the New Testament presented themselves as all too frequently dimwitted, cowardly, and faithless. For example, consider Peter's threefold denial of Jesus or the disciples' arguments over which of them was the greatest—both stories recorded in the Gospels. As respect for the apostles was crucial in the early church, inclusion of this kind of material doesn't make sense unless the apostles were reporting truthfully.<sup>20</sup>

In *The Story of Civilization*, Will Durant wrote about the apostles, "These men were hardly of the type that one would have chosen to remold the world. The Gospels realistically differentiate their characters, and honestly expose their faults."<sup>21</sup>

*Counterproductive or irrelevant material.*

The Gospels tell us that the empty tomb of Jesus was discovered by a woman, even though in Israel the testimony of women was considered to be virtually worthless and was not even admissible in court.

Jesus' mother and family are recorded as stating their belief that he had lost his mind. Some of Jesus' final words on the cross are said to have been "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" And so goes the list of incidents recorded in the New Testament that are counterproductive if the intent of the author were anything but the accurate transmission of the life and teachings of Jesus Christ.

*Lack of relevant material.* It is ironic (or perhaps logical) that few of the major issues facing the first-century church—the Gentile mission, spiritual gifts, baptism, leadership—were addressed directly in the recorded words of Jesus. If his followers were simply generating the material to encourage the growing church, it is inexplicable why they would not have made up instructions from Jesus on these issues. In one case, the apostle Paul flatly stated about a certain subject, "On this we have no teaching from the Lord."

## EXTERNAL EVIDENCE TEST

The third and final measure of a document's reliability is the external evidence test, which asks, "Do historical records outside the New Testament confirm its reliability?" So, what did non-Christian historians say about Jesus Christ?

“Overall, at least seventeen non-Christian writings record more than fifty details concerning the life, teachings, death, and resurrection of Jesus, plus details concerning the early church.”<sup>22</sup> This is astounding, considering the lack of other history we possess from this time period. Jesus is mentioned by more sources than the conquests of Caesar during this same period. It is even more astounding since these confirmations of New Testament details date from 20 to 150 years after Christ, “quite early by the standards of ancient historiography.”<sup>23</sup>

The reliability of the New Testament is further substantiated by over 36,000 extra-biblical Christian documents (quotes from church leaders of the first three centuries) dating as early as ten years after the last writing of the New Testament<sup>24</sup>). If all the copies of the New Testament were lost, you could reproduce it from these other letters and documents with the exception of a few verses.<sup>25</sup>

Boston University professor emeritus Howard Clark Kee concludes, “The result of the examination of the sources outside the New Testament that bear ... on our knowledge of Jesus is to confirm his historical existence, his unusual powers, the devotion of his followers, the continued existence of the movement after his death ... and the penetration of Christianity ... in Rome itself by the later first century.”<sup>26</sup>

The external evidence test thus builds on the evidence provided by other tests. In spite of the conjecture of a few radical skeptics, the New Testament portrait of the real Jesus Christ is virtually smudgeproof. Although there are a few dissenters such as the Jesus Seminar, the consensus of experts, regardless of their religious beliefs, confirms that the New Testament we read today faithfully represents both the words and events of Jesus’ life.

Clark Pinnock, professor of interpretations at McMaster Divinity College, summed it up well when he said, “There exists no document from the ancient world witnessed by so excellent a set of textual and historical testimonies. ... An honest [person] cannot dismiss a source of this kind. Skepticism regarding the historical credentials of Christianity is based upon an irrational basis.”<sup>27</sup>

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> According to [jesusseminar.org](http://jesusseminar.org), “The Jesus Seminar was organized under the auspices of the Westar Institute to renew the quest of the historical Jesus. At the close of debate on each agenda item, Fellows of the Seminar vote, using colored beads to indicate the degree of authenticity of Jesus’ words or deeds.”

<sup>2</sup> Will Durant, *Caesar and Christ*, vol. 3 of *The Story of Civilization* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1972), 555.

<sup>3</sup> William F. Albright, *Recent Discoveries in Biblical Lands* (New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1955), 136.

<sup>4</sup> William F. Albright, “Toward a More Conservative View,” *Christianity Today*, January 18, 1993, 3.

<sup>5</sup> John A. T. Robinson, *Redating the New Testament*, quoted in Norman L. Geisler and Frank Turek, *I Don’t Have Enough Faith to Be an Atheist* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2004), 243.

<sup>6</sup> McDowell, 33-68.

<sup>7</sup> McDowell, 34.

<sup>8</sup> Bruce M. Metzger, *The Text of the New Testament* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 34.

<sup>9</sup> McDowell, 38.

<sup>10</sup> Metzger, 39.

<sup>11</sup> Metzger, 36-41.

<sup>12</sup> John A. T. Robinson, *Can We Trust the New Testament?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), 36.

<sup>13</sup> Quoted in McDowell, 36.

<sup>14</sup> J. P. Moreland, *Scaling the Secular City* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000), 134-157.

<sup>15</sup> Quoted in Geisler and Turek, 256.

<sup>16</sup> Quoted in McDowell, 61.

<sup>17</sup> Quoted in McDowell, 64.

<sup>18</sup> Geisler and Turek, 269.

<sup>19</sup> J. P. Moreland, 136-137.

<sup>20</sup> Geisler and Turek, 276.

<sup>21</sup> Durant, 563.

<sup>22</sup> Gary R. Habermas, “Why I Believe the New Testament is Historically Reliable,” *Why I am a Christian*, eds Norman L. Geisler & Paul K. Hoffman (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2001), 150.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Metzger, 86.

<sup>26</sup> Quoted in McDowell, 135.

<sup>27</sup> Quoted in Josh McDowell, *The Resurrection Factor* (San Bernardino, CA: Here’s Life Publishers, 1981), 9.