

Reliability of the New Testament

Can we Trust it?

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The Question: Since we do not have the original writings from the New Testament authors, how dependable are the writings we do have? Can we be sure that what we have today in the New Testament is what the original authors intended and can we be sure that what was written actually happened?

Military historian, Professor C. Sanders, sets forth three tests necessary to determine the trustworthiness of all ancient documents: Bibliographical Test, Internal Test, and External Test. (Sanders, p. 143ff)

1. Bibliographical Test

Since we do not have the original books or letters, how reliable are the copies we have in regard to two questions: How many copies do we have? How long was the span from the original letter to the copies we have?

Author	Book	Date Written	Earliest Copies	Time Gap	No. of copies
Homer	Illiad	800 B.C.	400 B.C.	400 yrs	643
Herodotus	History	480 – 425 B.C.	A.D. 900	1,350 yrs	8
Thucydides	History	460 – 400 B.C.	A.D. 900	1,300 yrs	8
Plato	Tetralogies	427 - 347 B.C.	A.D. 900	1,200 yrs	7
Demosthenes		383 - 322 B.C.	A.D. 1100	1,300 yrs	200
Caesar	Gallic Wars	100 – 44 B.C.	A.D. 900	1,000 yrs	10
Livy	History of Rome	59 B.C. - A.D. 17	4 th Cent. (partial) Mostly 10 th cent.	400 yrs 1,000 yrs	1 partial 19 copies
Tacticus	Annals	A.D. 100	A.D. 1100	1,000 yrs	20
Pliny Secundus	Natural History	A.D. 61 – 113	A.D. 850	750 yrs	7
Aristotle		384 – 322 B.C.	A.D. 1100	1,400 yrs	49
New Testament		A. D. 40 – 100	114 (fragment) 200 (books) 250 (most of N.T.) 325 (complete N.T.)	+50 yrs 100 yrs 150 yrs 225 yrs	5,366 Greek 19,284 (non - greek)

Conclusion: Noted lawyer, professor, and theologian John Warwick Montgomery says that “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 document of the ancient period are as well attested bibliographically as the New Testament.” (Montgomery, p. 29)

2. Internal Evidence

The Rule: One must listen to the claims of the documents under analysis and not assume fraud or error unless the author disqualifies himself by contradictions or known factual inaccuracies.

Test: Is the New Testament free of known contradictions?

The authors of the New Testament wrote as eyewitnesses or with firsthand information. (Luke 1:1-3, 2 Peter 1:16, 1 John 1:3, Acts 2:22, Luke 3:1, 1 Cor. 15:3 – 8, Acts 26:24 – 26) They shared facts that happened in public.

Jews and Greeks alike wanted Jesus dead and gone – all that needed to be done was to bring up any false testimonies and they would have destroyed the Christian movement.

For years people have tried to prove error in the Bible. However, over and over again, objections have been fully resolved.

Most objections are a result of inconsistent standards being used for understanding apparent discrepancies. Josh McDowell shares a summary of principles for understanding apparent discrepancies in the Bible. (McDowell, 1999, p. 47)

1. The unexplained is not necessarily unexplainable.

When a scientist comes upon a problem in study, he or she does not give up on the whole study. Only recently have scientists been able to explain meteors, eclipses, and earthquakes. Scientists keep studying until they are able to understand. In the same way, the

Bible student keeps studying. Just because something cannot be explained today does not make it false.

2. Fallible interpretations do not mean fallible revelation.

Just because someone misinterpreted what was said, does not mean the Scripture is not trustworthy. “Slavery” in the Bible is not the same as “slavery” we practiced decades ago and therefore should never have been used as a proof text for slavery.

3. Understand the context of the passage.

You can take anything out of context and make it say what you want it to say. Out of the context, the Bible says there is “No God.” But, if you view the whole verse the real meaning is shown. Ps 14:1... “The fool has said in his heart there is no God.” Jesus said, “Give to him who asks you” does this mean we should give a gun to a child? No. Context is imperative.

4. Interpret difficult passages in light of clear ones.

Some passages are hard to understand. Sometimes the difficulty is due to their obscurity. For example, grace and works, choice and predestination.

5. Don't base teaching on obscure passages.

In 1 Cor. 15:29 Paul speaks of those who were being, “baptized for the dead.” We are not sure what Paul was speaking about. Mormons took this to mean we could baptize someone on behalf of the dead. However, the rest of scripture is clear that it can NOT mean we can baptize someone of behalf of the dead. When a given passage is not clear, never conclude that it means something that opposes another plain teaching of scripture. The rule of thumb is, “the main things are the plain things, and the plain things are the main things.”

6. The Bible is a human book with human characteristics.

The Bible claims that God used human personalities to receive and communicate eternal truths. Therefore, expression of speech (forgive 70 x 70, pluck out your eye if it offends you) should not be taken literally.

7. *Just because a report is incomplete does not mean it is false.*
Mark 5:1-20 and Luke 8:26 - 39 speak of one demoniac, while Matthew 8:28 - 34 speaks of two. The point was not the numbers but that God healed the demoniac. The accounts are not contradictory but complimentary.

8. *New Testament citations of the Old Testament do not always need to be exact.*

Just as in our day there is more than one translation of the Bible. New Testament believers often cited the Septuagint (the Greek translation of the Old Testament) which gave a little different wording of the same text.

9. *The Bible does not necessarily approve of all its record.*

Just because something is in the Bible doesn't mean it is commended by the Bible. Just because Rahab (Josh 2:4) lied does not mean that God is ok with lying anymore than God is ok with adultery because David slept with Bathsheba (2 Sam. 11:4). The Bible is full of real people making real mistakes – Scripture does not try to “protect” its heroes.

10. *The Bible uses non-technical, everyday language.*

Just because a term in the Bible is not scientific does not mean the term is inaccurate. For Dinosaurs, the Bible uses “Dragons” or “Mammoths”. To explain the revolving earth the Bible uses, “sun running through its circuit.”

11. *The Bible uses both round numbers and exact numbers.*

12. *Note when the Bible uses different literary devices. Context determines if the word is literal or figurative.*

13. *General statements don't necessarily mean universal promises.*

There are verses that offer general truths. Prov. 16:7 states, “When a man’s ways please the Lord, He makes even His enemies be at peace with Him.” This does not mean you will never have problems with your enemies – it is a general principle.

14. *Later revelations supersede previous revelation.*

God did not always tell everything at once, nor did He always lay down the same conditions for every period of time. A change of revelation does not mean a mistake.

A parent might tell a child to eat with fingers when he or she is young; when the child gets older, he or she is told to eat with a spoon, and eventually eat with a fork. We call this progressive revelation. Under Moses, followers of God were to sacrifice animals for peoples sin. Christ has since made the perfect sacrifice.

3. External Test

When we look at the External Test, we are asking the question, “Do other historical materials confirm or deny the internal testimony provided by the documents?”

- a) **Regarding Roman adverse witnesses**, see *Historical Jesus* by Jason Janich. This can be downloaded at (<http://newlife906.com/storage/Historical%20Jesus.pdf>)
- b) **Did any early authors mention the writings of the New Testament?** Do the writings of the early Christians agree with what we have today?
 - i) *Eusebius*, in his *Ecclesiastical History III. 39*, preserves writings of Papias, bishop of Heirapolis (AD 130) in which Papius records sayings of “the Elder” (the apostle John)

The Elder used to say: “Mark having been the interpreter of Peter, wrote down accurately all that he (Peter) mentioned, whether sayings or doings of Christ, not, however, in order. For he was neither a hearer nor a companion of the Lord; but afterwards, as I said, he accompanied Peter, who adapted his teachings as necessity required, not as though he was making a compilation of the sayings of the Lord. So then Mark made no mistake writing down in this way some things

as he (Peter) mentioned them; for he paid attention to this one thing, not to omit anything that he had heard, not to include any false abatements among them.” (McDowell, 1999, p. 53)

Papias also comments about the Gospel of Matthew: “Matthew recorded the oracles in the Hebrew.”

- ii) *Irenaeus*, Bishop of Lyons (A.D. 180), who was a student of Polycarp, Bishop of Smyrna: Martyred in A.D. 156, had been a Christian for 86 yrs, and was a disciple of John the Apostle. He wrote: “So firm is the ground upon which these Gospels rest, that the very heretics themselves bear witness to them, and, starting from these (documents) each one of them endeavors to establish his own particular doctrine.” (*Against heresies III*)

Irenaeus goes on to explain the four Pillars of the Gospels, “Matthew published his gospel among the Hebrews in their own tongue, when Peter and Paul were preaching the gospel in Rome and founding the churches there. After their departure, Mark, the disciples and interpreter of Peter, himself handed down to us in writing the substance of Peter’s preaching. Luke, the follower of Paul, set down in a book the gospel preached by his teacher. Then John, the disciple of the Lord, who also leaned on His breast (this is a reference to John 13:25 and 21:20), himself produced his Gospel, while he was living at Ephesus in Asia. (*Against heresies III*) (McDowell, 1999, p. 54)

- iii) *Clement of Rome* (A.D. 95) uses scriptures as a reliable and authentic source.
- iv) *Tatian* (c. A.D. 170) organized the Scriptures in order to put them in the first “harmony of the Gospels,” called the Diatessaron. (Kirby)

v) *Josephus* (A.D. 37 – A.D. 100) was a Pharisee who wrote several great works. In his writings Josephus give some detail to the NT writings.

- (1) *Discusses James, the brother of Jesus, being stoned* (Josephus, pp. book 20, chapter 9, section 1)
- (2) *Discusses the Martyrdom of John the Baptist.* (Josephus, pp. Book 18, chapter 5, section 2)
- (3) *Discusses Jesus and His mission.* (Josephus, pp. Book 18, chapter 3, section 3)

The quotations from the NT manuscripts are so numerous and so widespread by the early church fathers that if there did not exist any NT manuscripts, one could be reproduced from the writings of the early church fathers. This validates the transmission and authority of the NT manuscripts. (Is the New Testament Historical?)

Writer	Gospels	Acts	Pauline Epistles	General Epistles	Revelation	Total
Justin Martyr (133 AD)	268	10	43	6	3 (266 allusions)	330
Irenaeus (180 AD)	1038	194	499	23	65	1819
Clement (150-212 AD)	1107	44	1127	207	11	2406
Origen (185-253 AD)	9231	349	7778	399	165	17,992
Tertullian (166-220 AD)	3822	502	2609	120	205	7258
Hippolytus (170-235 AD)	734	42	387	27	188	1378
Eusebius (324 AD)	3258	211	1592	88	27	5176
Grand Total	19,368	1352	14,035	870	664	36,289

c) What about Archaeology?

Do Archaeology finds confirm or contradict the New Testament written reports? The fact is that there are numerous archaeological finds that have verified the reliability of the NT. Nelson Glueck, renowned Jewish archaeologist wrote, “It may be stated categorically that no archaeological discovery has ever controverted (contradicted) a biblical reference.” (McDowell, 1999, p. 61)

Sir William Ramsay, regarded as one of the greatest archaeologists to have ever lived went out to disprove the historical reliability of the Bible. As he began his research in Asia Minor, he was convinced of the reliability of the Bible!!

Matthias Tomb



A first century stone coffin is marked with the sign of the cross on its lid and a single name on its front: "Matthias". Scholars believe this may be the final resting place of one of Jesus' twelve Apostles. (Acts 1:23)

Erastus Inscription



Romans 16:23 Gaius, host to me and to the whole church, greets you. Erastus, the city treasurer greets you, and Quartus, the brother. NASB

The text mentions a city treasurer, Erastus. During excavations of Corinth in 1929 a pavement was found inscribed, “Erastus, curator of public buildings, laid this pavement at his own expense.”

The Pavement



Game markings of Roman soldiers in the floor of the Antonia fortress. Today this is at a basement level, which was the level of the streets in Jesus' time

For centuries there has been no record of the court where Jesus was tried by Pilate. (Named Gabbatha or the Pavement, John 19:13). William F. Albright, in *The Archaeology of Palestine*, shows that this court was the court of the Tower of Antonia, the Roman military headquarters in Jerusalem. It was left buried when the city was rebuilt in the time of Hadrian, and was not discovered until recently.

Pool of Bethesda



The Pool of Bethesda, another site with no record except in the New Testament, can now be identified “with fair measure of certainty in the northeast quarter of the old city in the first century A.D., where traces of it were discovered in the course of

excavations near the Church of St. Anne in 1888. (Bruce, ACNT, as cited in McDowell, 1999, p. 66)

Yohanan Ben Ha'galgol - crucifixion victim



In 1968, an ancient burial site was uncovered in Jerusalem containing about 35 bodies. It was determined that most of these had suffered violent deaths in the Jewish uprising against Rome in ad 70. One of these was a man named Yohaanan ben Ha'galgol. He was about 24 to 28 years old, had a cleft palate, and

7in. nails driven through both his feet. The feet had been turned outward so that the square nail could be hammered through at the heel, just inside the Achilles tendon. This would have bowed the legs outward as well so that they could not have been used for support on the cross. The nail had gone through a wedge of acacia wood, then through the heels and into an olive wood beam.

There was also evidence that similar spikes had been put between the two bones of each lower arm. These had caused the upper bones to be worn smooth as the victim repeatedly raised and lowered himself to breathe. Crucifixion victims had to lift themselves to free the chest muscles and, when they grew too weak to do so, died of suffocation.

Yohanan's legs were crushed by a blow, consistent with the common use of the Roman crucifragium (John 19:31-3). Each of these details confirms the New Testament descriptions of Crucifixion. (Geisler, BECA, 48, as cited in McDowell, 1999, p.67)

Pilate inscription



It wasn't long ago when many scholars were questioning the actual existence of a Roman Governor with the name Pontius Pilate, the procurator who ordered Jesus' crucifixion. In June 1961, Italian archaeologists led by Dr. Frova were excavating an ancient Roman amphitheatre near Caesarea-on-the-Sea (Maritima) and uncovered this interesting limestone block. On the face is a monumental inscription which is part of a larger dedication to Tiberius Caesar which clearly says that it was from "Pontius Pilate, Prefect of Judea." (Dockery, FBI, 360, as cited in McDowell, 1999, p.67)

The Tomb of Caiaphas



From the Caiaphas family tomb in Jerusalem, this ossuary bears the inscription "Yehosef bar Qafa: (Joseph, son of Caiaphas), and it is dated to the Second Temple Period. Caiaphas is the name of the High Priest who presided over the trial of Jesus (Matthew 26:3,57) (Specter, 1992)

New Testament Coins



Tribute penny: (Matt. 22:17-21; Mark 12:13-17; Luke 20:20 – 26)

The Greek word for the coin shown to Jesus in these passages is “denarius,” a small silver coin which carried the image of Caesar on one side. Its value was equal to one day’s wages for an average worker in Palestine.



Thirty pieces of silver: (Matt. 26:14-15) The amount was probably thirty silver shekels. Originally a shekel was a measure of weight equaling approximately two-fifths of an ounce. It later developed into a silver coin of the same weight.



Widow's mite: (Mark 12:41-44; Luke 21:1-4) The "widow's mite". The passage in questions reads (in NIV): "two very small copper coins, worth only a fraction of a penny." The first words translate the Greek "lepta" which is the smallest Greek copper coin; the second translates the Greek word "quadrans" which is the smallest Roman copper coin. Knowing the minute monetary value of these coins gives event greater meaning to the message of the parable. (Dockery, FBI 362, as cited in McDowell p. 68)

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