



# The Reliability of the New Testament



## Is Our New Testament Authentic?

- ❑ Some people think the New Testament (NT) has been significantly changed since its original writing. But the evidence refutes this idea.

### *Number of Manuscripts*

- ❑ There are roughly 5,500 Greek manuscripts (copies) of the NT, either in fragments or in whole.<sup>1</sup> Some of the most significant manuscripts are:
  - 📖 John Rylands Fragment (c. AD 125) – papyrus contains John 18:31-33, 37-38 (oldest)
  - 📖 Bodmer Papyri (c. AD 200) – papyrus contains most of John and Luke along with Jude, 1 and 2 Peter.
  - 📖 Chester Beatty Papyri (c. AD 200) – papyrus contains major portions of the NT
  - 📖 Codex Vaticanus (c. AD 325-350) – vellum contains nearly all of the NT and Greek OT
  - 📖 Codex Sinaiticus (c. AD 340) – vellum contains whole NT and portion of Old Testament
  - 📖 Codex Alexandrius (c. AD 450) – vellum contains whole NT
- ❑ No other ancient book has so many manuscripts. Homer's *Iliad* (9<sup>th</sup> century BC) is second with 643 manuscripts. Caesar's *Gallic War* (c. AD 50) has only 9 or 10 good copies.

### *Relative Date of Manuscripts*

- ❑ Assuming the New Testament was originally written between AD 45 and 100, most of the above manuscripts were copied 50 to 300 years after the original. This is significantly less time than other ancient manuscripts, which are at least 700 to 1000 years after the original.

### *Accuracy of Manuscripts*

- ❑ Though the manuscripts are numerous and widely distributed, textual variance (difference) between the copies is insignificant. Overall, 99% of the NT can be reconstructed beyond any reasonable doubt, and no Christian theological teaching is endangered by textual variation.
- ❑ Considering the quantity and dating of ancient manuscripts, and their wide geographical distribution, the NT “has far and away better attestation than any other ancient work.”<sup>2</sup>

## Is the New Testament Reliable?

In response to this question, let us ask some more specific questions, as follows:



### *Were the Original Authors Able to Record Reliable History?*<sup>3</sup>

- ❑ The human authors of the New Testament were either eyewitnesses of the events or had direct access to eyewitness accounts of the events. The authors were *near* enough to the actual events to record accurate history. The historical books include the following:

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<sup>1</sup> Paul Rhodes Eddy & Gregory A. Boyd, *The Jesus Legend: A Case for the Historical Reliability of the Synoptic Jesus Tradition* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 382.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 384.

<sup>3</sup> These questions focus on human ability. It should be noted that Christians believe that the Bible is “God-breathed” (2 Timothy 3:16). The authors were “carried along by the Holy Spirit” in their writing (2 Peter 1:21). Nonbelievers are not usually impressed by such claims. However, there is good reason to believe in the reliability of the New Testament even if the only evidence considered is on the human level.

- 📖 Matthew – written by the apostle Matthew (AD 60s)
  - 📖 Mark – written by Mark, probably informed by the apostle Peter (late AD 50s to mid 60s) – usually considered to be earliest Gospel
  - 📖 Luke – written by Luke, a traveling companion of the apostle Paul (early AD 60s)
  - 📖 John – written by the apostle John (perhaps AD 80s)
  - 📖 Acts – also written by Luke (early AD 60s)
- ❑ The exact dating of these books is disputed, but most scholars agree that all of them were written in the first century. Since Christ died around AD 30, these books were written within one or two generations after the events took place.<sup>4</sup>
  - ❑ Though the NT letters (epistles) are not considered historical narratives, they are set in history and make constant reference to historical events. In the apostle Paul’s letters (written between AD 49 and AD 67), the most significant details of Jesus’ life are presented, and are thoroughly consistent with the history recorded in the Gospels.

### *Did the Original Authors Intend to Record Reliable History?*



- ❑ Both the genre and expressed purpose of the writings indicate the New Testament authors *intended* to record reliable history.
  - 📖 Luke: “Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed down to us by those who were from the first eyewitnesses and servants of the word. Therefore, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, it seemed good also to me to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught” (*Luke 1:1-4, NIV*).
  - 📖 John: “The man who saw it has given testimony, and his testimony is true. He knows that he tells the truth, and he testifies so that you also may believe” (*John 19:35, NIV*).
  - 📖 Peter: “We did not follow cleverly invented stories when we told you about the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty” (*2 Peter 1:16*).
- ❑ Accepting the original authors’ *ability* and *intent* to tell the truth, any misrepresentation would need to be the result of self-delusion or outright deceptiveness. However, there are too many different authors, witnesses, and independent events to accept some type of collective delusion. And there is no evidence that the authors were dishonest or deceptive.

### *Did the Original Authors Succeed in Recording Reliable History?*



- ❑ Scholars use various criteria for evaluating the historicity (historical authenticity) of events or sayings. It is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss modern Biblical criticism and the more recent “criteria for authenticity” – subjects that are addressed in the sources listed in the Bibliography. Suffice it to say, the historicity of the NT stands firm amidst critical scholarship.
- ❑ The New Testament writings were circulated during the lifetime of those who could dispute them. The shortness of time between the events and the writings, along with the presence of living eyewitnesses, would hinder significant deviation from the truth.

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<sup>4</sup> Two recent books are especially helpful in addressing the reliability and stability of eyewitness accounts and their oral recitation and transmission over time, based on recent studies of orally dominant cultures. These books are *The Jesus Legend* by Eddy & Boyd, and *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses* by Richard Bauckham. See the bibliography.

### Do Non-Christian Writings Support the Reliability of the New Testament?

- ❑ Various details of New Testament history are affirmed by Jewish and Roman sources, including the following: (1) Jewish historian Josephus (AD 37-100); (2) the Jewish *Talmud* (c. AD 400-500); (3) Roman historian Tacitus (c. AD 55-117); (4) Roman historian Suetonius (c. AD 70-160); (5) governor Pliny the Younger (c. AD 61-113); and others. “At least seventeen non-Christian writings record more than fifty details concerning the life, teachings, death, and resurrection of Jesus, plus details concerning the earliest church.”<sup>5</sup>
- ❑ “Even if we did not have the New Testament or Christian writings, we would still be able to conclude ... that: (1) Jesus was a Jewish teacher; (2) many people believed that he performed healings and exorcisms; (3) he was rejected by the Jewish leaders; (4) he was crucified under Pontius Pilate in the reign of Tiberius; (5) despite this shameful death, his followers, who believed that he was still alive, spread beyond Palestine so that there were multitudes of them in Rome by AD 64; (6) all kinds of people from the cities and countryside – men and women, slave and free – worshiped him as God by the beginning of the second century.”<sup>6</sup>



### Does Archeology Support the Reliability of the New Testament?

- ❑ “Discovery after discovery has established the accuracy of innumerable details, and has brought increased recognition to the value of the Bible as a source of history” (respected archeologist William F. Albright).<sup>7</sup>

### What About the Seeming “Contradictions” in the New Testament?

- ❑ Some people question the reliability of the Bible because of supposed contradictions. However, many of these people have not bothered to do their own research. Most of the “contradictions” can be removed when the text is studied in context.<sup>8</sup> Some difficulties remain, but every difficulty has been addressed by competent Bible scholars. If you have a question about an apparent contradiction or inaccuracy, seek an explanation. (Contact Jay.)

### What About the Miracles Recorded in the New Testament?

- ❑ Some reject the historicity of the Bible miracles because of their own naturalistic presuppositions. In this case, their objection takes the form: “It cannot happen, so it did not happen!” Thus the fundamental question is not “Is the Bible reliable?” but rather “Are miracles possible?” This is a philosophical question, which must be adequately addressed *prior* to a fair evaluation of the historical accuracy of the Bible.



<sup>5</sup> Gary R. Habermas, “Why I Believe the New Testament is Historically Reliable,” in *Why I Am a Christian*, ed. Norman L. Geisler and Paul K. Hoffman (Grand Rapids, Baker, 2001), 148.

<sup>6</sup> Edwin M. Yamauchi, “Jesus Outside the New Testament: What is the Evidence?” in *Jesus Under Fire*, ed. Michael J. Wilkins and J. P. Moreland (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995), 221-222.

<sup>7</sup> Since Albright’s statement, there has been significant archeological activity that has continued to affirm the historical credibility and reliability of the Bible. In a tone of academic objectivity, Eddy & Boyd say, “it seems to us that archeological discoveries, especially over the last few decades, have on the whole served to enhance our confidence in the general reliability of the Gospels” (Eddy & Boyd, 447). Archeology also helps confirm the historical accuracy of the Old Testament. See the pamphlet “Archeology and the Bible” in the ICF library.

<sup>8</sup> This context includes the orally dominate culture in which the Gospels arose. Eddy & Boyd claim that our “post-Gutenberg literary paradigm” imposes inappropriate standards on the texts relative to exact similarity and verbatim representation (see Chapter 10 of their book).

## Conclusion

The *authenticity* of the New Testament documents is firmly established, and the *historicity* of the New Testament is also established on firm historical grounds, especially when compared to other ancient documents. Therefore, the New Testament, which contains the words and claims of Jesus and the apostles, deserves serious consideration. And though it is beyond our investigation of the *historical* reliability of the New Testament documents, the next logical step is *belief*.

## Is the Bible the "Word of God?"

- ❑ Christians believe that the Bible is the "Word of God." Though human authors recorded the words of the Bible, God was the Divine Author. In other words, God guided the writers such that the final product of the Bible is what God wanted written down. As the Word of God, it is trustworthy and authoritative. Is this belief reasonable?



### *One Argument - Based on Acceptance of the Reliability of the New Testament*<sup>9</sup>

1. The New Testament documents are historically accurate.
2. These documents accurately present Christ as claiming to be God Incarnate and proving it by fulfilled prophesy, by a sinless and miraculous life, and by predicting and accomplishing his resurrection from the dead.
3. Whatever Christ (who is God) teaches is true.
4. Christ taught that the Old Testament is the written Word of God and promised his disciples would write the New Testament.
5. Therefore, it is true on the confirmed authority of Jesus Christ that the Bible is the written Word of God.

Other arguments include the Bible's own claims (e.g. 2 Tim 3:16; 2 Pet 1:21); the amazing unity of the Bible (though written over 1500 years by more than 40 different authors); the literal fulfillment of prophesies made hundreds of years in advance; and finally, the many testimonies of the transforming power of the Truth presented in the Bible.

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<sup>9</sup> There are various arguments for the inspiration and authority of the Bible. The argument listed here is taken from Norman L. Geisler, *Christian Apologetics* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1976), 353.