

# The Reliability of the New Testament

“I believe the Bible is the best gift that God has ever given to man. All the good from the Savior of the world is communicated to us through this Book. I have been driven many times to my knees by the overwhelming conviction that I had nowhere else to go.” **Abraham Lincoln**

## 1) What Does it Claim About Itself?

Is. 40:8, Jn 16:13, 2 Tim 3:16-17, 2 Pe 1:20-21; 3:15-16

## 2) Unique from every other ancient literary work

- a] Continuity & fulfilled prophecy – Though written over many centuries by many authors in many places, the Bible fits together as one unified story (Gen 3:15; Ps 22:16-18; Is 7:14;53; Micah 5:2; Zech 9:9).
- b] Lack of Distortion – The authors included even embarrassing truth without distortion such as disorder in the churches and sins of the apostles (Rom 7; 1 Cor 3:1-3; Gal 2:11)
- c] Circulation and Translation – No book comes close to the Bible’s circulation and translation: 1.3 bill by 1932; 1 or more books in 739 lang. by 1966.
- d] Influence – The Bible toppled empires, ruled the world, and inspired innumerable literature.

## 3) How Does it Stand up to the 3 Tests of Reliability for any Historical Document?

### a] Bibliographical Evidence Test – How accurate are the copies we have?

- **Comparing NT manuscripts to other ancient literature:**

WORK	DATE WRITTEN	EARLIEST COPY FRAGMENT	TIME SPAN	NUMBER OF COPIES	ACCURACY OF COPY
Plato	427-347 BC	900 AD	1200 Years	7	-----
Aristotle	384-322 BC	1100 AD	1400 Years	49	-----
Thucydides	5th Cent. BC	900 AD	1300 Years	8	-----
Sophocles	496-406 BC	1000 AD	1400 Years	193	-----
Demosthenes	4th Cent. BC	1100 AD	1400 Years	200	-----
Homer ( <i>Iliad</i> )	9th Cent. BC	400 BC	500 Years	643	95%
New Testament	40 - 100 AD	125 AD	25 Years*	over 24,000**	99+%

\* to earliest manuscript fragment of book of John; ~ 100 years to large NT texts; 250 years to single, complete NT (*Codex Sinaiticus*)

\*\* 5,300 Greek texts, 10,000 Latin Vulgate translations, 9,300 other early translations.

- **Accuracy Comparison:**
  - New Testament: 40 lines out of 20,000 (.2%) have different readings between manuscripts, yet of these, no important doctrines are effected; most are spelling or stylistic changes.
  - Homer’s *Iliad*: 764 lines out of 15,600 (4.9%)
- **Outside Confirmation of the accuracy of our NT texts** – We have 86,489 NT citations by the early church fathers of the 2<sup>nd</sup> & 3<sup>rd</sup> centuries. Between them, they quote the entire NT except for 11 verses.
- **Conclusion:** The NT passes the Bibliographical test better than any other piece of ancient literature, meaning that the NT we read today very closely matches the original writings of the NT authors. But did these authors accurately record the events we read about in the

NT? Did they embellish the facts or distort the story? These are questions for the following 2 tests.

**b) Internal Evidence Test – Did the original NT authors accurately record history?**

- An author's nearness to an event in time, place, and participation affects the reliability of his account. The nearer they were, the more reliable the account. The NT authors were as near as possible to the events they recorded:
  - (1) Peter, John, and Mathew are highly trustworthy for they were direct apostles of Jesus, living with Him throughout His three year ministry (John 19:35; 1 John 1:3; 2 Peter 1:16)
  - (2) Luke and Mark wrote their historical accounts (Mark, Luke, and Acts) after careful research and with the help of direct witnesses such as Peter (Luke 1:1-3; 3:1).
  - (3) Paul personally witnessed Jesus Christ on the road to Damascus and was a direct participant in the growth, teachings, and controversies of the early church about which he wrote.
  
- So the NT authors were near enough to the events to competently tell the truth. But did they tell the truth or did they distort or embellish their accounts? Two lines of evidence prove that they accurately recorded the events and teachings of the NT without distortion or embellishment:
  - (1) The existence of numerous friendly and hostile witnesses: The NT was written and circulated during the lifetime of many people who were alive during Christ's ministry. Not long after the death of Christ, many Jewish believers were imprisoned or killed for their faith. Why would they suffer such hardship if they knew that the NT writings they were suffering for were inaccurate? Furthermore, those who were opposed to Christianity would have seized upon inaccuracies in the NT accounts and discredited Christianity. Yet even in Jerusalem where so many of the events in Jesus' lifetime occurred, we have no record of counter-evidence being presented to discredit the NT writings, and instead have evidence of a strong church growing even in the face of great persecution.
  - (2) The inclusion of embarrassing events: Most ancient historical documents tend to exaggerate the strengths and minimize the failings of their heroes (such as Josephus's account of the Roman leaders whom he was trying to impress). Yet the NT includes many of the failures and sins of its great heroes and authors such as the apostles' bickering for 1<sup>st</sup> place in the kingdom (Luke 22:24-6), Jesus' rebuke of Peter (Mark 8:32-3), Peter's denial of Jesus (Mark 14:66-72), the failure of Christ to work miracles in Nazareth (Mark 6:5-6), Jesus' confession of ignorance about the future (Mathew 24:36), and Paul's confrontation against Peter (Gal 2:11, Cephas = Peter). The inclusion of such embarrassing details tells us that the authors of the NT took great care to record the events and teachings of the NT accurately even when these exposed their own faults and failures.

**c) External Evidence Test – Do other ancient historical materials confirm the accuracy of the NT?**

- **Evidence in historical writings**
  - (1) Josephus, the preeminent historian of 1<sup>st</sup> century Jewish-Roman interaction, wrote *Antiquities* completed ~93 AD

- (a) It includes a description of how the high priest Ananias (Acts 23:2) took advantage of the death of the Roman governor Festus (Acts 23:24 with 24:27) to have James killed: “He convened a meeting of the Sanhedrin and brought before them a man named James, the brother of Jesus, who was called the Christ, and certain others. He accused them of having transgressed the law and delivered them up to be stoned.”
- (b) It also includes this description of Jesus, “About this time there lived Jesus, a wise man, *if indeed one ought to call him a man*. For he was one who wrought surprising feats and was a teacher of such people as accept the truth gladly. He won over many Jews and Greeks. *He was the Christ*. When Pilate, upon hearing him accused by men of the highest standing among us, had condemned him to be crucified, those who had in the first place come to love him did not give up their affection for him. *On the third day he appeared to them restored to life, for the prophets of God had prophesied these and countless other marvelous things about him*. And the tribe of Christians, so called after him, has still to this day not disappeared.” Most scholars agree that Josephus wrote what appears above in plain text. The italicized text was likely added by later Christian copyists. Despite the additions, Josephus’ words lend great evidence to the events of the NT.
- (c) Josephus also confirms the Roman census that is described in Luke 2:2
- (2) Tacitus, the most important Roman historian of the first century wrote in 115 AD about Nero’s persecution of Christians: “Nero fastened the guilt and inflicted the most exquisite tortures on a class hated for their abominations, called Christians by the populace. Christus, from whom the name had its origin, suffered the extreme penalty during the reign of Tiberius at the hands of one of our procurators, Pontius Pilate, and a most mischievous superstition, thus checked for the moment, again broke out not only in Judea, the first source of the evil, but even in Rome...”
- (3) In addition to the two primary historical sources above:
  - (a) Pliny the younger in 111 AD confirms that the “Christian” community worshipped Christ as if he were a god.
  - (b) Macrobius in his *Saturnalia* describes Herod’s killing of all boys two and younger just as it is recorded in Mathew 2:16.
  - (c) Seutonius in his *Life of Claudius* confirms Claudius’ expulsion of the Jews from Rome in 49 AD because of their bickering over Chrestus (Latin for Christ) recorded in Acts 18:2.
- **Evidence in archeology**
  - (1) As an example, Luke’s detailed accounts of rulers, cities, and events in the first century Roman world has proven true to archeological findings time and again.
    - (a) Luke 3:1 refers to Lysanias as tetrarch of Abilene in 27 AD, which seemed to contradict historical evidence until the discovery of an inscription written between 14 and 37 AD that confirmed Luke’s statement.
    - (b) Acts 17:6 refers to “politarchs” in Thessalonica, thought for years to be a historical mistake until confirmed by numerous inscriptions found in the excavation of Thessalonica and dating from the first century.
    - (c) Not a single archeological discovery contradicts Luke’s references to 32 countries, 54 cities, and 9 islands.
  - (2) The historical records of the other gospel writers are also confirmed by archeological evidence. In fact, many archeologists view the Bible as one of their best sources for

locating ancient sites. As the prominent Australian archeologist Clifford Wilson wrote, “Those who know the facts now recognize that the New Testament must be accepted as a remarkably accurate source book.”

#### 4) Why do we have These 27 Books?

- How did they decide what to include in the NT canon (the officially accepted list of books)?
- **Tests for Canonicity:**
  - (1) They must have apostolic authority; they had to be written by an apostle or someone very close to him.
  - (2) They must conform to the rule of faith; they had to agree with the fundamental teachings of the faith recognized by the church.
  - (3) They had to have been accepted and used consistently by the church at large.
- **Historical Background of the Canon**

There was little need to officially set the canon until heretics of the second century began to attack the church. In deciding the canon in the face of these attacks, the church fathers followed a simple policy: “if in doubt, throw it out.” For this reason, the canon started smaller than what we have today and grew to our 27 books as the early fathers settled upon the canonicity of the debated books of Hebrews, James, 2 & 3 John, 2 Peter, Jude, and Revelation. When the canon was finally set as we have it today at the synod of Hippo in 393 AD, as F.F. Bruce states, “[the council] did not confer upon them any authority which they did not already possess, but simply recorded their previously established canonicity.”
- **Conclusion:** The great scrutiny exercised upon the books of the NT over many decades gives us great confidence that only the correct books were included in our canon.

#### 5) Brief Word About Inerrancy

- a] “Inerrancy means that when all the facts are known, the scriptures in their original autographs [the original writings] and properly interpreted will be shown to be wholly true in everything that they affirm, whether that has to do with doctrine, morality, or with social, physical, or life sciences.” (Paul Feinburg, “The Meaning of Inerrancy” in *Inerrancy*)
- b] However we must remember that:
  - Inerrancy extends only to scripture itself, not to our own interpretations of scripture.
  - Because inerrancy demands proper interpretation, which demands that we interpret scripture according to the accepted literary conventions of its day, we can allow for the rounding of numbers, the description of events in experiential rather than scientific language (such as “the sun rising”), the listing of events in non-chronological order, and imprecise quotations common in scripture.
- c] What we are really after in affirming inerrancy is to say that God did not allow any mistakes into the scriptures. As John Wesley eloquently stated, “If there be any mistakes in the Bible, there may as well be a thousand. If there be one falsehood in that book, it did not come from the God of truth.”

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