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# Are the Gospel Accounts of Jesus True?

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Free media and discipleship resources for pastors, leaders, and growing disciples.

# Are the Gospel Accounts of Jesus True?

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The New Testament Gospels give us the accounts of Jesus' life, words, death and resurrection. The book of Acts tells us how the apostles spread the message of Jesus throughout the 1<sup>st</sup> century, and the letters to early churches are foundational to Christian doctrines believed today.

They claim to be eyewitness accounts of Jesus and the apostles. Jesus' close apostle, Simon Peter, wrote as an eyewitness when he declared,

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, NLT).

Regarding their accounts of Jesus, the apostle John wrote, "We proclaim to you what we ourselves have actually seen and heard..." (1 John 1:3).

But skeptics have argued that the New Testament was corrupted through its two thousand years of history, and what we read about Jesus today is the result of conspiring church leaders.

Furthermore, since none of the original manuscripts exist today, skeptics say that the New Testament accounts of Jesus we have today are unreliable due to numerous copying errors and textual variants.

So, is the New Testament a reliable witness of who Jesus Christ is, and what he said? Can we rely on its gospel message that Jesus died on the cross for our sins and rose again on the third day? And can we trust his promise of eternal life to all those who embrace him as their Savior?

In the following pages we will examine the evidence for the following:

- When were the original New Testament manuscripts written?
- How do we know if the copies are faithful to the original words?
- How does the New Testament compare with other ancient writings?

## **Redating the New Testament**

German critic Ferdinand Christian Baur (1792–1860) once contended that John’s Gospel was not written until about AD 160, when all eyewitnesses of Jesus would have been dead. Other critical scholars went further, stating that the entire New Testament was written between the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> centuries. If these critics were right, the books named after Matthew, Mark, Luke, John and other New Testament books would all be forgeries.

This skeptical view of New Testament dating destroyed the faith of many for nearly a century until new forensic evidence proved Baur’s claim false.

So, what evidence do we have concerning when the Gospel accounts of Jesus were really written? The consensus of most scholars today is that the Gospels were written by the apostles during the first century. Four primary forms of evidence build a solid case for their conclusions:

### **Extrabiblical Documents**

Late 1<sup>st</sup> century to early 2<sup>nd</sup> century writings from Christian sources such as Clement of Rome, Ignatius, and Polycarp cite New Testament passages, proving they had already existed within 10-35 years after Christ, and were regarded by early Christians as authentic.

Plus, over 36,000 extrabiblical quotations from New Testament passages in letters and sermons from early church leaders date from the first three centuries, some only ten years after its last book was written.<sup>1</sup> New Testament scholar Bruce Metzger notes, “If all other sources for our knowledge of the text of the New Testament were destroyed, they would be sufficient for the reconstruction of practically the entire New Testament.”<sup>2</sup>

### **Non-Christian Historians**

Josephus, Tacitus and Suetonius—all non-Christian Roman historians, confirm New Testament details about Jesus. These confirmations of New Testament details date from 20 to 150 years after Christ, “quite early by the standards of ancient historiography.”<sup>3</sup>

### **Early New Testament Manuscript Copies**

In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century a cache of New Testament papyri fragments was discovered in Egypt; among them was a fragment of the Gospel of John (specifically,

P52: John 18:31-33) dated to about AD 125, only 25-50 years after John wrote the original. Since P52 was a copy of John's Gospel, his original writing would have already existed.

Princeton New Testament professor, Bruce Metzger, explains its significance in dating the New Testament much earlier than critics like Baur had claimed:

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 P52 [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>4</sup>

## **Paul's Letters**

Paul wrote 13 early letters to churches and individuals, forming a significant portion of the New Testament. Paul's letters, dated by scholars between the mid-40s and the mid-60s (12 to 33 years after Christ), constitute the earliest witnesses to Jesus' life and teaching.

Non-Christian historian, 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>5</sup>

Most scholars date Paul's writings from AD 48-67. That's consistent with Biblical archaeologist William Albright's research, who concluded 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 80 A.D., two full generations before the date given by the more radical New Testament critics of today."<sup>6</sup>

Albright dates the writing of the entire New Testament at "very probably sometime between about 50 A.D. and 75 A.D."<sup>7</sup>

In *Redating the New Testament* critical scholar, John A. T. Robinson of Cambridge concludes that most of the New Testament books were written between AD 40 and AD 65 and are the eyewitness accounts of the apostles. His scholarly work that led

to his conclusions of early dating for the New Testament is impeccable.

Robinson puts its writing as early as seven years after Christ lived<sup>8</sup> when any historical errors pertaining to Jesus' teaching, death, and resurrection would have been immediately exposed by both eyewitnesses and the enemies of Christianity. For example, Peter could say of a forgery in his name, "That's not my Gospel, I didn't write that." And Matthew, Mark, Luke, or John could respond to questions or challenges aimed at their accounts of Jesus.

Early dating of the New Testament is also confirmed by early Christian creeds and hymns citing various passages, including 1 Corinthians 15: 3-5 about Jesus' resurrection within a few years after its occurrence. As mentioned, there are also thousands of early extrabiblical documents, as well as writings from non-Christian historians that refer to accounts found in the New Testament.

Together with the early manuscript copies of the Gospels, and the early dating of Paul's letters, there is overwhelming evidence that the entire New Testament was written while eyewitnesses to Jesus would still have been living.

## **Are New Testament Copies Reliable?**

The original New Testament manuscripts were handwritten on papyrus, a paper-like material which deteriorated rapidly as they were used to make hundreds of copies for dozens of churches and thousands of believers in the 1<sup>st</sup> century. Although none of the originals exist today, the same is true for all ancient historical documents—Christian or secular.

As the church spread throughout the Roman world, hundreds of copies of the originals were made by various scribes, who meticulously attempted to duplicate the original document. Yet, because slight copying errors occasionally occurred, how do we know whether copies, and copies of copies we have today are reliable, faithfully representing writings of the original authors of the New Testament?

Scholars studying ancient literature have devised the science of textual criticism, using three tests to determine the accuracy of manuscripts, and their faithfulness to the original writings:<sup>9</sup>

- Bibliographical test
- Internal evidence test

- External evidence test

Let's see what happens when we apply these essential tests to the New Testament manuscript copies in existence today.

## **Bibliographical Test**

In this test, textual critics examine both the quantity and quality of existing manuscript copies and the time gap from the original writings. 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?

## **Number of New Testament Manuscripts**

Over 5,600 copies of New Testament manuscripts exist today in the original Greek language.<sup>10</sup> Many are small fragments; a few are virtually complete books. Counting translations into Latin, Armenian, Slavic, Syriac & Coptic, 25,000 manuscripts exist today – dating from the 2<sup>nd</sup> to the 15<sup>th</sup> century. That's over 2.6 million pages of biblical text for scholars to examine!

Textual critics have compared dating and accuracy of these manuscripts to determine what was in the original text. Since the New Testament has a wealth of manuscript copies to examine and compare, these scholars have great confidence in what was written in the original documents.

Since there are over 2.6 million pages of handwritten text in 25,000 manuscripts, minor errors such as misspellings, skipping lines, or reordering words during the copying process have led to over 400,000 textual variants. Most of these copying errors are so minor that even the outspoken skeptic, Bart Ehrman, has concluded that no major New Testament doctrine is impacted by its textual variants. Biblical scholar John Wenham affirms, "The resulting text is 99.99 percent accurate, and the remaining questions do not affect any area of cardinal Christian doctrine."<sup>11</sup>

## **Time Gap from Originals**

Most extant New Testament manuscripts date after the 3<sup>rd</sup> century. However, as mentioned earlier, a tiny fragment from a copy of John's Gospel (John 18:31-33, labeled P52) is dated by scholars to roughly 25-50 years after John wrote the original in Ephesus. This early copy of John's Gospel supports Albright's and Robinson's opinions that the entire New Testament was written during the lifetimes of the apostles.

## **Internal Evidence Test**

Like good detectives, historians also 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 internal clues textual critics use to test a document's reliability are the following:<sup>12</sup>

- Consistency of eyewitness reports
- Details of names, places, and events
- Letters to individuals or small groups
- Features embarrassing to the authors
- Irrelevant or counterproductive material
- Lack of relevant material

## **Consistency**

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, critical scholars are amazed at the consistency of the Gospel accounts of Jesus' teaching, miracles, death and resurrection. Despite the different perspectives of the writers, all New Testament manuscripts present Jesus consistently in these key areas.

## **Details**

Historians also verify the authenticity of a document by the accuracy of its details. Classical historian Colin Hemer "identifies 84 facts in the last 16 chapters of Acts that have been confirmed by Archaeological research."<sup>13</sup> From the Gospel accounts to Paul's letters, the New Testament authors openly described details, even citing the names of at least thirty individuals who were alive at the time.

New Testament scholar Gary Habermas writes,

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>14</sup>

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.”

### **Letters To Small Groups**

Historical expert Louis Gottschalk notes that personal letters intended for small audiences have a high probability of being reliable. Since large portions of the New Testament consist of personal letters written to small groups and individuals, scholars deem them to be highly reliable.

### **Embarrassing Features**

Surprisingly, the authors of the New Testament presented themselves all too frequently as 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 their accounts truthfully.

In *The Story of Civilization*, non-Christian historian Will Durant writes of 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>15</sup>

### **Irrelevant or Counterproductive Material**

The Gospels tell us that the empty tomb of Jesus was discovered by a woman, even though in Israel the testimony of women wasn’t even admissible in court. Also, some of Jesus’ final words on the cross are said to have been “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” Scholars have determined that irrelevant or counterproductive material like these are evidence of authenticity.

## Lack of Relevant Material

Few of the major issues facing the 1<sup>st</sup> century church—the Gentile mission, spiritual gifts, baptism, leadership—were addressed directly in the recorded words of Jesus. If his followers were inventing Jesus’ words, it is inexplicable why they would not have made up instructions from Jesus on these issues. The lack of relevant material is evidence of the New Testament’s faithfulness to the original writings.

The New Testament manuscripts meet textual critics’ bibliographical and internal evidence tests used to evaluate the authenticity of ancient documents. However, there is one more important test to consider.

## External Evidence Test

The third and final test to determine the reliability of the New Testament is to compare its copies with those of other ancient historical documents.

### Comparison with Other Ancient Historical Documents

- **Number of copies:** Most ancient historical works have fewer than 10 copies. The second best documented ancient historical manuscript, Homer’s Iliad (8<sup>th</sup> century BC), has just 643 copies, compared with 25,000 for the New Testament.<sup>16</sup> 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>17</sup>
- **Time Gap:** Most ancient documents have time gaps of from 400 to 1,400 years from the originals. For example, Aristotle’s Poetics was written about 343 BC, yet the earliest copy is dated AD 1100, a time gap of over 1,400 years. In stark contrast, the earliest New Testament manuscript (P52) has a time gap of only 25-50 years.

Even critical scholar 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>18</sup>

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>19</sup>

As copies of the New Testament spread throughout the Roman world, the message of Jesus Christ written by the apostles transformed lives.

The New Testament was originally written in Koine Greek, but its text has been faithfully translated by scholars into hundreds of languages, including several different English versions. Although these translations from the original Greek language have somewhat different sentence structures, the original meaning as written by the apostles is faithfully preserved in them.

The New Testament's reliability assures us that we can trust the eyewitness accounts of Jesus today, including the fact that he died for our sins, rose again to give us eternal life, and is coming back for those who put their trust in Him.

As the apostle Peter wrote nearly 2,000 years ago,

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, NLT).

So, as you read the New Testament today, you can be confident that it's God's inspired Word to you, calling you into a deeper relationship with him.

For the Word that God speaks is alive and active; it cuts more keenly than any two-edged sword: it strikes through to the place where soul and spirit meet, to the innermost intimacies of a man's being: it exposes the very thoughts and motives of a man's heart (Hebrews 4:12, Phillips).

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## Endnotes