

# The Historical Reliability of the New Testament Text— Part Two

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Last month we began to look at the issue of the reliability of the New Testament. We mentioned that there are ten facts that lend support to the reliability of the material we find in our New Testament. We begin to look at those this month

## **Fact one: the bibliographical test (corroboration from textual transmission).**

The historical accuracy of the New Testament can be proven by subjecting it to three generally accepted tests for determining historical reliability. Such tests are utilized in literary criticism and the study of historical documents in general. (These are also discussed by Sanders. <sup>1</sup>) They involve 1) bibliographical, 2) internal and 3) external examinations of the text and other evidence.

The bibliographical test seeks to determine whether we can reconstruct the original manuscript from the extant copies at hand. For the New Testament we have 5,300 Greek manuscripts and manuscript portions, 10,000 Latin Vulgate, 9,300 other versions, plus 36,000 early (100-300 A.D.) patristic quotations of the New Testament—such that all but a few verses of the entire New Testament could be reconstructed from these alone. <sup>2</sup> What does this mean?

Few scholars question the general reliability even of ancient classical literature on the basis of the manuscripts we possess. Yet this amount is vastly inferior to that of the New Testament manuscripts. For example, of sixteen well-known classical authors, such as Plutarch, Tacitus, Suetonius, Polybius, Thucydides and Xenophon, the total number of extant copies is typically *less* than ten and the earliest copies date from 750 to 1600 years *after* the original manuscript was first penned. <sup>3</sup> We need only compare such slim evidence to the mass of biblical documentation, which includes over *24,000* manuscript portions, manuscripts and versions, with the earliest fragments and complete copies dating between 50 and 300 years after originally written.

Given the fact that the early Greek manuscripts (the Papyri and early Uncials\*) date much closer to the originals than for any other ancient literature and given the overwhelming additional abundance of manuscript attestation, any doubt as to the integrity or authenticity of the New Testament text has been removed—no matter what the “higher” critics claim. Indeed, this kind of evidence supplied by the New Testament (both amount and quality) is the dream of the historian. No other ancient literature has ever come close to supplying historians and textual critics with such an abundance of data.

Dr. F. F. Bruce, the late Ryland’s Professor of Biblical Criticism and Exegesis at the University of Manchester, asserts of the New Testament: “There is no body of ancient literature in the world which enjoys such a wealth of good textual attestation as the New

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\*Christian Scriptures in Greek were written in capital letters, separately formed often without spaces between words. These were called uncial letters. (Nelson’s New Illustrated Bible Dictionary)

Testament.”<sup>4</sup> Professor Bruce further comments, “The evidence for our New Testament writings is ever so much greater than the evidence for many writings of classical writers, the authenticity of which no one dreams of questioning. And if the New Testament were a collection of secular writings, their authenticity would generally be regarded as beyond all doubt.”<sup>5</sup>

It is this wealth of material that has enabled scholars such as Westcott and Hort, Ezra Abbott, Philip Schaff, A. T. Robertson, Norman Geisler and William Nix to place the restoration of the original text at 99 percent plus.<sup>6</sup> Thus no other document of the ancient period is as accurately preserved as the New Testament:

Hort’s estimate of “substantial variation” for the New Testament is one-tenth of 1 percent; Abbott’s estimate is one-fourth of 1 percent; and even Hort’s figure including trivial variation is less than 2 percent. Sir Frederic Kenyon well summarizes the situation: The number of manuscripts of the New Testament... is so large that it is practically certain that the true reading of every doubtful passage is preserved in some one or another of these ancient authorities. This can be said of no other ancient book in the world. Scholars are satisfied that they possess substantially the true text of the principal Greek and Roman writers whose works have come down to us, of Sophocles, of Thucydides, of Cicero, of Virgil; yet our knowledge depends on a mere handful of manuscripts, whereas the manuscripts of the New Testament are counted by hundreds and even thousands.<sup>7</sup>

In other words, those who question the reliability of the New Testament must also question the reliability of virtually every ancient writing the world possesses! So how can the New Testament logically be rejected by anyone when its documentation is 100 times that of other ancient literature? If it is impossible to question the world’s ancient classics, it is far more impossible to question the reliability of the New Testament.<sup>8</sup> In addition, none of the established New Testament canon is lost or missing, not even a verse, as indicated by variant readings. The New Testament, then, passes the bibliographical test and must, by far, be graded with the highest mark of any ancient literature.

### **Fact two: the internal evidence test (corroboration from content accuracy).**

This test asserts that one is to assume the truthful reporting of an ancient document (and not assume either fraud, incompetence or error) unless the author of the document has disqualified himself by their presence. For example, do the New Testament writers contradict themselves? Is there anything in their writing which causes one to objectively suspect their trustworthiness? The answer is no. There is lack of proven fraud or error on the part of *any* New Testament writer. But there is evidence of careful eyewitness reporting throughout the New Testament. The caution exercised by the writers, their personal conviction that what they wrote was true and the lack of demonstrable error or contradiction indicate that the Gospel authors and, indeed, all the New Testament authors pass the second test as well (Luke 1:1-4; John 19:35; 21:24; Acts 1:1-3; 2:22; 26:24-26; 2 Peter 1:16; 1 John 1:1-3).

The kinds of things the Gospel writers include in their narratives offer strong evidence for their integrity. They record their own sins and failures, even serious ones (Matthew 26:56, 69-75; Mark 10:35-45). They do not hesitate to record even the most difficult and consequential statements of Jesus, such as John 6:41-71. They forthrightly supply the embarrassing and even capital charges of Jesus’ own enemies. Thus, even though Jesus was their very Messiah and Lord, they not only record the charges that Jesus broke the Sab-

bath but also that He was a blasphemer and a liar, insane and demonized (Matthew 26:65; John 7:20,47; 8:48, 52; 10:20).

To encounter such honesty from those who loved the Person they were reporting about gives one assurance that the Gospel writers placed a very high premium on truthfulness.

**Notes:**

1. Chauncey Sanders, *An Introduction to Research in English Literary History* (New York: MacMillan, 1952), p. 160.
2. J. McDowell, *Evidence That Demands a Verdict*, rev. 1979, pp. 39-52; and Norman Geisler, William Nix, *A General Introduction to the Bible* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1971), pp. 238, 357-367.
3. McDowell, *Evidence That Demands a Verdict*, p. 42; Robert C. Newman, "Miracles and the Historicity of the Easter Week Narratives," in John Warwick Montgomery (ed.), *Evidence for Faith: Deciding the God Question* (Dallas: Probe, 1991), pp. 281-84.
4. F. F. Bruce, *The Books and the Parchments* (Old Tappan, NJ: Revell, 1963), p. 78.
5. F. F. Bruce, *The New Testament Documents: Are They Reliable?* (Downer's Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1971), p. 15.
6. J. McDowell, *Evidence That Demands a Verdict*, pp. 43-45; Clark Pinnock, *Biblical Revelation: The Foundation of Christian Theology* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1971), pp. 238-39, 365-66.
7. Robert C. Newman, "Miracles and the Historicity of the Easter Week Narratives," in John Warwick Montgomery (ed.), *Evidence for Faith: Deciding the God Question* (Dallas: Probe, 1991), p. 284.
8. See John Warwick Montgomery, *Faith Founded on Fact* (New York: Nelson, 1978); F. F. Bruce, *The New Testament Documents: Are They Reliable?* (Downer's Grove, IL: InterVarsity); John Warwick Montgomery, *History and Christianity* (Downer's Grove, IL: InterVarsity); Norman Geisler, *Christian Apologetics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1976), pp. 322-327.