



# Is The New Testament Reliable?

## By Tom Snyder, PhD

In the opening to the Gospel of Jesus Christ according to Luke in the New Testament, the Greek physician Luke, a close friend of the Apostle Paul, writes, "I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning."

How can we know if this is true? How can we find out if the books of the New Testament are accurate, reliable records of the teachings of Jesus Christ?

In a court of law, the burden of proof for denying the credibility of an eyewitness falls on those who wish to undermine that credibility. An eyewitness should therefore be given the benefit of the doubt "unless we have clear evidence to the contrary."<sup>1</sup> Since, however, the New Testament books make great demands on people, it seems fair to ask what is the evidence in support of the historical reliability of these ancient documents.

Historians use two standard tests for determining the reliability of an ancient document like the New Testament. The first test is the bibliographic test. This test asks three questions: 1) How many copies and fragments of copies do we have? 2) Are the copies basically the same, or do they show a wide variety of differences, indicating they have undergone an extensive amount of editing or redaction? 3) What is the time gap between the dates of the copies we have and the approximate date on which the document was probably written? The more copies we have, the more accurate they seem to be, and the closer the time gap, the more reliable the text of the document is.

Using this test, how does the New Testament stack up?

The New Testament books were written between 40 AD and, at the latest, 100 AD, with the earliest extant copies, excluding small fragments, dated between 300 and 400 AD, or 260-360 years later. We have over 5,000 Greek copies and fragments, 10,000 Latin Vulgate copies and fragments, and 9,000 other versions of the New Testament dated between 125 and 1200 AD. In comparison, we have only 643 manuscripts of Homer's Iliad, written about 900 BC, with the earliest extant copy dated 400 BC, 500 years later. Also, we have only ten copies of Julius Caesar's Gallic Wars, written 58 to 50 BC, with the earliest copy dated 900 AD, a gap of almost 1,000 years, and only 21 copies of the works of Tacitus, written about 100 AD, with the earliest copy dated 1000 AD, a span of 900 years.

According to New Testament scholar Bruce Metzger, only 40 lines, or about 400 words, of the 20,000 lines in the New Testament are in doubt. In contrast, Homer's Iliad contains approximately 15,600 lines, but 764 lines have been questioned by scholars. Christian scholar and philosopher Norman L. Geisler writes:

This would mean that Homer's text is only 95 percent pure or accurate compared to over 99.5 percent accuracy for the New Testament copies. The national epic of India [the Mahabharata] has suffered even more textual corruption....The Mahabharata is some eight times the size of the Iliad, of which some 26,000 lines are in doubt. This would be roughly 10 percent textual corruption or a 90 percent accuracy copy of the original. From this documentary standpoint the New Testament writings are superior to comparable ancient writings. The records for the New Testament are vastly more abundant, clearly more ancient, and considerably more accurate in their text.<sup>2</sup>

Copies of manuscripts are not the only source of our knowledge about the New Testament documents.

Before the Council of Nicea in 325 AD, the writings of the Ante-Nicene church fathers contain about 32,000 citations of the New Testament text. "Virtually the entire New Testament could be reproduced from citations contained in the works of the early church fathers," says Christian philosopher J. P. Moreland.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, although every church father does not quote every book of the New Testament, every book is quoted as authoritative and authentic by some church father. This indicates that the New Testament writings were "recognized as apostolic [originating from Jesus Christ's own appointed church leaders] from the very beginning."<sup>4</sup> There is no reason, therefore, to doubt the accuracy of the copies of the New Testament. The bibliographic test clearly shows that the text of the New Testament has not been significantly altered by the Christian church. We can trust that the translations we now have are as close to the original writings as possible.

Finally, we should also note the Apostle Paul's testimony in his own letters, which are the earliest of all New Testament writings. Paul's letter to the Galatians has been dated as early as 48 AD. The dates of his other letters may be established as follows: 1 and 2 Thessalonians, 50 AD; 1 and 2 Corinthians, 54-56 AD; Romans, 57 AD; and Philippians, Colossians, Philemon, and Ephesians, around 60 AD. Many scholars, including more liberal ones, believe that Paul's description of the resurrection of Jesus Christ in 1 Corinthians 15 can be traced back to an ancient catechism from the early to middle 30s AD!

The second test historians use to determine the reliability of an ancient document is the external test. In this test, historians look at what external sources say about the document.

I have already mentioned the testimony of the early church fathers with regard to the bibliographic test. Their testimony also satisfies the external test.

For instance, several second century fathers affirm that the book of John in the New Testament was written by the Apostle John. These writers include Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria, Theophilus of Antioch, and Tertullian of Carthage.

The testimony of Irenaeus is important "because he had been a student of Polycarp, bishop of Smyrna (martyred in 156 AD after being a Christian for 86 years), and Polycarp in turn had been a disciple of the Apostle John himself."<sup>5</sup> Not only does Irenaeus affirm the authorship of John's gospel, he also reports that Matthew produced his gospel for the Jews, perhaps in Aramaic, while Peter and Paul were founding the Christian church in Rome (about 55 AD). Irenaeus also writes that Mark, Peter's disciple, set down his gospel after Peter's death, around 65 AD, and that Paul's friend Luke wrote his gospel sometime thereafter. In a letter to his colleague Florinus, quoted by church historian Eusebius, Irenaeus mentions how both he and Florinus had heard Polycarp talk about what John and other witnesses had told Polycarp about Jesus.

According to Papias, bishop of Hierapolis, writing between 130 and 140 AD, the Apostle Matthew compiled a collection of Jesus' sayings in Aramaic, which Papias says many people later translated into Greek. Papias also testifies that the Apostle John before he died (about 95 AD) told Papias that Mark composed his gospel on the basis of information supplied by the Apostle Peter himself.

The New Testament documents are also consistent with the external evidence from ancient non-Christian sources. Even the Jewish Talmud refers to Jesus Christ and five of the disciples. These references say Jesus was a sorcerer who led the people astray and who came to add things to the Jewish law. Eventually, they say, Jesus was executed on the eve of Passover for heresy and for misleading the Jewish people. Following his death, his disciples healed the sick in his name.<sup>6</sup>

Although portions of his text are in doubt, Jewish historian Josephus, who wrote about 90 AD, mentions John the Baptist, Jesus Christ, and James, the brother of Jesus. According to New Testament scholar F. F. Bruce, Josephus confirms the dates of Christ's ministry, his reputation for practicing "wonders" of some kind, his kinship to James, his crucifixion by Pilate, his messianic claim, and the fact that his disciples believed Jesus rose from the dead.<sup>7</sup>

Cornelius Tacitus, the "greatest Roman historian in the days of the Empire,"<sup>8</sup> refers to Jesus Christ's execution under Pilate and relates Roman Emperor Nero's persecution of Christians after the great fire

ravaged Rome in 64 AD. Also, writing in 112 AD, C. Plinius Secundus (Pliny the Younger), governor of Bithynia in Asia Minor, wrote to Emperor Trajan asking for advice about how to deal with troublesome Christians. In his letter, Pliny reports that the Christians meet on a fixed day to pray to Christ as God and promise each other to follow certain moral standards. He also says they refuse to curse the name of Jesus.

The New Testament writings are full of references to secular history in the first century. Archeological evidence confirms many of these references to historical events and persons and to political factions, geographical areas, social differences, etc. For instance, the Apostle John in his gospel displays accurate knowledge about buildings and landscapes in Jerusalem and the surrounding countryside before 70 AD.

Luke, the author of the third gospel and the book of Acts, has been especially cited for his sense of the historical context in the first century AD. His books contain many references to the imperial history of Rome and a detailed chronicle of the Herod family. Luke is also very accurate in his use of various official titles in the Roman Empire, no mean feat considering the fact they sometimes changed in a short period of time during switchovers in administrations. Luke's description of the founding and rise of the Christian church in Acts matches what we know from other historical writings and archeology. Acts itself contains several instances where the apostles and various local churches receive reports from other Christians about efforts to spread the message of Jesus Christ. As St. Paul notes in chapter twenty-six of Acts, these things were not done in a corner, they were common knowledge.

The writers of the New Testament, most of whom knew Jesus personally, had a strong motive to obey the warnings of the Roman and Jewish authorities to stop preaching about Jesus. Instead, these men did the opposite and risked their lives to preach the good news of Jesus Christ's resurrection. They preached repeatedly and openly in the Jewish synagogues, leaving themselves vulnerable to the hostile religious Jewish leadership.

"The disciples could not afford to risk inaccuracies," says historian John Warwick Montgomery, "which would at once be exposed by those who would be only too glad to do so."<sup>9</sup> Yet they never hesitated to confront Jewish leaders, hostile pagan forces, and even the Roman authorities. They endured rejection, persecution, torture, and even death. If their testimony was full of holes, how could they have gotten away with such bad testimony? If the resurrection did not occur, how do we account for the empty tomb and the resurrection appearances by Jesus?

The Jews and pagans who opposed the apostles had the means, motive, and opportunity to completely refute the evidence for Jesus Christ's resurrection, yet they never could shake the eyewitness testimony of the first Christian evangelists. The hostile witnesses failed to produce the kind of solid evidence that would overturn this testimony.

According to the New Testament documents, Jesus Christ proved his claim to be God by his bodily resurrection from the dead and gave his disciples "many convincing proofs that he was alive (Acts 1:3)." He appeared to over 500 people at one time, most of whom were still living over 15 years later, when the Apostle Paul wrote his first letter to the Corinthian church (see 1 Corinthians 15:1-6). He also appeared to nonbelievers and hostile skeptics like his brother James, the Apostle Paul, and the Apostle Thomas. He also gave special authority and power to all of his apostles, who themselves performed public miracles.

The New Testament writings are internally consistent. None of the documents deny the resurrection and most of them explicitly proclaim it. Although the documents contain passages that are difficult to interpret or create questions about the text, many books have been written which clear up these textual problems. Among the best ones are John W. Haley's Alleged Discrepancies of the Bible (Springdale, PA: Whitaker House) and Encyclopedia of Bible Difficulties by Gleason Archer (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982).

So far, no one has been able to produce one solid contradiction in the New Testament documents. Even if someone could prove there are unresolvable problems in the New Testament text, however, "they cannot be used as evidence to prove that the resurrection did not take place."<sup>10</sup> Neither would they necessarily affect essential Christian teachings. This same reasoning can be applied to ancient non-Christian documents. For example, Greek historian Polybius and Roman historian Livy disagree over what route Hannibal took when

he crossed the Alps, but both agree he arrived in Italy.

The New Testament documents agree. They do not contradict each other. Jesus underwent a public execution. His death was certified by the Roman authorities. He was placed in a private tomb, the location of which was known. Jesus then appeared to his female disciples and to the male apostles. People touched him and talked with him. He ate with them. He also commanded them to lead all people into repentance, belief, and forgiveness of sins in the name of the Triune God (Matthew 28:18-20). The internal consistency of these documents is beyond reproach.

The evidence for the historical resurrection of Jesus Christ is better than the evidence for the actions of Julius Caesar or any other historical figure in the ancient world. "We are confronted with a hard core of historical fact," writes F. F. Bruce: "(a) the tomb was really empty; (b) the Lord appeared to various individuals and groups of disciples both in Judea and Galilee; (c) the Jewish authorities could not disprove the disciples' claim that He had risen from the dead."<sup>11</sup> Adds Bruce Metzger:

The evidence for the resurrection of Jesus Christ is overwhelming. Nothing in history is more certain than that the disciples believed that, after being crucified, dead, and buried, Christ rose again from the tomb on the third day, and that at intervals thereafter he met and conversed with them.<sup>12</sup>

Christianity is the only religion that can be objectively verified by historical evidence. The resurrection of Jesus Christ fits the facts.

"The kingdom of God is near," says Jesus in Mark 1:15. "Repent and believe the good news!"

Here is the good news: Jesus Christ died for your sins. Confess with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, and you will be saved (Romans 10:9).

#### NOTES

1. Bob Passantino, "Contend Earnestly for the Faith: How Far Can We Trust the Bible?" (Costa Mesa, CA: Answers in Action).
2. Norman L. Geisler, Christian Apologetics (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1989), 308.
3. J. P. Moreland, Scaling the Secular City: A Defense of Christianity (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1987), 136.
4. Norman L. Geisler and William E. Nix, From God to Us: How We Got Our Bible (Chicago: Moody Press, 1974), 108.
5. John Warwick Montgomery, Where Is History Going? (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 1969), 48.
6. F. F. Bruce, The New Testament Documents: Are They Reliable? (Madison, Wisconsin: InterVarsity Press, 1987), 100-102.
7. Bruce, 112.
8. Bruce, 117.
9. Montgomery, 51.
10. Bruce M. Metzger, The New Testament: Its Background, Growth, and Content, 2nd edition (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1983), 127f.
11. Bruce, 65.
12. Metzger, 126.

**For More Information Please Contact**

**Answers in Action  
P.O. Box 2067  
Costa Mesa, CA 92628  
(714) 646-9042**