

IS THE NEW TESTAMENT HISTORICALLY RELIABLE?

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Christianity is unique amongst the world religions in that it is based on historical accounts of creation and redemption. Since this is so, throughout history people have attempted to prove that the Bible is not a historically reliable and authoritative book. If this could be proved Christianity would crumble like a set of cards. On the other hand, if the truth and accuracy of the Bible can be established then the evidence for Christianity becomes overwhelming. As Morris and Morris III state the first priority of any apologist in relationship to the New Testament text is to establish the general historicity and reliability of the text. Once this has been clearly established it is a simple matter to establish the genuineness of the New Testament portrait of Christ, who thereafter “Himself becomes sufficient authority and proof of all doctrines.”¹

Josh McDowell bases his argument for the historicity and accuracy of the New Testament on three points.

1. Bibliographical evidence. McDowell decisively proves that the New Testament is a reliable historical document because of the share volume of early manuscripts that survive to this present day. Although no original manuscript of the any part of the New Testament is available, we have over five thousand six hundred copies of ancient manuscripts that prove the reliability of the New Testament in the original language. These ancient manuscripts were copied shortly after the original manuscripts were written, some within fifty years. When manuscripts in other languages are added the volume grows to nearly twenty-five thousand. This is astonishing in light of the fact that there are only 643 manuscripts that point to the original version of Homer’s “Iliad”, even less manuscripts are available for other ancient texts. ² “No work of antiquity even approaches the New Testament for authenticity.”³

During the twentieth century, the leading biblical scholars of the world after critically examining the ancient manuscripts confidentially asserted that most of the New Testament

¹ Morris and Morris III page 32

² Derived from McDowell pages 34-38

³ Radmacher, Allen and Wayne House page IVI

was written some twenty years earlier than had formally been believed. Most Scholars now believe that the majority of the New Testament was written somewhere between 45 and 70 A.D. Apologetically this is important as the earlier the date that we can establish for the writing of the New Testament the more confidently we can proclaim the reliability and historicity of the text.⁴

2. Internal evidence. Many today accuse the New Testament of containing error. McDowell points out that the allegations of error in the Bible are usually based on a failure to recognize basic principles of interpreting ancient literature.”⁵ McDowell lists these principles as

- “1 The unexplained is not necessarily unexplainable.
- 2 Fallible interpretations do not mean fallible revelation.
- 3 Understand the context of the passage
- 4 Interpret difficult passages in the light of clear passages
- 5 Don’t base teaching on obscure passages
- 6 The Bible is a human book with human characteristics.
- 7 Just because a report is incomplete does not mean that it is false.
- 8 New Testament citations of the Old Testament need not always be exact.
- 9 The Bible does not necessarily approve of all its records.

⁴ Richard Riss Christian Apologetics Date and Authenticity of The New Testament
http://www.grmi.org/renewal/Richard_Riss/evidences/12date.html

⁵ McDowell page 46

- 10 The Bible uses non-technical, everyday language.
- 11 The Bible may use round numbers as well as exact numbers.
- 12 Note when the Bible uses different literary devices.
- 13 An error in a copy does not equate to an error in the original.
- 14 General statements don't necessarily mean universal promises.
- 15 Later revelation supercedes previous revelation."

Some accuse the New Testament writers of been fraudulent. This view can be dismissed upon the basis that

1. The "conspiracy" would have had to involve too large a group of people with too diverse a background of cultures to maintain the collaboration.
2. No evidence of collusions can be internally found in the documents. Each writer provides his own personal independent account of what he has witnessed. At times the writers even appear on the surface to contradict one another. Morris and Morris III point out "such contradictions are resolved only by very close and careful examination and cross- examination of their testimonies."⁶
3. Rather than confine themselves to generalities, the writers include such details such as names of people, places and times that would have been capable of being independently verified by those living at the time.
- 4 "A candid reading of the New Testament books surely does not suggest fraud or hypocrisy in even the slightest degree. Not only are such sins scathingly rebuked, but also the very atmosphere of the writings is pervaded with the feeling of sincere conviction on the part of the authors. If the writings are actually wicked deceptions, these men were undoubtedly the greatest masters of deception who ever lived."⁷

⁶ Morris and Morris III page 38-39

⁷ Morris and Morris III page 38-39

5. The final and crowning proof of sincerity is proved by the fact that the New Testament writers were so convinced of what they had taught that they were gladly willing to suffer and die for the Gospel. “They did indeed “suffer the loss of all things” and all except John died as a martyr because of their testimony. Men may occasionally be willing to die for an unworthy cause which is false, but never if they knew it to be so. It is impossible that all these would gladly sacrifice their lives for what they knew to be a gross deception.”⁸

Another line of questioning taken by those attempting to discredit the reliability of the New Testament is that the writers were deluded or insane. However the following points dismantle this approach.

- 1 The events depicted in the Gospel usually happened in open public places where they could easily be verified.
 - 2 The events depicted were reported in a great variety of places and at different times. The people describing the events were from varying backgrounds and circumstances.
 - 3 The type of men who wrote the New Testament did not have the characteristics of those who are likely to suffer from hallucinations.
 - 4 The teaching of the New Testament was accepted by a great many people who in the mere act of accepting the teaching risked their very lives.⁹
3. External evidence. McDowell cites Dr Norman Giesler as emphasizing that the Four Gospels are the primary source for our knowledge of the life of Christ

“However, there are considerable reports from non-Christian sources that supplement and confirm the Gospel accounts. These come largely from Greek, Roman, Jewish, and Samaritan sources of the first century. In brief they inform us that:

(1) Jesus was from Nazareth;

(2) He lived a wise and virtuous life;

⁸ Morris and Morris III page 38-39

⁹ Morris and Morris III page 39-40

- (3) He was crucified in Palestine under Pontius Pilate during the reign of Tiberius Caesar at Passover time, being considered the Jewish King;
- (4) He was believed by his disciples to have been raised from the dead three days later;
- (5) His enemies acknowledged that he performed unusual feats they called 'sorcery'
- (6) His small band of disciples multiplied rapidly, spreading even as far as Rome;
- (7) His disciples denied polytheism, lived mortal lives, and worshipped Christ as Divine; ”¹⁰

This picture confirms the view of Christ as presented in the New Testament Gospels.

Modern Archaeological findings also provide overwhelming evidence of the reliability of the New Testament.¹¹ We shall take a brief look at the significance of this point later in this essay.

In addition to the archaeological evidence there are many incidental references amongst ancient heretic, Jewish Christian and pagan writers that inadvertently attest to the reliability of the New Testament included amongst these are

1. Thomas S Millington in 1863 published a book “The Testimony of the Heathen to the Truths of Holy Writ”. Millington compiled his work “almost Exclusively from Greek and Latin Authors of the Classical Ages of Antiquity, this book systematically covers the

¹⁰ McDowell page 60 sited Norman Geisler Baker Encyclopedia of Apologetics , Grand Rapids :Baker 1998 page 384-385

¹¹ See McDowell pages 61-68 for an extensive discussion.

entire Bible, chapter by chapter, citing all references from ancient writers that support the statements of the Bible.”¹²

2. Almost all of the New Testament can be compiled by the earliest extra biblical writings of the early apostolic Fathers.

3. Even the enemies of Christianity wrote about the deeds of Jesus and the early disciples included among these writings are those of Celsus and Lucian, Justin Martyn, Tertullian, Irenaeus, Clement and Eusebius alluded to an account that Pontius Pilate is believed sent to Rome.¹³

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Josh McDowell discusses two primary pointers to the reliability of the Old Testament.

1. The process of textual transmission used by the ancient scribes. Paul Enns summarizes

“The work of copying the ancient manuscripts was a tedious exercise, but the Jews very early developed strict rules for their work. Rules regulated the kind of parchment, the number of lines to be written, the color of the ink, and the manner of revision. When parchments began to wear, the Jew reverently buried the manuscripts. As a result until the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls at Qumran, the oldest extant manuscripts were dated from A.D. 900.”¹⁴

Both Enns and McDowell point to several ancient sources that indicate the reliability of the Old Testament these include, the Dead Sea Scrolls, the Septuagint, the Samaritan Pentateuch and the Aramaic Targums.¹⁵

2. Archaeological evidence. McDowell comments, “A substantial proof for the accuracy of the Old Testament has come from archaeology. Numerous discoveries have confirmed

¹² Richard M Riss Christian Evidences CONFIRMATIONS OF THE BIBLE IN THE CLASSICS AND IN OTHER INDEPENDENT ANCIENT SOURCES

http://www.grmi.org/renewal/Richard_Riss/evidences/5confirm.html 23 February 2002

¹³ Riss http://www.grmi.org/renewal/Richard_Riss/evidences/5confirm.html 23 February 2002

¹⁴ Enns page 173

¹⁵ See Enns page 173-174 and McDowell 77-87 for extended discussion.

the historical accuracy of the biblical documents, even down to the occasional use of foreign kings.”¹⁶

The archaeological findings rather than undermine the Bible confirm the Bible’s inerrancy.

“Archaeological confirmation is divided into artifact evidence and documentary evidence. Artifact evidence is defined as artifacts of a previous society testifying directly of a biblical event. On the other hand, documentary evidence will be defined as extra-biblical texts (written documents) that confirm Old Testament history directly or indirectly.”¹⁷

3. It should also be remembered that Jesus and the Apostles affirmed the reliability of the Old Testament.¹⁸

When it comes to the New Testament three different types of evidence are used to evaluate the reliability of the New Testament. “These are the Greek manuscripts, the various versions in which the New Testament is translated, and the writings of the Church fathers.”¹⁹ From historical evidence most scholars now believe that the Bible was written sometime between 50 A.D and 90 A.D. According to Josh McDowell the earliest fragment that we now have dates about 120 A.D., another fifty fragments date to within 150 – 200 years of composition.²⁰ There are about 5500 Greek manuscripts that are in existence today. In addition from a very early stage in the development of Christianity the Greek New Testament was translated into other languages, today we have at least 18, 000 and possibly as many as 25,000 early manuscripts of the New Testament in other languages. Furthermore even if these New Testament Manuscripts were not in existence from quotations found in the commentaries of the early fathers we could establish what the New Testament that existed 250 years after composition was like.

From this evidence F. F. Bruce has concluded

“The interval between the dates of original composition (of the New Testament) and the earliest extant evidence becomes so small as to be in fact negligible, and the last foundation for any doubt that the Scriptures have come down to us substantially as they were written has now been removed. Both the authenticity and the general integrity of the books of the New Testament may be regarded as finally established”²¹

Sir Fredric Kenyon has similarly observed

¹⁶ McDowell page 89

¹⁷ McDowell page 91

¹⁸ Refer McDowell page 115-116 for discussion

¹⁹ McDowell, J., & Stewart, D. (1997, c1993). *Answers to tough questions: Skeptics ask about the Christian faith* (electronic ed.). Nashville: Thomas Nelson. Chapter The Bible Section Hasn’t the New Testament changed since it was first copied and recopied through history.

²⁰ McDowell, J., & Stewart, D. (1997, c1993). *Answers to tough questions: Skeptics ask about the Christian faith* (electronic ed.) Nashville: Thomas Nelson. Chapter The Bible Section Hasn’t the New Testament changed since it was first copied and recopied through history.

²¹ McDowell, J., & Stewart, D. (1997, c1993). *Answers to tough questions: Skeptics ask about the Christian faith* (electronic ed.). Nashville: Thomas Nelson. Chapter The Bible Section Hasn’t the New Testament changed since it was first copied and recopied through history. Citation is from F F Bruce “The Bible and Archaeology page 288-289)

The number of manuscripts of the New Testament, of early translations from it, and of quotations from it in the oldest writers of the Church, is so large that it is practically certain that the true reading of every doubtful passage is preserved in some one or other of these ancient authorities. This can be said of no other ancient book in the world²²

The chart below compares the number of New Testament manuscripts that are extant today to the number of surviving manuscripts of other ancient writings that modern historians accept as history with little difficulty. The chart shows that the number of ancient New Testament manuscripts that are in existence today far exceeds that of any other ancient text. Not only this but the New Testament we have today is far closer to the date of original composition as well. Most New Testament manuscripts date within 200 years of composition while “the average *gap* between the original composition and the earliest copy is over 1,000 years for other books.”²³ Furthermore the New Testament manuscripts have an accuracy of 99% or more, the next closest is Homer with an accuracy of 90%, most of the other manuscripts have an uncertain accuracy and this is due to the fact that there are simply not enough manuscripts of these texts to establish the degree of accuracy.

COMPARISON OF ANCIENT TEXTS

Author	Date Written	Earliest Copy	Number of Copies	Accuracy of Copy
Caesar	1st Cent. B.C.	900 A.D.	10	—
Livy	1st Cent. B.C.	—	20	—
Tacitus	c. 100 A.D.	1100 A.D.	20	—
Thucydides	5th Cent. B.C.	900 A.D.	8	—
Herodotus	5th Cent. B.C.	900 A.D.	8	—
Demosthenes	4th Cent. B.C.	1100 A.D.	200	—
<i>Mahabharata</i>	—	—	—	90%
Homer	9th Cent. B.C.	—	643	95%
New Testament	1 st Cent. A.D. (50-100 A.D.)	2nd Cent. A.D. (c. 130 A.D. f.)	5,000	99 + %

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²²Geisler, N. L. (1999). *Baker encyclopedia of Christian apologetics* Baker reference library (Page 533) Grand Rapids, Mich: Baker Books. Page 553 citation is from F Kenyon The Bible and Archaeology, Our Bible and Ancient Manuscripts

²³Geisler, N. L. (1976). *Christian apologetics*. Includes index. (Page 308) Grand Rapids: Baker Book House page 307

²⁴Geisler, N. L. (1976). *Christian apologetics*. Includes index. (Page 307) Grand Rapids: Baker Book House page 307

From considering such evidence Paul Enns has concluded, “It is evident that the hand of God has preserved the various texts through the centuries to enable scholars to collate them and reconstruct the text as closely as possible to the original writings.”²⁵

In addition Muncaster when he researched the uniqueness of the Bible discovered that the Bible is unique in its consistency. He writes “Even though it contains many controversial points, written centuries apart by very different authors, yet it is in complete agreement with itself.”²⁶

The following chart shows just how diverse the background of the Bible writers was, it also depicts how varied the circumstances were in which they wrote. Yet in spite of these diverse circumstances and backgrounds a wonderful harmony of message is found within the Bibles pages that can only be the result of divine inspiration.

Biographical Background of the Bible Writers

Author	Occupation	Type of Period	Writings
Moses	Political leader	Wilderness experience	The Torah
Joshua	Military General	War	Joshua
Samuel	Prophet	Internal Strife	1 and 2 Samuel
David	King	Various – times of despair, times of rejoicing	Psalms
Solomon	King	Peace and Prosperity	Proverbs Ecclesiastes Song of Songs
Amos	Herdsmen	Before Jewish exile	Amos
Daniel	Prime Minister	Exile	Daniel
Nehemiah	Cupbearer to King of Persia	After return to Jerusalem	Nehemiah
Mark	Scribe for Peter	Early years of Christianity	Mark
Matthew	Tax collector	Persecution	Matthew
Luke	Doctor	Early years of Christianity	Luke Acts

²⁵Enns, P. P. (1997, c1989) *The Moody handbook of theology* Chicago, Ill.: Moody Press page 175

²⁶ Muncaster page 213

John	Fisherman	In Asia Minor Towards the close of the first century	John Epistles of John Revelation
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Paul	Former Rabbi Former persecutor of Christianity Founder of churches	Various including prisons	Most of the Epistles
Peter	Fisherman	Nero's persecution	1 and 2 Peter Gospel of Mark is his recollections of the life of Jesus

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The Bible's uniqueness is also shown by the following facts

1. The Bible internally declares itself to be the Word of God (2 Tim 3: 16)
2. The Bible is the only Scripture that offers salvation entirely by God's grace and mercy.
3. The Bible can demonstrate that it has been textually preserved and is virtually the same as its autograph.
4. The Bible contains the highest moral standards of any book.
5. The Bible is the only book that contains an account of creation by fiat and then provides a history of mankind from the first man, Adam, to the end of history.
6. Only the Bible contains prophecies that detail the coming of the Messiah and narrative as to how these prophecies have literally been fulfilled
7. Only the Bible accurately diagnoses the real condition of mankind, a fallen nature due to sin. The Bible is the only book that offers a cure for this problem, man's salvation procured by the death of Christ at Calvary. The Bible therefore is the only book that convicts man of sin, and by pointing the way to Christ and salvation can change the inner nature of man.
8. The Bible has a unique theological content.
9. The Bible has been confirmed by archaeology, textual criticism and modern science.
10. The Bible is the most translated book of all time, it has been translated into at least 1700 languages and this number keeps expanding.

²⁷ Derived from Muncaster pages 213-215

11. Only the Bible has withstood determined attempts throughout history to destroy it from the face of the planet and yet it has been better preserved than any other book in history.
12. The Bible has had more influence on history than other book; it has had a major influence in determining the shape of western civilisation.
13. The Bible is unique in that each of its 66 books centres either directly or indirectly upon one individual, namely the Lord Jesus Christ.
14. Only the Bible proclaims that its central character has been permanently resurrected from the dead.
15. The Bible is unique in that it proclaims and contains historical proof that the one true God loves the world.²⁸

²⁸ Derived from Ankerberg and Weldon page 82-85

