

# The Historical Reliability of the New Testament

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## Can I trust the Bible? Is it historically accurate?

### 1. What is the Bible?

God's ultimate revelation of himself is in the person of Jesus Christ and therefore also in the Bible, since that is the original book about Jesus. Bible is a collection of sub-books:

Old Testament - 39 books - deals with the beginning of history, the story of the moral fall of humans, and the narrative of God's preparation of his people for the coming of his Son, Jesus Christ. New Testament - 27 books. Jesus stayed on earth for a short 33 years, and after he rose into heaven his followers realized the danger of losing the revelation of God that he had brought, so they carefully recorded his life and teaching, and the writings of his early followers. These writings were collected and became what we know as the New Testament.

The Bible contains history, poetry, allegory, biography, apocalyptic literature, proverbs, psalms, songs, prophecy, letters - an amazing collection of literature, especially when you consider that all these writings basically agree with each other about the essentials.

### 2. How was it written?

"All Scripture is inspired by God and is useful to teach us what is true and to make us realize what is wrong in our lives. It straightens us out and teaches us to do what is right." 2 Tim 3:16,17 (New Living Transl.)

The Bible is an example of a human and divine interaction. We understand that the idea of the Bible being revelation means that God was involved in the making of the Bible, but it's also evidently a very human document. It's authors ranged from shepherds to kings and they are obviously very much involved in the writing. They use their own choice of words, their individual ideas and beliefs, their cultures, their personalities, their convictions, their hopes and fears. Often they are in dialogue with God. So, the Bible is divine in origin, but has the human element of being written by human hands under the control of human minds.

So, if humans are involved, and humans make mistakes, see things incorrectly, have flawed perspectives, how can we trust the Bible? Obviously God didn't just dictate the text of the Bible to warm bodies who just passively transcribed it. If that was the case, all the books of the Bible would show similarities in style, vocabulary, grammar and wording. This is obviously not the case. But on the other hand, God didn't just put vague ideas in the minds of the authors and leave them on their own to write it down as best as they could.

Doctrine of divine inspiration "all Scripture is breathed out" by God. The divine activity that surrounded the writers of the Bible, a co-operative activity in which God exerted enough influence in them without controlling them completely, so that the resulting documents rendered the thoughts of God without error or contradiction. There are some apparent contradictions in the Bible and we'll talk about those later - but note that I said the word apparent - it appears to be a contradiction, but may not actually be one.

### 3. How was it compiled?

#### Old Testament

The books of the OT had been compiled and in use by the Jews for centuries (though in a different order than we have them), but there was a formal council -

Council of Jamnia, just before AD70 - which formalized which writings of the Law, the Prophets and the Writings (as they were called) were to be considered holy and inspired by God.

Definition: The Canon – those books considered to be inspired by God and authoritative for the church (i.e. those that made the cut).

#### New Testament:

is more complicated, but a simplified version is like this:

*First century AD* - books written

*Second century AD* - books/letters travel from church to church in an improvised exchange program and are used to define Christian beliefs.

*Third century AD* - books gathered into groupings of gospels and epistles (letters).

*Fourth century AD* - worldwide representatives of churches came together, Synod of Hippo 393 AD, Third Council of Carthage 397 AD

#### The tests:

The books were assessed according to three main criteria:

##### 1. *Apostolic Authority*

Were these books written by the apostles themselves who were eyewitnesses, or by followers of the apostles? (e.g. Mark was not an eyewitness but was the helper of Peter who was; Luke was an associate of Paul)

##### 2. *Conformity to the Rule of Faith*

Were these books congruent with the basic Christian tradition that the church recognized as normative?

### *3. Continuous acceptance and usage by the church at large.*

Were these books/letters generally accepted and in use by the church i.e. was the church already treating them as though they were sacred scripture?

There was a high degree of agreement in the first two centuries about which should be included, and in a way, the process can be described as a “survival of the fittest.” Those that were in question were thrown out.

Arthur Darby Nock wrote, “The most traveled roads in Europe are the best roads; that’s why they are so well traveled.” This analogy works well for the books which made it into the Canon.

Important to note is that these councils did not make the books Scripture - they merely confirmed what was already the practice of the churches who were using these books already. (Bach and Handel - composers - decided in 1950 that this was great classical music - didn’t make it great, just formalized their greatness - same with NT books.)

An example of a rejected “gospel” is the Gospel of Thomas. It includes sayings that appear to contradict the Jesus of the canonical gospels. For example:

“Split wood; I am there. Lift up a stone, and you will find me there.”

This statement is pantheism, the idea that Jesus is one with the substance of the world and reflects a later philosophy. This idea is not in the canonical gospels.

The Gospel of Thomas ends with a note saying: “ Let Mary go away from us, because women are not worthy of life...Lo, I shall lead her in order to make her a male, so that she too may become a living spirit, resembling you males. For every woman who makes herself male will enter into the kingdom of heaven.”

Obviously these ideas are contrary to the Jesus we find in the canonical gospels.

Some parts of the NT were slow to be accepted as part of the Canon (James, Hebrews and Revelation – Martin Luther called James “ a right strawy epistle”) but this indicates the care that the Councils took in making their decisions. They didn’t have a “gung-ho”, anything goes attitude, but too their time and made careful choices.

#### **4. The Bible as Ideology**

Ideology –

The body of ideas reflecting the social needs and aspirations of an individual, group, class, or culture; A set of doctrines or beliefs that form the basis of a political, economic, or other system.

The argument goes, “We cannot trust the Bible since the writers are obviously biased and trying to move the reader towards a certain point of view.” How do we answer this charge?

a) The whole idea of objective history is a myth. Every historian has a bias, and is worse when they think they have no bias. The historian, even in his selection of facts, and what he/she reports, is evidencing bias. Modern historian recognize that there is no such thing as true objectivity, and that if someone claims it, their writing is to be treated with suspicion.

(Exercise – write one paragraph on what happened on Sep 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001)

b) It is only right to compare the Bible, and especially the NT with the standards of ancient literature. History, in the ancient world, was always written to teach a lesson. That’s why biographies are so disproportionate in comparison to modern biographies. The ancient biographies (like the gospels) focus most on those areas

where lessons are to be learned from the life of the subject. Modern biographies tend to give approximately equal weight to each stage of a person's life.

In ancient literature, the idea of writing history simply to chronicle events, with no ideological purpose, was unheard of. Nobody wrote history unless there were lessons to be learned from it, and since we believe that we can recover accurate history from other ancient sources (with their bias), then why not from the Bible?

c) An ideological purpose does not prohibit accuracy. Some of the best records and museums chronicling the Holocaust (the murder of 6 million Jews by the Nazi regime under Hitler in WWII) were created by Jews. Obviously they have a huge ideological purpose (to prevent such a thing ever happening again) but they have also proved the most faithful and objective in their reporting of historical truth.

In short, just because books have an agenda, does not mean they are inaccurate.

## **A FOCUS ON THE GOSPELS**

Since our faith is primarily based on the person of Jesus Christ, the remainder of this paper will be a more detailed focus on the reliability of the canonical gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John.

### **1. Authorship**

Were the gospels written by the people to whom they are traditionally attributed?

Strictly speaking, the gospels are anonymous, since they are not signed, but the early church has never attributed them to anyone else other than the names we use for them.

Matthew – also known as Levi, the tax collector and one of the twelve disciples

Mark – also known as John Mark, companion of Peter

Luke – companion of Paul (the “we” passages in the Acts of the Apostles)

John – John the Apostle, the son of Zebedee

All of the gospels are obviously based on eyewitness material.

## **2. The Synoptic Gospels and John**

Why is John so different to the other synoptic gospels?

The synoptic gospels are so called because they have a similar presentation (syn – same; optic – view) of the life of Jesus, told in a roughly documentary format. Both Luke and Matthew seems to show some dependence on Mark, (and another source they had in common, known as ‘Q’) so this similarity is not surprising.

John is somewhat different, and has a more explicit Christology (Jesus “I am” statements for example), and his style is more like an expressionist painting than a documentary. However, when John records the last week of Jesus’ life, his version is much more similar to the synoptic gospels than the rest of his writing.

Accordingly his gospel has traditionally been seen as less likely to be historically accurate than the synoptics, but archeological discoveries over the last century have repeatedly verified details of John’s gospel, and thus its reputation for historical accuracy has been much improved.

Why? There are two main theories. The old theory is that John knew the other three gospels, and decided that he would write in a style that would supplement theirs, rather than repeating it. The newer theory is that John wrote independently, and did not know these other gospels at all, and so was not influenced in any way by their style.

The nature of the synoptic gospels is rather plain when compared to later apocryphal gospels, which tend towards the mythological and fanciful. They tell stories in a more sober fashion, and without

the embellishments that later apocryphal gospels include (e.g. Jesus bringing a clay bird to life in his hands; Jesus coming out of the tomb as a huge person reaching to the sky, followed by the cross which speaks etc.) The later apocryphal gospels tend to include this stuff, and the reason why they get away with it, is because the generation of eyewitness has died out, and cannot refute their claims. Not so, with the canonical gospels.

### **3. When were the Gospels written?**

The argument is sometimes presented: “The gospels were written so long after the events they described, that inaccuracy must have crept in through human error, faulty memory, or they were overlaid with mythical elements etc.”

This sounds like a reasonable point (how many of us could recall in detail what we were doing a year ago?) but there are good arguments to refute it, as follows:

a) An early dating for the gospels.

The scholarly consensus is that Mark was written in the 70s, Matthew and Luke in the 80s and John in the 90s, all within the lifetime of the eyewitnesses of the life of Jesus, including hostile eyewitnesses, who would have served as a corrective if false teachings of Jesus were going around.

e.g. if, in 30 years, a book claimed that Bill Clinton declared war on Iraq in 2003, there would be enough of us still alive to refute that, and the book would be ridiculed as hopelessly inaccurate, and therefore would not gain widespread acceptance. This is exactly what did not happen with the gospels. They did gain widespread acceptance, even though plenty of eyewitnesses to the event were still alive.

The false apocryphal gospels only arise after the death of eyewitnesses (i.e. no one left to refute their fanciful claims).



b) Comparing this “late” date to other ancient literature.

Compared to other ancient literature, the time period between events and their being written down is practically instantaneous. Some examples:

Alexander the Great.

The two earliest biographies of ATG were written by Arrian and Plutarch more than 400 years after his death in 323 BC, yet historians consider them to be generally trustworthy.

Legendary material about Alexander did develop over time, but only in the centuries after these two writers. In other words, for the first 500 years after ATG’s death, his story was kept fairly intact. So, whether the gospels were written 30 years or 60 years after the events, this is still a very short time period in comparison with other ancient biographies.

In fact, the dates may be even earlier than suggested. Acts ends with Paul still alive in Rome in about 62 AD and Luke wrote his gospel of Luke before he wrote Acts, so the Gospel of Luke must be dated earlier than 62 AD, and if Luke used Mark as a source, then Mark would be even earlier, maybe in the early 60s or late 50s, which creates a maximum gap between events and writing of about 25 years – practically a newsflash by ancient standards.

c) Early Christian Creeds.

One way of assessing how early certain beliefs about Jesus became prominent is to look at Christian creeds and what they say about Jesus. Paul’s writings (the letters) are earlier than the gospels, and he includes various sections which look very much like formal creeds ( Phil 2:6-11; Col 1:15-20; parts of 1 Cor 15). If the crucifixion was around AD 30 (not AD 33 – there was a mix-up in the calendar) and Paul was converted in AD 32 and had his first

meeting with the apostles in AD 35, who passed on these creeds to him, which were already formulated and in use in the early church, this means that we have evidence for beliefs about Jesus deity, role in creation and resurrection existing a mere 2-5 years after the events.

#### **4. Eight tests examining the Gospel Writers**

##### *a) The Intention Test*

Did the gospel writers intend to accurately record history?

Yes – see Luke's preface:

Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eyewitnesses and servants of the word.

Therefore, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, it seemed good also to me to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught.

Luke 1:1-4

Matthew and Mark, which are similar literature in style to Luke, obviously have similar intentions.

John states his purpose in John 20:31:

Jesus did many other miraculous signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book.

But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.

John 20:30,31

and it appears that his purpose is primarily theological, but in order to be convinced, the theology has to flow from accurate history. Why include so many checkable details, if all you are interested in is theology?

The literary nature of the gospels is sober, responsible, with accurate incidental details, and you do not see the outlandish flourishes and blatant mythologizing that appears in so much other ancient writing.

b) *The Ability Test*

Even if the gospel writers wanted to reliably record history, could they do so? What about faulty memories, wishful thinking, the development of legend?

There are three main reasons why we can believe that the gospel writers were able to reliably record history:

i) the oral culture of remembering. This was a society in which books/scrolls were expensive and rare. There was no widespread distribution of literature, no printing press, and not many books. Education, learning, worship and teaching all depended on the oral tradition. Some rabbis had committed pretty much all of the OT to memory and it is quite possible that some of Jesus' disciples committed to memory more of his teaching than is recorded in the gospels.

ii) the memorable nature of Jesus' teaching. 80-90% of Jesus' teaching is in a highly memorable form – there is meter, balanced lines, wordplay, humor, parallelism, and vibrant figures of speech (a camel through the eye of a needle; a log in your own eye). The type of memorization was flexible and there could be a degree of variation in the telling of the story. (example – Little Red Riding Hood). Studies show that in the retelling of these types of stories in that culture, there is a 10-40% variation i.e. some details can be changed, but some essential key ones can not. Incidentally, this 10-40% variation is consistently the same amount of variation that we see in the synoptic gospels.

The disciples did commit Jesus' teaching to memory but felt free to recount it in various forms, but always preserving the significance of Jesus' original teaching and deeds.

iii) the controlling role of the community. If someone in the community told a Jesus story wrongly, there would be enough people who could monitor the change and correct it if the story had become garbled. In the Middle-Eastern culture, this is standard practice. It is known academically as “informal controlled oral tradition.” It is a system of checks and balances which keeps stories intact. There is great pride attached to telling a story correctly, and accordingly great shame if you get it wrong, so there are socially compelling reasons to get the facts right.

c) *The Character Test*

Is there any evidence of dishonesty or immorality that would taint the reliability and trustworthiness of the gospel writers?

There is no evidence to suggest that they were people of anything other than the greatest integrity. They lived out their beliefs and ten of the remaining eleven (after Judas) disciples, were killed for their faith. If they had been writing something which they knew to be untrue, they would have opportunity to recant it and live, but instead they stood by what they had written, and what they believed, and were martyred for it.

d) *The Consistency Test*

Aren't the gospels contradictory? If so, how can you trust them? How can something which is the “word of God” contradict itself? Don't such contradictions indicate that the writers were only human, and made human errors?

There are numerous points at which the gospels appear to disagree with each other, from minor variations in wording through to some of the most famous apparent contradictions. But, compared to ancient literature, allowing for paraphrase, abridgement, explanatory additions, selection and omission, these gospels are extremely consistent with each other by ancient standards, the only standards by which it would be fair to judge

them. These “contradictions” are usually only apparent and can be explained. (Diary, dentist, doctor example)

If the gospels had been identical to each other, this would have raised charges that the authors had conspired amongst themselves to coordinate their stories in advance. A mark of genuine eyewitness testimony is that there are differences in detail – this actually works towards proving their genuineness, not against.

e) *The Bias Test*

Is there any evidence that the authors had a vested interest in skewing the material? It is possible, but their inherent bias could also move them the other way. They loved, honored and respected Jesus so much that it prompted them to record his life with great integrity. The pressure from society (both the Romans and the Jews) was to keep quiet and deny him, yet they wrote about, and died for him. (Holocaust centers)

f) *The Cover-Up Test*

Is there any evidence of a cover-up? Did the gospel writers include any material that was embarrassing or were they just making themselves and Jesus look good?

There is quite a bit of evidence that they did include material that is surprising, and which you would not expect to be included if they were giving a “best presentation of Christianity “ and themselves:

i) the hard sayings of Jesus. There is a whole body of literature devoted to explaining the hard sayings of Jesus, from his extremely demanding and “unreasonable” sayings (“Be perfect as my heavenly Father is perfect”; “Unless you eat my body and drink my blood...”)

ii) Verses which appear to say less than wonderful things about Jesus:

Mk 6:5 which talks about how Jesus couldn't do many miracles in Nazareth because the people there had little faith – this seems to limit Jesus' power

Mk 13:32 where Jesus says he does not know the day or the hour – seems to limit his omniscience

Mt 27:46/LMk 15:34 Jesus asking on the cross, "Why have you forsaken me?" which seems to indicate that God would abandon his own son.

Mk 1:9 Jesus being baptized (for the forgiveness of sins??)

All of these can be explained, but it would have been simpler to leave them out, if you were trying to create a problem free gospel.

iii) There is also embarrassing material about the disciples:

- Mark's portrayal of Peter is often unflattering
- The disciples repeatedly misunderstand Jesus and are criticized by him for being "slow"
- James and John jockey for kingdom positions and are given a hard lesson about servant leadership by Jesus

#### *g) The Corroboration Test*

The gospels mention people, places and events. Can these be independently verified? The longer this question goes on, the more gets verified. Over the last 100 years, archeology has repeatedly unearthed discoveries that have confirmed specific references in the gospels. Some examples:

- Luke in ch 3:1 refers to Lysanias as tetrarch of Abilene in about AD 27. For years scholars pointed to this as evidence that Luke did not know what he was talking about because everyone knew that Lysanias was not a tetrarch but rather the ruler of Chalcis half a century earlier. Then an inscription was found from the time of Tiberius (AD 14-37) which mentions Lysanias as tetrarch in Abila

near Damascus, just as Luke has written. It turned out there had been two government officials named Lysanias.

- Luke in Acts 17:6 refers to politarchs (translated as ‘city officials’ in the NIV) and historians said there was no evidence of the term ‘politarchs’ in any ancient Roman documents. However, later an inscription was found on a first century arch which begins: “In the time of the politarchs...” and since then more than 35 inscriptions from that time period have been found which mention politarchs.

- John 5:2 Now there is in Jerusalem near the Sheep Gate a pool, which in Aramaic is called Bethesda and which is surrounded by five covered colonnades.

These have been found by archeologists. Even John, which is considered to be the more “theological” gospel less concerned with historical accuracy, has been verified time and again by archeology.

At the moment, there is no archeological discovery that disproves anything in the NT. In fact, the flow of evidence is in the other direction. The more that is dug up, the more accurate the NT is seen as being. Compare to The Book of Mormon/Smithsonian Inst.

#### h) *The Adverse Witness Test*

Were others present who could have contradicted or corrected the gospels if they had been distorted or false? Do we see examples of contemporaries of Jesus complaining that the gospels were wrong?

The answer to this question is perhaps best phrased as another question: Could the Christian movement have taken root right there in Jerusalem, in the very area where Jesus had done much of his ministry, where he had been crucified, buried and resurrected, if people who knew him were aware that the disciples were exaggerating or distorting the things he did? People wanted to destroy this vulnerable and fragile new movement that

was being subjected to persecution. If they could have attacked it on the basis of falsehoods and distortion, they would have done so.

## **5. Evidence about Christianity from outside the Bible (from non-Christians)**

Can the claims of Christianity, or the nature of Christ, his followers and the early church be validated anywhere outside of the Bible? Yes, both Jewish and Roman historians, plus the archeological evidence already mentioned, verify certain aspects of the history of early Christianity:

a) Josephus – a Jewish historian. Describing the activities of the High Priest Ananias who took advantage of the death of the Roman governor Festus (mentioned in Acts) he says: 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.

*Antiquities 20.200*

- This corroborates that James, brother of Jesus became a convert, and that Jesus was viewed by some as the Christ, the Messiah.

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 many of the 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 about these and countless other marvelous things about him. And the tribe of Christians, so called after him, has still to this day, not disappeared. *Antiquities 18:63,64*

(Note – the underlined sections are probably later Christian additions, or “interpolations” to the text, and not originally from Josephus. He is unlikely to have said these things.)

- This corroborates that Jesus was the martyred leader of the church in Jerusalem, that he was a wise teacher who had established a wide and lasting following, despite the fact that he had been crucified under Pilate at the instigation of some of the Jewish leaders.

b) Tacitus – a Roman historian. Explains how Nero persecuted the 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 Pilatus, and a most mischievous superstition, thus checked for the moment, again broke out not only in Judaea, the first source of the evil, but even in Rome...Accordingly, an arrest was first made of all who pleaded guilty: then upon their information, an immense multitude was convicted, not so much of the crime of firing the city, as of hatred against mankind. *Annals 15.44*

- This testimony, from an unsympathetic witness, corroborates the success and spread of Christianity, based on a historical figure – Jesus – who was crucified under Pontius Pilate, and that he had many followers who would rather die than recant.

c) Pliny the Younger – Roman Governor of Bithynia, correspondent of Emperor Trajan

I have asked them if they are Christians, and if they admit it, I repeat the question a second and a third time, with a warning of the punishment awaiting them. If they persist, I order them to be led away for execution; for whatever the nature of their admission, I am convinced that their stubbornness and unshakeable obstinacy ought not to go unpunished...They also declared that the sum total of their guilt or error amounted to no more than this: they had met regularly before dawn on a fixed day to chant verses, alternately amongst themselves in honor to Christ as if to a god, and also to bind themselves by oath, not for any criminal purpose, but to abstain from theft, robbery, and adultery...This made me decide it was all the more necessary to extract the truth by torture from two slave-women, whom they called deaconesses. I found nothing but a degenerate sort of cult carried to extravagant lengths. *Letters 10.96*

- This was probably written around AD 111 and shows the rapid spread of Christianity (to Turkey, where he was Governor), both in the city and rural areas, among every class of person, talks about the worship of Jesus as God, and the high ethical standards of the Christians.

d) Thallus, Phlegon, “The Day the Earth Went Dark” and The Earthquake

Thallus reported the time that the earth went dark, at the date of Christ’s crucifixion, and he thought that the reason was that it was an eclipse. Julius Africanus, in AD 221 reporting Thallus’ account shows that it could not have been an eclipse according to the calendar, and must have been some other cause.

Also, Phlegon, a Greek author from Caria, writing a chronology soon after 137 AD, reported that in the fourth year of the 202<sup>nd</sup> Olympiad (i.e. 33 AD), there was “the greatest eclipse of the sun”

and that “it became night in the sixth hour of the day (noon) so that the stars even appeared in the heavens. There was a great earthquake in Bithynia, and many things were overturned in Nicaea.” *Olympiades he Chronika 13*.

- This corroborates the gospel reports of the earth going dark during the time of Christ’s crucifixion, and of the earthquake at that time.

e) The Talmud – Jewish work from 500 AD which incorporates the Talmud (200 AD)

A quote from Professor M. Wilcox:

The Jewish traditional literature, although it mentions Jesus only quite sparingly...supports the gospel claim that he was a healer and miracle worker, even though it ascribes these activities to sorcery. In addition, it preserves the recollection that he was a teacher, and that he had disciples...”

- This corroborates Jesus’ healing, miracles and having disciples.

Summary – even if the gospels did not exist, this is what we would know about Jesus from the external sources alone:

- Jesus was a Jewish teacher
- Many people believed that he performed healings and exorcisms
- Some people believed he was the Messiah
- He was rejected by the Jewish leaders
- He was crucified under Pontius Pilate in the reign of Tiberius
- Despite his shameful death, his followers, who believed that he was still alive, spread beyond Palestine so that were multitudes of them in Rome by AD 64
- All kinds of people from the cities and the countryside, men and women, slave and free, worshiped him as God.

All in all, pretty much the same picture you get from the Gospels and Acts.

## 6. The Bibliographical Tests

If the above verifies that the gospels, as originally written, are basically trustworthy and historically accurate, the next question is, since we no longer have the originals, were they accurately transmitted?

The important factor here is the number of copies that have survived. Generally, the more copies you have, and especially if they are from a wide geographical area, the better because you can cross-check and figure out what the original said.

Example: You might find four documents with the following sentences:

1. They always paid their taxes.
2. They always paid their taxis.
3. They always paid their cab drivers.
4. They always paid their income taxes.

In this example, you can see how Document 3 can be made from Document 2, which is probably a misreading of Document 1, which is most likely correct since Document 4 is very close to it.

Also, when you have translations into other languages, such as Latin, Syriac and Coptic, you are able to work backwards and see what the original Greek (of the NT) might have been.

Let's compare the NT to other ancient literature, in terms of # of copies.

- Tacitus. (Roman historian)

He wrote the *Annals of Imperial Rome* in AD 116. The first six books exist in only one manuscript and this copy dates from about 850 AD. Books 11-16 are in another manuscript which dates from the 11<sup>th</sup> century. Books 7-10 are lost.

The period of time between when Tacitus wrote, and the earliest copy is 634 years.

- Josephus (Jewish historian of the first century)

There are 9 Greek manuscripts of his work *Jewish War* – these copies date from 10<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> century. There is a Latin translation from the 4<sup>th</sup> century and a medieval Russian translation from 11/12<sup>th</sup> century. The period of time between writing and earliest copy: at least 300 years (in the original language, 800 years)

- Homer

Wrote *The Iliad* in 800 BC. There are 650 Greek manuscripts, the earliest of which date from the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> centuries i.e. a 1000 year gap between writing and the earliest copy.

- New Testament

There are more than 5000 existing portions of Greek NT manuscripts (24,000 if you count those in other languages). The oldest fragment is from the Gospel of John and dates from 100-150 AD i.e. 10-60 years after writing. The others date from around AD 200 i.e. a gap between writing and earliest copies of a maximum of 130 years.

Tacitus 634 years	2 manuscripts
Josephus – 300 years	11 manuscripts
Homer – 1000 years	650 manuscripts
New Testament – 130 years	5000 (in Greek) 24000 (total)

“There is no body of literature in the world which enjoys such a wealth of good textual attestation as the New Testament.” F.F. Bruce

“...in no other case is the interval of time between the composition of the book and the date of the earliest manuscripts so short as in that of the New Testament.” Sir Frederick Kenyon

Textual variations – 99.5% of the documents agree with each other. Of the 0.5% which disagree, not one of them affects any doctrinal matter.

## 7. Christ and the Bible

Jesus trusted the Scriptures (Matt 5:27-29)

Jesus quotes from the writings of Moses in the OT, and thereby shows that he trusts it. He doesn't correct it by saying "but I say to you" what he corrects is the common interpretation of the contemporary rabbis which was misleading.

The role of the Holy Spirit (Matt 28:18-20, called upon to teach the commands of Jesus and he promises that he will be with them, in the form of the Holy Spirit, as they do so, guiding them to the truth.

Jn 14:15,16) - speaks of the Holy Spirit who will guide you into all truth. I believe that God was actively involved as the Holy Spirit when the disciples were teaching and writing down Jesus' commands. Jesus promised that and I believe him.

## 8. Bibliography

The main text used for this paper was: *The Case for Christ* by Lee Strobel.

I also recommend:

Craig Blomberg, *The Historical Reliability of the Gospels*

F.F. Bruce *The New Testament Documents: Are they Reliable?*

I. Howard Marshall *I Believe in the Historical Jesus*

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