

## Can the Bible Be Trusted?

By Matthew Tague

One of the most frequently asked questions by people skeptical toward Christianity is “How do you know the Bible is really true? Since it was written so long ago, can anyone really be sure that what has come down to us in the form of the modern Bible is what was really written thousands of years ago?” Take a couple of minutes to read this brochure and find out for yourself how the New Testament stacks up against other ancient historical literature.

When studying ancient documents, historians and professors of ancient literature have standards for determining if a document is a credible source and if the one claiming to be the author of the document authored it. One common argument raised by the skeptic is that the original documents are lost, so we really don’t know for sure what the New Testament authors were trying to say. What most people don’t know is that there isn’t one ancient document in the world that has been preserved for us. No original writing exists for Plato, Aristotle, Homer, Josephus, anyone. Since historians always have to rely on copies of ancient documents, they have created some “rules” or standards that help them in determining if the ancient writing is history or if it’s just unreliable myth.

Tests for determining the reliability of an ancient document

- I. The Bibliographic Test-(How many ancient copies are still around?)
- II. The Internal Test-(Did the author believe it was historically true?)
- III. The External Test-(Do archeology and history back up the book’s claim?)

### I. Bibliographical Test

This is a test to determine how many manuscript copies of an ancient document are still around and how close they are to the original. Simply because we do not possess any of the original copies of the New Testament books is no reason to question their reliability. Like I mentioned before, our culture today does not possess any original work from any of the ancient writers such as Homer, Plato, the Roman historians, etc. So, if someone is going to question the message of the New Testament because no original text is around, then they also have to question every single ancient document that was written before 1000 AD. Instead of questioning all of history, scholars use these criteria:

#### A. How many ancient copies of this document do we currently possess?

Usually historians must possess over 5 to consider it reliable, but there are instances where they have less, and still consider the document to be reliable. For example, we have less than 5 copies of some of Aristotle’s writings, yet they are considered a reliable record of his teachings.

#### B. How many of these copies date within a thousand years of it being originally written?

Plato wrote around 400 BC, yet the earliest copies of his writings come from 900 AD. That is a distance of about 1,300 years from the time Plato wrote.

How does the New Testament stack up against other ancient documents? The results for test A come out remarkably well for the New Testament documents. They are considered to be ancient documents, all being written before 100 AD. At present, historians possess over 5500 fragments or entire copies of the New Testament in the Greek language alone, not counting the 9000 Latin and 8000 Ethiopic, Slavic and Armenian versions. That is more than any ancient document can boast. Additionally, even if we did not possess even one ancient copy of the New Testament (N.T.), the entire N.T. could be reproduced simply from the writings of the early church Fathers’ quotations of the N.T. in the letters and books they wrote. That is pretty amazing.

Turning to test B, the timetable between the original documents and the copies that we now possess of the N.T., the gap is minimal. In fact, the earliest portion of the N.T. that historians currently know about is

a fragment of the Gospel of John, chapter 18. It contains five verses and was located among other papyri fragments in the John Ryland's Library in Manchester, England in 1934 and was originally found in Egypt in 1920. The fragment is now called the John Ryland's Papyri. The most eminent scholars have dated it anywhere between 100-150 AD. This means that there was a copy of the Gospel of John in the Nile region of Egypt as early as 150 AD, hundreds of miles away from Asia Minor where the gospel was written. To have a partial, even fragmentary, copy of an ancient document from less than a hundred years after it was written is almost unheard of in historical studies.

The John Ryland's Papyri is not the only example. Historians possess complete copies of the N.T. dated as early as 250 AD, less than 200 years after the N.T. was written. This kind of time limit is basically unheard of when dealing with ancient manuscripts.

## II. The Internal Test

The internal test determines whether the document itself claims to be a historical account. There can be no argument that the N.T. claims to be a historical document. The author of Luke and Acts clearly identifies himself and the person he is writing to in Luke 1:1-3 and Acts 1:1. The Apostle Paul identifies himself in all his letters. Peter mentions that he was an eyewitness to the event of the life of Christ in II Peter 1:16. John also tells his readers that he has seen, heard, and touched Jesus in I John 1:1. The writers of the N.T. did not always identify themselves the way that modern writers do, but this has more to do with the style of literature back then as opposed to now than anything else. Often ancient writers did not leave their name when writing a book. An example of this can be seen in the writing of the gospel of Mark. There is no author given for Mark, however, church history records that John Mark, mentioned in the book of Acts, wrote down what Peter had to say about the ministry of Jesus. A careful reading of Mark's gospel reveals some things that could only have been seen through Peter's eyes.

Dr. Simon Greenleaf was a professor of Law at Harvard from 1833-1848, and author of the three volume, *A Treatise on the Law of Evidence*, used for many years by the Supreme Court in determining what evidence is admissible in a court of law. As a non-believer, he would encounter Christian students at Harvard who asked him to read the gospel accounts of Jesus. He scrutinized the four gospels under the same rules that he applied to written evidence in a court of law and came up with a book entitled, *The Testimony of the Evangelists*. He also became a believer in Jesus. This monumental work describes the trustworthiness of the four gospels and answers common questions about the N.T. One of the most common questions that people ask is "Why do Matthew, Mark, and Luke all record basically the same events but with different details?" The answer that Dr. Greenleaf gives is surprising. He states that if the four gospels had exactly the same story with all the same details, they would be thrown out of court because they would have been guilty of inventing the story together. Because their stories have minor differences, it proves that they were objectively reporting the story as they experienced it. The gospel writers each had certain aspects they wanted to emphasize to the audience they were writing to, yet they wrote within the context of the same life events.

Not only does the N.T. claim to be written by eyewitnesses, (or in Luke and Mark's case, people who interviewed eyewitnesses) but also, the N.T. mentions many historical details that would not be expected in a mythological story. Throughout the Gospels, the book of Acts and various other places in the N.T., the writers are constantly mentioning historical occurrences, sometimes very casually. If the N.T. was written well after the disciples were all dead, there is no way they could have had the knowledge about the geography or politics of the time that they had. This leads us to our next test, the external test.

## III. The External Test

The External Test verifies the document through archeology and other ancient writers. Do archeology and other ancient writings confirm or tear down the testimony found in the N.T.? Let's begin with archeology.

Archeology

The limits of archeology need to be recognized by the student of history. Archeology will never come close to giving the modern world a complete video of the ancient world. Rather, archeology gives us a few snapshots here and there in very selective places. The N.T. cannot be conclusively proven through archeology, but archeology consistently confirms the record of the N.T. Below are just a few examples from the N.T. that have been supported in modern times through archeological research.

Acts 18: 12-17 lists Gallio Proconsul of Achaia. An inscription unearthed by archeologists in what was the ancient city of Delphi notes him as the Proconsul of the city at the exact time when Paul was in the city of Corinth, A.D. 51.

Luke 3:1 mentions Lysanias, Tetrarch of Abilene. An inscription was found by archeologists in the right region detailing a temple dedication that describes Lysanias' name and title. The inscription dates anywhere from A.D. 14-29, easily compatible with the beginning of John's ministry, which is what Luke was writing about in Luke 3:1.

John 4:12 mentions Jacob's well. Modern archeologists have excavated this well at this site.

John 5:1-2 The pool of Bethesda has been excavated, and it did contain five colonnaded porch ways, exactly as John recorded.

For many more examples and in-depth study, I recommend John McRay's book, *Archeology and the New Testament*.

#### Other Ancient Writings

Archeology has been helpful in the study of the N.T. However, there is another field of evidence to which we can look. It is the writings of other ancient authors. If they all contradict what the N.T. has to say, then that would cast doubt on the reliability and historicity of the N.T. If on the other hand, they all confirm what the N.T. has to say, then we may be more sure of the reliability of the N.T. The great majority of secular witnesses have confirmed the reliability of the N.T. Below are some of the major ancient writings that confirm the story of the N.T.

Matthew 2:16, Herod killing the male boys in Bethlehem,

*Macrobius, Saturnalia, 2:4:11*, which says, "When Augustus heard that Herod king of the Jews had ordered all the boys in Syria under the age of two to be put to death..."

Matthew 2:22, Archelaus reigning over Judea

*Josephus, Jewish War 2:94*, "Augustus gave half the kingdom to Archelaus with the title of ethnarch."

Acts 5:37 Judas the Galilean revolting in the days of the census.

*Josephus, Jewish War 2:118*, "A Galilean...Judas incited his countrymen to revolt...over paying tribute to the Romans."

Acts 12:20-23 Describes the horrible death of King Agrippa I.

*Josephus, Jewish Antiquities 19: 344-349* describes the same event for the same reason.

Acts 18:12 Claudius expelling all the Jews from Rome

*Suetonius, Life of Claudius 25:4* "Since the Jews constantly made disturbances at the instigation of Chrestus, he (Claudius) expelled them from Rome."

Acts 21:38 Egyptian man who stirred up a revolt in Israel

*Josephus, Jewish War 2:261* "The Egyptian false prophet...appeared in the county, collected a following of about thirty thousand and dupes, and led them...from the desert to the ...mount of Olives."

Many other quotations could be listed from the author Josephus alone. He was a Jewish Pharisee who defected to the Romans and wrote history for them. His two main works were *Jewish Wars* and

*Antiquities of the Jews*. Josephus was not a Christian and his references to historical detail are a great source of help to scholars since many of the same details are given in the N.T.

There are good reasons to believe that the Bible is not just reliable, but the most reliable ancient book in the world. The central message of the New Testament is found in the Gospel of John chapter 3. John 3:16 says that God loved the world so much that He sent His only Son so that whoever believes in him will not perish but will have eternal life. If the New Testament is a reliable record of the events of the life of Jesus, then the resurrection of Jesus from the grave must be taken as a serious claim. If Christ rose from the dead, it proved that he could conquer death and was who he said he was, God's only Son. The message of Christianity is that you can be made right with God through believing in Jesus. If you desire a relationship with Jesus, pray and ask God to forgive you of your sins and ask Him to make Jesus the Lord or your life. Then, begin to read the New Testament starting with the book of John and find a local Christian church. If you have questions, or don't have a Bible and would like one, please call Rancho del Rey Church at (760) 889-6488, or e-mail [Matt@ranchodelreychurch.com](mailto:Matt@ranchodelreychurch.com)

Recommended reading:

*A General Introduction to the Bible* By Norman Geisler and William Nix.

*Is the New Testament Reliable?* By Paul Barnett

*Evidence That Demands a Verdict*, Volume II, by Josh McDowell

*The Case for Christ*, Strobel, by Lee Strobel

*The Testimony of the Evangelists*, by Simon Greenleaf