

Is the New Testament reliable?

“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 eye-witnesses & 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)

So begins the opening verses of Dr Luke's gospel account of the life of Jesus Christ as recorded in the Bible. Luke possessed a scientific mind & wanted to investigate the reliability of this amazing story about Jesus. But how do we know that what he & the other apostles wrote was a reliable & accurately handed down account?

The only way that you can test the reliability of the New Testament is to apply the same kind of test that you would to any other document, that is to consider the evidence. Our legal system uses this approach in the law courts in order to establish a verdict based on reasonable evidence.

There are several factors that must be taken into account when considering a piece of ancient writing like the New Testament. This includes such factors as who wrote it, how soon after the actual events happened was the document written, how many copies were written & what is the time-span between the original work & the first copy being made? Obviously the longer the period of time between the actual events happening & the first copy being made increases the possibility of errors occurring or information being changed. Taking the New Testament documents as our example, let's apply this method of investigation to the Gospel accounts.

Who wrote the New Testament gospel accounts?

The accounts of the life, death & resurrection of Jesus are found in Matthew, Mark, Luke & John. Matthew & John were both first-hand eyewitnesses to the events of Jesus' life. They were among the first disciples of Jesus (Mark 2:13ff; Luke 6:12ff). The Gospel of Mark was written by an early follower of Christ who recorded the preaching of Peter (one of Jesus' twelve disciples - again an eye witness). Finally, the Gospel of Luke was a companion volume to the Book of Acts, which was unquestionably written by Luke, a physician who accompanied the Apostle Paul on many of his journeys (Luke 1:1 & Acts 1:1).

Most Biblical scholars agree that all of these gospel accounts were written sometime between AD 40 & AD 70. They also agree that all the gospels must have been written before AD 70, the year the Romans destroyed Jerusalem & the temple under Emperor Titus. This event would have been too significant to be overlooked by any of the gospel writers; it therefore stands to reason that the gospels were already in circulation before the fall of Jerusalem. Scholars believe the gospels to have been written between 15-40 years after the death & resurrection of Jesus, which occurred in approximately AD33. This period of time would be too short for any major errors to have occurred in their report. Besides, other eyewitnesses who were still alive at the time of writing would have quickly disproved any errors.

Can we trust their account?

As I have pointed out above, the disciples were first-hand eyewitnesses to Jesus' life & teaching. Ultimately they were in a far better position than we are to say whether or not what they saw was true. Many people however, have tried to argue against the gospels by claiming that the disciples might have forgotten what they heard or saw, or that they invented the whole story. But it has to be said that sceptics have only dreamt up most of these arguments in the past 150 years. Who are we to say what did, or did not happen, in the first century AD? Do we have access to

more eyewitness information than they did? Let us consider some of the common arguments put forward by the sceptics:

Could the disciples have remembered accurately what Jesus said?

This is an understandable argument because few of us nowadays can remember what we did last week without consulting our filofax. Basically we can't remember things unless we write them down. So how could the disciples remember the things Jesus said when they didn't have easy access to pen & paper?

First of all we have to remember that much of the world's communication back then was done by word of mouth. Now before anyone begins to think that the accuracy of the information was somehow diminished as it was verbally passed from person to person, let us first of all bear in mind that people back then had no option but to remember things from memory (for a start they didn't have a filofax). We have become less reliant on our memories because we can write things down & then forget about them. But, if we did not have that facility, then we too would, out of necessity, remember much more than we ever thought possible.

Furthermore, within the Jewish religion it was customary for disciples to memorise their Rabbi's teaching by heart. So Jesus' disciples would have probably memorised many of his teachings.

Secondly, the way in which Jesus communicated enabled people to remember what he said accurately. For instance, many people can still remember the parable of the Lost Sheep & the Prodigal Son from Sunday school, even though they have not heard them for years. Why? Because we remember stories quite easily. They were, if you like, the TV or video clips of Jesus' day. In addition to this, Jesus probably preached the same messages during his three-year ministry several times over. So the repetition of his teaching would have added to the accurate recollection of what he said.

Thirdly, we must never forget that the disciples had *the* most amazing three years of their life with Jesus. They had seen the most incredible miracles, listened to the most astounding teaching & examined the life of the most extraordinary man who has ever walked on earth. I think that most of us can recall life incidents accurately. The nearest equivalent I can think of today is the stories which my grandparents told me regarding the Second World War. Even though the war ended more than 55 years ago they can still remember clearly some of the 'life incidents' which have been engraved on their minds. They may well forget something that was said to them only a few minutes ago, but they can remember things vividly from decades ago without any difficulty. Why? Because 'life incidents' are easy to remember, & that's what the disciples had from their time with Jesus, a massive life incident!

Fourthly, there were enough people alive at the time of the writing of the gospels to both confirm their truthfulness or to refute any possible inaccuracy. The fact that we have four gospel accounts, which relate to the same incidents is strong evidence that these incidents actually happened.

Did the disciples invent the story of Jesus?

No, I believe that they could not have invented the life, teaching & miracles of Jesus for several reasons:

First of all, if the story was a hoax it would have been an easy one to expose. There were enough enemies of the Christian faith with access to far greater power & influence than the disciples, who could have easily uncovered any inaccuracy or hoax. But they couldn't!

Secondly, what would the disciples have hoped to gain by inventing the story of Jesus? Most hoaxes are done in order to gain money, power or position. Yet the early disciples lived in a very basic way, they certainly were not flush with cash & many of them were imprisoned, beaten & eventually executed for their

beliefs. That doesn't sound like the most successful & lucrative hoax to me! Who, after all, would die for a lie? Only a lunatic would do that. Yet this was never the charge brought by the enemies of Jesus' disciples.

This leads onto the third point, the character of the disciples themselves. They were men of character & standing. They wrote honestly about their own faults, fears, failings & doubts (that was highly uncommon in ancient times). Even when the disciples were being persecuted they did not show hatred towards their enemies, but willingly laid down their lives (see Acts 7:54-60).

Finally, if the disciples wanted to invent a story about Jesus they forgot a very obvious cultural problem, namely that they chose women as the first witnesses to the resurrection of Jesus. That was like committing intellectual suicide right from the start, for in those days the testimony of a woman was not regarded as valid compared to a mans. I therefore don't believe that the evidence points to the gospels being false.

How do we know the NT handed down to us is accurate?

The best way of answering this question is to compare the New Testament against other famous ancient writings by means of the following table:

<i>Author</i>	<i>When Written</i>	<i>Earliest Copy</i>	<i>Time Span*</i>	<i>Number of Copies</i>
<i>Caesar's Gaelic wars</i>	<i>100-44 B.C.</i>	<i>900A.D.</i>	<i>950 years</i>	<i>10 copies</i>
<i>Plato</i>	<i>427-347 B.C.</i>	<i>900 A.D.</i>	<i>1,200 years</i>	<i>7 copies</i>
<i>Aristotle</i>	<i>384-322 B.C.</i>	<i>1100 A.D.</i>	<i>1,400 years</i>	<i>49 copies</i>
<i>New Testament</i>	<i>40-100 A.D.</i>	<i>125-130 A.D.</i>	<i>25-30 years</i>	<i>18,000 copies</i>

** Time span between the original & earliest copy. Table taken from Josh McDowell 'Evidence that demands a verdict' Alpha publications 1997.*

Notice how much time elapsed between the original record & the first copy being made. Do you see how the New Testament stands out head & shoulders above the rest of these widely accepted ancient documents? Let's analyse the chart.

First of all, the New Testament was written within the lifetime of people who could have disputed the facts recorded by the original writers. The life, death & resurrection of Jesus were recorded within 10-37 years of the actual events happening. So it would have been easy for people who wanted to dispute the evidence recorded in the New Testament to do so. Just to set that in a modern day context, if someone wanted to tamper with the account of WW2 then there would be thousands of people still alive today who could expose any errors.

Secondly, notice the brevity of time between the original manuscript being written & the making of the first copy i.e. 25 -30 years. Again the time difference is minimal (by ancient history standards). Indeed, scholars argue that this period of 25 years is too short for any major corruption to have taken place. WF Albright (an archaeologist) said, *'The period is too slight to permit any appreciable corruption of the essential centre & even the specific wording of the sayings of Jesus.'*

(Richard Cunningham, Discovering Christianity (2nd edition, UCCF) p.37).

Third, notice the vast quantities of manuscripts produced! Once again the New Testament eclipses the other ancient writings in this area.

Of course one of the dangers of having so many manuscripts is that there is a higher risk of errors occurring in 5,000 manuscripts than in 10, especially if they were copied by hand, which of course they were in those days. Yet, even in this department the New Testament demonstrates overwhelming accuracy & consistency. Consider the table below:

Work	Number of lines in doubt	% of whole work
Homers <i>Illiad</i>	764	5%
New Testament	40	0.05%

Table taken from: Josh McDowell 'Evidence that demands a verdict' Alpha publications 1997.

The more error-free copies we have, the less doubt there is about the validity & accuracy of the original manuscript. Admittedly there are some lines in doubt in the New Testament, but *not one* of them affects any major doctrine or belief taught by the Christian church today. Let me give you an example of the kind of lines that are in dispute. When Jesus was being crucified some manuscripts say that he was offered wine vinegar on a stick but other manuscripts say that it was offered on a spear (see Matthew 27:48). Now I think it's fair to say that this is such a minor detail as to be insignificant. It certainly does not change any doctrine or belief of the Christian faith.

Commenting on the New Testament manuscripts Sir Frederic Kenyon a modern Biblical scholar said, 'No other ancient book has anything like such early & plentiful testimony to its text, & that which has come down to us is substantially sound!'

The Cambridge professor John Robinson was so impressed with the quantity & quality of the New Testament manuscripts that he wrote: "The wealth of manuscripts, & above all the narrow interval of time between the writing & the earliest extant copies, make it by far the best attested text of any ancient writing in the world." (John Robinson, *Can we trust the New Testament?* Published by Mowbrays.)

The late Professor FF Bruce of Manchester University made the following observation: '*The evidence for our New Testament writings is ever so much greater than the evidence for many writings of classical authors, the authenticity of which no one dreams of questioning.*' He goes on to say, '*And if the New*

Testament were a collection of secular writings, their authenticity would generally be regarded as beyond all doubt'

(FF. Bruce, The New Testament Documents: Are they reliable? (IVP 1960) p.15).

Why do you think that is? I think the main reason is that if the Bible is true, people will have to change the way they think & live. That's why I believe so many people dismiss the Bible. It's not because there is insufficient evidence for its reliability, but rather they are determined to keep God out of their lives. But simply dismissing the Bible does not change it's message or it's teaching. If the Bible is true, then that has huge implications for everyone's eternal destination - including yours. Therefore, don't put this off any longer, make it your aim to examine the truth of the Bible & in particular the claims of Jesus Christ.

The Apostle John (one of the disciples of Jesus) wrote the following words in his first letter to the early church.

That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at & our hands have touched - this we proclaim concerning the Word of life. The life appeared; we have seen it & testify to it, & we proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father & has appeared to us. We proclaim to you what we have seen & heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us. & our fellowship is with the Father & with his Son, Jesus Christ. We write this to make our joy complete. (1 John 1:1-4)

John was an eyewitness to the life death & resurrection of Jesus. I believe that what he saw he recorded accurately for us to read today in his gospel account, that Jesus Christ is the Son of the living God - the Saviour for sinners.