

The Historical Reliability of the New Testament

Craig Blomberg, *The Historical Reliability of the Gospels*, (IVP 1987)

F.F. Bruce, *The New Testament Documents: Are They Reliable?* (IVP 1960)

Tim Keller, Redeemer papers, *N.T. Documents: Are They Reliable?* (May 1994)

Rico Tice, *Exploring Christianity*, (2001)

Summary

There is a myth that modern scholars have largely debunked the historical reliability of the New Testament. In fact, the historical reliability of the New Testament is more credible today than ever.

[Note: We are not here discussing the authority of the Bible as God’s Word or dealing with matters such as canon and hermeneutics. See Kevin Vanhoozer *Is There a Meaning in This Text?* and Carson & Woodbridge *Hermeneutics, Authority, and Canon*.]

1. Clearing the decks...

So much misinformation abounds about the New Testament that a few preliminary points may help.

a. The Jesus Seminar

The Jesus Seminar has claimed to have proved that much of the Gospels do not record the actual words of Jesus Christ. But actually their methodology is seriously questioned by members of the theology faculties at top universities. Critique by Richard B. Hays of The Divinity School, Duke University.

b. John A.T. Robinson

John A.T. Robinson, far from a conservative theologian, turned the previous nineteenth century scholarly consensus about the late dating of the New Testament documents on its head in 1975 with his book *Redating the New Testament*. Robinson (Anglican dean and lecturer in theology of Trinity College, Cambridge University) believed that all of the New Testament should rightly be dated before the fall of Jerusalem in AD 70, and therefore well within the lifetime of the eyewitnesses of Jesus Christ. Review available on request.

c. ‘Higher Biblical Criticism’

The results of Higher Biblical Criticism are far from uniform. Tom Wright, one of Britain's leading New Testament scholars, uses a graphic metaphor for the confusion that surrounds dating the New Testament in scholarly circles. He says that it “is like finding yourself in the middle of a rugby field with 5 teams and 10 balls. There is all kinds of excitement: everybody is tackling everybody, and everyone thinks he's on the winning team.” See Alvin Plantinga “Two (or More) Kinds of Scripture Scholarship.”

2. Rules of Historical Investigation

Historians use various approaches to confirm the authenticity or otherwise of particular historical texts. The following are historical rules of testing applied to the New Testament.

a. The rule of document transmission

Many people question the historical reliability of the Bible because they are not sure that we have the same text as it was originally written. But the textual transmission of the New Testament is superior to any other ancient document. The earliest copies we have of other ancient documents are long after the original. In comparison we have thousands of copies of the Bible, some within a few decades of the originals. Most classical texts have at most a couple of hundred copies, and most much less, whereas the New Testament has thousands of copies. See *Myths and Mistakes in New Testament Textual Criticism*, IVP 2019, ed. Hixson and Gurry, for why dates and numbers are updated from previous versions of this paper, and why all remain estimates at best current understanding. Also see Clay Jones, “The Bibliographical Test Updated” from October 2013 <https://www.equip.org/articles/the-bibliographical-test-updated/>.

Ancient Writing	Thucydides’ History	Caesar’s Gallic Wars	Tacitus’ History	The Four Gospels
Date of Original Document ‘A’	460-400 BC	58-50 BC	AD 100	42-90 AD
Oldest Surviving Copy ‘B’	200 BC	AD 850	AD 800	125-175 AD ¹

¹ https://ntvmr.uni-muenster.de/en_US/liste.

Approximate Time Lapse between 'A' and 'B'	200 years	900 years	700 years	85 Years
Number of Ancient Copies in Existence Today	8 (30) ²	251	2 (31) ³	5,100

Note:

- P52, a piece of the Gospel of John found in Egypt, also known as the Rylands fragment. It is now dated between about 125 and 175 AD. Arguably, the dating suggests that as the Gospel of John was copied and circulated widely enough to have reached Egypt it was composed before the end of the first century. Additionally, because the Gospel of John was widely circulated in the second century it must have been written earlier.⁴ Since John was considered the last Gospel written some scholars date all the New Testament back into the possible lifetimes of the apostles and eyewitnesses.

- The 'Jesus Papyrus', a manuscript of part of Matthew's Gospel in the library of Magdalene College Oxford, was controversially re-dated by Carston Thiede to 52AD.

- Renowned classical scholar Giorgio Pasquali, "No other Greek text is handed down so richly and credibly [as the New Testament]."⁵

No historian doubts the accuracy of Caesar's *Gallic Wars*. Despite some few discrepancies between copies of the New Testament, we have essentially the same documents before us as were originally written.

b. The rule of genre

Does the New Testament claim to be an historical account? Yes. Luke 1:1-4. "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 were from the first eye-witnesses...so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught."

Is the New Testament written in the style of history or can it be fitted into the style of myth or fiction? It does not fit into other fictional genres of the time. Today it might be called a 'novel' but then that genre did not exist. It comes closest to being a 'documentary'. C.S. Lewis, professor of Medieval and Renaissance Literature at the University of Cambridge, "I was by now too experienced in literary criticism to regard the Gospels as myths. They had not the mythical taste...nothing else in all literature was just like this...And no person was like the Person it depicted; as real, as recognisable, through all the depths of time, as Plato's Socrates or Boswell's Johnson, yet also numinous, lit by a light from beyond the world, a god. But if a god—we are no longer polytheists—then not a god, but God. Here and here only in all time the myth must have become fact; the Word, flesh; God, Man." (C.S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy*).

c. The rule of corroboration

Are there other independent sources from the same era, outside of the biblical writings that attest to the same events the Bible claims happened? Yes.

- Graeco-Roman historians attest to several major aspects of the New Testament's assertions. Tacitus, AD 115, "Christ... was executed when Tiberius was emperor by the order of the procurator Pontius Pilate." Thallus, AD 52, wrote a history of the world and included the fact that there was an eclipse of the sun on the day Jesus died.
- The Jewish historian Josephus wrote in 80 AD, in his history of the Jews, he has a passage that says that Jesus was the Messiah. Such a positive note in a work by a Jew who was not a Christian has led historians to reject it as an addition by a copyist. But recently a 10th century Arabic copy of Josephus that had not been copied by Christians: "His disciples reported that he had appeared to them, three days after his crucifixion, and that he was alive. Accordingly he was perhaps the Messiah, concerning whom the prophets have recounted wonders."
- Archaeological finds, including the discovery of the Pool of Bethesda and five colonnades (John 5:1-2), and tombs sealed in AD50 with the inscription inside 'Jesus let him arise'.

d. The rule of internal consistency

The text needs to be self-consistent. The New Testament is astonishingly coherent and consistent. There are some very minor but noticeable apparent inconsistencies between the Gospels. But such apparent inconsistencies do not impinge on the New Testament's historical reliability because it is normal for eyewitness accounts to differ in perspective (differences of viewpoint are the mark of independent witnesses). And these apparent inconsistencies are susceptible to satisfying solutions. See Blomberg's *The Historical Reliability of the Gospels*.

² "Primarily" eight according to <https://www.equipt.org/articles/the-bibliographical-test-updated/>. About thirty according to *Myths and Mistakes in New Testament Textual Criticism*, (IVP, 2019), ed. Hixson and Gurry, 77.

³ According to Clay Jones, there are two manuscripts, one from the ninth century, the other mid-eleventh century, from which are derived thirty-one fifteenth century manuscripts. <https://www.equipt.org/articles/the-bibliographical-test-updated/>.

⁴ Charles E. Hill, *The Johannine Corpus in the Early Church* (Oxford University Press, 2004).

⁵ *Myths and Mistakes in New Testament Textual Criticism*, (IVP, 2019), ed. Hixson and Gurry, 86.

e. The rule of objectivity

Are the writers of the New Testament objective or do they have vested interests in falsifying the information? While the New Testament writers believed what they wrote was true, they certainly did not gain much from its dissemination, many of them being martyred. Who would die for a lie?

Does their description of miracles disprove their objectivity? Rudolph Bultmann, a major biblical scholar in the early 20th century, argued that the world had now advanced to such an extent that we cannot believe the miracles in the New Testament. This is really a kind of argument built on that of 18th century philosopher Hume. The trouble with this view is that it is founded upon the worldview of Newtonian physics whereby nature has set ‘laws’ which cannot be broken. With the advent of Quantum mechanics, physicists would now picture these ‘laws’ as provisional descriptions of observed regularities in nature. Science cannot disprove miracles. The issue is ‘is there a personal God?’ If there is, then miracles are no problem.

Conclusion: 1. There is no good reason to doubt the historical reliability of the New Testament. 2. There are many good reasons to accept the historical reliability of the New Testament. 3. Why don’t more people accept the historical reliability of the New Testament when they do accept the historical reliability of other ancient texts? Because more is at stake with the New Testament—if I accept the historicity of the New Testament, it will radically change my life. That means we need to be extra careful to check our biases when researching into the New Testament—are we willing to accept it, even though if we do, we may have our lives turned upside down by an encounter with Christ?

Note: A.N. Sherwin-White, historian of Rome⁶, “It is astonishing that, while Graeco-Roman historians have been growing in confidence, the twentieth century study of the Gospel narratives, starting from no less promising material, have taken so gloomy a turn.” Could it be that the reason for the gloom is due to philosophical and personal bias against the message of orthodox Christianity?

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⁶ 1911-1993; Fellow of St. John’s College, Oxford, and President of the Society for the Promotion of Roman Studies.