

WHY I BELIEVE THE NEW TESTAMENT IS HISTORICALLY RELIABLE by Gary Ha

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The credibility of Scripture is certainly a multifaceted issue. In this chapter, I will examine one specific angle—the New Testament is a historically reliable document. Topics such as precise textual issues, genre considerations, scholarly methodologies, scientific concerns, and the doctrine of inspiration are beyond the focus here.¹ Instead, I will focus on those factors that indicate that the New Testament speaks accurately when it makes historical claims that can be checked. I will also be assessing some conventional areas of consideration.

CUSTOMARY STRATEGIES

Typically, defenses of the reliability of the New Testament have emphasized several items: the superior manuscript dating of these copies, as well as the authoritative authorship and dating of the original compositions. I will return to these since they all still have an important part to play. Since these defenses have received much attention, however, I will also address a number of relevant issues.

Manuscript Evidence

To start, are we even able to ascertain whether the text of the Bible is that of the original authors? While this is a question of the reliability of the text rather than to the historicity of its contents, the issue is still important in the overall scholarly discussion. Generally, several qualities enhance manuscript value, assisting textual scholars in arriving at the original text. The strongest case is made when many manuscripts are available, as close in time to the origin as possible. Wide geographical distribution of the copies and their textual families are likewise crucial. Of course, the accuracy of the texts is essential.

In light of these criteria, the New Testament is the best attested work from the ancient world. First, it has by far the largest number of existing manuscripts. Ancient classical works are attested to by very few full or partial manuscripts. In comparison, over five thousand full or partial Greek manuscripts of the New Testament exist. Thousands exist in other languages, especially Latin. This overwhelming number of copies yields a much stronger base for establishing the text.

Concerning the date between the original writing and the earliest copies, ancient classical works generally exist seven hundred years. The interval significantly lengthens to twice this amount (or longer) with certain works by writers such as Plato and Aristotle. In contrast, the Bodmer and Chester Beatty Papyri contain most of the New Testament about 100-150 years later than the New Testament, using an approximate date of A.D. 100 for its completion. The Sinaitic is a complete copy of the New Testament, while the Codex Vaticanus is a nearly complete manuscript roughly 250 years after the originals. These small gaps help to ensure the accuracy of the New Testament text.

Further, significant portions of some ancient works are missing. For example, 107 of Livy's 142 books of Roman History are lost. Of Tacitus's original Histories and Annals, only approximately half remain.

The fact that there is outstanding manuscript evidence for the New Testament documents is even admitted by John A.T. Robinson succinctly explains, "The wealth of manuscripts, and above all the narrow interval of time between the original and the earliest extant copies, make it by far the best attested text of any ancient writing in the world."³ Even more succinctly summarizes:

Classical authors are often represented by but one surviving manuscript; if there are half a dozen or more, we can speak of a rather advantageous situation for reconstructing the text. But there are nearly five thousand manuscripts of the NT in Greek... The only surviving manuscripts of classical authors often come from the Middle Ages, but the manuscript tradition of the NT begins as early as the end of II CE; it is therefore separated by a century or so from the time at which the autographs were written. Thus it seems that NT textual criticism possesses a base which is far more advantageous than that for the textual criticism of classical authors.

The result of all this is an incredibly accurate New Testament text. John Wenham asks why it is that, in spite of the long interval between the original and our copies, the texts are still relatively homogeneous. He responds, "The only satisfactory answer seems to be that the homogeneity stems from an exceedingly early text—virtually, that is, from the autographs."⁵ The resulting text is so accurate, and the remaining questions do not affect any area of cardinal Christian doctrine.⁶

Authorship and Date

The above described quality of manuscript data shows that the New Testament manuscripts were carefully copied from the original authors produced. However, this does not necessarily guarantee that the contents of these writings are accurate. The traditional strategy has been to argue that the Gospels and Acts were written by eyewitnesses, or those under their influence, thereby ensuring as much as possible the factual content. A somewhat more cautious approach would be to argue that five books were at least influenced by eyewitness testimony.⁷

Evangelical scholars often date each of the synoptic Gospels ten or so years earlier than their critical counterparts. They prefer dates of roughly A.D. 65-90. There is widespread agreement on placing John at roughly A.D. 95. This places the manuscripts thirty-five to sixty-five years after the death of Jesus, close enough to allow for accurate accounts.

Perhaps the most promising way to support the traditional approach is to argue backward from the Book of Acts. The book is occupied with the ministries of Peter and Paul, and much of the action centers in the city of Jerusalem. The death of Stephen (7:54-60) and the apostle James (12:1-2) are recorded, and the book concludes with Paul under arrest (21:31). Yet Acts says nothing concerning the deaths of Paul and Peter (mid-60s A.D.) or James, Jesus' brother. Moreover, accounts of the Jewish War with the Romans (beginning in A.D. 66) and the fall of Jerusalem (A.D. 70) are strangely absent. Further, the book ends enigmatically with Paul under house arrest, without any resolution to his dilemma. How could the author of Acts not mention these events or resolve Paul's dilemma, each of which is centrally important and crucial themes? These events would even seem to dwarf many of the other recorded occurrences.⁸ It is difficult to reach the conclusion that the author did not record these items simply because they had not yet occurred. These omissions are more persuasively for an early date for the composition of Acts, before the mid-60s A.D.

If it is held that Luke was written prior to Acts but after Mark and Matthew, as perhaps most critical scholars would prefer, Luke may be dated before A.D. 65. It is simply amazing that Acts could be dated A.D. 80-85 and the author not be otherwise neglect to mention, any of these events.⁹

Additional Support

Extra-biblical sources are another avenue worth pursuing when determining whether the New Testament text concerning historical issues. While less frequently used by scholars, a number of ancient secular sources mention events of Jesus' life, corroborating the picture presented by the Gospels.¹⁰ The writers of these sources include ancient Roman historians Tacitus, Suetonius, and Thallus. Jewish sources such as Josephus and the Talmud add to our knowledge. Greek sources such as Pliny the Younger and even Roman Emperors Trajan and Hadrian describe early Christian beliefs and practices. The satirist Lucian and Syrian Mara Bar-Serapion provide other details. Several nonorthodox, Gnostic sources mention Jesus in a more theological manner.¹¹

Overall, at least seventeen non-Christian writings record more than fifty details concerning the life, teachings, and resurrection of Jesus, plus details concerning the earliest church. Most frequently reported is Jesus' death, mentioned in many sources. Dated approximately 20 to 150 years after Jesus' death, these secular sources are quite early by the standards of historiography.

Altogether, these non-Christian sources mention that Jesus fulfilled Old Testament prophecy, performed miracles, and that many thought he was deity. These sources call him a good teacher or a philosopher and state that he was crucified for blasphemy, conversion, denial of the gods, fellowship, and immortality. Further, they claim he was crucified for blasphemy, died, and appeared to his disciples, who were themselves transformed into bold preachers.¹²