

The Historical Reliability of Scripture

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There is, I imagine, no body of literature in the world that has been exposed to the stringent analytical study that the four gospels have sustained for the past 200 years.... Scholars today who treat the gospels as credible historical documents do so in the full light of this analytical study. –F. F. Bruce

Christians and skeptical non-Christians have different views concerning the credibility of the Gospels and the rest of the New Testament. For the Christian, nothing is more vital than the very words of Jesus Himself, who promised, “Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away” (Matt. 24:35). Jesus’ promise is of no small import. In essence, if His words were not accurately recorded, how can anyone know what He really taught? The truth is, we couldn’t know. Further, if the remainder of the New Testament cannot be established to be historically reliable, then little can be known about what true Christianity really is, teaches or means.

Who is right in this debate, the Christians who claim that the New Testament is historically accurate or the rationalistic critics who claim otherwise? The latter group usually approaches the Bible from a rationalistic materialistic viewpoint, discounting the Bible’s supernatural elements, employing higher critical methods and maintaining that it wasn’t written until the late first or early second century. After summarizing the critical and conservative views, in a brief point-by-point format we offer the following analysis designed to show why the New Testament is historically reliable.

The Critical View

The skeptics’ argument, characteristically based on the use of higher critical methods such as source, form, and redaction criticism,¹ is often given as follows: by a number of criteria the reliability of the New Testament text may be doubted. This includes its dominant “mythological” (supernatural) character; the fabrication of a fictitious view of Jesus on the basis of erroneous Messianic expectations, the theological embellishments of the Apostle Paul, and finally, the invention of most of the teachings of Christ to suit the spiritual or other needs of the early church, and, some argue, the removal of the actual teachings of Christ in later church councils for the purpose of political expediency or theological bias. The Jesus Seminar, for

example, widely employs higher critical methods, especially for criticism, to supposedly determine what Jesus actually said. They conclude that less than 18 percent of Jesus' sayings recorded in the New Testament are original. The remainder are inventions by the early church.

Thomas C. Oden provides a common view of Jesus held by most modern scholars:

Jesus was an eschatological prophet who proclaimed God's coming kingdom and called his hearers to decide now for or against the kingdom. After he was condemned to death and died, the belief emerged gradually that he had risen. Only after some extended period of time did the remembering community develop the idea that Jesus would return as the Messiah, Son of Man. Eventually this community came to project its eschatological expectation back upon the historical Jesus, inserting in his mouth the eschatological hopes that it had subsequently developed but now deftly had to rearrange so as to make it seem as if Jesus Himself had understood himself as Messiah. Only much later did the Hellenistic idea of the God-man, the virgin birth, and incarnation emerge in the minds of the remembering church, who again misremembered Jesus according to its revised eschatological expectation.

James W. Sire, who cites the above, remarks,

Oden in the following eight pages shows how and why this "modern view" is seriously at odds with reason.... How such a vacuous implausible interpretation could have come to be widely accepted is itself perplexing enough. Even harder to understand is the thought that the earliest rememberers would actually suffer martyrdom for such a flimsy cause. One wonders how those deluded believers of early centuries gained the courage to risk passage into an unknown world to proclaim this message that came from an imagined revolution of a fantasized Mediator. The "critical" premise itself requires a high degree of gullibility.²

The Conservative View

The conservative view takes quite another approach based on historical facts, logic and common sense. It maintains that, on the basis of accepted bibliographic, internal, and external criteria, the New Testament text can be established to be reliable history in spite of the novel and sometimes ingenious speculations of critics who, while often familiar with the facts, refuse to accept them due to a preexisting bias. Textually, we have restored more than 99 percent of the autographs, and there is simply no legitimate basis upon which to doubt the credibility and accuracy of the New Testament writers. Further, the methods used by the critics (rationalistic higher critical methods) which claim "assured results" proving the Scripture unreliable have been weighed in the balance of secular scholarship and been found wanting. Their use in biblical analysis is therefore unjustified. Even in a positive sense, the fruit they have born is minuscule while, negatively, they are responsible for a tremendous weight of destruction relative to people's confusion over biblical authority and their confidence in the Bible.

In this sense, the critics, who continue to advance discredited theories, conform to the warnings of Chauncey Sanders, associate professor of military history at The Air University, Maxwell Air Force Base, Montgomery, Alabama. In his *An Introduc-*

tion to *Research in English Literary History*, he warns literary critics to be certain they are also careful to examine the evidence *against* their case:

He must be as careful to collect evidence against his theory as for it. It may go against the grain to be very assiduous in searching for ammunition to destroy one's own case; but it must be remembered that the overlooking of a single detail may be fatal to one's whole argument. Moreover, it is the business of the scholar to seek the truth, and the satisfaction of having found it should be ample recompense for having to give up a cherished but untenable theory.³

What allows us to resolve this issue and logically demonstrate the credibility of the conservative view is the following ten facts:

- ◆ *Fact One:* The existence of thousands of Greek and Latin manuscripts, with the papyri and early uncials dating much closer to the originals than for any other ancient literature;
- ◆ *Fact Two:* The lack of proven fraud or error on the part of *any* New Testament author;
- ◆ *Fact Three:* The writings of reliable Christian resources outside the New Testament;
- ◆ *Fact Four:* The existence of a number of Jewish and secular accounts about Jesus;
- ◆ *Fact Five:* Detailed archaeological data concerning the New Testament;
- ◆ *Fact Six:* The existence of many powerful enemies of Jesus and the apostolic church who would have proven fraud or pointed out other problems if they could;
- ◆ *Fact Seven:* The presence of living eyewitnesses to the events recorded;
- ◆ *Fact Eight:* The positive appraisals by conservative and even some liberal authorities bearing on the issue of the genuineness of traditional authorship and the early date of the New Testament books;
- ◆ *Fact Nine:* The consistent scholarly, factual reversals of the conclusions of higher criticism that undermine its own foundations and credibility; and
- ◆ *Fact Ten:* Legal and other testimony as to New Testament reliability.

To begin, the historical accuracy of the New Testament can be proven by subjecting it to three generally accepted tests for determining historical reliability. Such tests are utilized in literary criticism and the study of historical documents in general. (These are discussed by military historian Chauncey Sanders in his *An Introduction to Research in English Literary History*.⁴) These involve the 1) bibliographical, 2) internal, and 3) external tests of historical evidence.

Fact One: The Bibliographical Test (corroboration from textual transmission)

The bibliographical test seeks to determine whether we can reconstruct the original New Testament writings from the extant copies at hand. We have 5,300 Greek manuscripts and manuscript portions, 10,000 Latin Vulgate, and 9,300 other versions, plus 36,000 early (100-300 A.D.) patristic quotations of the New Testament—such that all but a few verses of the entire New Testament could be reconstructed from these alone.⁵

Few scholars question the general reliability of ancient classical literature on the

basis of the manuscripts we possess. Yet this manuscript evidence is vastly inferior to that of the New Testament manuscripts. For example, of sixteen well-known classical authors (Plutarch, Tacitus, Seutonius, Polybius, Thucydides and Xenophon, etc), the total number of extant copies is typically less than ten, and the earliest copies date from 750 to 1600 years after the original manuscript was first penned.⁶ We need only compare such slim evidence to the mass of biblical documentation involving over 24,000 manuscript portions, manuscripts, and versions, with the earliest fragments and complete copies dating between 50 and 300 years after originally written.

Given the fact that the early Greek manuscripts (the Papyri and early Uncials⁷) date much closer to the originals than for any other ancient literature, and the overwhelming additional abundance of manuscript attestation, any doubt as to the integrity or authenticity of the New Testament text has been removed. Indeed, this kind of evidence is the dream of the historian. No other ancient literature has ever come close to supplying historians and textual critics with such an abundance of data.

Dr. F. F. Bruce, the late Ryland's Professor of Biblical Criticism and Exegesis at the University of Manchester, asserts of the New Testament: "There is no body of ancient literature in the world which enjoys such a wealth of good textual attestation as the New Testament."⁸ Professor Bruce further comments, "The evidence for our New Testament writings is ever so much greater than the evidence for many writings of classical writers, the authenticity of which no one dreams of questioning. And if the New Testament were a collection of secular writings, their authenticity would generally be regarded as beyond all doubt."⁹

Further, Dr. Rene Pache remarks of the great Princeton scholar B. B. Warfield that he "goes on to say that the great bulk of the New Testament has been transmitted to us without, or almost without, any variations. It can be asserted with confidence that the sacred text is exact and valid and that no article of faith and no moral precept in it has been distorted or lost."¹⁰

It is this wealth of material that has enabled scholars such as Westcott and Hort, Ezra Abbott, Philip Schaff, A. T. Robertson, Norman Geisler and William Nix to place the restoration of the original text at better than 99 percent.¹¹ Thus no other document of the ancient period is as accurately preserved as the New Testament.

Hort's estimate of "substantial variation" for the New Testament is one-tenth of 1 percent; Abbott's estimate is one-fourth of 1 percent; and even Hort's figure including trivial variation is less than 2 percent. Sir Frederic Kenyon well summarizes the situation:

The number of manuscripts of the New Testament... is so large that it is practically certain that the true reading of every doubtful passage is preserved in some one or another of these ancient authorities. This can be said of no other ancient book in the world.

Scholars are satisfied that they possess substantially the true text of the principal Greek and Roman writers whose works have come down to us, of

Sophocles, of Thucydides, of Cicero, of Virgil; yet our knowledge depends on a mere handful of manuscripts, whereas the manuscripts of the New Testament are counted by hundreds and even thousands.¹²

In other words, those who question the reliability of the New Testament must also question the reliability of virtually every ancient writing the world possesses! How can the Bible be rejected when its documentation is one hundred times that of other ancient literature? Because it is impossible to question the world's ancient classics, it is far more impossible to question the reliability of the New Testament.¹³

In addition, none of the established New Testament canon is lost or missing, not even a verse, as indicated by variant readings. By comparison, the books of many ancient authors are filled with omissions: 107 of Livy's 142 books of history are lost, and one-half of Tacitus' 30 books of Annals and Histories. For Polybius, only five complete books remain from the original forty. Finally, the Gospels are extremely close to the events which they record. The first three can be dated within twenty years of the events cited, and this may even be true for the fourth gospel. This means that all four Gospels were written during the lives of eyewitnesses, and that abundant opportunity existed for those with contrary evidence to examine the witnesses and refute them.

The Gospels, then, passes the bibliographical test and must, by far, be graded with the highest mark of any ancient literature we possess.

Fact Two: The Internal Evidence Test (corroboration from content accuracy)

This test asserts that one is to assume the truthful reporting of an ancient document (and not assume either fraud, incompetence or error) unless the author of the document has disqualified himself by their presence. For example, do the New Testament writers contradict themselves? Is there anything in their writing which causes one to objectively suspect their trustworthiness? Are there statements or assertions in the text which are demonstrably false according to known archaeological, historic, scientific or other data?

The answer is no. There is lack of proven fraud or error on the part of any New Testament writer. But there is evidence of careful eyewitness reporting throughout. The caution exercised by the writers, their personal conviction that what they wrote was true and the lack of demonstrable error or contradiction indicate that the Gospel authors and, indeed, all the New Testament authors pass the second test as well (Luke 1:1-4; John 19:35; 21:24; Acts 1:1-3; 2:22; 26:24-26; 2 Peter 1:16; 1 John 1:1-3).

For example, the kinds of details the Gospel writers include in their narratives offer strong evidence for their integrity. They record their own sins and failures, even serious ones (Matt. 26:56, 69-75; Mark 10:35-45). They do not hesitate from recording even the most difficult and consequential statements of Jesus (John 6:41-71). They forthrightly supply the embarrassing and even capital charges of Jesus' own enemies. Thus, even though Jesus was their very Messiah and Lord, they not only record the charges that Jesus broke the Sabbath but also that He was born in fornication, a blasphemer and a liar, insane and demonized (See Matt. 1:19; 26:65;

John 7:20,48; 8:41, 48, 52; 10:20, 33, etc.).

To encounter such honesty in reporting incidents of this nature gives one assurance that the Gospel writers placed a very high premium on truthfulness.

Fact Three: The External Evidence Test (corroboration from reliable sources outside the New Testament)

The test of external evidence seeks to either corroborate or falsify the documents on the basis of additional historical literature and data. Is there corroborating evidence outside the Bible for the claims made in the Gospels? Or are the claims of the New Testament successfully refuted by other competent reports or eyewitnesses?

Any honest investigation will reveal that the New Testament passes the test. For example, the resurrection itself has never been refuted, even by Jesus' own enemies, and Luke's careful historical writing has been documented from detailed, personal archaeological investigation by former critic Sir William Ramsay, who stated after his painstaking research, "Luke's history is unsurpassed in respect of its trustworthiness."¹⁴ A. N. Sherwin-White, the distinguished historian of Rome, stated of Luke: "For [the book of] Acts the confirmation of historicity is overwhelming. Any attempt to reject its basic historicity even in matters of detail must now appear absurd."¹⁵

Papias, a student of the Apostle John¹⁶ and Bishop of Hierapolis around 150 A.D., observed that the Apostle John himself noted that the Apostle Mark in writing his Gospel "wrote down accurately... whatsoever he [Peter] remembered of the things said or done by Christ. Mark committed no error... for he was careful of one thing, not to omit any of the things he [Peter] had heard, and not to state any of them falsely."¹⁷ Further, fragments of Papias' *Exposition of the Oracles of the Lord*, ca. 140 A.D. (III, XIX, XX) assert that the Gospels of Matthew, Mark and John are all based on reliable eyewitness testimony (his portion on Luke is missing).¹⁸

The relevant bibliographic, internal and external evidence for the New Testament force us to conclude the historical accuracy and reliability of the Gospel accounts. They pass persuasive tests which determine their integrity. Even two hundred years of scholarly rationalistic biblical criticism have proven nothing except that the writers were careful and honest reporters of the events recorded, and that these methods attempting to discredit them were flawed and biased from the start.¹⁹

In conclusion, it is not only a demonstrable historical fact that Jesus lived and taught what the New Testament says He lived and taught, it is also a fact that the Bible is the best-documented and most accurately preserved book of ancient history. That means we can trust what the authors say as true. When we examine the evidence for something like the resurrection of Jesus as reported in the new Testament, there is no logical, historical, or other basis upon which to doubt what is written.

Fact Four: Corroboration from Non-Christian Sources

The existence of both Jewish and secular accounts, to a significant degree,

confirm the picture of Christ we have in the New Testament. For example, scholarly research such as that by Dr. Gary R. Habermas in *Ancient Evidence for the Life of Jesus*, and other texts, indicates that “a broad outline of the life of Jesus” and His death by crucifixion can be reasonably and directly inferred from entirely non-Christian sources.²⁰ Even the resurrection of Christ can be indirectly inferred.

Using only the information gleaned from these ancient extra-biblical sources, what can we conclude concerning the death and resurrection of Jesus? Can these events be historically established based on these sources alone? Of the seventeen documents examined in this chapter, eleven different works speak of the death of Jesus in varying amounts of detail, with five of these specifying crucifixion as the mode. When these sources are examined by normal historical procedures used with other ancient documents, the result is conclusive. It is this author’s view that the death of Jesus by crucifixion can be asserted as a historical fact from this data....

The ancient references to the resurrection are fewer and more questionable. Of the seventeen sources, only six either imply or report this occurrence, with four of these works being questioned in our study. Before answering the issue concerning Jesus’ resurrection, we will initially address the cognate point of whether the empty tomb can be established as historical by this extra-biblical evidence alone. There are some strong considerations in its favor. First, the Jewish sources which we have examined admit the empty tomb, thereby providing evidences from hostile documents....

Second, there are apparently no ancient sources which assert that the tomb still contained Jesus’ body. While such an argument from silence does not prove anything, it is made stronger by the first consideration from the hostile sources and further compliments it. Third, our study has shown that Jesus taught in Palestine and was crucified and buried in Jerusalem under Pontius Pilate. These sources assert that Christianity had its beginnings in the same location. But could Christianity have survived in this location, based on its central claim that Jesus was raised from the dead, if the tomb had not been empty? It must be remembered that the resurrection of the body was the predominant view of the first century Jews. To declare a bodily resurrection if the body was still in a nearby tomb points out the dilemma here. Of all places, evidence was readily available in Jerusalem to disprove this central tenet of Christian belief.²¹

Fact Five: Corroboration from Archeology

There also exists detailed archaeological confirmation for the New Testament documents.²² Dr. Clifford Wilson, author of *New Light on the New Testament Letters, New Light on the Gospels, Rock, Relics and Biblical Reliability* and a 17-volume set on the archeological confirmation of the Bible writes concerning Luke:

Luke demonstrated a remarkably accurate knowledge of geographical and political ideas. He referred correctly to provinces that were established at that time, as indicated in Acts 15:41; 16:2, 6-8. He identified regions, such as that referred to in Acts 13:49, and various cities, as in Acts 14:6. He demonstrated a clear knowledge of local customs, such as those relating to the speech of the Lycaonians (Acts 14:11), some aspects relating to the foreign woman who was converted at Athens (Acts 17:34), and he even knew that the city of Ephesus was

known as “the temple-keeper of Artemis” (Acts 19:35)... he refers to different local officers by their exact titles—the proconsul (deputy) of Cyprus (Acts 13:7), the magistrates at Philippi (Acts 16:20, 35), the politarchs (another word for magistrates) at Thessalonica (Acts 17:6), the proconsul of Achaia (Acts 18:12), and the treasurer at Corinth (Aedile)—which was the title of the man known as Erastus at Corinth (Acts 19:22; Romans 16:23)....

Luke had accurate knowledge about various local events such as the famine in the days of Claudius Caesar (Acts 11:29); he was aware that Zeus and Hermes were worshiped together at Lystra, though this was unknown to modern historians (Acts 14:11,12). He knew that Diana or Artemis was especially the goddess of the Ephesians (Acts 19:2); and he was able to describe the trade at Ephesus in religious images (Acts 19:26, 27)....

At these points, archaeology has had something significant to say, sometimes where the biblical record had previously seemed to be in error. One good example relates to those magistrates at Philippi. In Acts 16:20, 35 we read of the magistrates being referred to as “praetors.” Strictly, their title should have been *duumvir*, but it was as though they called themselves, “senior magistrates” instead of magistrates.” Ramsay showed by an inscription recovered in another Roman colony, Capua, that Cicero had spoken of the magistrates: “Although they are called duumvirs in the other colonies, these men wish to be called praetors.”

This is a point at which critics had thought Luke was in error, but the fact is Luke was better informed than those who opposed him. His writings constantly bear this impress of authenticity. He was an eyewitness of so much that is recorded in the Acts, and the source documents have now been recognized as first-class historical writings.²³

This is only a minuscule portion of the data underlying his conclusion that “Those who know the facts now recognize that the New Testament must be accepted as a remarkably accurate source book.”²⁴

Fact Six: Corroboration from Enemies’ Silence

The complete inability of the numerous enemies of Jesus and the early Church to discredit Christian claims (when they had both the motive and ability to do so) also argues strongly for their veracity, especially in light of the dramatic nature of those claims (e.g., concerning Christ’s messiahship and resurrection) and the relative ease of disproof (documenting Jesus’ failure to fulfill specific prophecies; producing Jesus’ body).

Fact Seven: Corroboration from Eyewitnesses

The presence of numerous eyewitnesses to the events recorded in the New Testament would surely have prohibited any alteration or distortion of the facts, just as today any false reporting as to the events of the Vietnam War or World War II would be immediately corrected on the basis of living eyewitnesses and historic records.

Some argue that the Gospel writers’ reporting of miracles can’t be trusted because they were only giving their religiously excited “subjective experience” of Jesus, not objectively reporting real miraculous events. They thought Jesus did

miracles, but were mistaken. What is ignored by critics is what the text plainly states and the fact that the gospel writers could not have gotten away with this in their own day unless they had been telling the truth. They claimed that these things were done openly, not in a corner (Acts 26:26), that they were literally eyewitnesses of the nature and deeds of Jesus (Luke 1:2; Acts 2:32; 2 Peter 1:16), and that their testimony should be believed *because* it was true (John 20:30-31).

Indeed, the apostles wrote that Jesus Himself presented His miracles in support of His claims to be both the prophesied Messiah and God incarnate. In Mark 2:8-11, when He healed the paralytic, He did it so “that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins”—a clear claim to being God. In John 10:33, when the Jews accused Jesus of blaspheming because as supposedly only a man He was yet claiming to be God, what was Christ’s response? “Do not believe me unless I do what my Father does. But if I do it, even though you do not believe me, believe the miracles, that you may know and understand that the Father is in me, and I in the Father” (John 10:37-38).

When John the Baptist was in jail and apparently had doubts as to whether or not Jesus was the Messiah—after all, if Jesus was the Messiah, John probably reasoned, he shouldn’t be in jail—what did Jesus do? He told John’s disciples to go and report about the miracles that He did, which were in fulfillment of specific messianic prophecy (Matthew 11:2-5). Christ’s miracles prove His claim to be God.

The teachings and miracles of Jesus, as any independent reading of the Gospels will prove, are so inexorably bound together that if one removes the miracles, one must discard the teachings. It is logically impossible to have any other Jesus than the biblical one. It is precisely the biblical Jesus—His deeds and teachings—which has such abundant eyewitness testimony, as any reading of the Gospels and Acts proves.

Fact Eight: Corroboration From Date of Authorship

The fact that both conservatives (F. F. Bruce, John Wenham) and liberals (Bishop John A. T. Robinson) have penned defenses of early dating for the New Testament is a witness to the strength of the data for an early date. For example, in *Redating Matthew, Mark and Luke*, noted conservative British scholar John Wenham presents a convincing argument that the synoptic Gospels are to be dated before 55 A.D. He dates Matthew at 40 A.D. (some tradition says the early 30s); Mark at 45 A.D. and Luke no later than 51-55 A.D.²⁵

German papyrologist Carsten Peter Thiede has argued that the Magdalen papyrus, containing snippets of three passages from Matthew 26, currently housed at Oxford University, are actually the oldest extant fragments of the New Testament, dating from about 70 A.D. Thiede’s book, *Eyewitness to Jesus* (Doubleday, 1995), points out that the Magdalen papyrus is written in Uncial style, which began to die out in the middle of the first century. In addition, the fragments are from a codex,²⁶ containing writing on both sides of the papyri, which may have been widely used by Christians in the first century since they were easier to handle than scrolls. Further, at three places on the papyri the name of Jesus is written as KS, which is an abbre-

viation of the Greek word *kyrios* or Lord. Thiede argues that this shorthand is proof that early Christians considered Jesus a sacred name just as the devout Jews shortened the name of God to YHWH. This would indicate a very early belief for the deity of Christ.

New papyrus discoveries, Thiede believes, will eventually prove that all four gospels, even the problematic one ascribed to John, were written before A.D. 80 rather than during the mid-second century. He argues that a scroll fragment unearthed at the Essene community of Qumran in 1972 almost certainly contains a passage from Mark's gospel and can be accurately dated to A.D. 68. In Thiede's opinion, recent research has established that a papyrus fragment of *Luke* in a Paris library was written between A.D. 63 and A.D. 67.²⁷

Even liberal bishop John A. T. Robinson argued in his *Redating the New Testament* that the entire New Testament was written and in circulation between 40 and 65 A.D.²⁸ And liberal Peter Stuhlmacher of Tübingen, trained in Bultmann's critical methodology of form criticism, says, "As a Western scripture scholar, I am inclined to doubt these [Gospel] stories, but as *historian*, I am obligated to take them as reliable. . . . The biblical texts as they stand are the best hypothesis we have until now to explain what really happened."²⁹

Indeed, it is becoming an increasingly persuasive argument that all the New Testament books were written before 70 A.D.—within a single generation of the death of Christ.

Given Jesus' miracles, claims and controversy, which began early in His ministry, it is inconceivable that His disciples would not have recorded Jesus' words as He spoke them or immediately after. Even before He began His public ministry there had to be stories circulating about Him, such as about the unique circumstances surrounding His birth, the visit by the shepherds, His presentation in the temple, the visit by the Magi, His escape to Egypt, the return to Nazareth, the event in the temple as a boy and so on. At His baptism the Holy Spirit descended on Him as a dove and He went to the desert to be tempted by Satan. His first miracle in Cana, the changing of water to wine, His cleansing of the temple, the healing of a nobleman's son and so on were all done in the first six months or so of His public ministry. Even the people of His hometown tried to kill Him at Nazareth (Luke 4:16-30).³⁰ It is likely the Gospels would have been constructed from these accounts as soon as necessary, which could have been as early as 40 A.D. or even earlier.

The implications of this are not small. A New Testament written between 40-70 A.D. virtually destroys the edifice on which higher critical premises regarding the New Testament are based. If true, insufficient time elapsed for the early Church to have embellished the records with their own particularist views. What the New Testament reports, it reports accurately.

Fact Nine: Corroboration from Critical Methods Themselves

Even critical methods indirectly support New Testament reliability. Although higher critical theories in general reject biblical reliability *a priori*, nevertheless, when such theories "are subjected to the same analytical scrutiny as they apply to the New

Testament documents, they will be found to make their own contribution to validating the historicity of those records.”³¹ If 200 years of higher criticism of the biblical text reveals anything, it is that the higher critical methods are untrustworthy, not the Bible.

Fact Ten: Confirmation from Legal Testimony and Skeptics

Certainly we must also concede the historicity of the New Testament when we consider the fact that many great minds of legal history have, on the grounds of strict legal evidence, accepted the New Testament as reliable history—not to mention also the fact that many brilliant skeptical intellects, of both history and today, have converted to Christianity on the basis of the historical evidence (Athanagoras, Augustine, George Lyttleton and Gilbert West, C. S. Lewis, Frank Morison, Sir William Ramsay, John Warwick Montgomery, to name a few).

Lawyers, of course, are expertly trained in the matter of evaluating evidence, and they are perhaps the most qualified in the task of weighing data critically. Is it coincidence that so many of them throughout history have concluded in favor of the truth of the Christian religion?

What of the “father of international law,” Hugo Grotius, who wrote *The Truth of the Christian Religion* (1627)? Or the greatest authority in English and American common-law evidence in the nineteenth century, Harvard Law School professor Simon Greenleaf, who wrote *Testimony of the Evangelists*, in which he powerfully demonstrated the reliability of the Gospels?³² What of Edmund H. Bennett (1824-1898), for over 20 years the dean of Boston University Law School, who penned *The Four Gospels From a Lawyer’s Standpoint* (1899)?³³ What of Irwin Linton, who in his time had represented cases before the Supreme Court, and who wrote *A Lawyer Examines the Bible* (1943, 1977), in which he stated:

So invariable had been my observation that he who does not accept wholeheartedly the evangelical, conservative belief in Christ and the Scriptures has never read, has forgotten, or never been able to weigh—and certainly is utterly unable to refute—the irresistible force of the cumulative evidence upon which such faith rests, that there seems ample ground, for the conclusion that such ignorance is an invariable element in such unbelief, And this is so even though the unbeliever be a preacher, who is supposed to know this subject if he know no other.³⁴

What of hundreds of contemporary lawyers who, also on the grounds of strict legal evidence, accept the New Testament as historically accurate? The eminent Lord Chancellor Hailsham has twice held the highest office possible for a lawyer in England, that of Lord Chancellor. He wrote *The Door Wherein I Went*, in which he upholds the singular truth of the Christian religion.³⁵ What of Jacques Ellul and of Sir NORMAN Anderson, one of the greatest authorities on Islamic law, who is also a Christian convinced of New Testament authority and reliability?

Certainly, such men were well acquainted with legal reasoning and have just as certainly concluded that the evidence for the historical truthfulness of the Scriptures is beyond reasonable doubt. As apologist, theologian and lawyer John Warwick Montgomery observes in *The Law Above the Law*: considering the “ancient docu-

ments” rule (that ancient documents constitute competent evidence if there is no evidence of tampering and they have been accurately transmitted); the “parol evidence” rule (Scripture must interpret itself without foreign intervention); the “hearsay rule” (the demand for primary-source evidence); and the “cross-examination” principle (the inability of the enemies of Christianity to disprove its central claim that Christ resurrected bodily from the dead in spite of the motive and opportunity to do so) all coalesce directly or indirectly to support the preponderance of evidence for Christianity. The legal burden for disproving it rests with the *critic*, who, in 2,000 years, has yet to prove his case.³⁶

We must, then, speak of the fact that to reject the New Testament accounts as true history is by definition to reject the canons of all legitimate historical study. To reject the Gospels or the New Testament is to reject primary historical documentation in general. If this cannot be done, the New Testament must be retained as careful historical reporting. The Scripture has thus proven itself reliable in the crucible of history. It is the critic of Scripture who has been unable to prove his case.

Legal scholar J. N. D. Anderson observes in *Christianity: The Witness of History*:

...it seems to me inescapable that anyone who chanced to read the pages of the New Testament for the first time would come away with one overwhelming impression—that here is a faith firmly rooted in certain allegedly historical events, a faith which would be false and misleading if those events had not actually taken place, but which, if they did take place, is unique in its relevance and exclusive in its demands on our allegiance. For these events did not merely set a “process in motion and then themselves sink back into the past. The unique historical origin of Christianity is ascribed permanent, authoritative, absolute significance; what happened once is said to have happened once for all and therefore to have continuous efficacy.”³⁷

In other words, even if we personally choose to disbelieve what the New Testament teaches, our disbelief changes nothing. Jesus Christ is who the New Testament says he is. One day He will either become our Lord and Savior or He will become our Divine Judge.

Notes:

¹ “**Source** criticism, also known as literary criticism, attempts to discover and define literary sources used by the biblical writers...and answer questions relating to authorship, unity and date of Old and New Testament materials.... **Form** criticism studies literary forms such as essays, poems, and myths, since different writings have different forms. Often the form of a piece of literature can tell a great deal about the nature of a literary piece, its writer, and its social context.... **Redaction** criticism claims that subsequent editors (redactors) changed the text of Scripture.” (Dr. Norman Geisler, *Baker Encyclopedia of Christian Apologetics* (Baker Book House, 1999), pp. 86, 87, 635).

² James W. Sire, *Why Should Anyone Believe Anything at All?* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1994), p. 221, citing Thomas C. Oden, *The Word of Life* (New York: Harper and Row, 1989), pp. 223-224.

³ Chauncey Sanders, *An Introduction to Research in English Literary History* (New York: MacMillan, 1952), p. 160. His comments were specifically in reference to the authenticity or authorship of a given text.

- ⁴ Ibid.
- ⁵ J. McDowell, *Evidence That Demands a Verdict*, rev. 1979, pp. 39-52; and Norman Geisler, William Nix, *A General Introduction to the Bible* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1971), pp. 238, 357-367.
- ⁶ McDowell, *Evidence That Demands a Verdict*, p. 42; Robert C. Newman, "Miracles and the Historicity of the Easter Week Narratives," in John Warwick Montgomery (ed.), *Evidence for Faith: Deciding the God Question* (Dallas: Probe, 1991), pp. 281-84.
- ⁷ "Christian Scriptures in Greek were written in capital letters, separately formed often without spaces between words. These were called uncial letters." (*Nelson's New Illustrated Bible Dictionary*)
- ⁸ F. F. Bruce, *The Books and the Parchments* (Old Tappan, NJ: Revell, 1963), p. 78.
- ⁹ F. F. Bruce, *The New Testament Documents: Are They Reliable?* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1971), p. 15.
- ¹⁰ Cited in Rene Pache, *The Inspiration and Authority of Scripture*, tr. Helen I. Needham (Chicago: Moody Press, 1969), p. 193, citing Benjamin B. Warfield, *An Introduction to the Textual Criticism of the Old Testament*, p. 12ff; "The Greek Testament of Westcott and Hort," *The Presbyterian Review*, Vol. 3 (April 1982), p. 356.
- ¹¹ J. McDowell, *Evidence That Demands a Verdict*, pp. 43-45; Clark Pinnock, *Biblical Revelation: The Foundation of Christian Theology* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1971), pp. 238-239, 365-366.
- ¹² Newman, "Miracles and the Historicity of the Easter Week Narratives," p. 284.
- ¹³ See John Warwick Montgomery, *Faith Founded on Fact* (New York: Nelson, 1978); F. F. Bruce, *The New Testament Documents: Are They Reliable?* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity); John Warwick Montgomery, *History and Christianity* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity); Norman Geisler, *Christian Apologetics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1976), pp. 322-327.
- ¹⁴ William M. Ramsay, *The Bearing of Recent Discovery on the Trustworthiness of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1959), p. 81; cf. William F. Ramsay, *Luke the Physician, 177-179, 222* as given in F. F. Bruce, *The New Testament Documents: Are They Reliable?*, pp. 90-91.
- ¹⁵ A. N. Sherwin-White, *Roman Society and Roman Law in the New Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965) from Norman L. Geisler, *Christian Apologetics*, p. 326.
- ¹⁶ Gary R. Habermas, *Ancient Evidence for the Life of Jesus: Historical Records of His Death and Resurrection* (New York: Nelson, 1984), p. 66.
- ¹⁷ Philip Schaff, Henry Wace, eds., *A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, 2nd series, vol. 1, Eusebius: Church History, Book 3, Chapter 39, "The Writings of Papias" (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1976), pp. 172-173, emphasis added.
- ¹⁸ Habermas, *Ancient Evidence for the Life of Jesus*, pp. 66, 177.
- ¹⁹ E.g., Gerhard Meier, *The End of the Historical Critical Method* (St. Louis, MO: Concordia, 1977); and J. McDowell, *More Evidence That Demands a Verdict* (San Bernardino, CA: Campus Crusade for Christ, 1972).
- ²⁰ Habermas, *Ancient Evidence for the Life of Jesus*, pp. 112-115.
- ²¹ Ibid., pp. 112-113.
- ²² See our chapter on archeology in *Ready With An Answer* and F. F. Bruce, "Are the New Testament Documents Still Reliable?", *Christianity Today* (October 28, 1978), pp. 28-33; F. F. Bruce, *The New Testament Documents: Are They Reliable?*, chs. 7-8; Sir William Ramsay, *The Bearing of Recent Discoveries on the Trustworthiness of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1979); C. A. Wilson, *Rocks, Relics and Biblical Reliability* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1977), ch. 2, *New Light on New Testament Letters* and *New Light on the Gospels* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1975); Edwin Yamauchi, *The Stones and the Scriptures*, Section II (New York: Lippincott, 1972).
- ²³ Clifford Wilson, *Rocks, Relics and Biblical Reliability* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1977), pp. 112-114.
- ²⁴ Ibid., p. 120.
- ²⁵ John Wenham, *Redating Matthew, Mark and Luke*, (Downers Grove, IL, 1992), pp. 115-19, 136, 183, see pp. xxv, 198, 147, 200, 221, 223, 238-39, 243-45.
- ²⁶ "**CODEX [COE dex]**— the forerunner of the modern book. A codex was formed by folding several

sheets of papyrus in the middle and sewing them together along the fold.” (*Nelson’s New Illustrated Bible Dictionary*)

²⁷ John Elson, “Eyewitness to Jesus?” *Time*, April 8, 1996, p. 60.

²⁸ John A. T. Robinson, *Redating the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1976).

²⁹ In Richard S. Ostling, “Who Was Jesus?”, *Time*, August 15, 1988, p. 41, emphasis added.

³⁰ See the chronological “Life of Christ” chart in *The NIV Study Bible*, red letter edition, Zondervan 1985, pp. 1480-1481.

³¹ Bruce “Are the New Testament Documents Still Reliable?”, p. 55, cf., Craig Blomberg, *The Historical Reliability of the Gospels* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1987), pp. 247, 253.

³² Reprinted in J. W. Montgomery, *The Law Above the Law* (Minneapolis, MN: Bethany, 1975), appendix, pp. 91-140.

³³ Reprinted in *The Simon Greenleaf Law Review*, Vol. 1 (Orange, CA: The Faculty of the Simon Greenleaf School of Law, 1981-1982), pp. 15-74.

³⁴ Irwin Linton, *A Lawyer Examines the Bible* (San Diego: Creation-Life-Publishers, 1977), p. 45.

³⁵ *The Simon Greenleaf Law Review*, vol. 4 (Orange, CA: The Faculty of the Simon Greenleaf School of Law, 1984-1985), pp. 28-36.

³⁶ Montgomery, *The Law Above the Law*, pp. 87-88.

³⁷ J. N. D. Anderson, *Christianity: The Witness of History* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1970), pp. 13-14.