The Historical Reliability of the New Testament

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Objective: To show that the New Testament is historically reliable and accurate; we can be confident that our New Testament accurately describes the events of the first century.

We will look at two questions, concluding with a discussion on miracles:

* Do we have accurate copies of the original documents that were written down in the first century?
* Did the original documents tell the truth?

1. Do we have accurate copies of the original documents?

We don’t have the originals anymore, which is the case with other documents of classical literature. But scholars can very accurately re-construct originals if they have many copies that were made soon after the originals. Copies can be compared to each other to fill in gaps and identify errors.

* Up until the 1800s, we didn’t have many copies of early manuscripts. But then archaeology developed as a disciplined science, and the search was on.
* Now we have:
  + Over 100 papyrus fragments
  + Over 300 Uncials, or Codices
  + Thousands of minuscules.
  + Fragments of books, starting from c. 50 AD
  + Complete NT books starting from 100 AD
  + Most of the NT starting from 150 AD
  + Complete New Testaments starting from 225 AD

Total Greek manuscripts: 5,795

Total including other languages: 25,800[[1]](#footnote-1)

This far and away exceeds the number of early copies of any other ancient documents of that period. The closest is Homer’s Iliad, with 1800 copies and a time gap of 400 years between the original and the earliest copy.

* Having many copies protects against mistakes or intentional, fraudulent changes.
* Claims of large numbers of errors are not well founded. Most of the “errors” are really variations in spelling, or synonyms. Very few involve meaning, and those are noted in our modern Bibles. None affect any Christian doctrine.
* Cumulative errors in translations, as seen in the “Telephone Game” are not an issue, because our modern translations are derived from the earliest available manuscripts, not each other in sequence.

Conclusion to Question 1: Many early copies of the original New Testament documents give us very high confidence that the New Testament we have today matches the original documents that were written down in the first century.

1. Did the original documents tell the truth?

Following are 5 reasons we can be confident that the documents tell the truth:

1. They were written soon after the events, too soon to contain embellishment, legendary tendencies or myth.

* Most of the New Testament books were written within 30-40 years of the events. This is significant because it means the narratives and claims could be verified by many eyewitnesses.
* There wasn’t enough time for legend to replace real history. That takes 2-3 generations. Those who would desire to revise history will not be able to do so while eye witnesses are still alive.

1. The writers challenge their audiences (some of the audiences hostile) to verify the writers’ claims by checking with the many other eyewitnesses who were still alive and available at the time.
2. The writings contain eyewitness testimony, either written by eyewitnesses or their contemporaries who could interview them, and claims of honesty.
3. The writers *demonstrate* honesty and accuracy.
   * Luke is known to be very accurate with many details in the Gospel of Luke and Acts. He names thirty-two countries, fifty-four cities and nine islands without error. In addition, the New Testament writers include the names of 30 historically confirmed people. This is important evidence the accounts were not lies. If they were, the writers would have destroyed their credibility with contemporary audiences by implicating real people in a fictional story—especially people of notoriety and power.
     + Church tradition tells us that nearly all of the apostles were tortured and died for their belief in the risen Jesus. (Only John died a natural death, exiled on the island of Patmos). There is no historical evidence that any of them denied their story. This is different than, for example, a Muslim dying in a suicide bombing. Muslim martyrs die for something that others have told them. The apostles’ claim was that they actually saw and interacted with the risen Jesus. So if it wasn’t true, they would have known they were dying for a lie. This is considered powerful evidence to historians. Who would be willing to be tortured and die for a lie, when they have nothing to gain?
4. Sources outside the Bible support the historical narratives.

* There are (at least) ten non-Christian writers who mention Jesus within 150 years of his life. The following information can be gleaned from these writings:
* Jesus lived during the time of Tiberius Caesar.
* He lived a virtuous life.
* He was a wonder-worker.
* He had a brother named James.
* He was acclaimed to be the Messiah.
* He was crucified under Pontius Pilate.
* He was crucified on the eve of the Jewish Passover.
* Darkness and an earthquake occurred when he died.
* His disciples believed he rose from the dead.
* His disciples were willing to die for their belief.
* Christianity spread rapidly as far as Rome.
* His disciples denied the Roman gods and worshiped Jesus as God.
* The field of Biblical archaeology is large and growing. Archaeological finds continually affirm the Biblical accounts. Books on Biblical archaeology are available, and even an Archaeological Study Bible.

Conclusion to Question 2: Early testimony with demonstrated accuracy and honesty, supported by external sources, provides confidence the accounts are historically true.

But many people have a problem believing the accounts because of the miracles.

Miracles

* If God exists then we must admit that miracles are possible. In fact, if there is just a *possibility* that God exists, then we must admit that miracles are at least possible.
* Most people who don’t believe that miracles are possible have that opinion because of an unreasonable anti-supernatural bias. This is common in our culture and is a consequence of Enlightenment thinking from the 1700-1800s, in which an emphasis was placed on Naturalism—that there is no supernatural. The Enlightenment ushered in an era of skepticism, so that many historians and other truth seekers tended to limit investigation of historical events to natural causes only, whether the data fit naturalistic explanations or not.
* The most influential argument against miracles probably came from David Hume. He claimed that the uniform experience of the overwhelming majority of people in human history is that they have never witnessed a miracle. According to Hume, this uniform experience amounts to proof that miracles do not happen.
* But Craig S. Keener, New Testament Scholar, says otherwise in his two volume work *Miracles, The Credibility of the New Testament Accounts* published in 2011. According to Keener, Hume is wrong because “hundreds of millions of people alive on the earth today claim to have experienced miracles.” Keener then argues that supernatural explanations should be welcome on the scholarly table. In other words, the widespread acceptance of anti-supernatural bias resulting from Enlightenment thinking has been a mistake.

As a matter of interest, we have a miracle story in my family. My mother experienced a medical miracle in 1994. The brief account, in her own words, is available to read at: https://gregenos.org/a-miracle-story/

Conclusion on Miracles: If God exists, then miracles are possible, and no one has ever been able to prove that God does not exist; so miracles are possible. To reject miracle claims outright is a sign of anti-supernatural bias. Why not allow supernatural explanations, along with other explanations, on the table for serious investigation? If the evidence is lacking, it's okay to be skeptical. But what if it's compelling?

1. Manuscript numbers are taken from Norman L. Geisler and Frank Turek, *I Don’t Have Enough Faith to be an Atheist* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2004), 225-226. However, numbers are changing all the time. Updated numbers may be found in Dr. Clay Jones, “The Bibliographical Test Updated,” available at <https://clayjones.net/2012/07/the-bibliographical-test-updated/>, accessed 8/23/22. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)