

## Lesson #4

### The Dependability of the New Testament Text

In our last chapter we examined evidence from secular sources that corroborated events recorded in the New Testament, namely, the life and death of Jesus Christ. It is impossible, from the evidence offered by these sources, to deny that Jesus Christ existed and was crucified in Palestine in the first century. Your job is to remember the three best sources of secular information:

- (1) **Josephus** in 93 A.D. (who confirmed that Jesus was the so-called Christ, that He was sentenced to die on the cross by Pilate, and His followers were called Christians),
- (2) **Pliny the Younger** in 112 (who wrote in his letter to the emperor about the persecution of Christians and testified to their exemplary moral conduct), and
- (3) **Tacitus** in 116 (who wrote of Nero's blaming the 64 A.D. fire in Rome on Christians, killing many; the passage also confirms that Christ underwent the death penalty under Pontius Pilate).

The goal of our apologetics is ultimately to break down barriers so the skeptic will at least consider the New Testament texts. So often, though, when you mention the Bible, you hear, "The Bible has been copied so many times and there are so many different versions that no one knows what the original Bible said in the first place." How do you answer an accusation like that? How do you know you can trust the Bible we have today? That's the topic for discussion in this chapter. After we prove the Bible we have is substantially the same as was originally written, we can then offer proof for the historical accuracy of the New Testament, which we'll do in chapters five and six.

There are three basic tests for determining the reliability of any ancient text: the bibliographic test, the internal evidence test and the external evidence test. The bibliographic test seeks to determine the reliability of our current text based on the number of extant manuscripts (MSS) available and their proximity in time to the date the originals were composed. The internal evidence test attempts to determine the extent to which a document is credible by examining the statements in the document itself. The external evidence test is concerned with external sources (history, archaeology, etc.) that substantiate its accuracy. All three tests are necessary. In this chapter we'll apply the Bibliographic test to the New Testament.

One wrong assumption that many skeptics make is that the Bible was written down hundreds of years after the events took place. But the internal and external evidence of the MSS proves that the Gospels, Acts, epistles and Revelation were indeed first-century documents, as we will see. A second assumption is that, since we don't have the original MSS, no one can know for sure the content of the original. That's where the bibliographic test comes in. In determining the reliability of any ancient text, the more manuscripts available, the more likely the original text can be ascertained, and the older the texts (closer to the original), the more reliable they are. Look at the following chart to see the striking differences in these two areas among the most noted ancient works. As far as meeting the bibliographic test for reliability, nothing else comes close to the New Testament.

<u>Author</u>	<u>Date of Writing</u>	<u>Earliest Copy</u>	<u># Copies</u>	<u>Time Span</u>
Plato's <i>Tetralogies</i>	427-437 BC	AD 900	7	1,200 years
Thucydites' <i>History</i>	460-400 BC	AD 900	8	1,300 years
Caesar's <i>Galic Wars</i>	100- 44 BC	AD 900	10	1,000 years
Aristotle	384-322 BC	AD 1100	49 (of any 1 work)	1,400 years
Sophocles	496-406 BC	AD 1000	193	1,400 years
Tacitus' <i>Annals</i>	100 AD	AD 1100	20	1,000 years

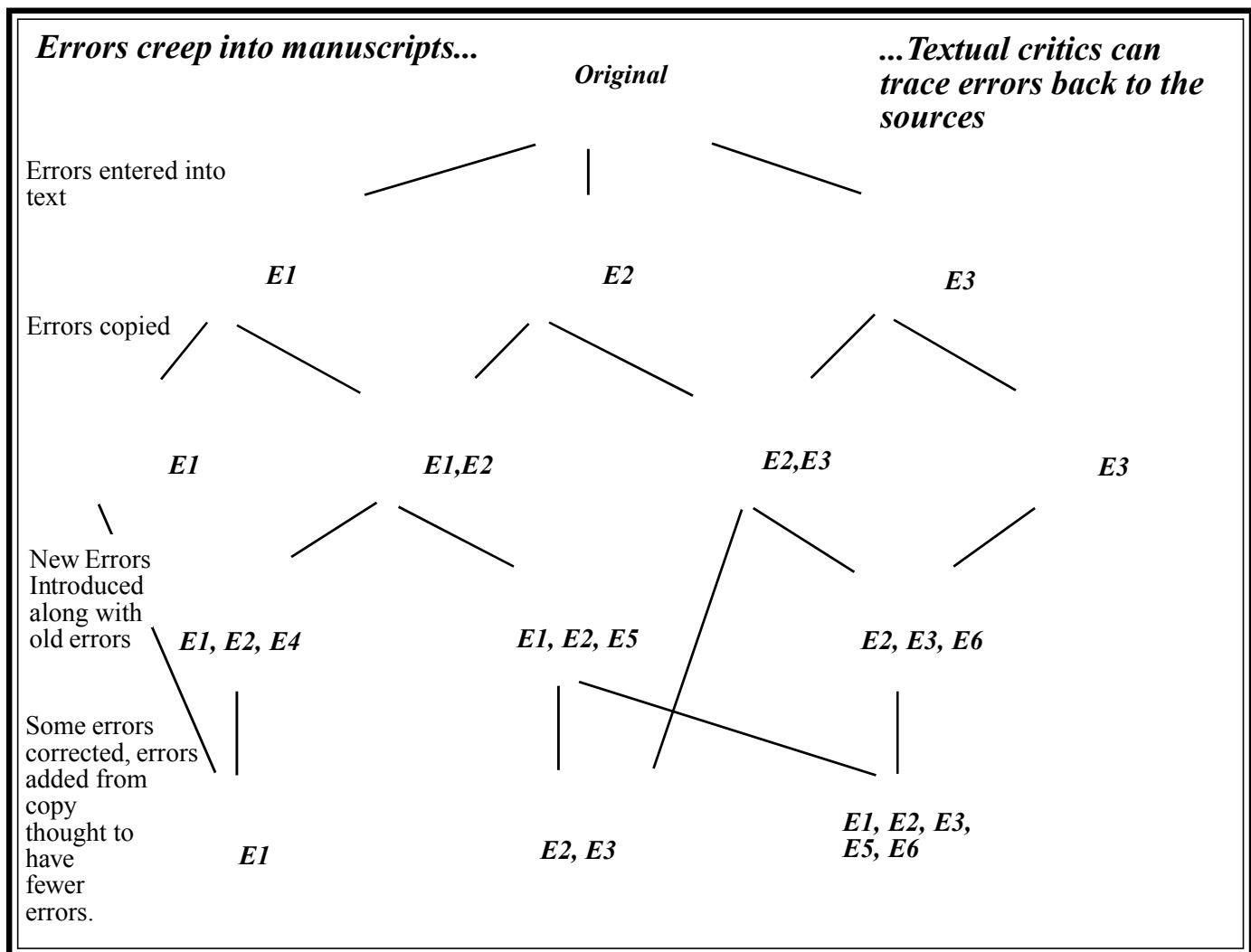
Suetonius' <i>De Vita Caesareum</i> 75-160 AD	AD 950	8	800 years
Homer's <i>Illiad</i> (#2)	900 BC	BC 400	643
The New Testament (#1)	40-100 AD	AD 130	24,633
			30 years <sup>1</sup>

The average gap between the original and the earliest extant MSS is over 1000 years. But, for the New Testament, the earliest fragment appears within one generation. Whole books are available within 200 years, and the entire New Testament within 250 years. And there are almost 10 times the number of MSS of the NT than of its closest competitor. Why, then, are these other ancient texts never questioned? Why are they taken for granted as true when the Bible isn't?

Perhaps the sheer number of MSS is part of the problem. There are in whole or in part "5,338 Greek MSS, as well as hundreds of copies of ancient translations (not counting over 8,000 copies of the Latin Vulgate), plus the evidence from the citations of the NT in the writings of the early Church Fathers."<sup>2</sup> Of the thousands of manuscripts, fragments and translations, no two manuscripts are exactly alike. During 1400 years of copying, scribes made every conceivable error.

### Why were there so many mistakes?

The Old Testament scribes were highly trained and educated in the copying of manuscripts. They had exacting methods of maintaining complete accuracy. But the early church was plagued by persecution. There was hardly the time to train scribes to make copies of the writings of the apostles. It was imperative to make copies quickly so the Word could be disseminated. Errors were bound to occur. Some mistakes were unintentional slips of the pen, but others were intentional additions to smooth out rough Greek, to make the text more understandable, and even to harmonize details in varying accounts. "They were more interested in making the message of the sacred text clear than in transmitting errorless MSS." [Epp p. 9] Once an error was made, each



succeeding copyist recopied the same error. But that doesn't mean that the earliest texts were necessarily the most accurate. Later texts may have relied on earlier texts than we now have instead of the corrupted texts. On the other hand, sometimes later copyists "corrected" additions based on another text that was likewise corrupted, resulting in the exchange of one error for another. (*See diagram on p. 24*)

### ***How can textual critics find the correct readings?***

Textual critics have been able to group manuscripts into error "families," which enables them to trace the distinctive error back to its root manuscript. In this manner, and by employing sophisticated techniques for determining which is authentic and which is in error, the textual critic is able to determine, with a high degree of probability, the original text. Of the 20,000 lines of the New Testament, only 40 are in doubt (about 400 words), and none of the disputed lines in any way affect the overall meaning or doctrine being expressed.

"Among the over 5,000 existing Greek manuscripts of the New Testament documents there are approximately 150,000 variant readings.... Of these 150,000 variants in the text, over 95% can be dismissed as having little support in the earliest and best manuscripts. And although about 7,500 of these variant readings exist in the earlier manuscripts, 95% of these in no way affect the sense of the passages in which they're found. These manuscript variations — as reflected in critical editions of the Greek New Testament — consist of minor spelling, grammatical and word-order variations that don't change the sense of the passage at all."<sup>3</sup>

Most of the discrepancies are noted in the footnotes or margins of modern translations. The only variations affecting more than a sentence or two are John 7:53-8:11 and Mark 16:9-20. Most of the others only involve a word or phrase. "Textual critics have come to general agreement on a text that's so close to the original — as pure as 98.33% accuracy over the entire New Testament — that the present Greek text is beyond doubt, except on minor textual problems."<sup>4</sup>

What do other scholars have to say? John Warwick Montgomery, a historian and law professor contended, "to be skeptical of the resultant text of the New Testament books is to allow all of classical antiquity to slip into obscurity, for no documents of the ancient period are as well attested bibliographically as the New Testament."<sup>5</sup> The following quote is by Dr. Kenneth A. Kitchen, a "world-renowned scholar in Ancient Near Eastern Studies and lecturer in Egyptian and Coptic in the School of Archaeology and Oriental Studies at the University of Liverpool":<sup>6</sup>

"...the New Testament, how different and how vastly superior is the manuscript evidence. Some 5,000 Greek mss. (whole or fragmentary) are known, not a mere eight or ten... Thus, the manuscript-attestation for the New Testament is of the highest quality in terms of date, and the sheer wealth of mss. Also enables textual scholars to determine very closely indeed the correct readings of the New Testament's basic text."

Sir Frederic Kenyon commented,

"The interval then between the dates of original composition and the earliest extant evidence becomes so small as to be in fact negligible, and the last foundation for any doubt that the Scriptures have come down to us substantially as they were written has now been removed. Both the authenticity and the general integrity of the books of the New Testament may be regarded as finally established."<sup>7</sup>

Greek scholar J. Harold Greenlee adds,

"Since scholars accept as generally trustworthy the writings of the ancient classics even though the earliest MSS were written so long after the original writings and the number of extant MSS is in many instances so small, it is clear that the reliability of the text of the New Testament is likewise assured."<sup>8</sup>

### ***How are manuscripts dated?***

Most scholars agree that the original Greek MSS of the NT were written on papyrus scrolls. Since scrolls were difficult to read and made it hard to locate specific passages, the codex was created, with leaves

similar to a modern book. Christians began to use this form right away, so that every MSS and fragment that has been found to date is from a codex, not a scroll. No copies of the NT on a scroll have ever been found.<sup>9</sup> The manuscripts and fragments are categorized as follows:

1. **Papyri** — The earliest MSS were written on papyrus leaves in uncials (capital letters), with no space between words. In uncials (in English), John 1:1 would begin, “INTHEBEGINNINGWASTHEWORDANDTHEWORDWASWITHGOD.” As we already noted, papyrus deteriorates within about a hundred years, except in the dry, desert areas of Egypt. Consequently all the extant MSS on papyrus were discovered in Egypt. The earliest dates to approximately AD 125 (or earlier), and the latest to the eighth century. Most, however, fall between the third and fourth centuries. Every NT book except 1 and 2 Timothy is represented in these MSS.<sup>10</sup>

2. **Uncials** — Vellum, or parchment, replaced papyrus at the beginning of the fourth century. Since vellum was made from animal skins, it was more durable and could be made in larger sizes. From the sixth to the fourteenth centuries, almost all literary works were written on parchment. The earliest of the parchment manuscripts were written with uncials (as were the papyri).

3. **Minuscules** — Beginning with the ninth century, a new script was created. Minuscules were lower case letters written in a “cursive” style, still with no spaces between words and very little, if any, punctuation. In minuscules, John 1:1 would read, “*inthebeginningwasthewordandthewordwaswithgod.*”

(4. **Illumination**) — During the Middle Ages (500-1500), monks not only copied the Scriptures, but they also sought to make them beautiful by including ornate artwork around the margins of a page or around the first letter of a book or chapter. This process was known as “illumination.”

By examining the writing style, page size, number of columns and material on which a MSS was written, along with other archaeological evidence surrounding its discovery, textual critics can come extremely close to pinpointing the dates of MSS.

### *What are the most important ancient manuscripts of the New Testament?* <sup>11</sup>

1. **Codex Vaticanus** is the oldest (except for the papyri fragments) and the best of all the manuscripts, dating to 325-350 AD. It was discovered in 1481 in the Vatican Library at Rome. This MSS is written in a neat uncial hand and contains almost the entire Bible.

2. **Codex Sinaiticus** — This MSS dates to 350 AD and is located in the British Museum. It contains almost all of the New Testament and over half of the Old Testament. It was discovered at St. Catherine’s Monastery at Mt. Sinai in 1845 by Constantine Tischendorf, a German scholar. He was in the library studying MSS when he noticed a waste basket filled with vellum leaves containing the oldest Greek he had ever seen. He was granted permission to keep 43 leaves, though he was told two baskets full had already been burned. Tischendorf returned to the monastery in 1853 and again in 1859, but was denied access to the MSS. On the eve of his departure a steward showed him the MSS. Tischendorf suggested they present it as a gift to Czar Alexander, since he was the protector of the church, which they did. The Soviet government later sold Codex Sinaiticus to the British Museum at London.

3. **Codex Alexandrinus** — This uncial MSS was written near 400 AD and contains almost the entire Bible. Most of Matthew and a good portion of 2 Corinthians are missing.

4. **Codex Ephraemi**, dating in the early 5th century, is a palimpsest, a vellum with its original writing washed or scraped off with a new manuscript written over it in order to conserve parchment. Some of the works of St. Ephraim had been written over the MSS in the 12th century. This codex originally contained the entire Bible, but now contains every book except 2 Thessalonians and 2 John. It was not discovered until the 17th century (and finally deciphered by Tischendorf).

5. **Codex Bezae** is the first-known example of the Bible in two languages: Greek and Latin on opposite sides of the page. Written in large uncials, the 5th century manuscript contains many variations from the traditional text and contains only the Gospels, Acts and a few verses from the epistles.

6. **John Rylands Papyrus 457** (also known as p<sup>52</sup>) is the oldest extant fragment of the New Testa-

ment. It contains John 18:31-33, 37 and 38. The 3½ by 2½-inch scrap was found in Egypt, a considerable distance from its place of original writing in Asia Minor, and has been dated to 130 AD (some believe even earlier). Since it would have taken time for the Gospel of John to circulate to Egypt, this fragment offers convincing proof for John's gospel being a 1st-century writing.

7. **Bodmer Papyrus II**, dating back to 150-200 AD, contains most of John's gospel. Herbert Hunger, director of the papyrological collections in the National Library at Vienna, believes it could even be dated to the first half of the 2nd century.

8. **Chester Beatty Papyri I-III**, dating to 200 AD, contains all four Gospels and Acts, Romans, Hebrews, 1 & 2 Corinthians, Ephesians, Galatians, Philippians, Colossians, 1 and 2 Thessalonians, and part of Revelation.

9. **Diatessaron**, a harmony of the Gospels compiled by Tatian, was written around 160 AD.

10. **Translations** of the New Testament into Syriac, Latin and Coptic were made around 150 A.D. Copies are available dating to the 5th century.

11. **Lectionaries** — These are passages from the Gospels and epistles that were to be read during worship services. There are 2,135, the earliest from the 6th century. The lectionaries were conservative and their creators used older texts, which makes them much more valuable than they would otherwise be.

These are the most notable of the MSS finds bearing light on the New Testament. They reveal that the New Testament comprised (for the most part) the 27 books we have today. And these books were grouped together not long after their original composition. Two hundred years is almost negligible as far as ancient manuscript transmission is concerned.

### ***How do we know when the books of the New Testament were actually written down?***

The Bible itself gives some evidence of when events were actually recorded. The apostle Paul died in 68 AD, so all of his letters would have to have been written prior to that date. The book of Acts, which records the life of the early church and Paul's ministry, ends without recording Paul's death, so it seems natural to date that book as having been written prior to AD 68. But, since it ends with Paul's first imprisonment in Rome in AD 62, many believe it was written near that time. Since Luke's Gospel preceded Acts (which he wrote as a sequel), it, too, must have a pre-AD 62 date. Scholars agree that Matthew and Mark were written prior to Luke, giving them an even earlier date. The Gospel of John and the Revelation must have been written prior to the disciple's death around the turn of the century. Since none of the New Testament books mention the destruction of the temple in AD 70, an event with enormous implications that could hardly be ignored, especially by the writer of Hebrews, many modern-day scholars are now tending to date all of the New Testament books prior to AD 70, though most scholars still believe John wrote in the 90's. Testimony by the early church fathers as to the time the books were written and by whom they were written confirms these early dates.

“There are no dissenting traditions whatever in the first centuries of the Church's history concerning the authorship of the first three gospels and Acts and concerning the repeated claims that these books were indeed written by Matthew, Mark, and Luke. Given that two of these men were not apostles (Mark and Luke), and that Matthew would have been one of the most “suspect” of the apostles, in light of his background as a tax collector, it seems unlikely that the first Christians would have invented these authorship claims if they were merely trying to enhance the credibility of the documents attributed to these writers.”<sup>12</sup>

The evidence we examined in this chapter should make it abundantly clear that what we hold in our hands today and call the New Testament, is so close to the original document as to be virtually indistinguishable. For the critic who believes that since we don't possess the original copies we will never know what the Bible really said, we can offer facts from this chapter as proof. We can have absolute confidence that God allowed His Word to reach us just as He wanted it to — without error in any essential doctrine.

We have established that our present-day Bible is substantially the same as the original, but our job isn't finished. Now we must prove that our “original” is reliable, that it is historically sound. Could it be possible that these events were written down hundreds of years later by men who only claimed to be Jesus' disciples? The

ample testimony of the early church precludes such a conclusion, as does the historical evidence. In the next chapter we'll begin studying some of the evidence that proves the New Testament is a first-century account which most assuredly could not have been written at a later date. We've completed the bibliographic test. In our next chapter we move on to the internal evidence test.

### *End Notes*

<sup>1</sup> Josh McDowell, *Evidence that Demands a Verdict* (San Bernardino, CA: Here's Life Publishers, Inc., 1972), p. 42..

<sup>2</sup> Eldon J. Epp, *Studies & Documents: Studies in the Theory and Method of New Testament Textual Criticism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1993), p. 3.

<sup>3</sup> Steven Collins, *Championing the Faith: A Layman's Guide to Proving Christianity's Claims* (Teacher's Edition) (Tulsa, OK: Virgil Hensley Publishing Co., 1991), p. 78.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p. 77.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. 79-80.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p. 80.

<sup>7</sup> Quoted by Josh McDowell and Bill Wilson, *He Walked Among Us: Evidence for the Historical Jesus* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1988, 1993), p. 113.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p. 113.

<sup>9</sup> Epp, p. 4.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p. 4.

<sup>11</sup> John A. Dickson, *The New Analytical Study Bible* (Iowa Falls: World Bible Publishers, 1931, 1973), p. 6-10.

<sup>12</sup> William Lane Craig, *Reasonable Faith: Christian Truth and Apologetics* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 1984), p. 204..