

APPENDIX E: QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

IS THE NEW TESTAMENT RELIABLE?

THE PROPOSED PROBLEM

Jesus died between 30 and 33 AD. The books of the New Testament were written from around 45 to 90 AD. However, the printing press was not invented until 1440 A.D. This means for **1300 years, Bibles were copied by hand**. When a document is copied by hand, there is a high probability that the copyist will make at least *some* scribal errors (differences between the original and copy). And if copyists are also copying all the scribal errors made before them, over the period of 1300 years the errors should almost exponentially increase.

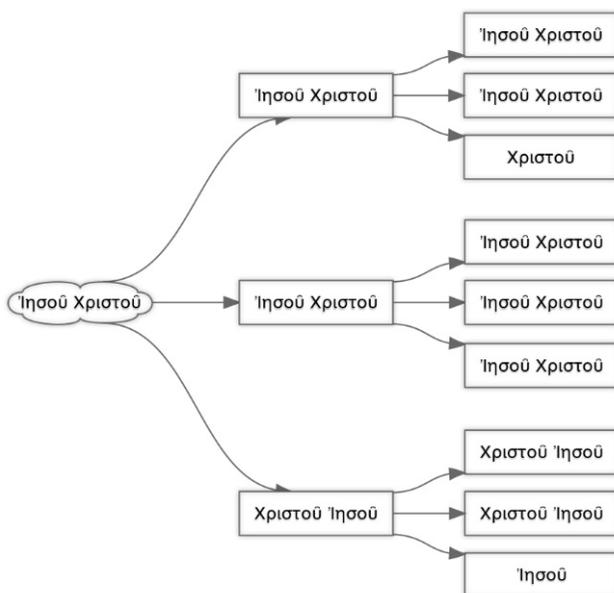
So if the Bible has been hand-copied for 1300 years, thus amassing 1300 years of scribal errors, how can we be sure that the Bibles we have today are anything close to what the original authors intended? They ought to be littered with mistakes!

HOW HISTORIANS DETERMINE WHETHER MANUSCRIPTS ARE RELIABLE

This is an issue not only for the New Testament, but for every other ancient document that we have. Before the invention of the printing press, all ancient documents were hand-copied, and so historians must take scribal errors into account in order to determine what the original manuscript said.

The task of a textual historian is to compare different copies of the same manuscript. By comparing early copies to late copies, especially from the same geographical area, it is possible to see where errors compounded and to rule them out. The **more manuscripts you have**, and the **earlier they are**, the easier it is to do this. If there are a great number of copies available, historians have a great deal of confidence in re-constructing the original wording.

See example below - as you move from left to right, the original reading of a given phrase (in this case, the name “Jesus Christ”) is copied over and over and gradually picks up variants. If you only had one or two copies of this Bible book and you weren’t sure which ones were oldest, you would have no idea whether the verse should read “Jesus Christ,” “Christ Jesus,” “Jesus,” or “Christ.” The more copies, and the earlier copies, the better.



HOW DOES THE NEW TESTAMENT COMPARE WITH OTHER ANCIENT MANUSCRIPTS?

There is more abundant and accurate manuscript evidence for the New Testament than for any other book from the ancient world. Here are a few of the earliest and most important manuscripts:

- **The John Rylands Fragment** - This manuscript contains five verses from John's Gospel (18:31-33, 37-38.) It is dated between A.D. 117-138.
- **The Bodmer Papyri** - Dating from around A.D. 200, these manuscripts contain most of the Gospels of John and Luke along with the books of Jude, I Peter, and II Peter. These are the earliest known complete copies of New Testament books.
- **Codex Vaticanus** - This manuscript, dating from between AD. 325-350, contains the whole New Testament as well as the Greek (LXX) Old Testament.
- **Codex Sinaiticus** - This manuscript dating from around AD. 340, contains the whole New Testament and half of the Old Testament.
- **Codex Ephraemi Rescriptus** - This manuscript, dating from around A.D. 350, contains only part of the Old Testament but most of the New Testament.
- **Codex Alexandrinus** - Dating from about AD. 450, this is a complete manuscript of the Bible with only minor damage. It is housed in the National Library of the British Museum.
- **Other Early Greek Manuscripts** - *The grand total of surviving copies of the Greek New Testament is around 5,000! Consider how well the New Testament has been copied and preserved compared to other ancient writings. . . .*

Author	Date Written	Earliest Copy	Number of Copies
Caesar	1st Cent. BC	900 AD	10
Livy	1st Cent. BC	450 AD	20
Tacitus' Annals	1st Cent. AD	850 AD	31
Thucydides	5th Cent. BC	900 AD	8
Herodotus	5th Cent. BC	900 AD	8
Demosthenes	4th Cent. BC	1100 AD	200
Homer	6th Cent. BC	100 BC	643
New Testament	1st Cent. AD	130 AD	5,000+

From the standpoint of a documentary historian, the New Testament has vastly superior evidence to that of any other book from the ancient world. Most ancient writings survive on only a handful of manuscripts; while the New Testament boasts thousands! The oldest surviving copy of most ancient writings comes from 1000 years after the original; while the oldest surviving copies of the New Testament come from just a generation after Christ! The accuracy and consistency of the New Testament message is unparalleled in all other literature. **Instead of not trusting the Bible unless it is backed up by secular writings, we shouldn't trust secular writings unless they are backed up by the Bible!** That's how excellent and well-preserved this historical document is.

BUT WHAT ABOUT ALL THE VARIANT READINGS?

Some critics claim that “the New Testament contains over 200,000 errors.” If you combine all 5,000+ New Testament manuscripts, there are indeed hundreds of thousands of variant readings. However, most of these are just repetitions of the same errors. There are really only 10,000 unique variants (out of 138,000 total words in the whole New Testament). The vast majority of those variants are minor differences in spelling or word order. There are only a few variants where the original word choice is debated. **And not a single one of these variants would change the teachings of the Bible.**

No book in history has been preserved as carefully and meticulously as the Bible (both Old and New Testaments.) We can be certain that when we pick up a Bible, we are reading the same words that were written down thousands of years ago. The only difference is that our Bibles have been translated into English from the original Hebrew and Greek.

Other resources:

Evidence that Demands a Verdict

Can We Trust the Gospels

Religion on Trial

The Case for Christ

The Case for Faith

The Case for the Resurrection of Jesus

The New Testament Documents

Josh McDowell and Sean McDowell

Peter Williams

Craig Parton

Lee Strobel

Lee Strobel

Gary Habermas

F.F. Bruce