

# Is the New Testament Reliable?

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Is the New Testament a reliable document? Or, as it has been alleged, is it a collection of stories and lore that have been so radically edited and redacted that they retain little semblance to the events that they represent? It has been a popular notion of contemporary scholars to say that the texts of the Bible were rewritten, sanitized or manipulated to fit the needs of the early church. Some go so far to say that entire books were "suppressed" (ie. The alleged "Lost Books of the Bible") in the period of the early church. Here we will look at some of the facts involving what we know of the original manuscripts and the issues surrounding the preservation of the sacred books of Christianity.

It is important to point out, due to the enormity of the subject matter, we will only deal with the question of reliability within the question of textual criticism. We will leave questions of archeological and historical reliability for another time. Attention then will be given to the New Testament as literature.

## HOW CAN WE MEASURE "RELIABILITY"?

As in the case of most ancient literature, we do not have any autographs (original writing) of any of the books of the New Testament. Everything is a copy, or a copy of a copy etc. For this reason, there is always the speculation that errors occurred in the copying process. It can be likened to the children's game of "Operator", where a message is whispered to a child, and passed on down a chain and usually by the end it is quite garbled. Is this the case with the New Testament?

There are three gauges that we might employ to determine the possibility of that happening. One would be the chronological proximity of the copy to the original. Common sense tells us that the more "generations" of copies, and the more time elapsing, the more chance for serious error. How do the New Testament manuscripts fare in this regard? The oldest extant papyri that we have is a fragment for the Gospel of John known as the "John Ryland MS" which is dated at 130 AD. This is merely 40 years after the actual autograph was penned. Nearly the whole Gospel of John is found in the Bodmer Papyrus II, which is dated around 150 AD. From approximately that year also we have fragments of the Diatesseron of Taitian, which was a Harmony of the four gospels. We have complete Syriac copies of this work, which shows that by the middle of the second century, not only were the four gospels already codified as part of the canon, but they were essentially unchanged from the way they are today. There is no extraneous material in the Diatesseron that is not found in the Four Gospels. The Chester Beatty Papyri (ca. AD 200) contains significant amounts of the New Testament. Not far behind this, we have a plethora of manuscripts. From the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> century on, there are numerous Greek and Syriac manuscripts, fragments and copies of these manuscripts. If we were to compare this with other ancient literature, the uniqueness of the New Testament is staggering. The writings of Julius Caesar, for example, have 10 Latin copies that date 1000 years from the autograph. From Pliny the Younger, we have 7 copies that date 750 years from the autograph. Looking at ancient literature as a whole, we typically find that scholars accept manuscripts as "reliable" that are 1000 years older than the autograph, and with only a handful of copies. The New Testament has it's first copies just 40 years after the original, and over 5,000 copies of Greek manuscript fragments are still extant. The New Testament is unlike any other piece of literature in this respect.

Another method to check reliability of ancient literature is to examine the internal consistency of document amongst it's various extant copies. It is true that amongst the 5,000 Greek manuscripts, there are variant readings in some verses. In many cases, it maybe a mere scribal error or misspelling of a name. In the most radical departures, there may be a few verses missing in one manuscript that are found in the others. Overall, there is about 98.5% agreement in all the readings between the thousands of manuscripts. The common notion that there are "so many translations" as an argument against New Testament reliability is a farce, since every

literal translation conveys the same meaning as the next. No fundamental Christian tenet rises or falls on the minuscule variations in manuscripts.

The last method I would evoke to test the reliability of ancient literature would be to examine the frequency and consistency of the literature as found in secondary sources. If we were talking about Plato, for example, I would want to see if Aristotle quotes him, and how Aristotle or other subsequent writers' quotes aligned with the copies of Plato. With respect to the New Testament, we can find that it was quoted accurately by numerous writers in the first century. This may come as a shock to those who believe the common notion that various writings were just floating around Palestine the first few centuries of the church until a vote was taken in the 4<sup>th</sup> century on the canon. The fact is that most of the apostolic writing that comprises the New Testament was in its final form and recognized as scripture in the first century. Looking at the Epistle of Barnabas, for example, we have the first quote of Matthew, (Chapter 20, verse 16) preceded by the authoritative declaration "It is written". The Epistle of Barnabas was likely written around 75 AD, while many of the apostles were still alive! Clement of Rome (95 AD) quotes from about one-half of the New Testament books. Likewise Ignatius (Bishop of Antioch from 70 AD to 110 AD), quotes the New Testament profusely. All of the quotations are perfectly congruent with the manuscripts that are still in existence, putting to rest forever the absurd criticism that the Bible was "re-written" in the 3<sup>rd</sup> of 4<sup>th</sup> centuries.

Regarding the possibility of "other books" there are occasionally are other works that had a place in the devotional life of early Christians, some which were thought to be of canonical status. The Teaching of the Twelve Apostles, The Shepherd of Hermas, and Clement's First Epistle to the Corinthians to name a few that some considered authoritative. These works strongly support the reliability of the New Testament records, and say nothing contrary to orthodox theology. Although they make good reading, they cannot be considered canon, since they were not universally received.

## **CONCLUSION**

In conclusion, it must be repeated that the New Testament, as ancient literature, stands alone with respect to its reliability. There is nothing else that even comes close. The 5,000 Greek manuscripts, plus thousands of other Latin, Armenian, Coptic, Syrian and other early versions confirms that it was not redacted and edited as many scholars have tried to claim. The tens of thousands of quotes from the early church prove that it was accepted in its existing form in the by the end of the first century, while the successors of the apostles were still alive. The New Testament stands as the single most reliable piece of literature from all of antiquity.