

The Historical Reliability Of The New Testament

by Dave Arch

The historical reliability of the New Testament is an issue that no person should take for granted. How sure can we be that what appears in our New Testament today is what was written?

This outline will share the heart of the evidence.

There are three primary sources to which the scholars go in order to reconstruct the original documents as they were written by the Apostles in the first century. These three sources are the large number of copied manuscripts in existence today, the large number of versions of the New Testament in other languages from that period of time, and the quotations from the early church leaders.

I. Manuscripts

A. The Original Manuscripts Are Non-Existent Today

B. Sir Frederick G. Kenyon (former director and principle librarian of the British museum) says:

"The books of the New Testament were written in the latter part of the first century; the earliest extant manuscripts (trifling scraps excepted) are of the fourth century -- say from 250-300 years later."

**(Handbook To Textual Criticism Of The New Testament.
London: Macmillan and Company, 1901, pg. 4)**

C. Although 250-300 years sounds like a long time from the writing of the original to the date of the first copy we have, the normal time for the Greek classical writers is 1000 years from the original to our first copy. (F.W. Hall, "Manuscript Authorities For The Text Of The Chief Classical Writers," Companions To Classical Text, Oxford:

Clarendon Press, 1913).

D. For the New Testament, there are 5000 Greek manuscripts. (A.T. Robertson. Instruction To Textual Criticism Of The New Testament. Nashville: Broadman Press, 1925, pg. 29).

E. The Iliad is the classical work which comes closest with only 625 copies in existence. (Geisler and Nix. A General Introduction To The Bible. Chicago: Moody Press, 1968, pg. 366)

F. The large number of manuscripts in existence for the New Testament makes it much more accurate to reconstruct the originals. The scholars compare manuscript with manuscript to determine what was said by the Apostles.

II. Other Versions

A. Immediately (150 AD) the New Testament was translated into other languages (Latin and Syriac).

B. We have more than 9000 copies of early translations. (Josh McDowell. Evidence That Demands A verdict. California: Campus Crusade For Christ, 1972)

C. When the textual critics compare these 9000 translations with the 5000 Greek manuscripts, they get an even more accurate reading.

III. Early Church Leaders

A. During the 200's and 300's AD, the early church leaders wrote and quoted from the New Testament. The New Testament could be re-written from their quotations with the exception of 11 verses. (Geisler and Nix. A General Introduction To The Bible. Chicago: Moody Press, 1968, pg. 357)

B. By comparing the quotations of the early church fathers with the versions of the Greek manuscripts and the translations, an even more reliable reconstruction of the New Testament is possible.

IV. Conclusions

A. Although it is 250-300 years between the time of the original to our first copy, this gap is bridged by the writing of the early church leaders and the other translations of the New Testament.

B. When this information is combined with archaeological discoveries and other historians who wrote during the same period, the evidence grows more compelling.

C. The New Testament has today only a .5% doubt ratio. This is determined by taking the number of words in the New Testament and comparing that to the number of words still in doubt. The Iliad has a 5% doubt ratio on the same basis. (Geisler and Nix, pg. 366)

D. The New Testament takes second place to no writing of the same period! It stands alone as the best attested set of documents from that time period.

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