

THE  
Historical Reliability  
OF THE  
New Testament

Second Edition



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*The Historical Reliability of the New Testament (2<sup>nd</sup> Edition), by Darren Hewer*

*Last revision: September 29 2009*

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## *Why is the Reliability of the New Testament Important?*

When I was in high school I took a class in ancient history. I was about sixteen years old at the time, and became enthralled (with as much enthusiasm as a sixteen year old high school student can muster) as we studied various civilizations and important figures in the distant past. We started several thousand years BC and slowly worked our way chronologically forward. As we neared what I falsely assumed would be “year zero”<sup>1</sup>, the thought occurred to me that we were coming to the time when Jesus lived.

Since I grew up in a secular, non-religious home, I never attended church and had little interest in religion. Nevertheless, I was intrigued by the prospect of learning what we could know about Jesus from history. So I was rather surprised when our class quickly sped past Jesus' time without so much as mentioning Jesus' name.

What did I, as a young student, conclude from this omission? My thinking at the time went like this: If Jesus was a real historical person, we would have studied such an influential figure like him in a class about ancient history. Since we hadn't studied him, he mustn't have been a real person, and therefore the Christian faith was merely a bunch of fanciful stories with no historical basis.

Was my reasoning correct? I had never studied the evidence, nor considered reasons why we neglected to study Jesus in our class.<sup>2</sup> However, I did get one thing right: I recognized that Christianity is a historically based religion. Its catalyst was not merely someone's sudden enlightenment like Buddhism. It is instead based on events that occurred in history: *history centered*, and not merely a philosophy of life.

This is the reason that the apostle Paul (who wrote a large portion of the New Testament) writes to his fellow Christians that “if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in

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1 Unbeknown to me at the time, there is no year zero, at least in the most widely used (Gregorian) calendar.

2 At the time I didn't consider or wasn't aware of factors such as the complications arising from teaching things about religious figures in secular high schools, due to the separation of church & state.

your sins.” (1 Cor 15:17) If Jesus was not *really* raised, the Christian *faith* is actually a Christian *farce*; or, as historian Hugo Staudinger put it, if the New Testament writings “are really only tales which have been made up,” then “they can quite legitimately be replaced by other tales.”<sup>3</sup> The idea that a person could retain their Christian faith while claiming that Jesus was not actually raised from the dead contradicts historic Christianity.<sup>4</sup> And it’s from the New Testament documents that we learn about what Christianity is all about.

If the texts that comprise the Bible are unreliable, Christianity loses its foundation, says New Testament scholar Richard Bauckham, because “Christian faith has trusted that within these texts we encounter the real Jesus, and it is hard to see how Christian faith and theology can work with a radically distrusting attitude to the Gospels.”<sup>5</sup>

Our primary record of the Christian faith is the New Testament; the New Testament texts serve as the foundation for accurate knowledge and belief about Jesus.<sup>6</sup> The authors of the New Testament claimed to be writing true accounts of the life of Jesus, and the historical reliability of their writings is important because it protects the Christian faith from modern revisionism.<sup>7</sup> Our duty, then, is to investigate whether or not the New Testament documents are in fact reliable, and it is the intent of this analysis to demonstrate why we can be confident that the New Testament is historically reliable, that is, accurately preserved according to the original documents and reliable according to the sort of traditional tests applied to historical documents.<sup>8</sup>

The question we are seeking to answer is: *Can we have confidence that the New Testament was accurately recorded and transmitted to us, and that what it contains is the product of early*

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3 Hugo Staudinger, *The Trustworthiness of the Gospels*. Translated by Robin T Hammond (Edinburgh: Handsel Press, 1983), 104.

4 See for example Norman Geisler, “The Significance of Christ’s Physical Resurrection,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 146:582 (1990): 148-170.

5 Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2006), 2.

6 Amy Orr-Ewing, *Is the Bible Intolerant? Sexist? Oppressive? Homophobic? Outdated? Irrelevant?* (Downer’s Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2005), 31-32.

7 I’m referring here to the tendency, when the Bible is dismissed as inaccurate, of reinterpreting the most central tenants of the faith to fit with the whims of the times.

8 See for example John DePoe, “The Historical Credibility of the New Testament,” n.p. Cited 6 April 2007. Online: <http://apologetics.johndepoe.com/bible.html>

*eyewitness testimony?* Was my high school conclusion correct, or is there more to the story?

While this study will attempt to be scholarly, the topic is obviously not merely scholarly in nature. For it makes a tremendous difference in our lives here and in eternity of the New Testament is actually true: If it is false, it can safely be ignored, but it would be a very good thing if the hope of the Christian message is true. C. S. Lewis explained it this way: “Christianity is a statement which, if false, is of no importance, and, if true, of infinite importance. The one thing it cannot be is moderately important.”<sup>9</sup> (See the Epilogue for more on this topic.)

Obviously every issue regarding the historicity of the New Testament cannot be addressed in a work of this size<sup>10</sup>, but my goal is to provide a summary the most pertinent subjects related to New Testament reliability. If you are a Christian, I hope that this work will encourage you in your faith. If you are not, I hope that this work will encourage you to take the Bible seriously, not just as a beautiful and moving story (although it certainly is that) but also the actually true story of how God has chosen to create a living relationship with us.

Let’s begin!

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9 C. S. Lewis, *God in the Dock Essays on Theology and Ethics* (Grand Rapids: William. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1994), 101.

10 N. T. Wright’s brilliant and comprehensive tome, for example, weighs in at over 700 pages! N. T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003)

# *General Criticisms of the New Testament*

## **Ancient Documents Can't be Trusted**

One common criticism of the New Testament is that its writings are so old that they can't be trusted. This sort of objection is partially a result of “historical relativism” which gained popularity in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century. This view of history proposes that we cannot really “know” anything that happened in the (ancient) past in any substantive way. To put it another way: “Documents from antiquity are sometimes condemned for being ancient.”<sup>11</sup>

This argument assumes that anything that is from earlier times is inherently inferior to that which is more recent. This is sometimes referred to as “chronological snobbery.”<sup>12</sup> A question naturally follows: How old is “too old”? At what point do past events become “history”, and therefore become unreliable? Is one hundred years too long? What about fifty years? Chronological snobbery is arbitrary, because it judges things that we may not happen to like to be untrustworthy because they are “too old,” with the bar being conveniently set to cause these things to fall short. On the contrary, sources (or ideas, or anything, for that matter) should be judged on their own merits, not merely or even primarily based on how old they are. In addition, from a purely practical standpoint, historical relativist thinking has led to serious practical problems, like potentially opening the door to ridiculous hypotheses such as holocaust denial.<sup>13</sup>

Although most now reject a totally objective (bias-free) approach to history, that doesn't mean we must accept a relativist view instead. A pragmatic approach, where we evaluate all of the available evidence and attempt to come to a conclusion based on its merit, taking into account the possibility of biases in both the authors of the ancient documents and in ourselves, seems like a reasonable method to use instead. As Rodney Stark, a sociologist of religion, explains: “Reality

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11 Douglas Groothuis, *On Jesus (Wadsworth Philosophers Series)* (Victoria: Thomson/Wadsworth, 2003), 12.

12 This term is often credited to C. S. Lewis, and was possibly coined (in print, at least) in his book *Surprised by Joy*.

13 Orr-Ewing, *Is the Bible Intolerant?* 34-35. Criticism that this commits the “slippery slide” fallacy could be countered by the fact that some people do famously deny the holocaust, such as Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, and that such declarations contrary to fact are often rationalized, in part, by claiming we can't really know history, or the “traditional” ways of doing history are “biased” and/or are said to be ineffective.

exists and history actually occurs. The historian's task is to discover as accurately as possible what actually took place."<sup>14</sup>

Similarly, the postmodern notion that we cannot know any history because historians are biased is, at best, "an exaggerated skepticism."<sup>15</sup> Each case must be evaluated based on its own merits, as we shall do in the latter part of this analysis. Lawyer Craig A. Parton comments:

*History, law and science are never completely 100% certain of their conclusions. They must always have some sense of humility and openness to being shown they are wrong and in need of correction if the facts turn out to be otherwise. Regardless of this, though, we continue to make life and death decisions based on probability evidence.*<sup>16</sup>

Even if we discover that there are good reasons for believing the New Testament text is reliable, some might still object that, even if we know what the texts *say*, we still wouldn't know what they *mean*. The argument goes that the Bible has been interpreted in many different ways, so we can't really know what it means. However, such an objection cannot be applied consistently. We do not doubt that the meanings of most documents can be discerned reliably. Why is this objection raised only in the case of the Bible? There is no doubt that interpreting portions of the biblical text can be at times difficult or ambiguous, but the meaning of the vast majority of the text is not in dispute. The bylaws of a particular town may too at times be difficult to understand or ambiguous, but no one suggests that their meaning is entirely up to individual interpretation!

An additional problem with this objection becomes apparent through this fictional dialogue, as imagined by Douglas J. Wilson:

*"... when someone hauls out the Bible we can't be sure that what they say is true. There are too many interpretations to be sure which one is right."*

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14 Rodney Stark, *Cities of God: The Real Story of How Christianity Became an Urban Movement and Conquered Rome* (New York: HarperCollins, 2006), 2.

15 Paul Barnett, *Is the New Testament Reliable? Second Edition* (Grand Rapids: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 12.

16 Craig A. Parton, *Religion on Trial* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2008), 34.

*Evangelist answered him, "Suppose we had a room with one hundred copies of this translation of the Bible." Evangelist held up his worn little black book. "Suppose further that we put one hundred people from various backgrounds into the room with the Bibles. Now how many different interpretations will we get of what they read?"*

*"I think we will get one hundred different interpretations."*

*"Well, perhaps it wouldn't be quite so bad, but let's grant it for the sake of the argument. Now here is the question. Where is the variable? Is it in the Bibles or is it in the men?"*

*"Well, it is in the men."*

*"So then we should say that men are not to be trusted because they come up with so many interpretations?"*

*"No ..."* The speaker looked trapped and glanced at his companions for help. It was not forthcoming.<sup>17</sup>

The point of the illustration is that the text doesn't change: It has absolute, objective meaning.<sup>18</sup> It is the primary responsibility of the interpreter to determine what the author originally intended to communicate before bringing his or her own interpretations into the equation. Some parts of the Bible are indeed open to differences in interpretation; however, the majority of the text is intended to be clear and absolute, thus any differences in interpretation are indicative of the interpreters, not the text.

Not all interpretations are equal. Someone reading John 11:35, the shortest verse in the Bible ("Jesus wept") might conclude Jesus had compassion, while someone else might conclude that Jesus was mentally unstable. We could further analyze the text to determine which is more likely. But both interpretations would be truer than a third suggestion that the text means that Jesus was an alien from outer space! There may be many interpretations, but not all interpretations should be considered equal. Clearly, some interpretations are better than others, and it is our responsibility to study ardently to find the best possible interpretations that we can.

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17 Douglas J. Wilson, *Persuasions: A Dream of Reason Meeting Unbelief* (Moscow, ID: Canon Press, 1989), 50-51.

18 Even when an author writes ambiguously or obtusely on purpose, in those cases *that* is the author's intent. It still has objective meaning, even if that meaning is that is ambiguous or obtuse on purpose!



## Miracles are Impossible

A second objection: The New Testament contains miracle accounts, and therefore it must be regarded as historically dubious. The New Testament reports of miracles were one of the reasons that, starting in the late eighteenth century, the Bible sometimes began to be studied more in terms of 'myth' than 'history'. This was due to "the difficulty which was found in accommodating the supernatural element in the gospel stories within the rationalistic world-view."<sup>19</sup>

The implication is that, assuming a rationalistic worldview, miracles do not or cannot happen and therefore any text claiming miracles occurred cannot be accurate. David Hume famously objected that the chances of miracles happening are so improbable that *any* naturalistic explanation (no matter how unlikely) is preferable to a miraculous explanation; Hume describes a miracle as "a transgression of a law of nature by a particular volition of the Deity, or by the interposition of some invisible agent."<sup>20</sup>

However, this argument, practically speaking, rules out the possibility of miracles from the outset without even considering the evidence. Since we can agree that if a legitimate miracle occurred it would be important to know about it, a wise person "should not a priori rule out the possibility of miracles."<sup>21</sup> If God exists then miracles are possible, and (some claim) perhaps even probable.<sup>22</sup> (Conversely, if a legitimate miracle occurred, this would be strong evidence that God exists.) Are legitimate miracles rare? In my opinion, yes. But it only takes a single legitimate miracle to prove that they are real.

While we might agree that miracles could be *possible*, one could object that science has proven that miracles do not occur, or at suggest that at very least no scientific study has ever

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19 R. T. France, *The Evidence for Jesus* (Vancouver: Regent College Publishing, 1986), 94.

20 David Hume, "Of Miracles," as cited in its entirety in chapter one of R. Douglas Geivett and Gary R. Habermas (eds), *In Defense of Miracles: A Comprehensive Case for God's Actions in History* (Downer's Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1997), 284. (Hume's essay 29-44, quote is found in Hume's footnotes)

21 Phil Fernandes, "Miracles," n.p. Cited 29 March 2007. Online: <http://www.biblicaldefense.org/Writings/miracles.htm>

22 W. David Beck in Geivett and Habermas, *In Defense of Miracles*, 149.

proven the miraculous. This objection is often stated as refusing to believe in the possibility of miracles until one or many are proven scientifically. But this objection seems to misunderstand the purposes and boundaries of scientific study.

Imagine that you are a scientist working alone in a laboratory late at night.<sup>23</sup> While you're working, you mix two chemicals together, expecting the normal chemical reaction. However, unlike anything you've ever seen before, the chemicals react strangely, and begin smoking. The whole lab fills with smoke, and then you notice that a shiny yellow metal has formed at the bottom of the beaker. You test it, and it's 100% pure gold! Now, what would a good scientist do? Probably they would try to replicate what happened. This is how the scientific method works: Its tests must be repeatable to be considered valid. However, say that in this case, you attempt to repeat what you did before, but this time you receive no reaction. Would you (as a scientist) likely conclude you'd witnessed a miracle? Probably not; it would be dismissed as a fluke, an unknown exception to the usual rules. So even if a scientist experienced a real miracle, the impossibility of validating it due to the scientific demand for replication would prevent it from being "scientifically proven."

This hypothetical situation illustrates an important point regarding the purpose and limits of scientific inquiry: "The scientific method was developed for the purpose of investigating natural phenomena, not as a means of authenticating the miraculous" and this is because miracles "are, by definition, relatively rare, unique, nonrepeated events."<sup>24</sup>

Certainly scientific study has *something* to say about miracle claims. But science should not be the primary means of evaluation. Trying to test whether a supposed miraculous event occurred using the scientific method is sort of like trying to determine whether a banana is tasty by sticking it in your ear and listening to it: It's inappropriate methodology.<sup>25</sup>

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23 This example was adapted from one given in Alan Kent Scholes, *The Artful Dodger: A Skeptic Confronts Christianity* (Crestline: Penrose Press, 2002), 115-116.

24 Ibid, 116, 114.

25 Darren Hewer, "Miracles (again)," n.p. Cited 24 October 2008. Online: <http://www.whyfaith.com/2007/06/30/miracles-again/>

What might be a better way to investigate the authenticity of miracle claims? If miracles are “rare, unique, nonrepeated events” occurring within history, it seems appropriate to investigate them using methods of historical inquiry. Since “if a miracle did literally occur, it did so in the time-space realm,”<sup>26</sup> it is appropriate to investigate the historical circumstances of miracle claims.<sup>27</sup>

While we are no doubt aware of supposed miracles that have been proven to be fraudulent, these false miracles neither prove that miracles in general cannot occur, nor do they prove that Jesus' miracles specifically did not occur. Again, it is most appropriate to not dismiss such claims out of hand but to examine them based on their own merit. As leading New Testament scholar Craig A. Evans suggests, we should “let historians be historians. Look at the sources.”<sup>28</sup>

When compared to other miracle claims in other religions (such as the miracles attributed to Muhammad long after his death) the evidence and arguments for Jesus' resurrection in particular is in “an entirely different category” from other such miracle claims.<sup>29</sup> Antony Flew (the eminent former atheist professor who recently became a believer in God) even though he is not a Christian nevertheless concedes that “The evidence for the resurrection is better than for claimed miracles in any other religion. It’s outstandingly different in quality and quantity, I think, from the evidence offered for the occurrence of most other supposedly miraculous events.”<sup>30</sup>

A related objection involving the miraculous claims that the miracle stories are later traditions added by the Gospel writers to help make their story more palatable to first century readers. This objection begs the question (assuming that miracles are impossible), ignores the fact that miracle traditions are unlikely to have developed if Jesus never performed any acts which

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26 Gary Habermas, *The Historical Jesus: Ancient Evidence for the Life of Christ* (Joplin: College Press Publishing Company, 1996), 60.

27 For a more in-depth discussion of this topic, see Francis J. Beckwith in Geivett and Habermas, *In Defense of Miracles*, 86-98.

28 Craig A. Evans in Lee Strobel, *The Case for the Real Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007), 59.

29 Gary R. Habermas and Michael R. Licona, *The Case for the Resurrection of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 2004), 92.

30 Antony Flew and Gary R Habermas, “My Pilgrimage from Atheism to Theism: An Exclusive Interview with Former British Atheist Professor Antony Flew,” page 13, dated 4 December 2004, Cited 22 November 2007. Online: <http://www.biola.edu/antonyflew/flew-interview.pdf> (Later published in the journal *Philosophia Christi*, 6:2 (Winter 2004): 197-212.)

people considered to be miraculous<sup>31</sup> (even the Jewish Talmud suggests that Jesus did perform miraculous feats, though it disputes the source of His power to do so<sup>32</sup>) and also ignores that there was likely insufficient time for such legendary development to take place.<sup>33</sup>

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31 Gerd Theissen and Annette Merz, *The Historical Jesus: A Comprehensive Guide*. Translated by John Bowden. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998), 113. For extensive discussion of several different variations of this objection, see Glenn Miller, "Did the NT authors invent the miracle stories in the gospels?," n.p. Cited 25 September 2007. Online: <http://www.christian-thinktank.com/mqx.html>

32 Jesus is charged in the Talmud with "sorcery." Habermas, *The Historical Jesus*, 203.

33 Craig L. Blomberg in Lee Strobel (et al), *The Case for Christ*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), 39.

## The Telephone Game

A third objection is that the New Testament documents (and early oral traditions) have been passed on so many times over hundreds of years that errors have inevitably crept in and corrupted the text. The example of the “telephone game” illustrates this objection: a message is whispered to the first person in a chain, who whispers it to the person beside them, and so on, until by the end of the game the message the last person hears is nothing like the original (to comedic effect). For example, Shirley McLean, a popular new-age teacher, was speaking on the Larry King show when she offhandedly brushed aside the Bible, saying it had been changed and retranslated so many times that it is impossible to be confident in its accuracy. King agreed, affirming that “Everyone knows that.”<sup>34</sup>

It should first be made clear that the New Testament, while of course copied and recopied many times, has not gone through a process of multiple *translations*. The modern English versions that we read today (such as the NIV, NRSV, ESV, etc) have all been translated directly from the original Hebrew and Greek (and occasionally Aramaic) into English by teams of trained and knowledgeable scholars.<sup>35</sup> For example, the NIV (the most popular modern translation<sup>36</sup>) was translated directly from the original languages by a team of over 100 scholars spanning six countries and over 20 different denominations.<sup>37</sup>

Before it even began to be translated, in the earliest times the Christian message was indeed transmitted orally. Beyond that basic fact, the telephone game analogy quickly breaks down. First, we should keep in mind that unlike modern times, the culture in which Jesus lived and preached was primarily an *oral* culture.<sup>38</sup> Most people at that time could not read or write.<sup>39</sup>

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34 Gregory Koukl, “Is the New Testament Text Reliable?,” n.p. Cited 12 March 2007. Online: <http://www.str.org/site/News2?page=NewsArticle&id=6068>

35 Groothuis, *On Jesus*, 13.

36 “More than 65 percent of the participating leaders named the NIV as their preferred Bible in a survey conducted by the National Association of Evangelicals.” Jennifer Riley, “NIV Bible Tops List by Evangelical Leaders,” *The Christian Post*, n.p. Cited 17 May 2008. Online: [http://www.christianpost.com/article/20080411/31904\\_NIV\\_Bible\\_Tops\\_List\\_by\\_Evangelical\\_Leaders\\_.htm](http://www.christianpost.com/article/20080411/31904_NIV_Bible_Tops_List_by_Evangelical_Leaders_.htm)

37 International Bible Society, “Background of the New International Version (NIV) Bible,” n.p. Cited 25 September 2007. Online: <http://www.ibs.org/niv/background.php>

38 Mark D. Roberts, *Can We Trust the Gospels?* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2007), 72-73.

Therefore, having a good memory was an important and necessary skill (see the later section *Eyewitness Testimony* for more on this point). Having a good memory was especially important for Jewish teachers (although it was of course important for everyone).

Early Christian beliefs were publicly preached and taught among large groups of people<sup>40</sup>, which shows how the transmission of the New Testament differs from the telephone game, since in the game the message is passed down linearly and secretly from one person to another. The participants in the game never have the chance to converse with each-other to clarify the message, nor do they have the opportunity to have the message repeated.<sup>41</sup> The message itself being passed along in a game setting is often obscure and lacking in context, whereas the New Testament message would be transmitted in context. Evans agrees with this analysis, commenting: "Unlike the telephone game, this is a community effort ... This was a living tradition that the community discussed and was constantly remembered because it was normative, it was precious, they lived by it."<sup>42</sup>

Also unlike the telephone game, early Christian scribes (many of whom, including the twelve disciples, were Jewish and thus would have been aware of the long history and importance of accurately copying Scripture) were also writing down the messages, not whispering them. The Old Testament prophets were instructed to not just hear and recite God's word but to *write it down*.<sup>43</sup>

Furthermore, since such high value was placed on community in the early church, there was plenty of opportunity for others to correct mistakes in written manuscripts. The Gospel message was publicly proclaimed among many people including other eyewitnesses who could intervene to correct faulty messages<sup>44</sup>, including the disciples themselves, some of whom would

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39 Only 2-3% of people in agrarian societies were literate. John J. Pilich & Bruce J. Malina (Eds), *Handbook of Biblical Social Values* (Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers Inc, 1998), 5.

40 For example, Peter in Acts 2:14-41; Stephen in Acts 6:8-10, 7:2-53; Paul in Acts 9:20-22, 13:16-41, etc.

41 Daniel B. Wallace in Strobel, *The Case for the Real Jesus*, 81.

42 Evans in Strobel, *The Case for the Real Jesus*, 58.

43 Ex. Jeremiah 30:2, Isaiah 30:8, Exodus 34:27; Steven Masood, *The Bible and the Qur'an: A Question of Integrity* (Atlanta: Authentic Media, 2007 (Originally published by OM Publishing, India, 2001)), 60-62.

44 Ibid.

later pen some of the New Testament documents themselves. (See *Eyewitness Testimony* below for elaboration of this point.) The information was passed down through “multiple streams,” not just a single stream, and thus the chances for corruption are minimized.<sup>45</sup>

Here’s the way that stories are orally transmitted in Middle Eastern culture:

*The setting is informal, not that of a school or academy. But the traditions are carefully controlled. For one thing, while any member of the village community should be capable of telling the stories correctly, there are generally recognized reciters for each story, usually more prominent men in the village. Further, only those who have grown up in the village hearing the stories are entitled to recite them. Stories are recited in public, and so are subject to the corrective scrutiny of the whole community.*<sup>46</sup>

Then, once the text was written down, the transmission of the text was in written form, not verbal, and a trail of manuscripts allows us to refute the theory that corruption occurred during its written transmission.<sup>47</sup> We have the manuscript evidence to see that, while there are variations between the copies, the general message (and in most cases each specific word) which they present has not been lost. (See *Manuscript Evidence: A Mountain of Manuscripts* below for elaboration of these topics.)

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45 Wallace in Strobel, *The Case for the Real Jesus*, 81.

46 France, *The Evidence for Jesus*, 110.

47 Koukl, “Is the New Testament Text Reliable?,” n.p.

## The Copycat Theory

An objection which has reappeared in recent years (after falling out of scholarly favor for decades) is the “copycat theory”. This theory proposes that the stories found in the New Testament and even the person of Jesus Christ were all based on the myths of first century “mystery religions” and/or other ancient religions. Common sources for parallels include some of the pagan mystery religions such as Mithrism, Egyptian gods like Osiris and Horus, and other religious teachers such as Apollonius of Tyana.<sup>48</sup> The claim is that numerous and explicit parallels exist between these works and the New Testament stories regarding Jesus, His resurrection, the disciples, and/or the early church.

The specific claims made regarding each of the persons/deities are far too lengthy and numerous to consider here. Slinging mud is, after all, much quicker and easier than washing it off! Since much more in-depth treatments of each individual for whom parallels are claimed are already freely available<sup>49</sup>, let’s focus on overarching issues related to the copycat theory.

At the outset it should be emphasized that Jesus, the apostles, and many of the earliest Christians were Jewish, and as such would be the least likely of all people to borrow from pagan sources. Paul, for example, was a well-trained orthodox Jew.<sup>50</sup> This means that “the earliest Christians shared this [Jewish] aversion to paganism” and theories that the New Testament authors borrowed from other religions “carries a heavy burden of proof.”<sup>51</sup> Another important note is that the amount of specific and detailed information regarding many ancient religions and mystery religions in particular is paltry at best. For example, information on Mithraism is limited to “some graffiti and inscriptions, as well as descriptions of the religion from its opponents,”<sup>52</sup> which is to be expected when a religion attempts to keep its doctrines secret from the outside world.

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48 For a full list of commonly adduced suspects (along with refutations of why supposed claims are false or unlikely) see J. P. Holding, “Confronting the Copycat Thesis,” n.p. Cited 18 September 2007. Online: <http://www.tektonics.org/copycat/copycathub.html>

49 Ibid; also several others such as Stanley E. Porter and Stephen J. Bedard, *Unmasking the Pagan Christ* (Toronto: Clements Publishing, 2006)

50 Acts 22:3, Phil 3:5, 2 Cor 11:22, etc.

51 Paul Rhodes Eddy and Gregory A. Boyd, *The Jesus Legend: A Case for the Historical Reliability of the Synoptic Tradition* (Baker Academic: Grand Rapids, 2007), 139.

52 Edwin M. Yamauchi in Strobel, *The Case for the Real Jesus*, 168.



However this naturally limits the firmness of any conclusions that we can draw from the small amount of material we have, especially compared to early Christian documents.

We will now, for the sake of discussion, focus on the most central event in the New Testament, namely Jesus' resurrection, since this event is clearly the focus of both the Gospels and the other writings. The resurrection must be differentiated from a mere *resuscitation*, such as we find in John 11:1-43 (where Lazarus is raised from the dead) or Acts 20:7-12 (where a young boy is brought back to life). Jesus' followers did not merely claim that He was raised back to His former life, but instead claimed that He was raised renewed and transformed. Others who were raised would die again, but Jesus was raised to eternal life. Not only that, but His resurrection had greater significance than mere resuscitation because (the New Testament authors claimed) it confirmed that those who believed in and put their trust in Jesus would too be raised to eternal life.<sup>53</sup>

When we look for parallel accounts to Jesus' resurrection in earlier religions, the Egyptian story of Osiris is the only pre-Christian god for whom we find a potential parallel resurrection (that is, a return to life that does not merely mirror the turning of the seasons or crop cycle). When that account is studied, the major and critical differences between it and Jesus' resurrection become evident.<sup>54</sup> For example, Osiris may or may not have been brought back to life on Earth, and was made god of the "underworld", and Osiris himself is not even the hero of the account, but rather the hero is Isis (or perhaps Horus, their son).<sup>55</sup> Osiris is hardly renewed and transformed; his "resurrection" is more akin to a "zombification."<sup>56</sup> The stories themselves are very dissimilar and most central details are different.<sup>57</sup>

This brings us to the second major point against the copycat hypothesis: The idea that ancient or contemporary mystery religions were sources for the New Testament crumbles when it

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53 See for example 1 Corinthians 15.

54 Edwin M. Yamauchi, "Easter: Myth, Hallucination, or History?," n.p. Cited 18 September 2007. Online: <http://www.leaderu.com/everystudent/easter/articles/yama.html>

55 Habermas and Licona, *The Case for the Resurrection of Jesus*, 91.

56 Ibid, quoting Chris Clayton.

57 For a comparison, see for example Porter and Bedard, *Unmasking the Pagan Christ*, 52-80 (in particular 66-68 re the "parallel resurrection" accounts).

is divulged that significant parallels only begin to be found in the sources for other religions *after* 100AD (which, as we'll see later, is after the entire New Testament was written).<sup>58</sup> The earliest account of a dying and rising god that at least in part parallels Jesus' resurrection is found over *100 years after* the biblical reports of Jesus' resurrection.<sup>59</sup>

During the first and second century mystery religions were “just starting to become popular,” says history professor and Greco-Roman history expert James S Jeffers, and “were still relatively small, localized cults.”<sup>60</sup> Certainly some of the mystery religions (such as Mithrism) existed before the first century, but the parallels to Christianity begin to appear only much later, *after* the New Testament documents had been written. This is why we should conclude that the “crucial point here is that if there was any line of influence, it would seem more reasonable to argue that it was from Christianity to the mystery religions rather than the other way around.”<sup>61</sup> In short, the timing is all wrong for “copycat” theories to work.

Furthermore, often supposed parallels will be cited carelessly and those who claim parallels have “inexcusably disregarded the dates and the provenience of their sources when they have attempted to provide prototypes for Christianity.”<sup>62</sup> For example, the earliest account of the life of Apollonius of Tyana was written nearly 200 years after Jesus, and is seen by many as the product of a conscious reaction against Christian beliefs.<sup>63</sup> Ronald H. Nash comments, in particular to the commonly cited mystery religions:

*It is not until we come to the third century A.D. that we find sufficient source material (i.e., information about the mystery religions from the writings of the time) to permit a relatively complete reconstruction of their content. ... Information about a cult that comes several hundred years after the close of the New Testament canon must not be read back into what is presumed to be the status of the cult during the first century*

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58 Ronald H. Nash, *The Gospel and the Greeks* (Richardson: Word Publishing, 1992), 127-128.

59 Habermas and Licona, *The Case for the Resurrection of Jesus*, 90.

60 James S. Jeffers, *The Greco-Roman World of the New Testament Era* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1999), 96.

61 Eddy and Boyd, *The Jesus Legend*, 141.

62 Yamauchi, “Easter: Myth, Hallucination, or History?,” n.p.

63 Habermas and Licona, *The Case for the Resurrection of Jesus*, 91.

*A.D. The crucial question is not what possible influence the mysteries may have had on segments of Christendom after A.D. 400, but what effect the emerging mysteries may have had on the New Testament in the first century.*<sup>64</sup>

Numerous and explicit parallels to Christianity do not exist, and most claimed similarities are not real parallels, even if they were found to exist pre-Christianity. For example:

- Many supposed parallels exhibit equivocation of terms or exaggeration of claims to make certain practices seem synonymous with earlier Christian practices.<sup>65</sup> For example, the Mithraic rite of “taurobolium”, where the initiate would stand in a pit and be bathed in the blood of an animal that was slaughtered standing on a platform above them, is not comparable in any way to the Christian sacrament of baptism, as is sometimes claimed.<sup>66</sup>
- Comparisons between the death & “resurrections” of gods in the mystery religions have also been exaggerated, as has the presence of notions of divine redemption.<sup>67</sup>
- Still others compare much later adopted Christian beliefs which are not found in the Bible with the beliefs of other religions. Such later Christian beliefs have no bearing on the reliability of the New Testament. For example, celebration of Christmas on December 25<sup>th</sup> is a 4<sup>th</sup> century idea that has no biblical basis, so it is irrelevant to make comparisons based on this date.<sup>68</sup>
- Some parallels are expected to be found in common between any two religions because certain features or motifs are intrinsic to religions by their very nature. For example, such common elements as there being a wise teacher, disciples, traveling, preaching, various acts of God, visions or spiritual experiences, citing holy texts, and dying a martyr's death.<sup>69</sup>

Although it is common to see lists of supposed parallels of Jesus and other religious figures

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64 Ronald H. Nash, “Was the New Testament Influenced By Pagan Religions?,” n.p. Cited 18 September 2007. Online: [http://www.inplainsite.org/html/new\\_testament\\_and\\_paganism.html](http://www.inplainsite.org/html/new_testament_and_paganism.html) (Originally published by the Christian Research Journal, 1994.)

65 Nash, *The Gospel and the Greeks*, 126.

66 Nash, *The Gospel and the Greeks*, 153.

67 Jeffers, *The Greco-Roman World*, 99.

68 Porter and Bedard, *Unmasking the Pagan Christ*, 98.

69 Mormonism (the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints) for example contains all of these elements, but no one would argue that it merely borrowed these from other religions.

(ostensibly because such lists seem impressive upon first glance) most of the parallels listed turn out to be superfluous, unimportant or even entirely made-up (or unverifiable) upon further study.

*Even if* we were to grant, purely for the sake of argument, that numerous and explicit parallels exist (which is not the case), that should not lead us to immediately conclude that copying occurred. To do so would be fallacious reasoning, “post hoc, ergo propter hoc”, that is, the assumption of causation due merely to succession in time.<sup>70</sup>

To demonstrate why this won't work, if we were to compare the life of Alexander the Great (whom no historian doubts actually lived) with Achilles (the fictional central character of Homer's Iliad) we would find many interesting parallels, but no one would suggest that Alexander the Great was a fictional character compiled piecemeal from the Iliad.<sup>71</sup>

A second example will help illustrate why this type of reasoning alone will not suffice. Listen to the following tale, and tell me if it sounds familiar. A gigantic ocean liner, measuring 800 feet & displacing 75,000 tons, considered “indestructible”, sinks on its maiden voyage. It sinks in the month of April after striking an iceberg on its starboard side. It carried an inadequate number of lifeboats, and as a result the lives of over half of its passengers were lost. Have you guessed it? It was the *Titan*. No, not the *Titanic*. The ship I'm talking about is described in an 1898 novel by Morgan Robertson, written 14 years before the Titanic sank in 1912.<sup>72</sup> There are many remarkable similarities between the sinking of the fictional Titan and the Titanic; their names are even almost identical! But it would be fatuitous to conclude that the Titanic must be a fictional account *merely* due to the striking similarities. In the same way, even if numerous and significant parallels existed between the New Testament and earlier stories, this would still not necessarily imply copying occurred, either from the non-Christian documents to the New Testament or vice-versa.<sup>73</sup>

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70 J. P. Holding, “Some notes on alleged parallels between Christianity and pagan religions,” n.p. Cited 17 September 2007. Online: <http://www.tektonics.org/copycat/pagint.html>

71 Christopher Price, “Is Alexander the Great a Fictitious Character Based on Achilles?,” n.p. Cited 4 October 2007. Online: <http://christiancadre.blogspot.com/2007/09/is-alexander-great-fictitious-character.html>

72 Flavio Cenni, “The Titanic Before the Titanic,” n.p. Cited 9 April 2009. Online: <http://digilander.libero.it/flavio.cenni/>; Full text of the story is available here: <http://daggy.name/cop/effluvia/twott.htm>

73 Thanks goes to Gregory Koukl for this illustration, as heard on the Stand to Reason radio show ([www.STR.org](http://www.STR.org)).

Before concluding this topic, a brief note should be made regarding Kersey Graves' 1875 book *The World's Sixteen Crucified Saviors* which is sometimes unfortunately cited as a source for alleged parallels, even though it has been decisively dismissed by modern scholarship. Richard Carrier (a historian and vocal opponent of Christianity) describes Graves' work as "useless to historians as a source", and concludes that Graves was "oblivious to the distinction between the origins of Christianity and its subsequent development."<sup>74</sup> He also lists ten ways that Graves demonstrates poor scholarship. Sadly Graves' list and derivatives of it are sometimes still being used today.<sup>75</sup> As James S. Jeffers notes in his book on Greco-Roman society, "the figures at the center of these [pagan] cults were mythological, not historical persons"<sup>76</sup>; that is, the members of these mystery religions themselves did not believe or claim that those they worshiped actually lived and existed in history, contrary to the person of Jesus Christ, who, except for a small handful of ardent skeptics, is universally agreed by scholars to be a real historical person.<sup>77</sup>

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74 Richard Carrier, "Kersey Graves and The World's Sixteen Crucified Saviors," n.p. Cited 17 September 2007. Online: [http://www.infidels.org/library/modern/richard\\_carrier/graves.html](http://www.infidels.org/library/modern/richard_carrier/graves.html)

75 Ibid. (For example, the recent film "Zeitgeist" makes indirect reference to Graves' list. For a more in-depth look at the claims made in Zeitgeist, see Preventing Truth Decay [website], "Zeitgeist Online Movie: Part One, Refuted," n.p. Cited 18 September 2007. Online: <http://www.preventingtruthdecay.org/zeitgeistpartone.shtml>)

76 Jeffers, *The Greco-Roman World*, 99.

77 Habermas, *The Historical Jesus*, 46.

## Alternative Gospels and “New” Ancient Writings

Although scholars have known about them for years, writings such as *The Gospel of Philip* and *The Gospel of Mary Magdalene* gained immense notoriety when they were popularized by Dan Brown in his book and movie *The Da Vinci Code*. In the bestselling novel, which was described by Publishers Weekly as an “exhaustively researched page-turner,”<sup>78</sup> Brown, through his character Leah Teabing, makes many claims regarding the many supposed “alternative gospels.” He says the following regarding texts which were supposedly ignored or suppressed in favor of the traditional biblical writings: “More than eighty gospels were considered for the New Testament, and yet only a relative few were chosen for inclusion—Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John among them.”<sup>79</sup>

While Dan Brown’s novel is fictional, he nevertheless explicitly cites as part of the body of the novel<sup>80</sup> several sources for some of his characters’ theories.<sup>81</sup> Some modern scholars such as Elaine Pagels of Princeton University have also given high credence to alternative gospels. And the Jesus Seminar (a group of scholars skeptical of the Bible’s reliability) included the *Gospel of Thomas* on equal footing with the four canonical gospels in their book *The Five Gospels*!<sup>82</sup>

Are Dan Brown and the other minority of biblical scholars correct? Were eighty or more other gospels which were in competition with the canonical gospels? And if so, were these other legitimate gospels unfairly discarded or oppressed in favor of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John?

Although it is worthwhile at the outset to state quite clearly, contra Dan Brown, that there were not “eighty gospels”<sup>83</sup>, we will begin by examining what is probably the most famous

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78 Amazon.com Website for *The Da Vinci Code* by Dan Brown, n.p. Cited 2 August 2008. Online: <http://www.amazon.com/Da-Vinci-Code-Dan-Brown/dp/0385504209/>

79 Dan Brown, *The Da Vinci Code* (New York: Doubleday, 2003), 231.

80 Brown, *The Da Vinci Code*, 253.

81 A decent and succinct reply to the sort of “exhaustively researched” claims in *The Da Vinci Code* is Ben Witherington III, *The Gospel Code: Novel Claims About Jesus, Mary Magdalene and Da Vinci*. (Downer’s Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2004)

82 Strobel, *The Case for the Real Jesus*, 26-27.

83 “Add up everything that was ever called a gospel in the first half-millennium of Christianity (most of which are small compilations of esoteric sayings ascribed to Jesus and not narratives of any portion of his life) and you come up with about two dozen documents. About half of these are known only from quotations in early church fathers or small scraps or fragments that have been discovered” Craig L. Blomberg, “The Da Vinci Code: A Novel,” n.p. Cited 3 August 2008. Online: <http://www.bethinking.org/bible-jesus/intermediate/the-da-vinci-code-a-novel.htm>

example of an alternative gospel: *The Gospel of Thomas*.<sup>84</sup> By examining this supposed gospel (the one most highly valued by the controversial Jesus Seminar and others) we will also reveal some general problems which plague other non-canonical writings like the recently discovered *Gospel of Judas*. There are three initial problems to consider regarding the Gospel of Thomas: First, it is not a gospel. Second, it was not written by Thomas. Third, it was written later than the canonical gospels and other New Testament writings.

This writing does not qualify as a gospel (the word “gospel” means “good news”) because for something to be good news, it must include things that Jesus accomplished for others via narrative, in particular Jesus’ death and resurrection.<sup>85</sup> Since the Gospel of Thomas is a collection of 114 sayings of Jesus with little narrative and few details of Jesus’ life and deeds, it should not be considered a gospel since it entirely ignores the “good news.”

Furthermore, although we may refer to it as “Thomas’ Gospel”, it’s unlikely that it was actually written by Thomas, the disciple of Jesus.<sup>86</sup> As we will explore later (see the *Short Time-Frame* section below) all of the New Testament writings can be confidently dated to have been written by, at latest, the end of the first century. However, while a minority of the non-canonical writings like the Gospel of Thomas are dated to within the second century, they cannot be confidently dated earlier than that.<sup>87</sup> The Gospel of Thomas is no exception. It is commonly dated to no earlier than 140AD.<sup>88</sup> Therefore it was written too late for Thomas to be its author. While some (such as Elaine Pagels and John Dominic Crossan<sup>89</sup>) suggest that it was written in the first century, there are several problems with early dating of the Gospel of Thomas.

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84 Ben Witherington III, *What Have They Done with Jesus? Beyond Strange Theories and Bad History – Why We Can Trust the Bible* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 2006), 27.

85 Witherington, *The Gospel Code*, 98.

86 Witherington, *What Have They Done with Jesus?*, 8-9.

87 France, *The Evidence for Jesus*, 84.

88 Bruce M. Metzger, *The Canon of the New Testament: Its Origin, Development, and Significance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), 86; see also Evans in Strobel, *The Case for the Real Jesus*, 35-39.

89 Strobel, *The Case for the Real Jesus*, 36.

First, the Gospel of Thomas references several New Testament documents, including all four gospels, Paul's letters, Hebrews, 1 John, and possibly even Revelation.<sup>90</sup> In fact, over half of the books included in the New Testament are quoted, paralleled, or alluded to. Additionally, when the Gospel of Thomas includes portions of the synoptic gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) it includes the later versions found in Matthew and/or Luke, which are identifiable by the more polished Greek grammar used in those gospels.<sup>91</sup> This further indicates that the Gospel of Thomas is, at very least, older than Matthew and Luke's gospels, with themselves are older than Mark's.

Second, there are anachronisms in the text which we would not expect to see if the Gospel of Thomas was written in the first century, such as how saying 12 calls Jesus' brother "James the Just", a phrase which is not found in the New Testament and only became popular in later writings.<sup>92</sup> Also, Judas is referred to as "Judas Thomas". Although Judas is not referred to this way in any of the Greek version New Testament documents, this is the way he was referred to in the Syrian church once the Christian message spread to Syria near the end of the second century. This, and other Syrian clues within the text, again point to a composition date late in the second century, after the Christian message had been translated into the Syrian language.<sup>93</sup>

Third, the Gospel of Thomas includes Jesus endorsing many decidedly un-Jewish ideas<sup>94</sup>, such as polytheism (saying 30), pantheism/panentheism (saying 77) and perhaps most infamously misogyny in saying 114, which states: "Simon Peter said to him, "Let Mary leave us, for women are not worthy of life." Jesus said, "I myself shall lead her in order to make her male, so that she too may become a living spirit resembling you males. For every woman who will make herself male will enter the kingdom of heaven.""<sup>95</sup>

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90 Witherington, *What Have They Done with Jesus?*, 32.

91 Evans in Strobel, *The Case for the Real Jesus*, 36-37.

92 Witherington, *What Have They Done with Jesus?*, 30.

93 Evans in Strobel, *The Case for the Real Jesus*, 38.

94 Witherington, *What Have They Done with Jesus?*, 31.

95 James M. Robinson, ed., *The Nag Hammadi Library, Revised Edition* (San Francisco : HarperCollins, 1990) n.p. as cited online: <http://www.gnosis.org/naghamm/gthlamb.html>. This final saying is sometimes arbitrarily suggested to have been added to the original text later after it was written because it's so offensive. However there is no textual evidence to suggest this, as per Evans in Strobel, *The Case for the Real Jesus*, 40.



Given all of these considerations, what can the Gospel of Thomas tell us about the historical Jesus? The late Bruce M. Metzger, formerly Emeritus Professor of New Testament Language and Literature at Princeton Seminary, concludes that "in the Gospel of Thomas the voice of the Good Shepherd [Jesus] is heard in only a muffled way, and that it is, in fact, often distorted beyond recognition by the presence of supplementary and even antagonistic voices."<sup>96</sup>

What about the recently popularized "Gospel of Judas"? The single existing copy of this text was first discovered in the 1970's, but was finally translated for the first time in the twenty-first century. Since it is generally agreed to have been originally composed between 130 and 170AD<sup>97</sup>, also likely has little to tell us about the historical Jesus. The translation team dated the writing of this fragmentary copy of the manuscript to between 220 and 340AD, although the team leaned towards this copy being written in the early fourth century.<sup>98</sup>

The Gospel of Judas was originally promoted as being sympathetic to Judas Iscariot (one of the original twelve disciples) who in the canonical gospels is portrayed as a traitor. However the initial translation and interpretation by National Geographic Magazine<sup>99</sup> has been repudiated by April D. DeConick, professor of biblical studies at Rice University, who concludes based on some questionable decisions by the translation team that "Not only is this interpretation based on a problematic English translation, rather than on what the Coptic actually says, but the opinion that Judas is a hero and a good guy is nonsense in terms of the bigger gospel narrative."<sup>100</sup>

It's not surprising that it's difficult to come up with a definitive translation of the Gospel of Judas, given that the only surviving manuscript is so fragmentary. DeConick describes the condition of the manuscript: "The book that contains the Gospel of Judas was in the worst possible

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96 Metzger, *The Canon of the New Testament*, 272.

97 Peter Kirby, "Gospel of Judas," n.p. Cited 13 June 2009. Online: <http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/gospeljudas.html>

98 Evans in Strobel, *The Case for the Real Jesus*, 54.

99 Read the original, possibly erroneous translation, here: <http://www.nationalgeographic.com/lostgospel/pdf/GospelofJudas.pdf?fs=www7.nationalgeographic.com&fs=magma.nationalgeographic.com>

100 April D. DeConick, "The Gospel of Judas," n.p. Cited 17 April 2009. Online: <http://www.aprildeconick.com/gospelofjudas.html>; DeConick has also published a book with a revised translation: April D. DeConick, *The Thirteenth Apostle: What the Gospel of Judas Really Says* (London: Continuum, 2007)

shape due to terrible handling once it left the grave. It had been torn in parts ... It was brittle and crumbling thanks to a stay in someone's freezer. The ink was barely legible because of exposure to the elements."<sup>101</sup>

Similar problems to those noted above regarding the Gospel of Thomas and the Gospel of Judas plague other "competing" gospels and writings. Among other reasons, due to the fact that "the canonical gospels are early, and the gnostic gospels are late"<sup>102</sup> the canonical gospels should be trusted instead of the gnostic texts. When compared to the accepted New Testament documents, the non-canonical documents are often written later, contain anachronisms, contradict or present very different central themes than the New Testament documents, and were never accepted by the early Christians as being authentic and truthful witnesses.

At the end of the day, what can we conclude about the value of these other writings in terms of their historical value? R. T. France concludes that there is "little to be expected by way of historical information about Jesus from such writings; that is not their area of interest."<sup>103</sup> Why then is there such interest in alternative gospels in modern times? N. T. Wright speculates that authors are excited about them because they are in line with current "social and religious (or indeed anti-religious) fashions ... Anything will do," Wright comments wryly, "as long as it is not classic Judaism or Christianity." The obsession with conspiracy theories (ranging from the assassination of John F. Kennedy to the "faked" moon landings to *The Da Vinci Code*) as well as chronological snobbery also contributes to accepting any idea that is antithetical to traditional accepted history. This is especially true of matters involving the church, which is seen by many as an outdated, yet large, powerful, and somewhat mysterious "establishment."<sup>104</sup>

The reasons provided above, coupled with the positive evidence for the trustworthiness of the New Testament documents which follows, should provide ample evidence that while

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101 April D. DeConick, "The Gospel of Judas," n.p.

102 N. T. Wright, *Judas and the Gospel of Jesus: Have We Missed the Truth about Christianity?* (Grand Rapids: BakerBooks, 2006), 76.

103 France, *The Evidence for Jesus*, 28.

104 Wright, *Judas and the Gospel of Jesus*, 123-124, 126.

alternative documents like the Gospel of Thomas or the Gospel of Judas may contain some interesting general historical or cultural information about the beliefs of certain religious groups, they tell us very little of historical value about Jesus, and therefore serious historical study should use and regard these documents as being secondary and inferior in value to the canonical documents.

# *Evidence for the Historical Reliability of the New Testament*

## **How Will We Test the New Testament?**

When evaluating historical documents, there are several questions that we might ask in order to help determine how likely they are to be accurate reports of history<sup>105</sup>:

- **How long after the events were these documents written?** The closer we can trace the documents to the events that they describe (and therefore the shorter the gap) the more likely they are to accurately depict what happened.
- **Who wrote the documents? Were they eyewitnesses to the events?** The writings will have more credibility if eyewitnesses to the events wrote them and/or were consulted.
- **How many copies of the documents exist?** If we possess only a few copies of an ancient document, we cannot be very confident that we know what the original said, whereas if we have a large number of documents we can compare them to verify their contents have been transmitted accurately and establish with much greater certainty what the original author(s) wrote.
- **Do external sources exist, and if so, do they confirm what our primary sources tell us?** Although not always available, multiple attestation of historical events is preferred. Does what we find when we compare the documents in question to other sources from the same time period confirm or contradict what we find in the New Testament?
- **Are the documents internally consistent?** Do the documents demonstrate consistency within themselves, and do they include literary or cultural anachronisms?

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<sup>105</sup> Trial lawyer Craig S. Parton similarly breaks down his evaluation criteria into *bibliographical* tests, *internal* evidence, and *external* evidence. Parton, *Religion on Trial*, 44.

In addition to these questions, there are many other factors to consider<sup>106</sup>, but our analysis below will focus on these main areas as we examine the New Testament.

But did the New Testament authors even intend to write accurate history? The authors claim they did. In the prologue to the Gospel of Luke we read the following:

*Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eyewitnesses and servants of the word. Therefore, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, it seemed good also to me to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught. (Luke 1:1-4)*

Luke clearly intends for his work to be taken seriously as an accurate account. He mentions careful investigation “from the beginning” of relevant sources, eyewitnesses (the Greek word here refers to firsthand observers of events<sup>107</sup>), and writing an “orderly account” so that his readers would know the “certainty” of what they were taught, ie, that they may have confidence that what they believe is actually true.<sup>108</sup> Luke's prologue indicates that he, at least, intends to be writing accurate history.<sup>109</sup> Similarly, Paul in his letters plainly differentiates between transmissions from Jesus Himself and Paul's own opinions.<sup>110</sup> This does not prove they *did* do so, but does mean that we should investigate to look for evidence that they were being truthful.

Let's now examine the biblical text to attempt to answer the questions above, and determine whether Luke's claim to be accurately preserving a historical account is justified.

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106 For example, Mark D. Roberts examines these in addition to other questions in Roberts, *Can We Trust the Gospels?*, 24ff, although many of these questions are addressed in whole or in part within this short analysis.

107 Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*, 117.

108 Roberts, *Can We Trust the Gospels?*, 65.

109 Blomberg in Strobel, *The Case for Christ*, 40-41; Roberts, *Can We Trust the Gospels?*, 64-65. For example, see Luke 3:1-2 for an example of Luke's concern for historical details.

110 Ex. 1 Corinthians 7:10-16, 9:14. Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*, 268.

## Short Time-Frame

Although we do not know precisely when the New Testament books were written, the available evidence allows us to come to educated conclusions. For some books we can ascertain fairly exact dating, for others we are limited to more general ranges of possible dates.

Of the New Testament documents, the letters of Paul can be most confidently dated, so we'll begin with those. Few scholars dispute dating Paul's first letter (1 Thessalonians) to 48-50AD, and the remainder of Paul's letters were composed between that date and his death, at latest 68AD.<sup>111</sup> This means that all of Paul's letters were composed within 40 years of Jesus' death, the earliest being composed as little as 18 years after the crucifixion.<sup>112</sup>

However, there is material in Paul's letters which is even older. In 1 Corinthians 15:3-7, Paul restates what he previously "received" and "passed on" regarding Jesus' death and resurrection, including Jesus' burial, resurrection, and appearances to many individuals and groups:

*For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Peter, and then to the Twelve. After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles (1 Corinthians 15:3-7)*

There are several reasons to conclude that this passage is actually an early Christian creed which Paul has incorporated into his letter. First, the words "received" and "delivered" Paul uses "are technical Rabbinic terms which indicate Paul is passing on Holy tradition."<sup>113</sup> These terms were used to refer to reiterating tradition, and were used in that way in other ancient sources.<sup>114</sup> Next, some of the words used in this passage are not words Paul uses elsewhere in his letters.<sup>115</sup>

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111 For further rationale for the dating of Paul's letters, see for example Barnett, *Is the New Testament Reliable?*, 37.

112 Barnett, *Is the New Testament Reliable?*, 41.

113 Gary Habermas in Strobel, *The Case for Christ*, 228.

114 Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*, 264-265.

115 Habermas, *The Historical Jesus*, 153-154.

The passage is also written in a parallel, highly metered form, indicating it likely was originally oral in nature.<sup>116</sup>

Furthermore, there are indications this portion of Paul's letter, when it was written down, was originally written in Aramaic, indicating an earlier non-Greek source.<sup>117</sup> And Paul himself implies that the teaching was a summary of all the apostles preached (1 Cor 15:11).<sup>118</sup> All of these reasons indicate this was a very early creed that Paul incorporated into his letter.<sup>119</sup> Paul also notes that he verified the information he received to make sure it was accurate (Galatians 2:1-10).

Paul's inclusion of this early church creed demonstrates, among other things, that he was concerned with the historicity of Jesus as an actual person of history and that the events he described actually occurred. He likely mentioned that some of the witnesses were still alive (1 Corinthians 15:6) because at least some of them were well known within the community and available for questioning regarding what actually happened.<sup>120</sup>

Paul must have received this creed several years earlier, since in this letter he is reminding the church in Corinth of what he previously told them. It is probable that Paul received it between five and seven years after Jesus' crucifixion, during Paul's time in Galatia<sup>121</sup>, though he may have received it even earlier.<sup>122</sup> Additionally, if this is when Paul received the creed, the creed *itself* must be even earlier than that! (There are also other passages that are likely creeds or hymns which provide a wealth of early details about Jesus' life and ministry.<sup>123</sup>)

This early testimony comes *extremely* close to the events it describes, and is unprecedented in ancient history, as evidenced further below. Recent research indicates that

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116 Ibid.

117 Ibid.

118 William Lane Craig, *The Son Rises: The Historical Evidence for the Resurrection of Jesus* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1981), 47.

119 Regarding Robert Price's suggestion that this passage is a later interpolation (a view not shared by other New Testament scholars), see for example Christopher Price (no relation), "Is 1 Corinthians 15:3-11 an Interpolation?," n.p. Cited 1 October 2007. Online: [http://christiancadre.org/member\\_contrib/cp\\_interpolation.html](http://christiancadre.org/member_contrib/cp_interpolation.html)

120 France, *The Evidence for Jesus*, 89.

121 Habermas in Strobel, *The Case for Christ*, 230.

122 Craig, *The Son Rises*, 48.

123 For a list of some of these creeds & discussion, see Habermas, *The Historical Jesus*, 144-152.

Jesus was worshiped as God by the earliest Christians, perhaps within days after Jesus' crucifixion.<sup>124</sup> This indicates that the belief that Jesus rose from the dead was held by the earliest Christians, as expressed in the creed quoted by Paul. Although it is sometimes challenged that Paul tells us little about the historical Jesus, in fact the Pauline texts (which were largely written to those who already knew the stories about Jesus and therefore there would be no reason for Paul to repeat such stories) tell us a wealth of details about Jesus' life, including that Jesus was descended from David, was the Messiah, ministered primarily in Israel, had a brother named James, instituted communion, was betrayed, died, buried, raised, and taken up into heaven, among other details.<sup>125</sup>

The dating of the gospels and non-Pauline documents is less certain, but it is still possible to date essentially the entirety of the New Testament within the first century AD based, in part, on the letters of the New Testament fathers. Based on quotations of the scriptures found in letters written by Clement (95AD<sup>126</sup>-96AD), Ignatius (108AD) and Polycarp (110AD) we have confirmation of all of the New Testament documents except 2 John and Jude.<sup>127</sup> Of course the fact that these two books were not quoted doesn't prove that they were *not* written in the first century, only that these early authors did not quote from them explicitly.

The date of the gospels can also be generally fixed by the existence of the earliest known extant fragment, that being the St John Fragment at the John Rylands Library at the University of Manchester. It was acquired in Egypt in 1920 and contains John 18:31-33 (on one side) and John 18:37-38 (on the reverse).<sup>128</sup> This fragment (also referred to as P<sup>52</sup>) is usually dated between 125AD<sup>129</sup> and 130AD<sup>130</sup>. This means that the Gospel of John must have been written prior to this time for it to first be put into codex form and then spread to Egypt. The other three gospels are

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124 Larry W. Hurtado, *How on Earth Did Jesus Become a God?: Historical Questions about Earliest Devotion to Jesus* (Grand Rapids: William. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2005), 4.

125 Peter M. Head, *Is the New Testament Reliable?* (Cambridge: Grove Books Limited, 2003), 19.

126 Orr-Ewing, *Is the Bible Intolerant?*, 42; 95AD is listed for Clement in Orr-Ewing, all other dates in this list are from Barnett.

127 Barnett, *Is the New Testament Reliable?*, 39-41.

128 The fragment is viewable online: John Rylands Library, "St. John Fragment" n.p. Cited 2 December 2008. Online: <http://www.library.manchester.ac.uk/specialcollections/collections/stjohnfragment/>

129 Roberts, *Can We Trust the Gospels?*, 29.

130 Bruce, *The New Testament Documents*, 12.



universally considered to be older than John's gospel. Thus in a second way we've established the latest possible limit timeframe that the gospels could have been written, although they could of course have been composed much earlier.

Further evidence, in this case evidence of omission, can be deduced which may lead us to conclude that many (or perhaps even all) of the New Testament documents were written before the year 70AD. Before exploring this line of reasoning, consider the following:

*Imagine a history student is given this assignment: Write the history of New York City's famous World Trade Center. The student submits a paper which describes the seven buildings comprising a hub of finance and world trade, including the twin towers, each of which contain 110 stories. Their paper notes the over 50,000 people that work there, and that the World Trade Center is so huge (around 10 million square feet of office space) that it warrants its own zip code. Then the paper ends.*<sup>131</sup>

What would a reader of this document conclude about when it was written? Obviously the reader would conclude it was written before September 11, 2001. If it had been written after that date, it surely would mention the twin towers' destruction when two hijacked planes were smashed into them. This was such a monumental event that it would be inconceivable that it would not be mentioned in any significant writings about the WTC written after the tragic events of 9-11. In much the same way, the fact that nowhere in the New Testament do we find mention of the destruction of the Jewish temple (which was at the time the central place of worship for the Jewish people) and the fall of Jerusalem to the Romans in 70AD leads us to believe that the texts were written before that event occurred.<sup>132</sup>

Since none of the New Testament documents mention the destruction of the Jewish temple in 70AD, when we consider the massive importance of that event and that it is (vaguely but

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<sup>131</sup> Example & much of the following discussion was adapted from J. P. Moreland and Tim Muehlhoff, *The God Conversation* (Downer's Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2007), 96.

<sup>132</sup> Randall Price, *Searching for the Original Bible* (Eugene: Harvest House Publishers, 2007), 115.

unmistakably) predicted in prophecy<sup>133</sup>, this would indicate that they were likely written before the event occurred.<sup>134</sup> This is certainly a curious omission. If the temple was destroyed when these documents were written, we would expect to find some mention of this fact somewhere. The book of Hebrews, for example, “speaks of the Jewish sacrificial system as if it were a still-present reality.”<sup>135</sup> The author is arguing that the current Mosaic sacrificial system is inferior to the once-and-for-all sacrifice of Jesus, and an obvious argument would have been to mention the cessation of the temple sacrifices, if that had already happened.

These factors, which when combined with Luke's sudden ending of his book of Acts with Paul awaiting trial (which would have been, at latest, 68AD, has led some scholars to conclude that the majority of the New Testament was composed before the year 70AD.<sup>136</sup>

Even if for the sake of argument we grant a date of 100AD to the latest of the New Testament documents, this means the entire New Testament was composed less than 70 years after Jesus' death. Compared with writings about other historical figures of around the same time, the superiority of the New Testament manuscripts becomes clear: a “treasure trove from any historian’s point of view.”<sup>137</sup> For example, the biographies of Alexander the Great were composed over 400 years after his death, but they are still considered generally reliable.<sup>138</sup> By comparison to other ancient writings, the New Testament “is like a news flash!”<sup>139</sup> This situation is “encouraging, from a historian's point of view” because we now know that at very least the first three Gospels and many of the other New Testament writings “were written at a time when many were alive who could remember the things that Jesus said and did”.<sup>140</sup>

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133 For example: Matthew 24:1-2, Mark 13:1-2, Luke 21:5-6,20-24,32.

134 If these predictions were actually later interpolations into the text, we would expect that they would have been made more explicit.

135 Lane T Davis (ed) et al, *The ESV Study Bible* (Wheaton: Crossway Bibles, 2008), 2357-2358.

136 Norman Geisler lists 15 reasons to believe Acts was written pre-70AD: Norman Geisler, “The Dating of the New Testament,” n.p. Cited 29 September 2009. Online: <http://www.bethinking.org/bible-jesus/advanced/the-dating-of-the-new-testament.htm> See also: Orr-Ewing, *Is the Bible Intolerant?*, 42-43; France, *The Evidence for Jesus*, 119-121.

137 Evans in Strobel, *The Case for the Real Jesus*, 56.

138 Blomberg in Strobel, *The Case for Christ*, 33.

139 Blomberg in Strobel, *The Case for Christ*, 34.

140 F. F. Bruce, *The New Testament Documents: Are They Reliable? Sixth Edition* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1981), 7.

## Eyewitness Testimony

Everyone recognizes the limitations of eyewitness testimony, but it is still powerful evidence that was highly valued in the ancient world and is still valued today. One obvious requirement for accurate eyewitness testimony is that the eyewitnesses must be able to *remember* things; witnesses must have good memories. In this respect, first century Jews were well prepared to be good witnesses. First century communication was primarily oral, so people were forced to develop strong memory skills.<sup>141</sup> Especially among Jewish culture, “virtually all knowledge was learned in the form of sayings and texts which were imprinted on the memory, so that one knew them by heart.”<sup>142</sup> Some first century Rabbis memorized entire books of the Old Testament.<sup>143</sup> This lends credibility to the idea that the eyewitness accounts would still be reliable even many years after the events themselves took place.<sup>144</sup> Even today amazing feats of memory are still possible<sup>145</sup>, especially when the circumstances are ripe for strong memory retention, as they were for the New Testament authors.<sup>146</sup>

Jesus' teaching style was similar to that used by other Jewish Rabbis (teachers) in the first century<sup>147</sup>, which often included techniques like pointed formulations, alliteration, rhythmic phrases, repetition, and so on. We also know that it was Jewish custom to carefully memorize Rabbis' teachings.<sup>148</sup> Since the apostles and many of Jesus' early followers were Jews, it is safe to assert they would have done likewise. Students of Rabbis observed their masters closely, not just their teachings but also in their actions, and were careful to remember both word and deed so

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141 Blomberg in Strobel, *The Case for Christ*, 43.

142 Birger Gerhardsson, *The Origins of the Gospel Traditions*. Translated by Gene J. Lund (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1979), 19.

143 Craig L. Blomberg, “The Historical Reliability of the Gospels,” n.p. Cited 15 March 2007. Online: <http://www.4truth.net/site/apps/nl/content3.asp?c=hiKXLbPNLrF&b=784441&ct=981289>

144 Darrell L. Bock in Michael J. Wilkins and J. P. Moreland (eds), *Jesus Under Fire: Modern Scholarship Reinvents the Historical Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995), 79-81.

145 I once observed a live performance where a man dramatically recited the entire book of Luke (nearly 20,000 words) from memory.

146 Bauckham lists several factors that would have contributed to strong memory retention among the witnesses, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*, 341-346.

147 J. P. Moreland, “The Historicity of the New Testament,” n.p. Cited 16 September 2007. Online: <http://www.apologetics.org/books/historicity.html#C> (Excerpted from J. P. Moreland, *Scaling the Secular City* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1987))

148 John Warwick Montgomery, *History, Law and Christianity* (Edmonton: Canadian Institute for Law, Theology & Public Policy Inc, 2002), 34; see for example Deuteronomy 6:6-7.

that they could put them into practice and carry on their master's tradition.<sup>149</sup> This makes the testimony of the early followers of Jesus especially valuable regarding what they have to tell us about His life, acts, and teachings.

Some of the New Testament authors explicitly claimed to be eyewitnesses to Jesus' ministry. For example, it's claimed in 2 Peter 1:16 that "*We did not follow cleverly invented stories when we told you about the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty.*"<sup>150</sup> Similarly, 1 John 1:1,3 states that "*That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched ... we proclaim to you what we have seen and heard.*"

This does not prove that they *actually were* eyewitnesses, only that they claimed it. We should be willing to investigate whether they were or not. The importance of such investigation is evident when we note how highly regarded eyewitness testimony is in the New Testament itself. As previously noted, in Luke's prologue (Luke 1:1-4) he makes note of the importance of speaking with eyewitnesses. Also, Peter's insistence on replacing Judas Iscariot with someone who had personally observed what had occurred (Acts 1:21-22) demonstrates that firsthand eyewitnesses were highly regarded.<sup>151</sup>

Ancient historians did not value recording the exact words spoken by an individual as highly as we value it today. Instead, ancient historians attempted to communicate a speaker's intended meaning.<sup>152</sup> Therefore, while different authors may record a speaker's words differently, their testimonies can still be reliable if they are in agreement.<sup>153</sup> Additionally, if the stories in the Gospel were all related in *exactly* the same way, we might suspect the authors were merely copying (colluding with) each other. "If the Gospels were too consistent," notes Craig Blomberg, "that itself

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149 Gerhardsson, *The Origins of the Gospel Traditions*, 17-18.

150 The authors also claim they are telling the truth and not lying, ex Romans 9:1, though of course this does not *prove* that they *were* telling the truth, only that they claimed to be, and that they differentiated *truth* from *error*.

151 Staudinger, *The Trustworthiness of the Gospels*, 26.

152 Bock in Wilkins and Moreland (eds), *Jesus Under Fire*, 79.

153 Roberts, *Can We Trust the Gospels?*, 86-88.

would invalidate them as independent witnesses.”<sup>154</sup> The New Testament writings thus present common histories from independent eyewitness perspectives. Although the Gospels may have different emphases<sup>155</sup>, they still present the same message. Even John's Gospel (which differs the most from the “synoptics”, ie Matthew, Mark & Luke, especially in terms of style) has a plethora of details in common with the other Gospels.<sup>156</sup>

The evidence strongly suggests that a large part of the New Testament is based upon eyewitness testimony. Mark's Gospel, for example, includes many indicators that it is based on the testimony of the eyewitness Peter, and perhaps also of Mark himself and others. Mark's Gospel places more emphasis on Peter than any other Gospel<sup>157</sup>, such as when Mark mentions that Jesus speaks to Peter twice in Gethsemane<sup>158</sup>, whereas the other Gospels are less specific<sup>159</sup>. Mark also mentions Peter more times per page than any other Gospel writer<sup>160</sup>, and uses the technique of *inclusio* (a literary “framing” device) at the beginning and end of his Gospel, which likely indicates that Peter is the source of the Gospel's material.<sup>161</sup> John Warwick Montgomery notes that there are scenes in Mark's Gospel where the third person plural perspective switches to third person singular involving Peter, which is the indirect equivalent of a first person discourse of Peter himself.<sup>162</sup>

Furthermore, Richard Bauckham suggests that the unnamed persons in Mark's gospel are not named due to “protective anonymity” because they had run afoul of the authorities who were persecuting the early church, and, being still alive at the time of the writing, would thus need to be

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154 Blomberg in Strobel, *The Case for Christ*, 47; see also Montgomery, *History, Law and Christianity*, 79-80.

155 For example, Matthew seems to have been written for a primarily Jewish audience, whereas Luke's Gospel was almost certainly intended, primarily, for gentile readers.

156 See Mark D. Roberts' non-exhaustive list of 33 points of agreement between all four Gospels agree on details of Jesus' life in *Can We Trust the Gospels?*, 98-100.

157 J. P. Holding, “The New Testament: Mark. Profiles of Key Issues Concerning the Four Gospels,” n.p. Cited 13 March 2007. Online: <http://www.tektonics.org/ntdocdef/markdef.html#pete>

158 Mark 14:32-42; Matthew 26:36-46; Luke 22:40-46

159 Matthew mentions Peter only once in the Gethsemane passage, and Luke does not specifically mention him.

160 Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*, 125, 148-149, 155.

161 Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*, 125-127, 204. Bauckham argues that Luke and John adopt Mark's *inclusio* technique, giving supplemental support to Mark's implicit claims.

162 Montgomery, *History, Law and Christianity*, 29.

protected.<sup>163</sup> If this is the case, not only does this mean the writing is based on eyewitness accounts, it also confirms that Mark's gospel (or at least his sources) were written early in the church's history.

Although Mark's Gospel is “unnamed” in the sense that it does not include the title “The Gospel According to Mark” as we find in modern translations, there is in fact no ancient competition for its authorship, which we might expect to find if the authorship was attributed later. As more and more copies were made of the document, and as it spread far and wide geographically, it would quickly become impossible to universally attribute an author to it at a later date. We would also expect that if its authorship was fabricated by the early church that a more prominent figure would have been chosen, not the relatively unknown “John Mark”.<sup>164</sup>

External testimony from Papias in the late first or early second century (as quoted by Eusebius) also confirms Mark as author of the Gospel and Mark's use of Peter as a source, which, although a later affirmation, is still considered valuable by modern scholars.<sup>165</sup> Also, the Muratorian Canon (dated to between 140-170AD) lists Luke and John explicitly as Gospel authors, and likely included Mark and Matthew as well<sup>166</sup>, although unfortunately that portion has been lost in the fragmentary surviving copy.<sup>167</sup> If the author of the Muratorian Canon did include Mark's Gospel on his list, he or she is also making the claim (due to how the text is worded) that Mark himself is an eyewitness.

An interesting yet somewhat puzzling detail in Mark's Gospel is recorded in Mark 14:51-52, during the author's account of Jesus' arrest in the Garden of Gethsemane: *“A young man, wearing nothing but a linen garment, was following Jesus. When they seized him, he fled naked, leaving his garment behind.”* This seemingly inconsequential detail does not appear in any of the other

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163 Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*, 184-187. (Here Bauckham follows & expands Gerd Theissen's argument in his book *The Gospels in Context* (tr. L. M. Maloney; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), chapter 4.)

164 Blomberg in Strobel, *The Case for Christ*, 23.

165 Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*, 203ff.

166 The author of the Muratorian Canon clearly accepts four Gospels, with Luke and John being the latter two, but the names of the first two the author recorded are unfortunately lost. For its text, see Bruce M. Metzger (trans), “The Muratorian Fragment,” n.p. Cited 25 September 2007. Online: <http://www.bible-researcher.com/muratorian.html>

167 Roberts, *Can We Trust the Gospels?*, 42.

Gospels. Why did Mark choose to include it? Possibly the author himself was the “young man ... following Jesus” (the young man was not one of the apostles) and therefore chose to include an incident in his Gospel that involved himself.<sup>168</sup> This theory is inconclusive but an intriguing possibility, and is an example of one of many “anonymous witnesses” in the Gospels, many of whom are likely eyewitness sources.<sup>169</sup>

Persuasive cases can also be made that the other gospels and letters of the New Testament are based on eyewitness testimony, such as, for example, the book of Acts (the continuation to the Gospel attributed to Luke which describes the history of the early church) which was in part based on Luke being a traveling companion of Paul.<sup>170</sup> Certain similarities of phrasing and terminology in Paul and Luke's writings back up this assertion.<sup>171</sup>

The New Testament includes certain incidental details that would be hard to comprehend unless they are the result of eyewitness testimony. One example is recorded in John 19:34. After Jesus dies on the cross, John notes that “*one of the soldiers pierced Jesus' side with a spear, bringing a sudden flow of blood and water.*” Death by crucifixion occurred due to two primary causes: hypovolemic shock and exhaustion asphyxia (asphyxiation).<sup>172</sup> One consequence of the person going into hypovolemic shock and also being asphyxiated (unable to draw in breath) was that water would collect around the pericardium, the sac surrounding the heart. Thus when the Roman soldier stabbed Jesus' side with the spear (which was not common procedure for crucifixions) the wall of the pericardium was pierced, resulting in a flow of both blood from the heart itself and water from the surrounding sac.<sup>173</sup>

Even though he would have no idea why he saw blood and water pour out, John's

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168 “Many scholars believe the young man ... was none other than Mark himself.” Phillip Yancey and Tim Stafford (eds), *The Student Bible: New Revised Standard Version* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 1046.

169 The suggestion that the young man lived nearby, was roused from sleep, and came near after hearing the commotion caused by Jesus' arrest ignores the fact that the young man was “following Jesus”, (and that the guards would not likely have tried to arrest him had he *not* been a follower of Jesus) so it seems to me to be an unlikely hypothesis. Further discussion in Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*, 197-201.

170 C. J. Hemer, “Luke the Historian,” *Bulletin of the John Rylands University Library of Manchester* 60 (1977): 46-51.

171 Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*, 267.

172 William D. Edwards, Wesley J. Gabel, and Floyd E. Hosmer, “On the Physical Death of Jesus Christ,” *Journal of the American Medical Association* vol 255, No. 11, 21 March 1986, 1461.

173 Ibid, 1462-1463.

description of the scene is entirely consistent with modern medical conclusions about what would have happened. John would have had none of this modern medical knowledge; he merely recorded what he saw. How could John have known that if a person who had just been crucified were stabbed in the chest that blood and water would run out unless he (or someone else who was there) witnessed it?<sup>174</sup> Details of this sort strongly indicate that the New Testament is a result of eyewitness testimony regarding the events it describes.

Taken together, this evidence (as well as other lines of evidence<sup>175</sup>) strongly suggests that Mark's gospel and at least several of the other New Testament writings are based on eyewitness testimony.

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174 See also Metherell in Strobel, *Case for Christ*, 198-200; Habermas, *The Historical Jesus*, 74.

175 Bauckham gives other indirect evidence, such as curious wording in the *Gospel of Thomas* "Saying 13" that may indicate Peter as a source for Mark. Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*, 236-238.



## Manuscript Evidence: A Mountain of Manuscripts

We currently possess over 5,686 early Greek manuscripts of the New Testament, including some full books, and others in more fragmentary form.<sup>176</sup> Approximately eighty-eight of these Greek manuscripts are made of papyrus.<sup>177</sup> It's astounding that even that many fragile papyrus documents have survived for nearly 2,000 years! Some of the Greek manuscripts were originally written on scrolls, while others were originally included in codices.<sup>178</sup>

The number of extant manuscripts is important because the more manuscripts that we have, the more confident we can be that we can reconstruct the original text, even if the original hand-written manuscripts by the authors themselves (often referred to as the "autographs") have not survived. The fact that the original New Testament autographs haven't survived should not concern us, since we possess few (if any) autographs from the Greek and Latin periods. We do not even possess any autographs of any of Shakespeare's thirty-eight plays, and he wrote them over a thousand years later than the New Testament authors!<sup>179</sup>

The reason why having many copies is important is that if we possess only one copy of an ancient document (as is the case with many of the "alternative gospels") we should have little confidence in what the original said, because we have nothing to compare it against. Conversely if we possess many copies of a document we can compare them through the process of textual criticism (described below) to determine the original text to a high degree of probability.

One of Randy Newman's characters gives an analogy to explain the importance of having many manuscripts:

*In Washington, D.C., let's say we've got the "official yard stick" that establishes the standard for thirty-six inches [one yard]. ... Let's just suppose that in some terrorist*

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176 Figure cited of 5,686 has no doubt increased since Geisler's book was published in 1999. Norman L. Geisler, *Baker Encyclopedia of Christian Apologetics* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1999), 532.

177 Geisler, *Baker Encyclopedia of Christian Apologetics*, 533.

178 A "codex" is the ancient equivalent of a modern book which began to become popular in the late first century.

179 Parton, *Religion on Trial*, 45.

*attack, that building gets blown up and the official yard stick gets destroyed. We wouldn't have the original, but we'd have so many millions of other yard sticks that, centuries later, we could say that we do know how long an official yard is ...*<sup>180</sup>

The count of 5,686 Greek manuscripts mentioned earlier does not include the thousands of early manuscripts written in Latin, Slavic, and many other languages.<sup>181</sup> When compared to the number of existing manuscripts of other historical ancient writings, such as those by Herodotus, Thucydides, Plato, Caesar, Tacitus, and others, the New Testament dwarfs them in comparison; some of these other ancient writings exist in less than a dozen copies.<sup>182</sup> Indeed, “the quantity of New Testament material is almost embarrassing in comparison with other works of antiquity.”<sup>183</sup>

A secondary source of textual information is found in the citations of the early church writers. These include sermons, commentaries, and personal letters of the leaders of the church, which can often be dated quite confidently. These writings are useful to confirm the text of the New Testament, since the writers cite the New Testament text frequently and also “sometimes a church [leader] wrote concerning a disputed reading in a text and thus provides valuable information about the variants as they existed in the texts of his time.”<sup>184</sup> It is estimated that there are approximately *one million* such citations, and that even if all of the thousands of the copies of the New Testament were lost, almost the entire text would be able to be reconstructed from piecing together the quotations in the early church writers.<sup>185</sup>

It should also be noted that not only are there a tremendous number of manuscripts in existence, they are also geographically distributed widely, meaning that we find relatively early manuscripts spread over a wide geographic area. Various “families” of documents can be identified and can act as controls on any variants that might be found among a minority of the

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180 Randy Newman, *Corner Conversations: Engaging Dialogues About God and Life* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 2006), 50.

181 DePoe, “The Historical Credibility of the New Testament,” n.p.

182 Norman L. Geisler, “Can We Know the Bible is the Word of God?,” in Dean C. Halverson (ed), *The Compact Guide to World Religions* (Minneapolis: Bethany House Publishers, 1996), 259.

183 Bruce M. Metzger in Strobel, *The Case for Christ*, 60.

184 Price, *The Search for the Original Bible*, 83; see also Wallace in Strobel, *The Case for the Real Jesus*, 83.

185 Price, *The Search for the Original Bible*, 83, 111-112.

others. When the geographic distribution of the New Testament documents is considered, the New Testament “has far and away better attestation than any other ancient work.”<sup>186</sup>

What then are we to make of the often quoted statement from Bart Ehrman's book *Misquoting Jesus*? “There are more variations among our manuscripts than there are words in the New Testament.”<sup>187</sup> Elsewhere in his book, Ehrman claims that there are 200,000-400,000 variations among the ancient New Testament manuscripts.<sup>188</sup>

Ehrman is technically correct. When every scribal mistake in the thousands of manuscripts we have of the New Testament (no matter how minor and recounting the same mistake each time it's made in different documents<sup>189</sup>) is counted, we do find a large number. However, when we actually look at the variations found, “the great majority of these variants are inconsequential— involving spelling differences that cannot even be translated, articles with proper nouns, word order changes.”<sup>190</sup> The number and nature of copying errors that exist between the manuscripts are relatively minor and result in no doctrinal problems.<sup>191</sup> The errors that do occur consist predominantly of spelling errors, word order (the order of the words in the sentence is unimportant in the Greek text, ie it does not change the meaning of the sentence like it would in English<sup>192</sup>), and other similar mistakes.<sup>193</sup> Approximately 75% of the errors are spelling and word order type errors, about 24% are minor variations which do not leave us uncertain about the meaning of the passage, and only the remaining 1% lead to some uncertainty.<sup>194</sup>

Due to decades of careful study through the process of textual criticism<sup>195</sup>, scholars are led

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186 Eddy and Boyd, *The Jesus Legend*, 384.

187 Bart D. Ehrman, *Misquoting Jesus: The Story Behind Who Changed the Bible and Why* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 2005), 90.

188 Ehrman, *Misquoting Jesus*, 89.

189 Metzger in Strobel, *The Case for Christ*, 65.

190 Daniel B. Wallace, “The Gospel According to Bart,” n.p. Cited 21 September 2007. Online: [http://www.bible.org/page.php?page\\_id=4000](http://www.bible.org/page.php?page_id=4000)

191 Geisler, “Can We Know the Bible is the Word of God?,” in Halverson (ed), *The Compact Guide*, 260.

192 “It makes a whale of a difference in English if you say, ‘Dog bites man’ or ‘Man bites dog’ – sequence matters in English. But in Greek it doesn’t.” Metzger in Strobel, *The Case for Christ*, 64.

193 Roberts, *Can We Trust the Gospels?*, 34.

194 Price, *Searching for the Original Bible*, 116, 217-219.

195 For a brief overview and explanation of the process of textual criticism, see Roberts, *Can We Trust the Gospels?*, 25-37.

to conclude that “the variations, when they occur, tend to be minor rather than substantive.”<sup>196</sup> There is in fact no Christian doctrine that is challenged by the minor variations we find in the manuscripts.<sup>197</sup>

Although it may surprise some Christians, it has been widely known for many years that two passages in the New Testament, specifically John 7:53-8:11 and Mark 16:9-20, were likely not in the original manuscripts, and this fact is clearly noted in all modern Bibles.<sup>198</sup> Besides those two passages, no significant sections have been shown to not have been in the originals, and again, none affect any Christian belief or doctrine.<sup>199</sup>

Elsewhere in his book, Ehrman himself states:

*To be sure, of all of the hundreds of thousands of textual changes found among our manuscripts, **most of them are completely insignificant, immaterial and of no real importance for anything** other than showing that the scribes could not spell or keep focused any better than the rest of us.*<sup>200</sup> (Emphasis mine)

Furthermore, the only reason why we are able to identify a large number of variants is that we have so many manuscripts to study! If we had fewer manuscripts, we would have less variations (for example, if there were only one surviving copy, there'd be no variations) *however* we would actually be *less sure* of what the original actually said, because the process of textual criticism cannot operate efficiently with a paucity of documents to work from.<sup>201</sup> The process of textual criticism (which has been shown to be highly reliable, with agreement among scholars of many different backgrounds<sup>202</sup>) has demonstrated that “of the approximately 138,000 words in the New Testament only about 1,400 remain in doubt. The text of the New Testament is thus

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196 Strobel, *The Case for Christ*, 65.

197 Metzger in Strobel, *The Case for Christ*, 65.

198 Wallace in Strobel, *The Case for the Real Jesus*, 90-94.

199 One other section of note is the interpolated version of 1 John 5:7-8 which the KJV translation uses, which is not found in the earliest Greek manuscripts and is not included in any modern translation like the NIV, NRSV or ESV. This does not affect the doctrine of the Trinity, which does not depend on this verse.

200 Ehrman, *Misquoting Jesus*, 207.

201 Roberts, *Can We Trust the Gospels?*, 34.

202 Roberts, *Can We Trust the Gospels?*, 32-33.

about 99.9% established.”<sup>203</sup> Therefore, the variations found in the New Testament text become minimal when properly examined.

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203 William Lane Craig, “Establishing the Gospels’ Reliability,” n.p. Cited 16 September 2007. Online: <http://www.reasonablefaith.org/site/News2?page=NewsArticle&id=5711>

## External Evidence: Writing Outside the New Testament

Before detailing some of the external evidence for the New Testament, an important point regarding the New Testament itself should be noted. The New Testament is not a single source. In fact, it consists of 27 individual literary works, many of which were originally composed as letters. These 27 writings were composed by several different authors, at varying times, in diverse locations, under varying circumstances, often for very specific audiences:

*[T]he New Testament writers were not in league with each other at the point of writing. Nothing Mark wrote indicates any verbal influence by Paul, or vice versa. John did not depend on Paul nor, many scholars believe, upon Mark. While Luke and Matthew have used Mark, their Gospels appear to have been written independently of each other and of John. While James, Hebrews and 1 Peter hold some ideas in common with Paul, none of them appears to have been influenced by, or to be dependent upon, the other.<sup>204</sup>*

Clearly then the New Testament should not be understood as a single source, but rather as comprising *multiple independent sources* collected in one volume.<sup>205</sup> Some of the New Testament authors were even skeptics before they became convinced of the truth of the Christian message themselves, namely Paul (formerly Saul of Tarsus, a persecutor of Christians) and James (brother of Jesus, who was not a believer until after Jesus' death & resurrection).<sup>206</sup> Therefore, even if there were no available sources outside the New Testament we would still possess several sources, not a single source, and some of the authors were formerly hostile to Christian belief. This is more than we possess for many other incidents of history which are generally accepted as factual! However, in addition, there are also several corroborating sources outside of the New Testament.

Flavius Josephus, a Jewish historian, confirms several of the central figures in the New

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204 Barnett, *Is the New Testament Reliable?*, 36.

205 W. R. Miller, "The Truthfulness of the Eyewitness Accounts as Presented in the Bible," n.p. Cited 21 September 2007. Online: <http://www.tektonics.org/guest/truthfulness.html>

206 Habermas and Licona, *The Case for the Resurrection of Jesus*, 64-69.

Testament, such as John the Baptist, James the brother of Jesus, and Jesus himself<sup>207</sup>, as well as others minor figures like Augustus, Tiberius, Pilate, Annas, and Caiaphas.<sup>208</sup> One of Josephus' references to Jesus, found in Josephus' *Antiquities* xx.9.1, concerns James, "the brother of Jesus who was called the Christ". This reference confirms with the New Testament that, at least, Jesus existed, had a brother who was martyred for his faith, and that some called Jesus "the Christ". This passage is generally undisputed<sup>209</sup>, and most conclude that "the authenticity of the text may be taken as certain"<sup>210</sup> because the reference is minimal and shows no signs of interpolation (among other reasons).<sup>211</sup>

A second reference is found in Josephus' *Antiquities* (xviii.3.3) and is known as the *Testimonium Flavianum*. It verifies many details about Jesus' life and acts (such as his "surprising feats", teaching, encounter with Pilate, condemnation, appearances, etc), but, unlike the first passage, the validity of this second passage is partially in dispute. Most scholars conclude that the majority of the *Testimonium Flavianum* is original and accurate<sup>212</sup>, with possibly three interpolations<sup>213</sup>, although a minority argue that the entire passage is a later interpolation<sup>214</sup>, while yet another minority argue that the entire passage is legitimate.<sup>215</sup> Noted New Testament scholar F. F. Bruce gives the following plausible reconstruction of the passage (which he believes reflects the content of the original) although since all existing copies (with the exception of one later Aramaic copy) are nearly identical, any reconstruction is speculative:

*Now there arose about this time a source of further trouble in one Jesus, a wise man who performed surprising works, a teacher of men who gladly welcome strange things.*

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207 Robert E. Van Voorst, *Jesus Outside the New Testament: An Introduction to the Ancient Evidence* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2000), 83.

208 Bruce, *The New Testament Documents*, 106.

209 Van Voorst, *Jesus Outside the New Testament*, 83; Barnett, *Is the New Testament Reliable?*, 31; cf Bruce, *The New Testament Documents*, 111.

210 Theissen and Merz, *The Historical Jesus*, 65.

211 Porter and Bedard, *Unmasking the Pagan Christ*, 140.

212 Craig L. Blomberg, *The Historical Reliability of the Gospels* (Downer's Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1987) 200-201.

213 Van Voorst, *Jesus Outside the New Testament*, 88-104; Theissen and Merz, *The Historical Jesus*, 71-74.

214 R. T. France argues that G. A. Wells' position, that the entire passage is an interpolation because when it is removed the writing flows naturally, is misguided, since the passage would not actually flow any better without it. Regardless, he says even if that were true, "It is in any case typical of Josephus' style to include short stories as 'digressions'". France, *The Evidence for Jesus*, 28.

215 F. F. Bruce wonders if the positive references to Jesus were written by Josephus and intended as sarcasm, "tounge-in-cheek". Bruce, *The New Testament Documents*, 112-113.

*He led away many Jews, and also many of the Gentiles. He was the so-called Christ. When Pilate, acting on information supplied by the chief men among us, condemned him to the cross, those who had attached themselves to him at first did not cease to cause trouble, and the tribe of Christians, which has taken this name from him, is not extinct even today.*<sup>216</sup>

A second source comes to us from Cornelius Tacitus, a Roman historian, wrote his *Annals of Imperial Rome* around 115AD. In it he confirms several biblical details<sup>217</sup>, including that Jesus lived when Pilate was governor and Tiberius was emperor, and that Jesus was executed as a criminal.<sup>218</sup> He also confirms the early existence of Christian groups, that the movement began in Jerusalem, and that an “immense multitude” had become convinced of the Christian message. Tacitus' writing does not seem to be derived from Christian sources<sup>219</sup>, and he may have derived his information in part from official Roman records.<sup>220</sup> Few would suggest that this passage is a forgery, since it is found in all existing copies, is stylistically the same as Tacitus' other written work, and is very anti-Christian in tone. Tacitus is also considered by historians to be an eminently reliable writer.<sup>221</sup>

There are several other early extra-biblical references, including Pliny the Younger<sup>222</sup>, Suetonius<sup>223</sup>, Mara bar Serapion<sup>224</sup>, Jewish Rabbinic tradition in the Talmud (where Jesus' miracles are not denied, but it is claimed that Jesus performed them by means of sorcery!)<sup>225</sup>, and early (pre 80AD) Christian inscriptions in Pompeii<sup>226</sup>, as well as the extra-biblical Christian writings of the church fathers. Another potential source (which was likely written in the first century) which has

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216 France, *The Evidence for Jesus*, 30-31, citing F. F. Bruce, *Jesus and Christian Origins Outside the New Testament* (London: Hodder, 1984), 39.

217 *Annals of Imperial Rome*, 15.44.2-5

218 Barnett, *Is the New Testament Reliable?*, 25-26.

219 Bruce, *The New Testament Documents*, 121.

220 Porter and Bedard, *Unmasking the Pagan Christ*, 135; J. P. Holding (ed), *Shattering the Christ Myth: Did Jesus Not Exist?* (Longwood: Xulon Press, 2008), 60-62.

221 Holding (ed), *Shattering the Christ Myth*, 55-57.

222 Van Voorst, *Jesus Outside the New Testament*, 23-29; Barnett, *Is the New Testament Reliable?*, 22-24; Bruce, *The New Testament Documents*, 122-123.

223 Van Voorst argues persuasively that Suetonius' reference to “Chrestus” does indeed refer to Jesus, *Jesus Outside the New Testament*, 23-29; as does Habermas, *The Historical Jesus*, 191; see also Barnett, *Is the New Testament Reliable?*, 28-29; Bruce, *The New Testament Documents*, 122.

224 Van Voorst, *Jesus Outside the New Testament*, 53-58; Van Voorst concludes that Jesus is without a doubt the one referred to as “wise king” in Suetonius, as do Theissen and Merz, *The Historical Jesus*, 76-79.

225 Habermas, *The Historical Jesus*, 202-205; Van Voorst, *Jesus Outside the New Testament*, 104-122.

226 Barnett, *Is the New Testament Reliable?*, 24-25.



unfortunately been lost is the writing of Thallus, which is still partially preserved (secondhand) in the writings of Julius Africanus.<sup>227</sup>

Some may wonder why we do not find more frequent mention of Jesus in extra-biblical sources. First, it's worth reiterating that the New Testament itself contains several independent sources, and thus represents a collection of independent sources itself rather than only one single source. This is significant because the New Testament itself includes several sources.

Second, we should be aware that most historians of the first century were interested primarily in political matters, and although Jesus was condemned by the Roman government, His movement was not primarily political.<sup>228</sup> The usual intended readership of early history was Roman leaders, who would not likely be interested in reading about a Jewish prophet and especially not material that would be in any way laudatory of Him, his teaching, or his deeds.<sup>229</sup> Therefore we would not expect lengthy treatment of Jesus by non-Christian historians, and, due to the usual emphases of ancient historians, "it is remarkable that Jesus gets mentioned at all."<sup>230</sup> Even so, Jesus was still mentioned by two of the three most important historians of Rome (Tacitus and Seutonius, but not Dio Cassius), the most important Jewish historian (Josephus) and several other sources as described above.<sup>231</sup>

Additionally, there is actually less evidence for certain historical figures whose existence is not doubted (for example Rabbi Hillel, or Simon bar Kochba) than there is for Jesus, so if those figures are accepted as historical, Jesus must also be accepted as a real historical person.<sup>232</sup> Finally, archaeological findings (as previously noted) provide confirmatory evidence that the New Testament documents are accurate at points where it can be objectively tested, leading scholars to conclude that "Archaeology has not produced anything that is unequivocally a contradiction to the Bible ... there have been many opinions of skeptical scholars that have become codified into

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227 Theissen and Merz, *The Historical Jesus*, 84-85; Porter and Bedard, *Unmasking the Pagan Christ*, 131-132.

228 Edwin A. Yamauchi in Lee Strobel, *The Case for Christ*, 81.

229 Barnett, *Is the New Testament Reliable?*, 27.

230 Blomberg, "The Historical Reliability of the Gospels," n.p.

231 Porter and Bedard, *Unmasking the Pagan Christ*, 130.

232 Theissen and Merz, *The Historical Jesus*, 93.

'fact' over the years but that archaeology has shown to be wrong."<sup>233</sup> Archaeology has actually confirmed certain biblical people and places that were, for a time, in dispute (see *Internal Evidence* below).

Even if we find certain details in less than total agreement between the New Testament text and other ancient documents, there is no reason to automatically accept the other source rather than the New Testament. When we find that Luke records an event where 4,000 men follow an Egyptian bandit into the desert, and Josephus records the same event but claims 30,000 men went out, then we would likely be more willing to conclude (on this point, at least) that Luke's more sober account is likely correct.<sup>234</sup>

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<sup>233</sup> John McRay in Strobel, *The Case for Christ*, 100.

<sup>234</sup> Hemer, "Luke the Historian," 50.

## Internal Evidence

A historical source such as the New Testament should inspire confidence “if, at points where it can be checked, the writer proves trustworthy.”<sup>235</sup> The historical details that we are able to test through archeology and other ancient writings testify to the accuracy of the New Testament. For example, Luke's specific use of the Greek word “*politarche*” (used only once in Luke-Acts, and only where it was verifiably appropriate to do so<sup>236</sup>) is an example of the care he took when choosing his words. Even certain recorded facts that have been doubted by historians have been proven correct based on later archaeological findings, such as John's mention of such locations as the Pool of Bethesda and the Pool of Siloam<sup>237</sup>, the identification of a location that matches the one where Jesus performed one of His miracles<sup>238</sup>, and even possibly the placard posted above Jesus at His crucifixion!<sup>239</sup>

Numerous other internal features of the New Testament also subtly suggest its authenticity, such as the authors' choice to include “hard sayings”<sup>240</sup>, both of Jesus Himself (ex. Mark 6:5) and regarding the actions of certain disciples (ex. Peter, in Mark 14:66-72).<sup>241</sup> These sayings caused tension for the early church (and some continue to do so today) which makes them unlikely to have been fabricated. If the New Testament documents were subject to later redaction we would not expect to find stories included that portray the early leaders of the church in such a negative light.

It is actually astounding that the Bible is so harmonious even though its texts were written, as previously noted, under such diverse conditions. Norman L. Geisler lists some of the conditions under which the Bible (including the Old and New Testaments) was written<sup>242</sup>:

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235 Barnett, *Is the New Testament Reliable?*, 168.

236 Mark D. Roberts, “Hidden Treasure in the British Museum,” n.p. Cited 16 September 2007. Online: <http://markdroberts.com/?p=153> ; also McRay in Strobel, *The Case for Christ*, 98.

237 McRay in Strobel, *The Case for Christ*, 99.

238 Roberts, *Can We Trust the Gospels?*, 153.

239 Ian Wilson, *Murder at Golgotha: A Scientific Investigation into the Last Days of Jesus' Life, His Death, and His Resurrection* (New York: St Martin's Griffen, 2006), 82-84.

240 Blomberg, “The Historical Reliability of the Gospels,” n.p.

241 Blomberg in Strobel, *The Case for Christ*, 49-50.

242 Geisler, “Can We Know the Bible is the Word of God?,” in Halverson (ed), *The Compact Guide*, 257.

- Written over the time-span of approximately 1,500 years (1400BC – 100AD; at most 70 years for the New Testament)<sup>243</sup>
- Penned by 40 different authors. (9 for the New Testament)
- Contains 66 separate books. (27 in the New Testament)
- Composed in three languages: Hebrew, Greek, and some Aramaic.
- Speaks about hundreds of different topics.
- Written by authors of widely varying social status and occupation.<sup>244</sup>

The Book of Mormon was not composed this way. It was written by a single man, Joseph Smith, over the span of about two years.<sup>245</sup> The composition of the Qur'an is also not comparable, since it was also the product of a single man, Muhammad (although subject to redaction after his death) which was dictated by him over a period of 20-22 years<sup>246</sup>, although it was not collated in final form until after his death.<sup>247</sup> Yet despite the relatively adverse conditions under which the Bible was written, it remains a "continuous unfolding drama"<sup>248</sup> and a congruous narrative. (It should also be noted that we possess four Gospels written by different authors that can be "cross-checked" against each other, as well as checked against the other New Testament authors.<sup>249</sup>) These amazing conditions under which the Bible came together are only some of the challenges that the Bible and the early Christians faced. An entire book, *The Impossible Faith*, has been written describing the many reasons why the Christian faith should have failed, but inexplicably succeeded.<sup>250</sup> (Inexplicable, that is, unless something with the transforming power of the resurrection occurred.)

Certainly some difficulties remain in the New Testament (as perhaps should be expected in

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243 Masood, *The Bible and the Qur'an*, 41.

244 For example, David was a shepherd boy who became king, Solomon (David's son) was born a wealthy and powerful king, Zechariah was a priest, Matthew was a tax collector, John was a fisherman, and Paul was a Roman citizen and well-educated Pharisee. See for example Masood, *The Bible and the Qur'an*, 8.

245 James A. Beverley, *Religions A-Z* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2005), 140-141.

246 Beverley, *Religions A-Z*, 103.

247 Masood, *The Bible and the Qur'an*, 5, 18-40.

248 Geisler, "Can We Know the Bible is the Word of God?," in Halverson (ed), *The Compact Guide*, 257.

249 Barnett, *Is the New Testament Reliable?*, 169.

250 J. P. Holding, *The Impossible Faith* (Longwood: Xulon Press, 2007)

such a long, diverse and occasionally complex ancient text), but most proposed “contradictions” are not contradictions at all, properly defined. For there to be contradictions they would need to violate the law of non-contradiction, that is, claiming both that a thing is true and is also false (to “be and not be”) in the same way and at the same time.<sup>251</sup> Most difficulties labeled “contradictions” do not fit this categorization, even if such proposed contradictions were to be granted just as they are proposed.

It's frustrating when critics (many of whom will be quick to chastise Christians for reading the Bible too “literally”) read certain passages (or verses) out of context or with unnecessary literalness and then claim a contradiction has been found.<sup>252</sup> Philosopher Douglas Groothuis notes that “The standard practice of the ancient historian is to think through possible ways of reconciling seemingly conflicting passages.”<sup>253</sup> No one reading another great yet complex work of literature (such as Shakespeare) would, upon first encountering apparently conflicting statements, immediately dismiss the work as contradictory and worthless. Nor should they, and the biblical text should be read with *at least* the same *appropriate respect* with which other books are read, meaning that when a problem is found, reasonable attempts should be made to reconcile it. Mark D. Roberts relates the frustration he experienced with this issue while completing his PhD in New Testament studies at Harvard University:

*[A]rguments in defense of the Gospel writers' accuracy either were not considered or were quickly rejected as a remnant of naïve fundamentalism. This seemed ironic to me, since these same professors often spent hours in class teasing out nuanced meanings out of ancient texts. ... Yet when it came to the possible historicity of the Gospels, nuance and thoughtful exegesis were often rejected in favor of what could only be called fundamentalist-like literalism.*<sup>254</sup>

Let's examine two verses which may, at first glance, seem to be contradictory. In Matthew

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251 Gregory E. Ganssle, *Thinking About God* (Downer's Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 160-161.

252 France, *The Evidence for Jesus*, 112.

253 Douglas Groothuis, “Understanding the New Atheism, Part 2: Attacks on the New Testament,” n.p. Cited 2 June 2008. Online: <http://www.trueu.org/Academics/LectureHall/A000000921.cfm>

254 Roberts, *Can We Trust the Gospels?*, 147.

11:14, Jesus says (referring to John the Baptist): “if you are willing to accept it, he is the Elijah who was to come.” (Elijah was an Old Testament prophet who many first century Jews believed would return some day.) However, when people asked John the Baptist if he is Elijah, he denied it: “They asked him, “Then who are you? Are you Elijah?” He said, “I am not.”” (John 1:21) So who is right? At first glance it looks like a contradiction. But let’s see if there’s a reasonable explanation. What if Jesus was speaking *figuratively* while John the Baptist was speaking *literally*?<sup>255</sup> That’s a possible solution, but we’d need some evidence to back up this proposed synthesis. It turns out this solution is confirmed by Luke 1:17, where John the Baptist is said to come “in the spirit and power of Elijah”. This confirms that Jesus was giving a figurative statement, while John the Baptist was refuting the crowd’s question as to whether he was literally Elijah brought back to life.<sup>256</sup>

Many proposed difficulties can be alleviated by keeping certain common mistakes of biblical exegesis in mind<sup>257</sup>, and others by recognizing that the various authors retell the stories in their own words with their own emphases (and also not necessarily in chronological order<sup>258</sup>) while still “faithfully and accurately” representing the facts.<sup>259</sup> Furthermore, it’s generally accepted by scholars that Jesus most often spoke in Aramaic, while the New Testament was written in Greek.<sup>260</sup> Therefore, there should be no surprise that we encounter variations in his speech within the gospels, even when describing the same incident, as the authors translate his speech.

The vast majority of the remaining difficulties can be answered by simply studying passages in context and through proper knowledge of first century culture.<sup>261</sup> In this regard, studying the culture of the first century can often provide many fascinating insights into understanding the New Testament writings.<sup>262</sup> Based on study of the internal evidence of the New Testament, we can

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255 Eric Vestrup and J. P. Holding, “Elijah? Who, Me?,” n.p. Cited 29 September 2007. Online: <http://www.tektonics.org/gk/johnsure.html>

256 Darren Hewer, “Bible “contradictions”: A real example,” n.p. Cited 29 September 2007. Online: <http://www.whyfaith.com/2006/06/23/bible-contradictions-a-real-example/>

257 For a list and explanation, see Norman Geisler and Thomas A. Howe, *When Critics Ask* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1992), 15-26.

258 Head, *Is the New Testament Reliable?*, 23-24.

259 Bock in Wilkens & Moreland, *Jesus Under Fire*, 76-77.

260 France, *The Evidence for Jesus*, 117.

261 For example, Geisler and Howe, *When Critics Ask*; Blomberg, *The Historical Reliability of the Gospels*, 113-152.

262 For example, Jeffers, *The Greco-Roman World*; David A. deSilva, *Honor, Patronage, Kinship and Purity* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2000)

conclude that they are consistent within themselves. (See also the *Manuscript Evidence: A Mountain of New Testament Manuscripts* section above regarding the variations we do find in the ancient manuscripts.)

Even if we were to, for the sake of argument, say that the New Testament is a very fallible document, everyone would still agree that the various New Testament texts cohere on the most central and major points regarding Jesus.<sup>263</sup> In fact, an argument that the resurrection occurred can be built using only those historical facts in the New Testament that are so well attested that virtually everyone who studies them (whether they are Christians, Jews, agnostics or skeptics) agree upon them.<sup>264</sup>

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263 DePoe, "The Historical Credibility of the New Testament," n.p.

264 See for example Gary R. Habermas, "The Facts Concerning the Resurrection," n.p. Cited 21 December 2007.

Online: [http://www.growthtrac.com/artman/publish/article\\_815.php](http://www.growthtrac.com/artman/publish/article_815.php) ; For more details on the argument, Habermas and Licona, *The Case for the Resurrection of Jesus*.

## Conclusion

Crucifixion was the most shameful means of death in the Greco-Roman world. It was called the most horrendous torture by Cicero (a first century BC historian) who said of crucifixion that “the very word 'cross' should be far removed not only from the person of a Roman citizen but from his thoughts, his eyes and his ears.”<sup>265</sup> The terrible pain a person hanging on a cross felt necessitated the coining of a new word to describe that pain: “excruciating.”<sup>266</sup> Larry W. Hurtado comments regarding the inexplicable reaction of the earliest Christians to Jesus' dreadful and humiliating crucifixion:

*[A]gainst all odds, as it must have seemed at the time, in Jesus' case crucifixion did not have the result intended by his executioners. ... Perhaps within only a few days or weeks of his crucifixion, Jesus' followers were circulating the astonishing claim that God had raised him from death and had installed him in heavenly glory as Messiah and the appointed vehicle of redemption. Moreover ... these claims were accompanied by an enduring pattern of devotional practices in which Jesus featured with an unprecedented centrality.*<sup>267</sup>

The Bible, including the New Testament, claims to be God's word. If this claim is to be taken seriously, we should first ascertain that the New Testament that we possess is historically reliable. And when carefully examined, the case for the reliability of the New Testament is remarkably strong. N. T. Wright sums up the case when he declares that “there is better evidence for the New Testament than for any other ancient book.”<sup>268</sup> This is a compelling apologetic for the truthfulness of the Christian faith.

### **In summary, the New Testament:**

- was written within a short time frame from the events it records

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265 Habermas and Licona, *The Case for the Resurrection of Jesus*, 49. (Citing Cicero, *Pro Rabirio*, 9-17)

266 Alexander Methelrel in Strobel, *The Case for Christ*, 198.

267 Hurtado, *How on Earth Did Jesus Become a God?*, 4.

268 N. T. Wright, forward to Bruce, *The New Testament Documents*, x.



- is based on multiple independent eyewitness testimony
- has been demonstrated to be consistent via the thousands of extant manuscripts
- has been confirmed to be historically accurate where it can be tested
- is confirmed by extra-biblical documents
- is internally consistent
- has not been successfully impugned by criticisms against it.

This analysis has not proven that the New Testament is the infallible word of God, nor has that been its intent. However, I believe we have explored the many good reasons why the New Testament is worthy of our trust and merits serious consideration of its content.

The New Testament's reliability will not, on its own, convince a person to accept the gospel, God's gift of grace. However, knowledge of the New Testament's reliability may remove an intellectual barrier which prevents a person from taking the Christian Bible seriously, and put a “stone in their shoe”<sup>269</sup> to encourage them to find out what the Bible really says, and why it is so critical to their life. To that end, the case for the reliability of the scriptures is a case worth making, and as we have seen it is a case which rests upon the “sufficiently reliable foundation”<sup>270</sup> of centuries of scholarly study.

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269 Gregory Koukl, “A Stone in His Shoe,” n.p. Cited 24 September 2007. Online: <http://www.str.org/site/News2?page=NewsArticle&id=6306>

270 Head, *Is the New Testament Reliable?*, 25.

## *Epilogue: What's the Point?*

In this short eBook, I've attempted to present evidence that the New Testament is a trustworthy historical document. But what difference does it make if it truly is reliable? What possible difference could Jesus rising from the dead make to us 2,000 years later, even if it were true?

Before we examine that important question, I'd like you to think for a moment about the world we live in. I think you would agree with me that something about this world seems not quite right. In fact, *many things* about it don't seem right at all. Amid glimpses of hope, honor, love, and charity, we also witness evil, injustice, hatred, and sadness. When we take a step back and behold our world, and even our own personal daily lives, I'm sure you'll agree with me that **the world doesn't seem like it's supposed to be.**

Our observation that the world isn't like it's "supposed to be" assumes that there is some higher standard to which we are comparing with the current state of the world. We juxtapose our higher ideal with what we see and conclude, "This just doesn't measure up."

Some have reacted to the terrible things that they see in the world by denying that evil exists. But what is perhaps easy to say is quite difficult to live, or as C. S. Lewis put it: "Whenever you find a man who says he does not believe in a real Right and Wrong, you will find the same man going back on this a moment later."<sup>271</sup> There is a name for the person who denies good and evil: a sociopath.<sup>272</sup> Clearly the proper response to evil is not denial.

Others choose to respond to evil by removing God from the equation. But doing so seems to just cause more questions. Lewis posed the dilemma like this:

*My argument against God was that the universe seemed so cruel and unjust. But how*

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271 C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1952, 1980), 6.

272 Gregory Koukl, "Relativism Self-Destructs," n.p. Cited 12 April 2009. Online: <http://www.str.org/site/News2?id=5539&page=NewsArticle>

*had I got this idea of just and unjust? A man does not call a line crooked unless he has some idea of a straight line. What was I comparing this universe with when I called it unjust?*<sup>273</sup>

And removing God does not make evil less evil, nor pain less painful. In fact, removing God also removes ultimate hope. There is no one to hear our cries in times of sorrow. Instead, there is only the empty, uncaring void of the universe. Without God, our world seems permanently and irredeemably evil. Without God, there is no ultimate relief from pain; there is only pain.<sup>274</sup>

Similarly to how the world seems “not like it’s supposed to be,” our own individual lives too often also seem inadequate. Everyone, whether they are religious or not, has determined their own personal morality, a set of ethical standards they feel are moral. Think about your own self-defined moral standard. Have you lived up to the moral standard that you set up for yourself? Or put another way, have you ever done (or not done) some of the things that you would call someone else immoral for doing? Most honest people would answer “yes”. I know that I would.

So, by even our *own* minimal standard, which we define for ourselves, we are not moral. Consider then this question: *Would God’s standards be higher or lower than the standards I define for myself?* Think about a young child whose bedtime curfew is 9:00pm. One day her babysitter, rather than enforcing the normal curfew, tells her she’s free to set their own. Do you think the child will set her bedtime earlier or later than usual? I think we can say she would likely set it much later, if she actually sleeps that night at all! I think it’s safe to assume a standard of behavior we make up for ourselves would be lower than God’s. And so if we fail miserably at even our own minimal standard, how much more have we failed God’s standard and are in need of His help and forgiveness?<sup>275</sup>

That’s what I call *bad news*. Not only are there big problems with the world, but there are

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<sup>273</sup> Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 38.

<sup>274</sup> Adapted from a blog post I made in honor of a friend. Darren Hewer, “On Evil and Death,” n.p. Cited 12 April 2009. Online: <http://www.whyfaith.com/2007/11/13/on-evil-death/>

<sup>275</sup> Adapted from Darren Hewer, “Are you “good”? Take a different kind of test,” n.p. Cited 7 June 2009. Online: <http://www.whyfaith.com/2008/07/21/are-you-good-take-a-different-kind-of-test/>

big problems in our own personal lives!

Not to be too much of a downer, but religious people throughout the years haven't been too helpful with these problems. Sure, sometimes the religious guys gave people good advice. But really, they just made problems worse. They all preached basically the same thing: If you're good, really good all the time, then just maybe you'll be good enough to get into heaven. Of course, no one knew where the cut-off point was. How good is "good enough"? And after all they were totally powerless to do anything, besides perhaps wagging their finger at people, telling them to "be good", and generally making everyone feel even more miserable. (Perhaps you've known some religious people like that.)

Then Jesus came along.

He taught something unlike any other religious person, a message that has remained unique ever since. He pointed his finger, but not just at you and me: He then pointed to himself as the way to heaven. "*I am the way and the truth and the life,*" he said.<sup>276</sup> Not just a teacher of the way, but he himself as the way, the only way. Who did this guy think he was, anyways?

Jesus is in fact an utterly unique person who made some pretty bold claims. He claimed, for example, that he had the power to forgive other peoples' sins. He also claimed that whoever believes in him will have eternal life. He even accepted worship from his followers. Remember, among first century Jews, accepting worship was a capital offense because only God could be worshiped: **Jesus was claiming to be God!**

But Jesus didn't just make the claim to be God: *He backed it up.* He proved this claim with a flawless life, amazing miracles, and stunning preaching. The crowds who gathered to see him cried out "Nothing like this has ever been seen!" and even the guards who were told to seize him exclaimed "No one ever spoke the way this man does."<sup>277</sup>

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<sup>276</sup> John 14:6.

<sup>277</sup> Matthew 9:33, John 7:46.

Jesus' final confirmation of his unique identity is the most awe-inspiring of all. He willingly died on the cross, accepting the punishment we rightly deserve, so that by believing in him and committing our lives to becoming more like him, we could receive God's gift of eternal life. Not by our own effort – by which we're guaranteed to fail – but instead given freely by God to anyone willing to accept it.

Maybe you've seen people holding John 3:16 signs at football games, or remember hearing it somewhere else: *"For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life."* This is what God offers you. The apostle Paul explained *"God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us"* because *"All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God"* and *"The wages of sin is death."*<sup>278</sup>

What's all this talk about "sin"? We sin whenever we choose to rebel against God by breaking his law (and his heart) and therefore at the same time walk away from fulfilling our true purpose in life. God's justice demands punishment for sin. But rather than forcing us to pay the fine for our sins, God paid it himself on the cross. Then, in demonstration of his power over even death, Jesus was raised from the dead. And because he lives, we also have the chance to live. And not just live mildly or contentedly, but fully, realizing our full potential as we discover our true purpose.<sup>279</sup>

This may all sound like a bunch of wishful thinking. "Sure, it *sounds* good." you may be thinking. Maybe it even sounds a little too easy. But what if there is evidence it is actually true? What if the New Testament stories aren't *merely* stories? What if Jesus *really was* who he claimed to be, at once God and man, bridging the gap between God and ourselves created by our choices to turn away from God? This God-man, who did for us what we could never do for ourselves ... what difference would *that* make to how we understand and experience our world? Author Max

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278 Romans 5:8, 3:23, 6:23.

279 Adapted from Darren Hewer, "The Uniqueness of Jesus," n.p. Cited 7 June 2009. Online: <http://thelife.com/discover/faith/uniquejesus/>

Lucado attempts to explain the magnitude of the significance this way:

*What do we do with such a person? We applaud men for doing good things. We enshrine God for doing great things. But when a man does God things?*

*One thing is certain, we can't ignore him.*

*Why would we want to? If these moments are factual, if the claim of Christ is actual, then he was, at once, man and God.*

*There he was, the single most significant person who ever lived. Forget MVP; he is the entire league. The head of the parade? Hardly. No one else shares the street. Who comes close? Humanity's best and brightest fade like dime-store rubies next to him.*

*Dismiss him? We can't.*

*Resist him? Equally difficult. Don't we need a God-man Savior? ... a God-man Jesus? Near enough to touch. Strong enough to trust. A next door Savior.*

*A Savior found by millions to be irresistible. Nothing compares to "the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord" (Philippians 3:8, RSV). The reward of Christianity is Christ.<sup>280</sup>*

The bad news is that we're incapable of saving ourselves. That would be like someone who is drowning in quicksand trying to pull themselves out of it. It won't work. We need a rope, and someone to pull us out. That's what God did when He came Himself and took the punishment that we deserve so that anyone who trusts in him can have eternal life. That's the gospel: the "good news."

You can change your life forever. God loves you, and so he has already done the work for you. He offers you the gift of life, if you're willing to accept it: *"As many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, even to those who believe in His name."*<sup>281</sup> Accepting

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<sup>280</sup> Max Lucado, *Next Door Savior* (Nashville: W Publishing Group, 2003), 5.

<sup>281</sup> John 1:12.

God's gift has nothing to do with being "religious" and everything to do with God renewing both you and the world itself.

Today, if you resolve to repent (turn away from) the things you know are wrong, and accept God's gift of salvation by putting your faith (trust in God for good reasons!), you will be saved. This day will mark the beginning of your renewed and transformed life, as you begin to live out the life you were always meant to, and begin the process of knowing God even deeper and more completely than you ever thought possible!

**For more information on who Jesus is**, including a Flash presentation of what the Gospel is all about, please visit: [www.WhyFaith.com/jesus-christ/](http://www.WhyFaith.com/jesus-christ/)

**To read the Bible for yourself** online, please visit [www.BibleGateway.com](http://www.BibleGateway.com) or [request a free Bible to be mailed to you](#) or visit your local church.

**Some other good sites to get started are:**

- Starting with God – [www.startingwithgod.com](http://www.startingwithgod.com)
- All About God – [www.allaboutgod.com](http://www.allaboutgod.com)
- Bible.org – [www.bible.org](http://www.bible.org)

## About the Author

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I did not grow up in a religious home, but came to faith later in life at the age of twenty-two. During my undergraduate study at the University of Guelph I accepted Christ and became a follower of Jesus. I came to faith after a careful process of inquiry, and was not willing to take a leap of blind faith. I took a step of trust based on a firm foundation. To read a summary of how and why this occurred, please see [my story on WhyFaith.com](#).

I hope to someday return to school to study philosophy of religion and/or religions of the world (formerly referred to as “comparative religion”) and earn a doctorate degree in a related discipline. I enjoy music of all kinds, video games (especially classic/retro games), reading, hockey, web comics, The Simpsons, and apparently writing long-winded and self-laudatory “About the Author” pages. Other than my faith site WhyFaith.com I own and have developed several other websites including [www.DOSGames.com](http://www.DOSGames.com), [www.Play.vg](http://www.Play.vg), and [www.SimpsonsTest.com](http://www.SimpsonsTest.com) which combined receive over 15,000 unique visitors per day.

I currently live in Canada, attend Scarborough Community Alliance Church ([www.scac.org](http://www.scac.org)) where I am deacon of outreach, and work with TruthMedia Internet Ministry ([www.TruthMedia.com](http://www.TruthMedia.com)).

**Thank you for taking the time to read this eBook!** If you have any questions please don't hesitate to contact me at my website [www.WhyFaith.com](http://www.WhyFaith.com), because I'd love to hear from you!



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