

Some Evidences for the Historical Reliability of the New Testament

The study of ancient writings is called palaeography. Palaeographers find the oldest New Testament manuscripts written on papyrus (from a plant), and later on vellum parchments (animal skin). By these types of material together with the language (in this case Greek is the primary one) and style of handwriting (uncial or minuscule) the palaeographer is able to determine the era and region of the manuscript under investigation.

There are 88 undisputed New Testament manuscripts written on papyrus, which means that they can be dated to within the first 200 years after the New Testament was written. One of these manuscripts is called the *John Rylands Fragment* (P52), kept in the John Rylands Library at Manchester, England. Scholars have conservatively fixed its date to be between 117 to 138 A.D. (some scholars arguing for an earlier date). It is a small piece of papyrus written on both sides, containing portions of five verses from the Gospel of John (18:31-33, 37-38). (Incidentally, this is the passage where Jesus testifies that He is a king and was born to bear witness to the truth and that everyone of the truth hears his voice, to which Pilate replied, ‘What is truth?’) This papyrus was found in Egypt, far from Asia Minor, where early church tradition claims that the Gospel of John was written. This means that for a copy to have reached Egypt, it was most likely written in the late first century, within a generation of Jesus’ lifetime. (Historians have determined that not even *two* generations is long enough for myth to develop in place of historical fact.)

There is also what is called the *Bodmer Papyri* collection of papyrus manuscripts, which are at the Library of World Literature near Geneva, Switzerland. These date from 200 A.D. or earlier and contain most of the Gospels of John and Luke as well as Jude and 1 and 2 Peter.

Finally, in this grouping of papyrus manuscripts there is what is called the *Chester Beatty Papyri*, containing most of the New Testament, and which is owned by the University of Michigan in the United States. Scholars date these from about 250 A.D.

When we move from papyrus manuscripts on to vellum we see that the amount of extant (available today) manuscripts becomes truly enormous in comparison to other ancient writings.

There are 274 uncial manuscripts and 245 uncial lectionaries (‘collections of Scripture texts bound for use in worship’). The other 2795 manuscripts and 1964 lectionaries are minuscule (handwriting from Medieval times). Including yet other fragments than these mentioned we see that ‘Counting Greek copies alone, the New Testament text is preserved in some 5686 partial and complete manuscript portions that were copied by hand from the second (possibly even the first) through the fifteenth centuries.’¹

These are contained all over the world in places like the Vatican Library at Vatican City, the University Library at Leipzig Germany, the National Library of the British Museum, the National Library at Paris, the Cambridge University Library, the University of Basel in Switzerland, the Public Library at Hamburg, the Smithsonian Institute in Washington D.C., the Oxford University Library, as well as Libraries at Leningrad, Moscow, Kiev, etc. etc.

COMPARISON OF ANCIENT TEXTS

Author	Date Written	Earliest Copy	Number of Copies	Accuracy of Copy
Caesar	1 st Cent. B.C.	900 A.D.	10	————
Livy	1 st Cent. B.C.	————	20	————
Tacitus	c. 100 A.D.	1100 A.D.	20	————
Thucydides	5 th Cent. B.C.	900 A.D.	8	————
Herodotus	5 th Cent. B.C.	900 A.D.	8	————
Demosthenes	4 th Cent. B.C.	1100 A.D.	200	————
<i>Mahabharata</i>	————	————	————	90 %
Homer	9 th Cent. B.C.	————	643	95 %
New Testament	1 st Cent. A.D. (50-100 A.D.)	2 nd Cent. A.D. (c. 130 A.D. f.)	5,000	99 + %

‘Several observations are pertinent to the above chart. (1) No other book is even a close second to the Bible on either the *number* or early dating of the copies. The average secular work from antiquity survives on only a handful of manuscripts; the New Testament boasts thousands. (2) The average *gap* between the original composition and the

¹ Geisler, Norman L. (1999), *Baker Encyclopedia of Christian Apologetics*, Grand Rapids, Baker Book House, ‘New Testament Manuscripts’.

earliest copy is over 1,000 years for other books. The New Testament, however, has a fragment within one generation from its original composition, whole books within about 100 years from the time of the autograph, most of the New Testament in less than 200 years, and the entire New Testament within 250 years from the date of its completion. (3) The degree of *accuracy* of the copies is greater for the New Testament than for other books that can be compared. Most books do not survive with enough manuscripts that make comparison possible. A handful of copies that are 1,000 years after the fact do not provide enough links in the missing chain nor enough variant readings in the manuscripts to enable textual scholars to reconstruct the original. Bruce Metzger does provide an interesting comparison of the New Testament with the Indian *Mahabharata* and Homer's *Iliad*. The New Testament has about 20,000 lines. Of these only 40 are in doubt (i.e., about 400 words). The *Iliad* possesses about 15,600 lines with 764 of them in question. This would mean that Homer's text is only 95 percent pure or accurate compared to over 99.5 percent accuracy for the New Testament manuscript copies. The national epic of India has suffered even more textual corruption than the *Iliad*. The *Mahabharata* is some eight times the size of the *Iliad*, of which some 26,000 lines are in doubt. This would be roughly 10 percent textual corruption or a 90 percent accuracy copy of the original. From this documentary standpoint the New Testament writings are superior to comparable ancient writings. The records for the New Testament are vastly more abundant, clearly more ancient, and considerably more accurate in their text.²

'There are more manuscripts, earlier manuscripts, better copied manuscripts, and manuscripts written by more people who were closer to the events than for any other piece of ancient history.'³

Comments from professionals in various historical fields:

C. S. Lewis (whose literary histories and criticisms include *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century* for The Oxford History of English Literature, *The Allegory of Love: A Study in Medieval Tradition*, and *A Preface to Paradise Lost*, all published by Oxford University Press, and who was the Professor of Medieval and Renaissance English at Cambridge University) made the following statement:

'All I am in private life is a literary critic and historian, that's my job. And I'm prepared to say on that basis if anyone thinks the Gospels are either legends or novels, then that person is simply showing his incompetence as a literary critic. I've read a great many novels and I know a fair amount about the legends that grew up among early people, and I know perfectly well the Gospels are not that kind of stuff.'⁴

Archaeologist Nelson Glueck (Director of the American School of Oriental Research in Jerusalem) asserted: 'it may be stated categorically that no archaeological discovery has ever controverted a biblical reference. Scores of archaeological findings have been made which confirm in clear outline or exact detail historical statements in the Bible.'⁵

The Roman historian A. N. Sherwin-White said about the Book of Acts: 'For Acts the confirmation of historicity is overwhelming... Any attempt to reject its basic historicity must now appear absurd. Roman historians have long taken it for granted.'⁶

The eminent Archaeologist William F. Albright (director of the American School of Oriental Research at Johns Hopkins University) stated in an interview: 'In my opinion, every book of the New Testament was written by a baptized Jew between the forties and the eighties of the first century A.D. (very probably between about 50 and 75 A.D.).'⁷ Albright also wrote: 'We can already say emphatically that there is no longer any solid basis for dating any book of the New Testament after about A.D. 80, two full generations before the date between 130 and 150 given by the more radical New Testament critics of today.'⁸

The classical scholar Sir Fredric Kenyon (director of the British Museum) wrote: '**The interval then between the dates of original composition and the earliest extant evidence becomes so small as to be in fact negligible, and the last foundation for any doubt that the Scriptures have come down to substantially as they were written has now been removed. Both the authenticity and the general integrity of the books of the New Testament may be regarded as finally established.**'⁹

² Geisler, Norman L. (1976), *Christian Apologetics*, Grand Rapids, Baker Book House, pp. 307-08.

³ Geisler, Norman L. (1999), *Baker Encyclopedia of Christian Apologetics*, Grand Rapids, Baker Book House, p. 381.

⁴ From Lewis's *Christian Reflections*, p. 209.

⁵ *Rivers in the Desert: A History of the Negev*, p. 31.

⁶ *Roman Society and Roman Law in the New Testament*, p. 189.

⁷ *Christianity Today*, 'William Albright: Toward a More Conservative View' (18 January 1963).

⁸ *Recent Discoveries in Bible Lands*, p. 136.

⁹ *The Bible and Archaeology*, pp. 288ff.