

10 Misconceptions of the Christian Faith

#1 The New Testament Is Not Historically Reliable

Is the New Testament (NT) a reliable source for answering the question: who is Jesus? Some claim that the NT authors did not leave us with an accurate record of the life and teaching of Jesus, and hence the origins of Christianity. There are suggestions forwarded to support this claim. However, the positive evidence for the NT's trustworthiness often goes unreported. Consider the following.

1. Bibliographic Evidence. It is not an overstatement to say that the NT far surpasses any ancient text in terms of bibliographic evidence to substantiate its antiquity. One bibliographic test of antiquity measures the span of time between the original document and our earliest surviving copy. The NT was written from AD 40 – 100 and the first surviving fragment dates to AD 130 (P52). Since the fragment comes from John's gospel, which is believed to have been written around AD 100, there is only an approximate 30 year span between the original and a surviving copy. Additionally, we have other sizeable extant NT manuscripts that date from circa AD 200 (e.g., P46). This time gap is a surprisingly narrow one when compared to all other writings from antiquity. For example, Herodotus lived and wrote from 488 – 428 BC, and the earliest manuscripts of his writings appear in AD 900 – a span of 1300 years. The first copy of Livy's (59 BC – AD 17) Roman history is dated to AD 900 – a span of 900 years. This kind of time lapse is typical for ancient texts. The NT's nearest rival in this matter is Homer's *Iliad*, which was written in 900 BC, the first surviving copy of which dates to 500 years later (400 BC). The NT also greatly exceeds other ancient documents in the number of existing fragments and manuscripts. We have over 5000 Greek manuscripts of the NT, not counting non-Greek versions of the NT, such as Syriac, Coptic, Latin, etc. However, there only exist 9 copies of Herodotus' works, 20 of Livy's history, and 643 of the *Iliad*. The bibliographic evidence for the NT is so strong that if we reject it on textual grounds, we would also be forced to reject every other surviving work from antiquity.

2. External Evidence. Other 1st and 2nd century non-Christian authors support the basic outlines of Jesus' life and the teachings of the NT, including Tacitus, Josephus, Suetonius, Pliny the Younger, Lucian of Samosata, Mara bar Serapion, Thallus, and the Tannaim. Even if we did not have the NT, these non-Christian historians tell us some important facts about Jesus and his followers. They report that Jesus was a Jew who lived in Judea in the 1st century and attracted people because of his distinct teaching and surprising deeds. He amassed a following while he was alive. And though he suffered the ignominious death of crucifixion under one Pontus Pilate, worship of him and allegiance to his teachings spread throughout the Roman Empire. In addition to ancient historians, archaeological evidence corroborates historical facts within the NT. For example, an inscription discovered early in the 20th century confirmed the claim of Acts 18:12, naming Gallio as proconsul in Achaia circa AD 51-52. This epigraphic evidence is especially significant because Achaia had only become a senatorial province in AD 44 instead of an imperial province, which was ruled by a legate. Many extrabiblical ancient sources verify that the NT authors carefully recorded history, even those details that were not central to their message.

3. Internal Evidence. Just because the writers of the NT were Christians, we should not immediately exclude their historical account of Jesus as hopelessly biased and unable to report events as they actually occurred. All historiography is in some measure interpretation, and the gospel writers were aware of this fact. They were indeed writing to engender faith, but their faith was in an historical person who spoke and lived in time and space. This is why it was so important to the gospel writers that they got the story of Jesus right, both historically and theologically. Luke 1:1-4 reflects the care employed by the gospel writers in compiling their accounts of Jesus. In his opening pericope Luke assures his reader(s)

that he investigated the subject matter thoroughly and that his narrative accords with eyewitness testimony (again, Luke 1:1-4). Therefore, for instance, the evangelists recorded names and places associated with Jesus' ministry, so that their stories could be validated by several sources. The NT gospels are primarily the collected testimony of eyewitnesses, whether from the apostles of Jesus or others. It is possible, and indeed likely, that one of the strongest motives of the NT authors was sincere testimony. They had nothing to gain and everything to lose, yet they were constrained to speak about what they had seen and heard. What else could have led early Christians to risk persecution and death except that Jesus was truly who they knew him to be?

If one is to deny the claims of the NT based on content, that is one thing. But it is unreasonable to dismiss the claims of Christianity based on textual and historical grounds. In every test, the NT remains an incredibly reliable historical document. Perhaps there is good reason that it is the most influential book in history. If the NT is as historically reliable as other ancient works, you owe it to yourself to read it thoroughly from cover to cover. What's more, if the events of the NT truly happened – that Jesus is God in the flesh, who lived, died, and rose again – the only appropriate response is for you to follow him as Lord.

For further positive assessments of the NT's historical reliability, go to bible.org and search 'new testament reliable.' For a range of views on the issue, search the same on google.

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