

Manuscript Support for the Bible's Reliability

by **Ron Rhodes**

[Edited Version]

Manuscript Evidence for the New Testament

There are more than 24,000 partial and complete manuscript copies of the New Testament. These manuscript copies are very ancient and they are available for inspection now. There are also some 86,000 quotations from the early Church Fathers and several thousand Lectionaries (church-service books containing Scripture quotations used in the early centuries of Christianity). Bottom line: the New Testament has an overwhelming amount of evidence supporting its reliability.

The Variants in the New Testament Manuscripts Are Minimal

In the many thousands of manuscript copies we possess of the New Testament, scholars have discovered that there are some 150,000 "variants." This may seem like a staggering figure to the uninformed mind. But to those who study the issue, the numbers are not so damning as it may initially appear. Indeed, a look at the hard evidence shows that the New Testament manuscripts are amazingly accurate and trustworthy.

To begin, we must emphasize that out of these 150,000 variants, 99 percent hold virtually no significance whatsoever. Many of these variants simply involve a missing letter in a word; some involve reversing the order of two words (such as "Christ Jesus" instead of "Jesus Christ"); some may involve the absence of one or more insignificant words.

Really, when all the facts are put on the table, only about 50 of the variants have any real significance - and even then, no doctrine of the Christian faith or any moral commandment is effected by them. For more than ninety-nine percent of the cases the original text can be reconstructed to a practical certainty. Even in the few cases where some perplexity remains, this does not impinge on the meaning of Scripture to the point of clouding a tenet of the faith or a mandate of life.

Thus, in the Bible as we have it (and as it is conveyed to us through faithful translations) we do have for practical purposes the very Word of God, inasmuch as the manuscripts do convey to us the complete vital truth of the originals.

By practicing the science of textual criticism - comparing all the available manuscripts with each other - we can come to an assurance regarding what the original document must have said.

By comparing the various manuscripts, all of which contain very minor differences, it becomes fairly clear what the original must have said. Most of the manuscript variations concern matters of spelling, word order, tenses, and the like; no single doctrine is affected by them in any way.

We must also emphasize that the sheer volume of manuscripts we possess greatly narrows the margin of doubt regarding what the original biblical document said. If the number of [manuscripts] increases the number of scribal errors, it increases proportionately the means of correcting such errors, so that the margin of doubt left in the process of recovering the exact original wording is not so large as might be feared; it is in truth remarkably small.

The New Testament Versus Other Ancient Books

By comparing the manuscript support for the Bible with manuscript support for other ancient documents and books, it becomes overwhelmingly clear that no other ancient piece of literature can stand up to the Bible. Manuscript support for the Bible is unparalleled! There are more [New Testament] manuscripts copied with greater accuracy and earlier dating than for any secular classic from antiquity.

Norman Geisler makes several key observations for our consideration:

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.

The average gap between the original composition and the 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 [original manuscript], most of the New Testament in less than 200 years, and the entire New Testament within 250 years from the date of its completion.

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.

From this documentary evidence, then, it is clear that 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."

Support for the New Testament from the Church Fathers

As noted at the beginning of this chapter, in addition to the many thousands of New Testament manuscripts, there are over 86,000 quotations of the New Testament in the early Church Fathers. There are also New Testament quotations in thousands of early Church Lectionaries (worship books).

There are enough quotations from the early church fathers that even if we did not have a single copy of the Bible, scholars could still reconstruct all but 11 verses of the entire New Testament from material written within 150 to 200 years from the time of Christ. [Editors Note: This is well before the time of Constantine]

Manuscript Evidence for the Old Testament

The Dead Sea Scrolls prove the accuracy of the transmission of the Bible. In fact, in these scrolls discovered at Qumran in 1947, we have Old Testament manuscripts that date about a thousand years earlier (150 B.C.) than the other Old Testament manuscripts then in our possession (which dated to A.D. 900).

The significant thing is that when one compares the two sets of manuscripts, it is clear that they are essentially the same, with very few changes. The fact that manuscripts separated by a thousand years are essentially the same indicates the incredible accuracy of the Old Testament's manuscript transmission.

A full copy of the Book of Isaiah was discovered at Qumran. Even though the two copies of Isaiah discovered in Qumran Cave I near the Dead Sea in 1947 were a thousand years earlier than the oldest dated manuscript previously known (A.D. 980), they proved to be word for word identical with our standard Hebrew Bible in more than 95 percent of the text. The 5 percent of variation consisted chiefly of obvious slips of the pen and variations in spelling.

From manuscript discoveries like the Dead Sea Scrolls [combined] with the massive amount of manuscript evidence we have for the New Testament, it is clear that the Christian Bible is a trustworthy and reliable book.

The Dead Sea Scrolls prove that the copyists of biblical manuscripts took great care in going about their work. These copyists knew they were duplicating God's Word, so they went to incredible lengths to prevent error from creeping into their work. The scribes carefully counted every line, word, syllable, and letter to ensure accuracy.

Hence, the Bible itself indicates that copies can faithfully reflect the original text and therefore function authoritatively.

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Comparison of Bible & Other Ancient Manuscripts

Author and Work	Author's Lifespan	Date of Events	Date of Writing	Earliest Extant MS	Lapse: Event to Writing	Lapse: Event to MS
Matthew, <i>Gospel</i>	ca. AD 1-70?	4 BC-AD 30	AD 50-65/75	ca. AD 200	<50 yrs	<200 yrs
Mark, <i>Gospel</i>	ca. AD 15-90?	AD 27-30	AD 65/70	ca. AD 225	<50 yrs	<200 yrs
Luke, <i>Gospel</i>	ca. AD 10-80?	5 BC-AD 30	AD 60/75	ca. AD 200	<50 yrs	<200 yrs
John, <i>Gospel</i>	ca. AD 10-100?	AD 27-30	AD 90-110	ca. AD 130	<80 yrs	<100 yrs
Paul, <i>Letters</i>	ca. AD 1-65	AD 30	AD 50-65	ca. AD 200	20-30 yrs	<200 yrs
Josephus, <i>War</i>	ca. AD 37-100	200 BC-AD 70	ca. AD 80	ca. AD 950	10-300 yrs	900-1200 yrs
Josephus, <i>Antiquities</i>	ca. AD 37-100	200 BC-AD 65	ca. AD 95	ca. AD 1050	30-300 yrs	1000-1300 yrs
Tacitus, <i>Annals</i>	ca. AD 56-120	AD 14-68	AD 100-120	ca. AD 850	30-100 yrs	800-850 yrs
Seutonius, <i>Lives</i>	ca. AD 69-130	50 BC-AD 95	ca. AD 120	ca. AD 850	25-170 yrs	750-900 yrs
Pliny, <i>Letters</i>	ca. AD 60-115	AD 97-112	AD 110-112	ca. AD 850	0-3 yrs	725-750 yrs
Plutarch, <i>Lives</i>	ca. AD 50-120	500 BC-AD 70	ca. AD 100	ca. AD 950	30-600 yrs	850-1500 yrs
Herodotus, <i>History</i>	ca. 485-425 BC	546-478 BC	430-425 BC	ca. AD 900	50-125 yrs	1400-1450 yrs
Thucydides, <i>History</i>	ca. 460-400 BC	431-411 BC	410-400 BC	ca. AD 900	0-30 yrs	1300-1350 yrs
Xenophon, <i>Anabasis</i>	ca. 430-355 BC	401-399 BC	385-375 BC	ca. AD 1350	15-25 yrs	1750 yrs
Polybius, <i>History</i>	ca. 200-120 BC	220-168 BC	ca. 150 BC	ca. AD 950	20-70 yrs	1100-1150 yrs