

## THE HISTORICAL RELIABILITY OF THE NEW TESTAMENT

BY: Jill Graham

One of the key points in proving the truth of Christianity is showing that the New Testament writings are historically reliable. Without this foundation, it is impossible to know if the story of the life and teachings of Jesus that has come down to us can be trusted, and thus if the Jesus presented in the New Testament is worthy of reasonable faith. Muslims claim that the New Testament documents have been corrupted and that Christians do not have access to the true teachings of Jesus through their Scriptures.<sup>1</sup> Higher critics and groups such as the Jesus Seminar assert that the New Testament is marred by fictitious inventions and legendary additions, and that the Jesus of history is far different from the Jesus presented in the gospels.<sup>2</sup> Post-modernist relativists challenge that truth about history, including the truths about the historical Jesus, cannot be known with any degree of certainty.<sup>3</sup> These challenges must be answered, and a positive case built for the historical reliability of the New Testament if Christianity is to remain a viable faith in our world today.

As F.F. Bruce cautions in his introduction to his book on the historical reliability of the New Testament documents, the teachings of Confucius or Plato can stand regardless of the traditions about their lives that have come down to us, but the truth of

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<sup>1</sup> Norman L. Geisler and Abdul Saleeb, *Answering Islam*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 2002), 60-1.

<sup>2</sup> William Lane Craig, *Reasonable Faith*, (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1994), 225.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 157.

the teachings of Jesus is intimately connected to his real life in history and the reliability of the Christian story.<sup>4</sup> F.F. Bruce writes:

The Christian gospel is not primarily a code of ethics or a metaphysical system; it is first and foremost good news . . . [which is] intimately bound up with the historical order . . . This historical ‘once-for-all-ness’ of Christianity, which distinguishes it from those religious and philosophical systems which are not specially related to any particular time, makes the reliability of the writings which purport to record this revelation a question of first-rate importance . . . The character of Jesus can be known only from the New Testament records; the influence of his character is therefore tantamount to the influence of the New Testament Records.<sup>5</sup>

Bruce’s authority on the question of the authenticity of the New Testament makes this statement of its importance even more compelling.

### **Preliminary Considerations**

#### The Problem of Historical Knowledge

It is first necessary to touch on some important preliminary considerations that must be dealt with when studying history in general and the New Testament documents specifically. William Lane Craig’s book *Reasonable Faith* includes a lengthy chapter which discusses the problem of historical knowledge. According to Craig, “Rooted in Continental philosophy and hermeneutics and in the anti-realism of Wittgenstein, there has emerged a powerful post-modernist current of relativism which flows through virtually every academic field, including history.”<sup>6</sup> This relativism undermines the idea

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<sup>4</sup> F.F. Bruce, *The New Testament Documents – Are They Reliable?* 5<sup>th</sup> ed. (Leicester, England: Inter-Varsity Press), 7-8.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 7-9.

<sup>6</sup> Craig, 167.

that anything can be known with any degree of certainty about history, including the historical nature of Christ and the gospels. According to Craig, this relativism asserts that “We cannot know anything about the past as it actually happened, because we cannot directly observe the past; and second, we cannot reconstruct the past objectively, because we are not neutral observers, but rather products of our time, place, culture, circumstances, and so forth.”<sup>7</sup> In other words, the modern observer is too far removed from history and too influenced by his or her own cultural biases to objectively discern any truth about history. The only Jesus that can be found, according to this view is a Jesus constructed after one’s own image. The author quotes an observer of this mindset as saying, “Each one looked down the long well of history and saw his own face reflected at the bottom.”<sup>8</sup>

Craig continues to explain the effect of this relativism on historical apologetics: “Both dialectical and existential theology severed the theological truth of the gospel from the facts concerning the historical Jesus. Hence, any historical apologetic was conceived to be worse than useless, since it focused on the historical Jesus instead of the Christ of faith.”<sup>9</sup> Thus, influenced by a lack of confidence in the objectivity of the historical method, bad theology cut the ties between the Jesus of faith and the Jesus of history. This has had profoundly negative effects on the effectiveness of historical apologetics, as well as on the faith of those who seek to have a “reasonable faith” based on the historicity of Christ and his gospel.

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 169.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 168.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

Craig counters the claims of historical relativism by showing that the theory itself is self-defeating. He asks the reader to reflect on the following:

The untenability of even this moderate philosophical constructionism may be seen by reflecting on a case in which every statement in a historian's reconstruction of the past corresponds to what actually happened in the past. In such a case those statements are true, according to a view of truth as correspondence, and if the evidence justifies belief in that historian's theory, how is it possible to have knowledge only of the historian's theory and not of the past itself?<sup>10</sup>

In other words, the truth of a theory is based on evidence (in this case from history) that supports it. Yet if there is no such thing as true historical knowledge, how can a theory about history be known to be true or false? It also seems bizarre and contrary to reality to deny historical events such as the holocaust, yet that is what some contemporary neo-Nazis utilizing historical relativism have claimed to do.<sup>11</sup> Craig also quotes Nowell-Smith as saying, "Some results of historical thinking are so well established that it would be madness to doubt them; others have only the status of being a more probable explanation of the evidence than any rival hypothesis . . . Why is it still reasonable to doubt whether there ever was such a person as King Arthur but utterly unreasonable to question the existence of George Washington?"<sup>12</sup> While historical knowledge does not have degree of certainty of mathematics or repeatable scientific experiments, and while certain facts about history may have less certainty than others, it does not follow that *no* truth about history (such as the fact that George Washington was a real person) can be known with at least some degree of certainty. This all goes back to the self-evident principle that truth about reality (even historical reality) can be known. To deny this is self-defeating since

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 174.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 173.

one must claim to *know* something about reality (or historical reality), namely that truth about reality (or history) is not knowable. Craig sums up by stating, “We do believe that historical analysis is capable of establishing an inherent probability of the trustworthiness of the historical portions of the New Testament.”<sup>13</sup>

### Biblical Criticism

A second important consideration is the challenge posed by certain schools of biblical criticism and radical groups such as the Jesus Seminar. The concern is whether the New Testament gospels and other books accurately convey what Jesus actually did and thought, or whether his disciples and later followers added legendary and other fictitious elements. Form critics such as Rudolf Bultmann assert the hypothesis that there was a long period of oral transmission of the stories about Jesus in which miraculous stories and legends were gradually added on until the true core was obscured. It is the form critic’s job to discern which of the words and deeds attributed to Jesus in the gospels are authentic. This core of authenticity is believed by the form critics to be very small and to present a Jesus very different from the one believed in by a majority of Christians today.<sup>14</sup> As Craig Blomberg puts it in a chapter of William Lane Craig’s *Reasonable Faith*, “Early form critics believed that the early church had increasingly turned Jesus into a divine wonder-worker making grandiose claims for himself, when in fact he had originally been little more than a great, human teacher who did not put himself forward nearly so pretentiously.”<sup>15</sup> Redaction criticism postulated that Matthew, Mark,

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 175.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 203.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 197.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 198.

Luke, and John acted as editors and obscured the original intent of the teachings with their own interpretations and “theological stamps.”<sup>16</sup>

Radical groups such as the Jesus Seminar composed of “seventy-four contemporary academicians and pastors, mostly American, and mostly representing scholarship’s radical fringe” have re-created their own version of what they think Jesus really said and did.<sup>17</sup> They use different colors to designate the certainty of Jesus giving a particular teaching. According to Blomberg, they give only about twenty percent of Jesus’ sayings any degree of authenticity. Most of Jesus’ teachings are said to be the “perspective or content of a later or different tradition.”<sup>18</sup> Clearly, all of these groups severely undermine the historicity of the New Testament documents and thus the gospel message.

Blomberg counters the challenges given by form criticism by pointing out that “ancient Mediterranean cultures, particularly Judaism, relied heavily on memorization of sacred traditions.”<sup>19</sup> These practices would have helped Jesus’ disciples transmit his teachings accurately through a period of oral tradition. In addition, the veneration the disciples had for Jesus and his teachings coupled with the fact that up to 90% of Jesus teachings were “poetic in structure and memorable in form” lend further support to the claim that the disciples would have accurately transmitted Jesus’ teachings and deeds

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 201.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 209.

until they were written down.<sup>20</sup> Other checks on oral tradition included the presence of other eye-witnesses and apostolic leadership which would have kept false details or legendary additions from tainting the story.<sup>21</sup> Also, as will be explained in more detail later, the gap between oral tradition and the written documents is too small to admit for legendary development. Blomberg sums up by saying, “Investigation of the period of oral tradition behind the writings of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John actually bolsters confidence that these authors had both the *ability* and *desire* to preserved accurate history, according to the standards and practices of their day.”<sup>22</sup>

Blomberg answers the challenges of redaction criticism by stressing the fact that “ideological and historical motivations do not cancel each other out.” He goes on to say, “One of the most firmly entrenched fallacies of modern redaction criticism is that an author cannot be writing theology and history simultaneously.” In other words, the fact that the disciples were recording theology did not necessarily mean that they were not accurately recording history. Blomberg uses the example of the holocaust to illustrate his point. The Jews were “passionately committed to seeing that such atrocities never occurred again.”<sup>23</sup> But this passion did not negate the fact that they were accurately recording history. The disciples were also passionate about what they were recording, but it does not follow that their passion led them to distort the historical facts about Jesus.

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 210.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 211.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

While it is true that the gospel writers presented the story of Jesus from different perspectives and with different emphasis, this does not mean that this in any way distorted the historical facts. For example, redaction criticism reveals that “Mark highlights the failure of the disciples, while Matthew stresses how Jesus’ life and teaching fulfilled the Law and the Prophets.”<sup>24</sup> However, these differences do not mean that the disciples in any way distorted the facts or contradicted each other. Blomberg says it this way, “The oral tradition did not accidentally falsify the accounts; the Evangelists did not arbitrarily distort them. Rather the same events are retold from complementary perspectives to highlight those themes that were most relevant for their respective audiences.”<sup>25</sup> What emerges are complementary accounts that more fully illuminate Jesus’ life in a way that no one gospel could.

Blomberg also points out that “in the ancient world, *all* history was ideologically motivated.” However, this does not mean that we can know nothing about history because of this. According to Blomberg, the reliability of an account should be assessed based on, “the author’s access to accurate reports of the past or to a trustworthy memory of his or her own experiences.” For example, historians agree that Caesar’s crossing of the Rubican was an actual historical event even though it “is attested only by four ancient writers, two to three generations after the event, all dependent on one eyewitness account, and preserved in significantly different forms corresponding to the various authors’ ideologies.”<sup>26</sup> In comparison, the gospel writers accounts seem much more reliable as

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 212.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 213.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 211.

they are “even better attested, at an earlier date, and based on more eyewitness.”<sup>27</sup> If one can believe that Julius Caesar crossed the Rubican with a high degree of historical certainty, why not believe in the historicity of the Jesus of the gospels which is much better attested?

In answer to the claims of the Jesus Seminar Blomberg asserts, “We should reject these claims as eccentric (though widely publicized) even within non-evangelical scholarship and as based on highly unreliable methodology.” He’s saying that although the Jesus Seminar has gotten a great deal of publicity, their methods are dubious, and their conclusions are rejected by majority of today’s serious biblical scholars, including more liberal scholars. As Blomberg points out, the conclusion of the Jesus Seminar, “leaves us with a Jesus who would not have alienated the authorities of his day sufficient to trigger his execution.”<sup>28</sup> In other words, the Jesus presented by the Seminar does not make sense with the historical fact that he was executed by the Roman officials at the recommendation of the Jewish authorities. The Jesus Seminar claims to present a more historically accurate Jesus, but it ends up with a Jesus who cannot be reconciled with known history or the extraordinary phenomenon of the rise and growth of the Christian church.

#### Authenticity and Genuineness

The final consideration deals with criteria for authenticity. According to Blomberg, critics of the New Testament judge authenticity based on the criteria of

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 212.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 225.

“dissimilarity, multiple attestation, Palestinian environment, and coherence.”<sup>29</sup> The New Testament meets these criteria for authenticity remarkably well. Blomberg says, “The criterion of dissimilarity accepts as authentic that which is noticeably distinctive from both a first-century Jewish and an early Christian milieu.” For example, Jesus’ form of the parable does not seem to arise out of any Jewish practice, but is distinctively his own. Although Jewish teachers used parables, they used them to explain Scripture rather than to “illustrate God’s in-breaking reign.”<sup>30</sup> It is also significant that the early Christians did not use parables to teach. Thus, the parables of Jesus seem to be unique, and thus authentic. Multiple attestation “affirms that those details which appear in more than one independent source or layer of the gospel tradition are likely to be authentic.” The feeding of the 5,000 fits this criterion because it appears in all four gospels.<sup>31</sup> The criterion about the Palestinian environment, “admits as more likely authentic those traditions which seem to require an early Palestinian Jewish-Christian milieu for their genesis.”<sup>32</sup> Jesus’ use of the terms ‘Son of Man,’ ‘Abba’ (Aramaic for ‘daddy’ in reference to God the Father), and ‘Amen’ (Hebrew for ‘truly’) are all details that seem to come from a Palestinian Jewish-Christian time period and thus vouch for the authenticity of the gospels.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 233.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 231.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 223.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 223-24.

Finally, the criterion of coherence “affirms that we may accept traditions which are not immediately suggested by an application of the previous three criteria but which are profoundly consistent with the meaning and significance of those which do.”<sup>34</sup> For example, Jesus’ miracle of changing the water into wine illustrates the “newness of the kingdom taught by the parable of the wineskins.” This miracle coheres with the parables of Jesus which were shown to be authentic using the criterion of dissimilarity. Blomberg concludes that analyzing the New Testament with these criteria attests to its overall authenticity, “Even when one adopts a skeptical starting point, a sane application of the criteria of authenticity can lend credence, with varying degrees of confidence, to virtually all of the major themes and forms within the historical narratives of the New Testament.”<sup>35</sup>

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

### Manuscript Evidence

The first step in ascertaining the historical reliability of the New Testament documents is to determine whether or not the New Testament we have today is an accurate copy of the original writings. If our copy is different from the original, then we already know that it may contain serious historical errors. However, there is abundant evidence that today’s New Testament is a remarkably accurate copy of the original.

Although we do not have the original copies of the writings of the New Testament, we have plenty of very early manuscripts. These manuscripts are closer to their originals and more numerous than any other manuscripts from the ancient world.

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 224.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

For example, according to Dr. Norman Geisler's texts, *Twelve Points that Show Christianity is True* and *Baker's Encyclopedia of Christian Apologetics*, we have around 5,686 New Testament manuscripts that date within twenty-five years of the original writings. In contrast, the second most attested work from antiquity, Homer's *Illiad*, only has about 643 manuscript copies, with a gap of over five-hundred years from the original.<sup>36</sup> F.F. Bruce gives the comparison that Caesar's *Gallic Wars*, a major piece from antiquity which was composed between 58 and 50 B.C., only has about nine or ten good manuscripts; and the oldest comes from nine-hundred years after Caesar's day.<sup>37</sup> Caesar's military forays into Gaul are held to be historic on such little attestation. Surely the events of the New Testament should be given a high degree of historic certainty because they are even better attested! Craig Blomberg sums this up nicely, "The point is simply that the textual evidence for what the NT authors wrote far outstrips the documentation we have for any other ancient writing, including dozens which we believe have been preserved relatively intact."<sup>38</sup>

Also according to Geisler, "undisputed manuscript evidence from the early second century has been found in Egypt."<sup>39</sup> This is the John Rylands fragment of John 18:31-33. Dating from the early second century (A.D. 117-138), this fragment is the

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<sup>36</sup> Norman L. Geisler, *Twelve Points that Show Christianity is True* (Charlotte, NC: Impact), 15.

<sup>37</sup> Bruce, 16.

<sup>38</sup> Craig, 194.

<sup>39</sup> Geisler, *Twelve Points*, 15.

“earliest undisputed copy of a portion of the New Testament.”<sup>40</sup> Also significant is the fact that it was found in Egypt, which is far from where John would have written the gospel. This means that it must have been in circulation for quite some time, and lends credence to the view that John was written before the end of the first century.<sup>41</sup>

Other, even earlier fragments have also been found. For example, the “Magdalen fragment” of the gospel of Matthew is believed by some scholars to come from around 60 A.D.<sup>42</sup> Geisler also states that, “Other Gospel fragments are dated as early as A.D. 50. These were originally found among the Dead Sea Scrolls.”<sup>43</sup> These fragments are parts of the gospel of Mark that had been preserved by the Qumran community. Although some dispute the identification of these fragments, they at least support the claim that the gospels were written earlier than many critics thought.

Other famous, undisputed manuscripts are the Bodimer Papyri and the Chester Beatty Papyri. The Bodimer Papyri includes portions of Jude, 1&2<sup>nd</sup> Peter, the Psalms, and other apocryphal books. It also contains the gospels of John and Luke almost in their entirety and is the earliest manuscript we have of the book of Luke. The Bodmer Papyri dates from between 175 and 225 A.D. The Chester Beatty Papyri dates from A.D. and contains most of the New Testament, including the four gospels, many of Paul’s epistles, and Revelation.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Norman L. Geisler, *Baker Encyclopedia of Christian Apologetics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1999), 533.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Geisler, *Twelve Points*, 15.

<sup>43</sup> Geisler, *Encyclopedia*, 533.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

In addition to many early manuscripts for the New Testament, we also have more accurately copied manuscripts than and other works of antiquity. New Testament Scholar Bruce Metzger estimates that the New Testament we have today is 99.5% accurate when compared with the ancient manuscripts. In comparison, the Hindu *Mahabharata* was copied with only about 90 percent accuracy; Homer's *Illiad* is a close second with 95% accuracy.<sup>45</sup> In addition, textual scholar Phillip Schaff estimated that of the copying errors present in the New Testament, only fifty were significant, and not even one affected "an article of faith or a precept of duty which is not abundantly sustained by other and undoubted passages, or by the whole tenor of Scripture teaching." Other textual scholars Westcott and Hort estimated that even with the errors, the New Testament documents remain 98.33% pure.<sup>46</sup>

The last line of evidence comes from the fact that the early church fathers from the second and third century quoted extensively from the New Testament. They quoted the New Testament 36,289 times. In fact, virtually the entire New Testament (except for eleven verses) can be reconstructed from their writings.<sup>47</sup> Even if all of the manuscripts were lost, the New Testament could be verified from their writings. And comparing their quotations with existing manuscripts again underscores the accuracy and care with which the New Testament was passed down. These early church fathers, such as Clement (bishop of Rome), Ignatius (bishop of Antioch), and Polycarp (a disciple of the apostle

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 532-33.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 532.

<sup>47</sup> Geisler, *Twelve Points*, 15.

John) all wrote between A.D. 90-160.<sup>48</sup> These are very early dates, which means that the writers would have had access to very early manuscripts. Again, this lends credence to the idea that our New Testament is accurate.

To sum up, the thesis that we can be reasonably certain that the New Testament we have today is an accurate copy of the original has been abundantly supported by the evidence. F.G. Kenyon sums this up nicely in his book *Our Bible and the Ancient*

*Manuscripts*:

It cannot be too strongly asserted that in substance the text of the Bible is certain; Especially is this the case with the New Testament. The number of manuscripts of the New Testament, of early translations of it, and of quotations from it in the oldest writers of the Church, is so large that it is practically certain that the true reading of every doubtful passage is preserved in some one or other of these authorities.<sup>49</sup>

The manuscript evidence also counters the claim by the Muslims, mentioned earlier, that the New Testament has been corrupted through time. If Jesus is really a prophet speaking from God, as Muslims claim, then they will have to deal with the fact that the New Testament has accurately transmitted his teachings.<sup>50</sup> If they think the Christian message has been corrupted, they will have to find a line of attack different from attacking the accuracy of Scripture.

#### Authorship and Dating

The manuscript evidence establishes that we have an accurately transmitted record of the life of Jesus, but how do we know whether or not it is fact or fiction? This leads us to the next line of evidence: the authorship and dating of the writings of the New

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<sup>48</sup> Bruce, 18.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 16.

Testament. The earlier the dates for the writing of the New Testament documents, the more sure we can be that they accurately recorded history as seen by eye-witnesses, and the less possibility there is for legendary accretions. Also, establishing that the authors of the documents were eye-witnesses or closely associated with eye-witnesses and that these writers were people of integrity further backs up the claim that the writings record historic facts, not fiction.

### ***Authorship***

Concerning the authorship of the New Testament, Craig Blomberg writes,

There are no dissenting traditions whatever in the first centuries of the Church's history concerning the authorship of the first three gospels and Acts and concerning the repeated claims that these books were indeed written by Matthew, Mark, and Luke. Given that two of these men were not apostles (Mark and Luke), and that Matthew would have been the most 'suspect' of the apostles, in light of his background as a tax collector, it seems unlikely that the first Christians would have invented these authorship claims if they were merely trying to enhance the credibility of the documents attributed to these writers.<sup>51</sup>

In other words, those most likely to know the true authors of the gospels (the early Christians and church fathers) credit the writing of the gospels to Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. Matthew and John were both apostles and eye-witnesses, so their authorship makes sense and underscores the trustworthiness of their gospels because they are eye-witness testimony. However, if the gospels were fiction or were given fictitious authors later, it would hardly seem reasonable to attribute a gospel to a tax-collector like Matthew who would have been immediately mistrusted by the masses, or to two non-apostles, Mark and Luke. In fact, Blomberg points out that later spurious, apocryphal gospels

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<sup>50</sup> Geisler, *Answering Islam*, 57-59.

<sup>51</sup> Craig, 204.

were attributed to Peter, James, Bartholomew, Thomas, and even Mary.<sup>52</sup> Thus, the traditional authors of the gospels have more credence because they are not what one might immediately expect and have the ring of truth to them.

In addition, it is important to note that Mark was known as “Peter’s interpreter” and wrote his gospel “accurately “though not in order from what he learned from that apostle.” Peter was another eye-witness, and his influence gives the gospel of Mark credibility. The testimony of Papias, which was recorded by the Christian historian Eusebius in the early third century, supports this claim that Peter’s apostolic authority behind the gospel of Mark as well as affirming that Matthew wrote his gospel of the life and sayings of Jesus in the Hebrew (or Aramaic) language. Blomberg also suggests that it would be quite possible for Matthew to have used Mark as a help in writing his gospel because it contained the witness of Peter, who head of the early church.<sup>53</sup> This makes some sense out of the similarity between the two. However, Matthew also contains elements that are entirely different from either Mark or Luke, so his gospel is a separate witness. Blomberg suggests that Matthew may have authored a collection of the sayings of Jesus and then later combined this with other information gained from Mark, other traditions, and his own memory.<sup>54</sup>

Blomberg further writes that “The internal evidence of Luke-Acts certainly fits the early church’s claim that these two books were written by Paul’s traveling companion and ‘beloved physician’ (Col. 4:14).” For example, in portions of Acts, the narrator shifts

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

from first person (“I”) to third person (“we”).<sup>55</sup> This would make the most sense if the book was written by someone traveling with Paul. Much of the books of Luke and Acts could have been written from eye-witness testimony, the teachings of Paul, reliance on the book of Mark, and other sources that Luke sought out. During Paul’s imprisonment in Palestine under Felix and Festus, Luke would have had a great deal of time to seek out information from those who would have known Jesus and been present in the early church.<sup>56</sup> Indeed, the gospel writer says in Luke 1:1-4 that he was intending to write an “orderly account” that he had “carefully investigated from the beginning” and that was based on testimony which had been “handed down to us from the first” by “eye-witnesses and servants of the word.” Thus, Luke’s gospel and Acts are supported by the apostolic authority of Paul as well as by the other eye-witnesses and apostles. This underscores the veracity of his accounts.

The evidence that the fourth gospel was written by John the apostle has been most clearly given by B.F. Westcott.<sup>57</sup> Blomberg describes Westcott’s process in the following:

Westcott amassed detailed evidence to zero in on successively smaller targets by demonstrating that the author of the gospel was a Jew (with his detailed knowledge of the Hebrew feasts, customs, and Scriptures), a Palestinian (with his impressive grasp of local geography and topography), an eyewitness (with repeated, compelling references to details of people, time, and place), and apostle (from his intimate acquaintance with the actions and thoughts of the Twelve), and the apostle John- as the ‘beloved disciple.’<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 205.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

In other words, clues within the gospel itself points clearly to the apostle John himself as no one else could have had the specific knowledge evidenced in the gospel. As an apostle, John was an eye-witness of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, as well as privy to many teachings that others were not privileged to hear. Thus, he was in a position to produce the most accurate picture of Christ and his teachings.

In this way, investigating and affirming the traditional authorship of all of the gospels further supports the accuracy of the gospels themselves. If all of the gospels have eye-witness testimony behind them, their reliability, including historical reliability is made more credible. As far as the integrity of the gospel writers, it must be remembered that as followers of Christ, they had nothing to gain in promoting lies in an environment that was very hostile to Christianity. Many early Christians, including all of the remaining disciples except for John, were martyred for their beliefs. While some people may be dedicated enough to die for a lie, no one would die for something that he or she *knew* was a lie. The apostles and gospel writers were clearly in a position to know whether or not what they wrote was a lie, and it would certainly have been more convenient for them to have renounced their faith to save their lives. The fact that they did not deny their faith even in the face of death speaks to the veracity of the gospel accounts. In addition, the gospel writers did not attempt to harmonize minor details (which is an earmark for eye-witness accounts), nor did they leave out embarrassing details about themselves (such as Peter's denial of Christ) or Christ's difficult teachings. The New Testament authors also were propagating a high standard of ethics given by

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

Jesus which prohibited lying.<sup>59</sup> Also, as discussed earlier in the section on oral tradition, the respect the writers had for Jesus and his teachings would have led them to be extremely careful to preserve and pass on the truth of his life and teachings. In short, the evidence supports the claim that the New Testament writers were people of integrity who had no reason to fabricate the story and every reason to be as accurate (historically and otherwise) as possible.

### ***Dating***

As for the dating of the writing of the New Testament documents, the manuscript evidence discussed previously and other evidence that will be discussed in the following section suggest that the gospels were written earlier than some critics might think. F.F. Bruce, who again is well-respected in the field of New Testament criticism states, “A first-century date for most of the New Testament writings cannot reasonably be denied, no matter what our philosophical presuppositions may be.”<sup>60</sup> Noted biblical archeologist William F. Albright 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 today.”<sup>61</sup> Albright has also written, “In my opinion, every book of the New Testament was written by a baptized Jew between the forties and the eighties of the

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<sup>59</sup> Geisler, *Twelve Points*, 17.

<sup>60</sup> Bruce, 15.

<sup>61</sup> Geisler, *Encyclopedia*, 529.

first century (probably between 50 and 75 A.D.).<sup>62</sup> Thus, at least a first century date for the documents is supported by these two experts on the subject.

Blomberg writes that if the gospels were written by the traditional authors (as was established in the previous section), then the gospels must date from the first century in which they lived. He says that this is “a point generally conceded even by the most who suspect the traditional ascriptions of authorship.”<sup>63</sup> Although liberal scholars date most of the New Testament after A.D. 70, Blomberg points out that the writings of Matthew, Mark, and Luke were probably written before A.D. 70. The reasoning is that Acts ends abruptly without any mention of the fall of Jerusalem in A.D. 70 or the death of Paul. This would only make sense if Luke was writing Acts while Paul was under house arrest and awaiting word on his appeal to Caesar *before* the fall of Jerusalem. Luke does not tell what happens to Paul because he does not know at that point. Paul’s house arrest under Festus can be dated to A.D. 60-62, thus, the writing of Acts must have been around this time. Since Acts was written after the gospel Luke (they were both part of a two-scroll set), the gospel must also have been written before this time.<sup>64</sup>

Blomberg reasons further, “Because Luke shows clear signs of dependence on Mark, Mark must have written earlier.” According to Blomberg, Clement of Alexandria says that Mark wrote his gospel while Peter was preaching in Rome, which probably would have been at least in the early sixties. Thus, a date for Mark in the mid to late

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<sup>62</sup> Geisler, *Twelve Points*, 16.

<sup>63</sup> Craig, 206.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*

fifties seems reasonable.<sup>65</sup> Blomberg adds that some critics object to dates prior to A.D. 70 for the synoptic gospels because they say that it was impossible for Jesus to have predicted the destruction of Jerusalem in advance as he does in Matthew 24, Mark 13, and Luke 21. But, as he says, “these objections depend on an unjustified anti-supernaturalist world view. What is more, after-the-fact ‘prophecies’ are usually far more explicit than those we allegedly find in the gospels.”<sup>66</sup>

According to Geisler, Roman historian Colin Hemer agrees with Blomberg on a date for Acts of A.D. 60-62. He also cites the fact that Acts does not mention the fall of Jerusalem. He also adds that there was no hint in Acts of the death of James at the hands of the Sanhedrin in A.D. 62, which was recorded by the Jewish historian Josephus. Other evidence is the lack of hints of the outbreak of the Jewish war in A.D. 66 or the deterioration of Christian relations with Rome in the late 60’s.<sup>67</sup>

Geisler adds to evidence of early dates for the synoptics by pointing out that the New Testament gospels are cited in other first-century works such as Pseudo-Barnabas, Didache, Clement’s “Corinthians,” and Ignatius’ “Seven Epistles,” so the gospels must have been written earlier in the first century. Also, Paul cites Luke’s gospel as Scripture in 1 Timothy 5:18, which is dated between 62-65 A.D., which puts the date for Luke’s gospel even earlier. Additionally, the New Testament writings speak of the Jewish temple as if it was still standing and still in use at the time of the writings. This meant the

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<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 207.

<sup>67</sup> Geisler, Encyclopedia, 528.

books must have been written prior to the fall of Jerusalem in A.D. 70 in which the temple was destroyed.<sup>68</sup>

One of the earliest dates for any part of the New Testament is a passage from 1 Corinthians. Geisler writes that “most critical scholars date 1 Corinthians at A.D. 55-56. This places written testimony about the death and resurrection (1 Cor. 15:1-6) only twenty to twenty-two years after the date.”<sup>69</sup> These verses formed what was probably an early creed that would have been memorized and passed down by the first Christians and may date from even closer to the end of Jesus’ earthly life. In fact, according to Geisler, some scholars such as John A. T. Robinson place the earliest written records at A.D. 40-60, which would be just seven years after the death and resurrection of Jesus.<sup>70</sup>

In summary, the early dates attested to for the gospels and other New Testament writings supports the claim that they are near enough to the life of Jesus to accurately record it. They also leave so little of a gap between Jesus’ life and the writings that legends would not have had time to develop. According to Geisler, tests have shown that legends need at least two generations to develop and replace historic fact because before that time eye-witnesses are still present who could correct the stories.<sup>71</sup> In fact, it is interesting to note that after two generations, obviously spurious and legendary stories about Jesus began to surface. For example, the apocryphal book *The Gospel According to St. Peter* includes a talking cross and an extremely tall, risen Jesus who towers into the

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<sup>68</sup> Geisler, *Twelve Points*, 16.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

clouds.<sup>72</sup> This fanciful story is much different from the gospel accounts of the resurrection, and the comparison further supports the reliability of the New Testament. According to C.S. Lewis, who knew much about the nature and character of mythology, the New Testament is written in a simple, unembellished, straight-forward fashion that is very different from mythology. He writes, “All I am in private life is a literary critic and historian...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 know perfectly well that the Gospels are not that kind of stuff.”<sup>73</sup>

Corroboration of New Testament Accounts in Archeology and Extra-biblical Writings

### *Archeology*

Modern archeology has done much to contribute to the case for the historical reliability of the Bible in general and the New Testament specifically. For example, according to Geisler, archeologists have confirmed the historical accuracy of Luke (which was once questioned), by showing that author of Luke named “thirty-two countries, fifty-four cities, nine islands, and hundreds of details without making a single error.”<sup>74</sup> An inscription that names Pontius Pilate as the prefect of Judea as the New Testament claims was discovered in Caesarea in 1961. Another inscription naming “Erastus” as the director of public works mentioned in Romans 16:23 was found in Corinth in 1929. The remains of a crucifixion victim from the first century were found in

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<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 17.

<sup>72</sup> Jones-Wake, ed., *The Lost Books of the Bible* (USA: Bell Publishing Co., 1979), 285.

<sup>73</sup> Geisler, *Encyclopedia*, 518.

<sup>74</sup> Geisler, *Twelve Points*, 19.

1968, which shows that crucifixion was in use at this time and that the hands and feet would have been pierced as the New Testament describes. In 1990, the bones of Joseph Caiaphas were found, who was mentioned in the New Testament as being one of the religious leaders who brought about Jesus' death. New Testament cites such as Bethlehem, Nazareth, Cana, and Capernaum have been discovered.<sup>75</sup> And more recently, an ossuary has been found containing the bones of one said to be "James (Jacob), son of Joseph, brother of Jesus."<sup>76</sup> This could be direct confirmation of the historicity of Jesus, his brother James (a leader of the early church), and their father. All of these facts attest to the historical reliability of the New Testament.

### ***Extra-biblical Writings***

References in non-Christian writings to Jesus and other details in the New Testament also attest to its historical reliability. For example, the rabbinical writings collected in the Talmud, which are usually hostile to Christianity, do mention Jesus as a historical figure. According to F.F. Bruce, these writings record that

Jesus of Nazareth was a transgressor in Israel, who practiced magic, scorned the words of the wise, led the people astray, and said he had not come to destroy the law but to add to it. He was hanged on Passover Eve for heresy and misleading the people. His disciples, of whom five were named, healed the sick in his name.<sup>77</sup>

An astonishing amount of facts about Jesus are attested in these writings. Jesus is clearly depicted as someone who had supernatural power, had a message that was influential

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<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 20.

<sup>76</sup> Dr. T.V. Oommen, "James' Ossuary Found in Jerusalem," Amazing Bible Discoveries, available from [www.biblediscoveries.com/ossuary.html](http://www.biblediscoveries.com/ossuary.html); Internet; accessed 23 December 2004.

enough to cause the Jewish authorities to think he was “leading people astray” and to cause them to kill him for alleged heresy. Even the time of the crucifixion on the eve of Passover is alluded to. Jesus’ disciples are attributed with super-natural powers of healing. Although this is clearly a hostile account, some of the main claims of the gospel message are supported here.

The Jewish historian Josephus also mentions Jesus in his history of the Jewish nation called the *Antiquities*. Although the text about Jesus may have been edited and embellished by later Christians, the undisputed portions of the passage affirm that Jesus was known as a “wise man,” a “doer of marvelous deeds” (perhaps an allusion to miracles), “a teacher of men who receive the truth with pleasure” who “led away many Jews, and also many Greeks.” He also records that Jesus was condemned to die on the cross by Pilate at the instigation of “the chief men among us” (the Jewish religious leaders), that his followers did not cease loving him, and that “the tribe of Christians, so named after him” had not yet died out.<sup>78</sup>

There are also a few non-Jewish sources that attest to the truths of the New Testament. F.F. Bruce explains a possible reason why there are not more gentile references to Christ: “From the standpoint of Imperial Rome, Christianity in the first hundred years of its existence was an obscure, disreputable, vulgar oriental superstition, and if it found its way into official records at all these would most likely be police records which have disappeared.”<sup>79</sup> In other words, at its beginning, Christianity was not large enough of a force to warrant the attention of Rome and its chroniclers. However,

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<sup>77</sup> Bruce, 101.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, 108.

there were some New Testament events that were important enough and global enough to be recorded by gentiles. A first century writer named Thallus recorded a strange darkness that he explains as an eclipse of the sun.<sup>80</sup> This may be the unnatural darkness that came upon the land when Jesus was crucified. The great Roman historian Tacitus, who wrote about the reign of Nero (A.D. 54-68), described the fire that engulfed much of Rome in A.D. 64, which was probably caused by Nero himself so he could rebuild an even greater city. However, Nero found a convenient scapegoat and blamed the fire on Christians. Tacitus writes:

Therefore, to scotch the rumor, Nero substituted as culprits . . . a class of men, loathed for their vices, whom the crowd styled Christians. Christus, from whom they got their name, had been executed by sentence of the procurator Pontius Pilate when Tiberius was emperor; and the pernicious superstition was checked for a short time, only to break out afresh, not only in Judaea, the home of the plague, but in Rome itself, where all the horrible and shameful things in the world collect and find a home.<sup>81</sup>

Thus, even from such a hostile description, the historical existence of Jesus Christ, his death at the hands of Pontius Pilate, and the subsequent spread of Christianity are all attested to.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, a wide body of evidence attests to the historical reliability of the New Testament Documents. History, including the history of Jesus is knowable and accessible to those who are willing to seek it out. The challenges given by Muslims, biblical critics and the Jesus Seminar are all readily answerable. And the positive case

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<sup>79</sup> Ibid., 114.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., 113.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid., 117.

for historical reliability based on manuscript evidence, the eye-witness writers and their integrity, the early dates for the writing of the New Testament, and even the support of archeology and non-Christian sources has been laid out not only in this paper, but in many more thorough and well-written books on the subject.

Craig Blomberg writes, “The burden of proof that any portion of these works is unhistorical must rest squarely on the skeptic’s shoulders.”<sup>82</sup> Yet, as has been shown, even when the Christian (or the seeker) takes the burden of proof back onto his or her own shoulders, the evidence is ample enough to establish, at least beyond reasonable doubt, that the New Testament is historically reliable and has accurately preserved and transmitted the record of the life and teaching of Jesus.

Dr. Norman Geisler explains that we can be 99% sure that the New Testament is historically reliable. Although the skeptic may complain that this is not 100% proof, Geisler suggests two “welds’ for these ‘cracks’ in the chain.” These are “the providence of God and the witness of the Holy Spirit” which “provide assurance to the believer that the chain is unbroken.”<sup>83</sup> As is the case in any subject in apologetics, God can use evidence to convince the head that his Word can be trusted, but the final step to faith must be made by a free-will choice in the heart of each individual. But thankfully for those who seek, the evidence to convince the head is readily abundant.

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<sup>82</sup> Craig, 222.

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<sup>83</sup> Norman L Geisler, *A General Introduction to the Bible* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1983), 238-39.