The New Testament: Can I Trust It?

Rusty Wright and Linda Raney Wright examine how the New Testament documents measure up when subjected to standard tests for historical reliability.

 This article is also available in Spanish.

"How can any well-educated person believe the New Testament? It was written so long after the events it records that we can't possibly trust it as historically reliable." This is a common question on the university campus and deserves an honest answer.

How does one determine the authenticity of an ancient book? C. Sanders, a military historian, outlines three basic tests used by historians and literary critics.{1} These are the internal, external and bibliographic tests. Let's consider briefly how the New Testament stands up to each one.

1. The Internal Test

Here our question concerns the trustworthiness of the writers as revealed by the text itself. One of the chief issues is whether or not we have eyewitness testimony. The New Testament accounts of the life of Christ were written by eyewitnesses or by people relating the accounts of the eyewitnesses of the actual events. John wrote, "what we have seen and heard [concerning Christ], we proclaim to you also."{2} Peter stated that he and his associates were "eyewitnesses of His majesty."{3} Luke claimed that his gospel was based on accounts compiled from eyewitnesses.{4} In a court of law, eyewitness testimony is the most reliable kind.

Another issue in the internal test is the consistency of the

reports. If two writers present testimony that is contradictory, doubt is cast on the integrity of one or both records.

Many have charged that the New Testament contains contradictions. To deal with such charges, it is important to understand that "contrary" is defined by Webster as "a proposition so related to another that, though both may be false, they cannot both be true." Thus, the statement, "Joe and Bill are in this room" contradicts the statement, "Only Joe is in this room." It does not, however, contradict the statement, "Joe is in this room." *Omission does not necessarily constitute contradiction.*

With this in mind, consider several alleged New Testament contradictions. Some observe that Luke writes of two angels at the tomb of Jesus after the resurrection{5} while Matthew mentions "an angel."{6} The observation of the statements is accurate, but the interpretation of them as contraries is not. If Matthew explicitly stated that only one angel was present at that time, the two accounts would be dissonant. As it is, they are harmonious.

Others note an apparent discrepancy in the accounts of the birth of Jesus. Hans Conzelmann, a German theologian, writing of Matthew's and Luke's accounts of the nativity, states that "in every detail they disagree."{7} He focuses on apparent geographical inconsistencies.

Simple observation shows that the two accounts do differ. Luke tells of Joseph and Mary starting in Nazareth and traveling to Bethlehem (for the census and the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem). He then records the family's return to Nazareth.{8} Matthew's account begins with the couple in Bethlehem (and Jesus' birth there) and records their flight into Egypt to escape King Herod's wrath, and relates their travel to Nazareth after Herod's death.{9}

Contradictory vs. Complementary

Conzelmann regards these details as contradictory, but are they? The Gospels never claim to be exhaustive records of the life of Christ. Any biographer must of necessity be selective. Could not Matthew have chosen to omit the census journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem and Luke the flight into Egypt? As such, the accounts are complementary, rather than contradictory.{10}

Often such critics seem unable to carefully discern the content of biblical texts because of their own negative presuppositions and lofty speculations. One is inclined to agree with C. S. Lewis' criticism of these skeptics when he writes, "These men ask me to believe they can read between the lines of the old texts; the evidence (that they cannot) is their obvious inability to read (in any sense worth discussing) the lines themselves."{11} Consider a final (and more difficult) example of alleged inconsistency. Many have noted a difference between the synoptic accounts (those in Matthew, Mark and Luke) and John's account of the dating of the death of Jesus. Specifically, the issue concerns the chronological relationship of the crucifixion to the celebration of the Passover meal by the Jews. Mark refers to some Jews observing the Passover the evening before the crucifixion.{12} John seems to indicate a Passover celebration *after* the crucifixion.{13} In a recent definitive article, Dr. Harold Hoehner of Dallas Theological Seminary solves the puzzle.{14} Citing evidence from the *Mishnah* and the scholars Strock-Billerbock, Hoehner shows that the Pharisees and Sadducees (two contemporary religious parties) disagreed about the day of the week on which the Passover should fall. The result was that the Pharisees celebrated the Passover one day before the Sadducees did. This makes it entirely plausible that the synoptics use the reckoning of the Pharisees, while John presents that of the Sadducees, thus accounting for the difference.

2. External Test

This test asks whether other historical and archaeological materials confirm or deny the internal testimony provided by the documents themselves. Several authors of antiquity wrote of Jesus as a person of history. Among them were Tacitus, Josephus, Seutonius, and Pliny the Younger.{15} Sir William Ramsey, an eminent archaeologist, once held that Luke's writings were not historically sound. His own subsequent investigation of near-eastern archaeology forced him to reverse his position and conclude that "Luke is a historian of the first rank."{16}

Nelson Glueck, former president of Jewish Theological Seminary in Cincinnati, one of the greatest archaeologists, and a Jew, wrote: "It may be stated categorically that no archaeological discovery has ever controverted a biblical reference."{17}

Archaeological Evidence

Consider a few examples of archaeological confirmation of the New Testament. In I Corinthians, Paul refers to the meat market in Corinth.{18} An inscription from ancient Corinth has been discovered which refers to the "meat market."{19} Luke refers to the temple of Artemis in Ephesus and speaks of a riot that occurred in a theater in the same city.{20} The temple was excavated in 1803 and measured 100 by 340 feet.{21} Twentieth-century Austrian archaeologists unearthed the theater and found it could hold nearly 25,000 people.{22}

Mark writes of Jesus healing a blind man as He left Jericho.{23} Luke, apparently writing of the same event, says it happened while Jesus was *approaching* Jericho.{24}

Excavations in 1907-09 by Ernest Sellin, of the German Oriental Society, showed that there were "twin cities" of Jericho in Jesus' time—an old Jewish city and a Roman city separated by about a mile.{25} Apparently Mark referred to one

and Luke referred to the other, and the incident occurred as Jesus traveled between the two.

William F. Albright, one of the world's leading biblical archaeologists, adds a helpful comment: "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 of between A.D. 130 and 150 given by the more radical New Testament critics of today."{26} This statement is crucial because it means that some of Christ's opponents, who were living when He was on earth, were undoubtedly still around when the New Testament books were penned. Their presence would have prompted the New Testament writers to give careful attention to the veracity of the statements. And we can be certain that if any errors were made in their accounts the opponents of Christ (of which there were many) would have been quick to expose them.

3. Bibliographic Test

This final test is necessary because we do not possess the original manuscripts of most ancient documents. The question that must be asked, then, is: "How many early copies do we have and how close in time are they to the original?" A. T. Robertson, author of one of the most comprehensive grammars of New Testament Greek, wrote, "…we have 13,000 manuscript copies of portions of the New Testament."{27} Many of these copies are dated only a short time (80-400 years) after the original.

When the New Testament documents are compared with other writings of antiquity for the numbers of early copies and the chronological proximity of the copies to the original, the New Testament is far superior. (For instance, we have only 10 good copies of *Gallic Wars* and they are 1,000 years after the original; seven copies of Plato's Tetrologies, 1,200 years after the original. Similar results hold for the writings of Thucydides, Herodotus and a host of others.){28}

The late Sir Frederic Kenyon, former director and principal librarian of the British Museum, was one of the leading authorities on the reliability of ancient manuscripts. He drew this conclusion:

> *"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 us 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."{29}*

If one concludes that the New Testament documents are historically reliable, it stands to reason that he should seriously consider the message they present. In the Old Testament and the New, the message of the Bible is the message of Jesus Christ. And He offers an abundant and eternal life to anyone who will consider and respond to His claims: "I am the light of the world; he who follows Me shall not walk in the darkness, but shall have the light of life…and you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free."{30}

Notes

1. Sanders, C. *Introduction to Research in English Literary History* (New York: MacMillan, 1952), pp. 143ff; quoted in Montgomery, John. "History and Christianity," *His Magazine* reprint, Chicago, December 1964-March 1965, pp. 6-9.

2. I John 1:3.

3. 11 Peter 1:16.

4. Luke 1:1-3.

5. Luke 24:1-4.

6. Matthew 28:1-8.

7. Conzelmann, Hans. *Jesus.* The classic article from the RGG expanded and updated (Philadelphia: Fortress Press), pp. 26-27.

8. Luke 1:26, 2:40.

9. Matthew 2:1-23.

10. Cheney, Johnston. *The Life of Christ in Stereo.* (Portland, OR: Western Seminary Press, 1971), pp. 6-14, 243.

11. Hooper, Walter (ed.). *Christian Reflections* (William B. Eerdmans) quoted in McDowell, Josh. *More Evidence That Demands a Verdict* (San Bernardino, CA: Campus Crusade for Christ, Inc., 1975), p. 342.

12. Mark 14:12ff.

13. John 18:28.

14. Hoehner, Harold W. "Chronological Aspects of the Life of Christ, Part IV" *Bibliotheca Sacra* (Dallas: Dallas Theological Seminary, July, 1974), pp. 241-264.

15. Bruce, F. F. *Jesus and Christian Origins Outside the New Testament.* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), pp.19-41.

16. Ramsay, W.M. The Bearing of Recent Discovery on the Trustworthiness of the New Testament. (1915), p. 222; quoted in Bruce, F. F. *The New Testament Documents – Are They Reliable?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1968), p. 91.

17. Glueck, Nelson. *Rivers in the Desert History of Negev.* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publications Society of America, 1969); quoted in McDowell, Josh. *Evidence That Demands A Verdict.* (San Bernardino, CA: Campus Crusade for Christ, Inc., 1972), p. 68.

18. 1 Corinthians 10:25.

19. Bruce, *Christian Origins.* p 200.

20. Acts 19:27-29.

21. Free, Joseph P. *Archaeology and Bible History.* (Wheaton: Scripture Press,1951), p.324.

22. Ibid.

23. Mark 10:46-52.

24. Luke 18:35 43.

25. Free, op cit, p. 295; the old Jewish Jericho may have been a "ghost town" or merely a mound in Jesus' day.

26. Albright, William. *Recent Discoveries in Biblical Lands.* (New York: Funk and Wagnalls, 1955), p. 136; quoted in McDowell, op. cit., p. 65.

27. Robertson, A T., *Introduction to the Textual Criticism of the New Testament.* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1925), p. 70; quoted in Montgomery, op. cit., p. 6.

28. McDowell, op. cit., pp. 46-56: Montgomery, op. cit., p. 6: Bruce, op. cit., pp. 10-20.

29. Kenyon, F. G. *The Bible and Archaeology.* (New York and London: Harper, 1940), pp. 288, 89; quoted in Montgomery, op. cit., p. 6.

30. John 8:12, 32.

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