

QUESTIONS ABOUT THE BIBLE

# IS THE NEW TESTAMENT HISTORICALLY RELIABLE?

ARTICLE #7



**The New Testament** is comprised of 27 documents written by Jesus' apostles and earliest followers approximately 2,000 years ago. Their original writings, called autographs, no longer exist. Today we read copies of copies translated from Greek to English and other modern languages. For approx. 1,500 years until the invention of the printing press all of these copies were made by hand. Now we know that humans aren't machines and that no human is perfect. Surely throughout the centuries the copyists made many mistakes. How then can we be confident that the New Testament we read today is the same as the original written 2,000 years ago?

New Testament critic, Bart Ehrman asks, *"What good is it to say that the original writings of the New Testament were inspired? We don't have the originals! We only have error-ridden copies! And the vast majority of these are centuries removed from the originals and different from them, evidently, in thousands of ways."*

In short, if we can't trust the New Testament, we can't trust anything it says about Jesus. The New Testament, along with all significant literature from the ancient world, is reconstructed into its original form by comparing manuscript copies that have survived.

To determine the reliability of a reconstruction historians ask three questions: 1. How many copies exist? 2. How large is the time gap between when the original was written and when the surviving copies were made? 3. Are there any significant differences between the surviving copies? Historians are more confident in the reliability of a reconstruction when there are a large number of copies, the time gap is short, and the differences are relevantly insignificant. As an example, historians are confident they have accurately reconstructed some of the works of Greek philosopher Plato and Greek writer Homer. Let's examine how the New Testament compares to these ancient writings.

### **HOW MANY COPIES EXIST?**

We have 219 copies of Plato, and 2,300 copies of Homer. But when it comes to the New Testament we have over 5,500 Greek manuscripts alone. Furthermore, the New Testament documents were also translated into several other languages at an early date. Translation of a document into another language was rare in the ancient world; this is another plus for the New Testament. Christian apologist Josh McDowell notes that, "The number of copies of the versions is in excess of 18,000, with possibly as many as 25,000." This is further evidence that helps establish the reliability of the New Testament.

### **HOW LARGE IS THE TIME GAP?**

1,300 years passed before the first surviving manuscript of Plato was written. For Homer, the time gap is down to 400 years. But for the New Testament, it's only 35 years. By examining that many manuscript copies that are so close to the autographs, scholars and historians, can reconstruct the original documents with amazing precision.

### **HOW SIGNIFICANT ARE THE VARIATIONS?**

The thousands of manuscript copies of the New Testament are not identical. In fact, there are approximately 400,000 differences. But how significant are these variations? The majority of these variations are differences in spelling (i.e. John/Johnn) Almost all of the remaining differences are made up of minor variations, such as the use of synonyms (i.e. Christ/Lord), and errors scholars have been able to determine were not in the original text. Less than 1% of all the variations have any real significance for the meaning of the original text. However, it has been established that none of these, not a single one, affects a core doctrine of the Christian faith.

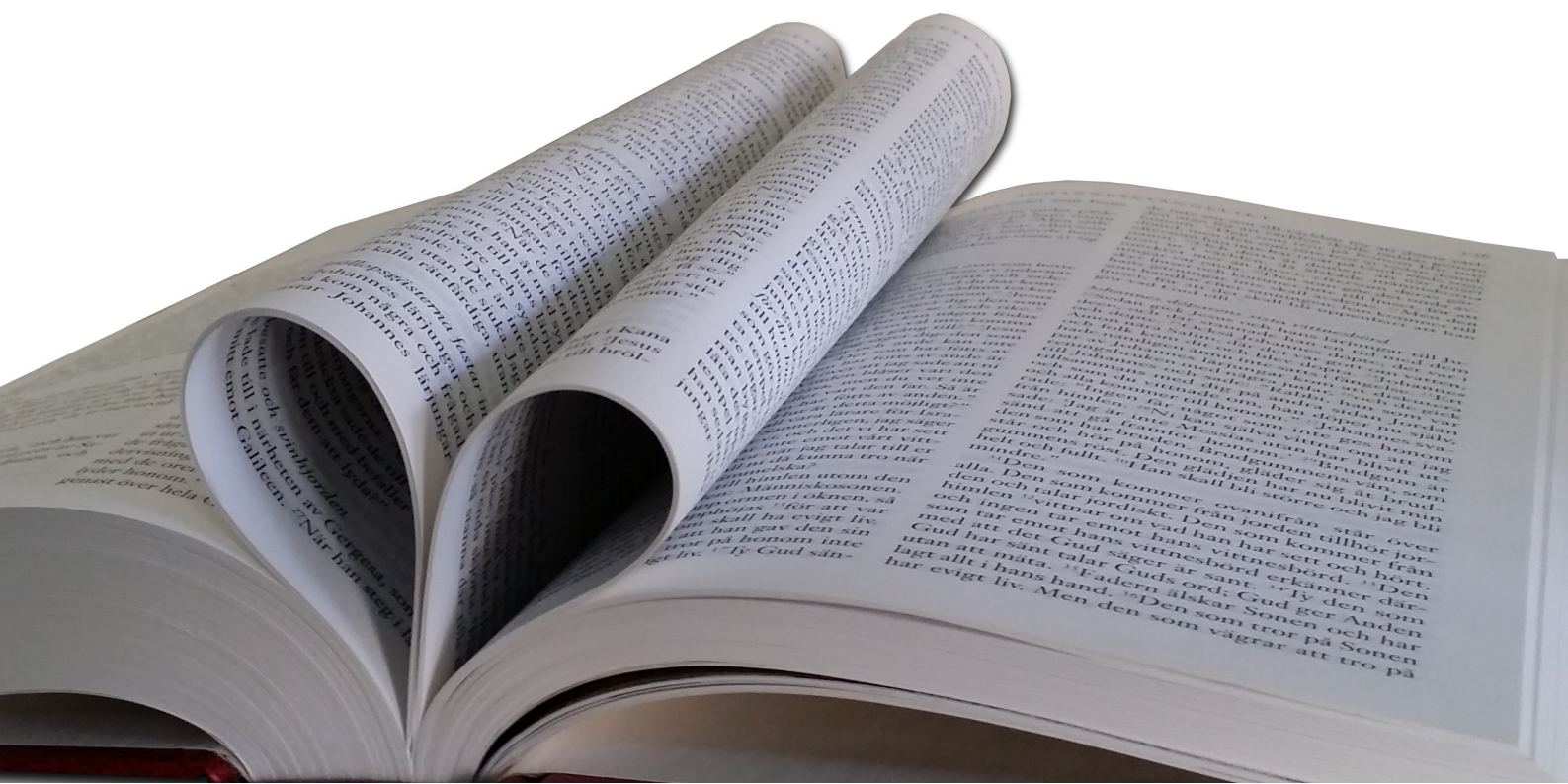
Furthermore, even if we did not possess the 5,500 Greek manuscripts or the 18,000 copies of the various translations, we could almost reconstruct the entire text of the New Testament within 250 years after its composition. How? By examining the writings of the early

church fathers. Early Christian writers, such as Clement, Ignatius and Polycarp, quote the biblical text in commentaries and letters, thus providing us with another witness to the text of the New Testament. John Burgon, a 19th century Anglican divine, catalogued more than 86,000 citations of the New Testament in the writings of the early church fathers who lived before 325 A.D. Bruce Metzger (Biblical scholar, translator and textual critic) states that, "So extensive are these citations that if all the other sources for our knowledge of the text of the New Testament were destroyed they would be sufficient alone for the reconstruction of practically the entire New Testament." On the reliability of the New Testament F.F. Bruce observed that, "The evidence

for our New Testament writings is ever so much greater than the evidence for many writings of classical authors, the authenticity of which no one dreams of questioning." **It is clear, we can be confident that the New Testament we read today is the same as the original written 2,000 years ago.**

### FURTHER READING

- 'The New Testament Documents: Are They Reliable?' by F.F. Bruce
- 'The Historical Reliability of the New Testament' by Craig Blomberg
- 'The Text of the New Testament' by Bruce Metzger
- 'The Reliability of the New Testament' by Robert B Stewart
- 'Evidence That Demands a Verdict' by Josh and Sean McDowell





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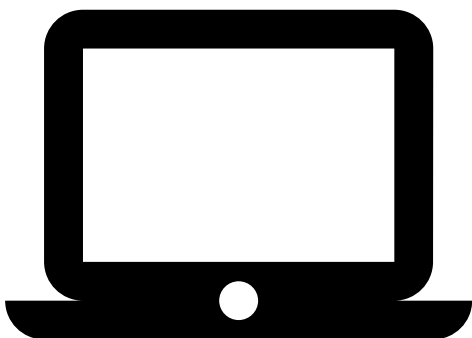




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