

The Miracle of the Bible and How we Know it's True

According to the Military Historian C. Sanders, there are three tests of reliability for an historical document: bibliographical, internal, and external tests¹.

Test 1 Bibliographical test

This test examines how accurately the books of the Bible have been **preserved** over 2000 years. Historians measure this in two ways:

1. **Number of manuscripts available.**
 - a. There are over 20,000 copies of New Testament documents, or fragments of documents in existence today².
 - b. There are no originals of the NT documents in existence.
2. **The time interval between the original and the extant (earliest existing) copy.**
 - a. The earliest copy (extant) of any NT document is the John Ryland manuscript which is dated A.D. 130.³
 - b. Homer's Iliad has 643 manuscripts and is second in manuscript authority only to the New Testament.

So when were the New Testament books written?

William Albright, who was the world's foremost biblical archaeologist, wrote:

"In my opinion, every book of the New Testament was written by a baptised Jew between the forties and eighties of the first century A.D. (very probably some time between about 50 and 75 A.D.)"⁴

What about the gap between the original NT documents and the earliest copies?

Sir Frederick Kenyon who was the director and the principal librarian of the British Museum and second to none in authority in issuing statements about manuscripts concludes:

"The interval between the dates of the 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 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."⁵

"Computer analysis of all known NT manuscripts reveals only 0.1 percent variance. That means that 99.9 percent of the manuscripts' contents are in perfect agreement."⁶

¹ C. Sanders. *Introduction to Research in English Literary History*. MacMillan Company. New York. 1952. p143ff. cited in: Josh MacDowell. *More than a Carpenter*. p46.

² Josh MacDowell. *More than a carpenter*. Kingsway Publications. Eastbourne. 1989. p47.

³ Paul Little. *Know why you believe*. Inter-varsity Press. 1988. p78.

⁴ William F Albright. *Christianity Today*. Vol. 7. Jan.18,1963. p3. cited in: Josh MacDowell. *More than a Carpenter*. p43.

⁵ Josh MacDowell. *More than a carpenter*. Kingsway Publications. Eastbourne. 1989. p48.

⁶ Terry Hall. *How the Bible became a Book*. Victor books. London. 1990. p135.

Test 2 Internal evidence test

The bibliographical test has determined only that the text we have now is what was originally recorded. What if what was recorded was a lie? Then all we have is a well-preserved lie.

So the question we need to answer now is: "To what extent is the written record accurate?"

Historians use two tests to determine how accurate an historical document is:

1. How near chronologically was the witness to the event?
2. How near geographically was the witness to the event?

People who were eyewitnesses, or who had received their information from eyewitnesses, wrote the New Testament documents.

Luke 1:1-4 Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eyewitnesses and servants of the Word. Therefore, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, it seemed good also to me to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught.

2 Peter 1:16 We did not follow cleverly invented stories when we told you about the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty.

1 John 1:3 We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ.

What happens though if an eyewitness consciously or unconsciously tells falsehoods about what they saw? But there is further convincing internal evidence that what the New Testament writers recorded was truthful.

1. The documents about Jesus were circulating during the lifetime of those who saw Him.

Jesus caused a great stir politically and spiritually. He was a high profile person. People were writing down what He said and did. Some wrote to promote Him (e.g. John and Luke). Others wrote to accuse and convict Him (e.g. the Pharisees). If either side has written falsehood, it would have been quickly detected. In fact, those who were promoting Christ made appeal to common knowledge about Jesus.

Acts 2:22 "Men of Israel, listen to this: Jesus of Nazareth was a man accredited by God to you by miracles, wonders and signs, which God did among you through him, as you yourselves know."

Acts 26:24-28 At this point Festus interrupted Paul's defense. "You are out of your mind, Paul!" he shouted. "Your great learning is driving you insane". "I am not insane, most excellent Festus," Paul replied. "What I am saying is true and reasonable. The king is familiar with these things, and I can speak freely to him. I am convinced that none of this has escaped his notice, because it was not done in a corner. "

Lawrence J. McGinley comments on the value of hostile witnesses in relationship to recorded events:

“First of all, eyewitnesses of the events in question were still alive when the tradition had been completely formed; and among those eyewitnesses were bitter enemies of the new religious movement. Yet the tradition claimed to narrate a series of well known deeds and publicly taught doctrines at a time when false statements could, and would, be challenged”.

What McGinley is saying is that hostile witnesses keep testimonies honest!

But there is further convincing evidence that what the New Testament writers recorded was truthful. The authors of the New Testament books were living when their books were circulating. If an author wrote a book and someone changed the content of the book during the lifetime of the author, who would be the first to know? The author. The fact that the authors of NT books were alive when their books were circulating was another strong factor working to preserve their validity.

2. The inclusion of records of human failures, doubts and fears in the Bible

If the incidents recorded in the Bible were invented or made up, surely many negative aspects of the lives of Christians would have been concealed? Will Durant writes:

“Despite the theological preconceptions of the evangelists, they record many incidents that mere inventors would have concealed - the competition of the apostles for high places in the Kingdom, their flight after Jesus’ arrest, Peter’s denial, the failure of Christ to work miracles in Galilee, the references of some auditors to his possible insanity, his early uncertainty as to his mission, his confession of ignorance as to the future, his moments of bitterness, his despairing cry on the cross. No one reading these scenes can doubt the reality of the figure behind them. That a few simple men should in one generation have invented so powerful and appealing a personality, so lofty an ethic, and so inspiring a vision of human brotherhood, would be a miracle far more incredible than any recorded in the Gospels. After two centuries of Higher Criticism the outlines of the life, character and teaching of Christ remain reasonably clear and constitute the most fascinating feature in the future of Western man” ⁷

The third test that historians use to determine the reliability of an historical document is the external evidence test.

Test 3 External evidence test

This is the third test historians use to test whether an ancient document is trustworthy. Historians ask the question: Do other historical documents confirm or deny the validity of the documents in question? In other words, are there other documents, other than the ones under analysis, which confirm the accuracy, validity, and reliability of the document in question? There are nine sources⁷ outside of the Bible, which confirm its validity.

⁷ Dr E.K. Victor Pearce. *Archaeology; Evidence for Truth*. Vol.2. Eagle Publishing. 1998. p158.

1. Josephus, a respected Jewish historian and contemporary of the Apostles (A.D. 37-95) “

‘Now there was about this time Jesus, a wise man, if it be lawful to call him a man, for he was a doer of wonderful works, a teacher of such men as receive the truth with pleasure. He drew over to him both many of the Jews and many of the Gentiles. He was the Christ and, when Pilate, at the suggestion of the principal men among us, had condemned him to the cross, those that loved him at the first did not forsake him; for he appeared to them alive again on the third day; as the divine prophets had foretold, these and ten thousand other wonderful things concerning him. And the tribe of Christians so named from him are not extinct at this day’⁸

2. Tacitus

A well-known Roman historian. Tacitus was born in A.D. 52. Among the many other things he wrote about the Christians he writes ‘Christ was their founder. He was put to death by Pontius Pilate, who was procurator of Judea in the reign of Tiberius Caesar’⁹

3. Suetonius (A.D. 69-130)

Also a well-known Roman historian. Suetonius was a court official under the emperor Hadrian, the one who built Hadrian’s Wall in Britain. He records that the Jews were making constant disturbances against Christ, so Hadrian expelled them from Rome.¹⁰

The other four Roman historians who wrote about Christ are:

4. Lucian; (A.D.120 – 180)

5. Pliny (a Roman official); (A.D. 63-113)

6. Thallus (A.D. 50)

7. Serapion (A.D. 191-211)

Thallus tried to explain away the great darkness during the crucifixion, which even reached Rome where he lived and was still a talking point. He says it must have been an eclipse. But Julius, a Christian, pointed out that an eclipse is impossible during a full moon at the Passover.

And there are other sources.

8. Eusebius the historian, (A.D. 275 – 339) preserves the writings of Papias, Bishop of Hierapolis (A.D. 130). Papias reports that Mark was the interpreter of Peter the Apostle. Papias says of Mark “...[he] made no mistake, writing down ... for he paid attention to this one thing, not to omit anything that he heard, not to include any false statement among them”.¹¹ What Mark wrote down from Peter (who walked and talked with Jesus for three years), plus his own notes and memories, he used to write the gospel of Mark.

9. Irenaeus (A.D. 130 – 202), Bishop of Lyons, writes in A.D. 180 “...Matthew published his Gospel among the Hebrews in their own tongue, when Peter and Paul were preaching the gospel in Rome and founding the church there. After their departure [i.e. their death], Mark, the disciple and interpreter of Peter, himself handed down to us in writing the substance of Peter’s preaching. Luke, the follower of Paul, set down in a book the Gospel preached by his teacher. Then John, the disciple of the Lord, who also leaned on his breast, himself produced his gospel, while he was living in Ephesus in Asia.”¹²

⁸ Ibid, p158. Quoted from Josephus’ main work *The Wars of the Jews*.

⁹ Ibid, p159.

¹⁰ Dr E.K. Victor Pearce. *Archaeology; Evidence for Truth*. Vol.2. Eagle Publishing. 1998. p158.

¹¹ Josh MacDowell, *More than a carpenter*. Kingsway Publications. Eastbourne. 1989. p54.

¹² Ibid, p55.

Fulfillment of Prophecy

The OT contains 306 prophecies about Christ's coming to Earth. Each one of them came true, literally, exactly as predicted. According to Professor Peter Stoner, the probability of all 306 prophecies coming true is a number greater than the estimated stars in known space.

Professor Stoner calculates the probability of just eight prophecies coming true. To visualise how big such a number is, follow the following. Cover NZ with 20-cent coins, one metre deep. Paint one of the coins red. Take someone up in a plane over NZ. Blind fold them. Put a parachute on them. Ask that person to jump from the plane at any time as it fly's from one end of the country to the other. The probability that that person would land, still blindfolded, and pick up the one red coin is the same as the probability of just eight Bible prophecies coming true.¹³

The 'Ring of Truth'

In his book 'The Ring of Truth', J.B. Phillips tells of a radio interview he had with the distinguished classical scholar, Dr E.V.Rieu. Rieu was the scholar who translated

Homer into very Modern English for the "Penguin Classics". Rieu was sixty, and a lifelong agnostic, when the same firm invited him to translate the Gospels. His son remarked: "It will be interesting to see what father makes of the four Gospels. It will be even more interesting to see what the four Gospels make of father." The answer was soon forthcoming. A year later Dr Rieu, convinced and converted, joined the Church of England. When Phillips asked him, "Did you not get the feeling that the whole material was extraordinarily alive?" Rieu replied, "I got the deepest feeling. My work changed me. I came to the conclusion that these words bear the seal of the Son of Man and God." Phillips concluded, "I found it particularly thrilling to hear a man who is a scholar of the first rank, as well as a man of wisdom and experience, openly admitting that these words written long ago were alive with power. They bore to him as to me, the ring of truth."¹⁴

To Finish

The eighteenth century French skeptic Voltaire boasted, "One hundred years from my day there will not be a Bible on earth except one that is looked upon by an antiquarian curiosity seeker" while his works would be found in every household. But 50 years after Voltaire's death, the Geneva Bible society purchased the infidel's old home and moved in presses to print the Word of God! Two hundred years later, on Christmas Eve, 1933, the British government paid the Russian Government \$AU1.3m for one copy of the Bible in Greek – Codex Sinaiticus. That same day a first edition of Voltaire sold in Paris for 11 cents.¹⁵

¹³ Terry Hall. *How the Bible became a Book*. Victor books. London. 1990. p140.

¹⁴ Dick Tripp. *Did the New Testament Writers Get their Picture of Jesus right?*. Published by Dick Tripp. Governors Bay, New Zealand. 1996. p22

¹⁵ Terry Hall. *How the Bible became a Book*. Victor books. London. 1990. p142.

Summary

1. Bibliographical test

Number of copies and Gap Test

- 1) Number of copies
 - a) 20,000 copies
 - b) .1% variance from computer analysis
 - c) Accuracy from the Scribes and Monks
- 2) Gap Test
 - a) Earliest original 130 A.D. (John Ryland Script)
 - b) Gap - 100 years

By comparison Julius Caesar 9-10 copies/1000 year gap (Gallic Wars)

2. Internal evidence test

- a) Eyewitnesses
- b) Enemies
- c) Authorship
- d) Inclusion of fears and failings

3. External evidence

- a) 9 external sources

4. Prophecy

- b) 306 prophecies
- c) Chances of 8 prophecies coming true (20 cent pieces story)

5. Ring of Truth