

HISTORICITY OF THE NEW TESTAMENT

The Existence of Multiple Accounts About Jesus in the New Testament

It is a well-established rule of law that “on the evidence of two or three witnesses a matter shall be confirmed” (Deuteronomy 19:15). But in the case of the New Testament there are eight or nine writers (depending on whether Paul wrote Hebrews) who contribute to the confirmation of the events of Jesus’ life: Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, Paul, Peter, James, Jude, and the writer of Hebrews. Even if all the traditional authors are not the actual authors (and even the critics admit that some were), nonetheless, by the critics’ own late dates for the New Testament (namely, 70 to 100 AD), they were still written during the time of contemporaries and eyewitnesses of the events. To have 27 pieces of literature written by eight or nine authors contemporary to the events, all of whom were giving the same basic message—about Christ—is unprecedented. Nothing like it exists for any other book from antiquity. This alone should be sufficient evidence for the reliability of the New Testament documents.

By contrast, the life of Alexander the Great, the basics of which are widely accepted as true, is based on no contemporary writers and only several histories from some 300 to 500 years later. *A fortiori* (with the greater force), considering that we have 27 documents from contemporaries of the events, we should have no hesitation accepting their general reliability, particularly in regard to the core events on which their testimony overlaps.



This bust of Alexander the Great (356–323 BC) as a youth was probably sculpted by Leochares around 336 BC.

The Eyewitness Nature of the New Testament

Not only are there earlier, more multiple, more accurate, and more numerous contemporary documents for the basic New Testament events than for any other ancient history, but these documents were based on eyewitness testimony. This is indeed what the Gospel of Luke claims: “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” (Luke 1:1-3). And Doctor Luke was not only an educated eyewitness, but his writing has been confirmed in numerous details by archaeological and literary sources (see below in this chapter).

Consider the emphasized phrases in the following New Testament references (NIV):

- “*The man who saw it [the crucifixion] has given testimony*, and his testimony is true” (John 19:35).
- “*This is the disciple who testifies to these things and who wrote them down*. We know that his testimony is true” (John 21:24).
- “That which was from the beginning, which *we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched*—this we proclaim concerning the Word of life” (1 John 1:1).
- “God has raised this Jesus to life, and *we are all witnesses of the fact*” (Acts 2:32).
- “Peter and John replied... ‘For we cannot help speaking *about what we have seen and heard*’” (Acts 4:19-20).
- “*We are witnesses of everything he did* in the country of the Jews and in Jerusalem. They killed him by hanging him on a tree, but God raised him from the dead on the third day *and caused him to be seen*” (Acts 10:39-40).
- “...He [Jesus] was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and *that he appeared to Peter, and then to the Twelve. After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles, and last of all he appeared to me also*” (1 Corinthians 15:3-8).
- “How shall we escape if we ignore such a great salvation? This salvation, which was first announced by the Lord, *was confirmed to us by those who heard him*. God also testified to it by signs, wonders and various miracles, and gifts of the Holy Spirit distributed according to his will” (Hebrews 2:3-4).
- “We did not follow cleverly invented stories [myths] when we told you about the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but *we were eyewitnesses of his majesty*” (2 Peter 1:16).

- “To the elders among you, I appeal as a fellow elder, *a witness of Christ’s sufferings* who also will share in the glory to be revealed” (1 Peter 5:1).

A recent book by Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*, argues convincingly that the New Testament is based in eyewitness testimony. He concludes that

reading the Gospels as eyewitness testimony... honors the form of historiography they are. From its historical perspective, radical suspicion of testimony is a kind of epistemological suicide. It is no more practical in history than it is in ordinary life.¹

Bauckham is not alone in his conclusion. Numerous scholars have come to the same conclusion.* In fact, there are around 2,000 biblical scholars in the Evangelical Theological Society, virtually all of whom accept the reliability of the New Testament documents as based in eyewitness testimony!

Given that there are multiple documents based on numerous eyewitness testimonies of honest men, the burden of proof falls on the skeptic and critic, not on those who accept the reliability of the New Testament. Critics are swimming upstream, drowning in waves of evidence against their view.

The Confirmation of the Historical Accuracy of Luke’s Writings

One of the Gospel writers, Dr. Luke, is known to have been the writer of a highly accurate New Testament document, the book of Acts. The earlier work of Sir William Ramsay (*St. Paul the Traveler and the Roman Citizen*) and the more recent work of the noted Roman historian Colin Hemer (*The Book of Acts in the Setting of Hellenistic History*) have demonstrated the minute historical accuracy of the book of Acts.

Four points are important in this confirmation of the Gospel record: 1) The author of the book of Acts, known as Luke the physician (Colossians 4:14), the companion of the apostle Paul (2 Timothy 4:11), was an accurate historian. 2) He was also the writer of the Gospel of Luke. 3) He wrote Acts before AD 62 (only three decades after Jesus died) while numerous eyewitnesses were still alive. 4) He wrote the Gospel of Luke before he wrote Acts. Hence, the Gospel of Luke was written by an accurate historian by about AD 60 or 61, during the lifetime of numerous eyewitnesses (Luke 1:1-4).

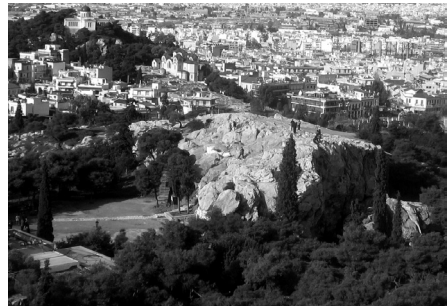
The first point is demonstrated by Hemer, who shows that the writer of Acts has detailed, specific, and firsthand knowledge of numerous things about which he wrote. These include the following:

* These include Craig Blomberg (*The Historical Reliability of the Gospels* and *The Historical Reliability of John’s Gospel*); F.F. Bruce (*The New Testament Documents: Are They Reliable?* and *Jesus and Christian Origins Outside the New Testament*); D.A. Carson and Douglas Moo (*New Testament Introduction*); William Lane Craig (*Knowing the Truth About the Resurrection*); C.H. Dodd (*History and the Gospels*); Donald Guthrie (*New Testament Introduction*); Gary Habermas (*The Historical Jesus*); Colin Hemer (*The Book of Acts in the Setting of Hellenistic History*); John Warwick Montgomery (*Christianity and History*); Eta Linnemann (*Is There a Synoptic Problem?*); Bruce Metzger (*The Text of the New Testament*); and N.T. Wright (*Can We Trust the Gospels?*), among others.

- a natural crossing between correctly named ports (Acts 13:4-5);
- the proper river port, Perga, for a ship passing from Cyprus (13:13);
- the proper location of Lycaonia (14:6);
- the unusual but correct declension of the name Lystra, the correct language spoken there, and two gods associated with the city, namely Zeus and Hermes (14:12);
- a conspicuous sailors' landmark at Samothrace (16:11);
- the association of Thyatira with cloth dyeing (16:14);
- the proper locations where travelers would spend the nights on the journey being described (17:1);
- the correct designation of Gallio as proconsul (18:12);
- the name Tyrannus, which is attested on a first-century AD inscription (19:9);
- the appropriate route for passing across the open sea from Cyprus when favored by persistent northwest winds (21:3);
- the correct identification of Ananias as high priest (23:2) and Felix as governor (23:24);
- agreement with Josephus on the name *Porcius Festus* (24:27);
- the proper description *gregale* for a south wind that suddenly became a violent nor'easter (27:13);
- correct identifications for stopping places along the Appian Way (28:15).

In over 80 such things the author of Acts did not make a single mistake! He is recognized as a first-rate first-century historian.

Further, the same author also wrote the Gospel of Luke, to which he refers in Acts 1:1 as “the first book” (ESV) or “former book” (NIV) of “all that Jesus began to do and teach until the day when He was taken” (1:2). Not only did Luke refer to the Gospel bearing his name, but both books were written to the same person, “Theophilus” (Luke 1:3 and Acts 1:1), and in the same style of an educated Greek. This is supported by other lines of internal and external evidence,² including his medical interest, traveling companions, and the testimony of early Church Fathers such as Irenaeus, Tertullian, Clement, Origen, and Jerome.



This rocky outcropping beneath the Acropolis in Athens is the location where the apostle Paul gave his famous message to the Areopagites about the “Unknown God” described in Acts 17:16-34.

What is more, Hemer lists 15 lines of evidence supporting a date prior to AD 62 for the book of Acts. Just a few are sufficient to make the point: 1) There is no mention of the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70. For a historical record of this time and place not to mention this most crucial historical event in the life of first-century AD Jews (if it had already occurred) is akin to writing the life of President John F. Kennedy after his death without mentioning his assassination. 2) Likewise, there is no mention of the Jewish Wars that broke out in AD 64. 3) The apostle Paul is still alive (Acts 28), so the timing of the book must have been before his death in about AD 65. 4) There is no hint of the death of James at the hands of the Sanhedrin, which Josephus says occurred in AD 62.³ These and almost a dozen more points support a date for Acts before AD 62.⁴

Therefore, we have good evidence to conclude that the Gospel of Luke was written by an accurate first-century AD historian within three decades of the death of Christ while numerous eyewitnesses were still alive to confirm it. Indeed, this is exactly what Luke says in his prologue:

Just as those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word have delivered them to us, it seemed good to me also, having followed all things closely for some time past, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, that you may have certainty concerning the things you have been taught (Luke 1:2-4 ESV).

The Confirmation of the Gospels by the Accepted Epistles of Paul

An often overlooked but powerful argument for the basic reliability of the Gospel record about Jesus' life and teaching is found in the accepted epistles of the apostle Paul.⁵ Placing late dates on the Gospels and attempting to cast doubt on their reports fails to undermine their historical reliability for many reasons. One is that it is widely accepted by critics that Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians, and Galatians are genuine epistles of the apostle Paul and that they were written between AD 55 and 57. But these four epistles confirm the basic historicity of the Gospels on the life, teachings, death, and resurrection of Christ.

In fact there are 27 such facts about Jesus in these accepted epistles of Paul, including

- the Jewish ancestry of Jesus (Galatians 3:16);
- His Davidic descent (Romans 1:3);
- His virgin birth (Galatians 4:4);
- His life under Jewish law (Galatians 4:4);
- the existence of His brothers (1 Corinthians 9:5);
- the existence of His twelve disciples (1 Corinthians 15:7);
- one of the disciples was named James (1 Corinthians 15:7);
- some of the disciples had wives (1 Corinthians 9:5);

- Paul knew Peter and James (Galatians 1:18–2:16);
- Jesus’ poverty (2 Corinthians 8:9);
- His meekness and gentleness (2 Corinthians 10:1);
- His abuse by others (Romans 15:3);
- His teachings on divorce and remarriage (1 Corinthians 7:10-11);
- His view on paying wages of ministers (1 Corinthians 9:14);
- His view on paying taxes (Romans 13:67);
- His command to love one’s neighbors (Romans 13:9);
- His views on Jewish ceremonial uncleanness (Romans 14:14);
- His titles of deity (Romans 1:3-4; 10:9);
- His institution of the Lord’s Supper (1 Corinthians 11:23-25);
- His sinless life (2 Corinthians 5:21);
- His death on the cross (Romans 4:25; 5:8; Galatians 3:13);
- His death paid for our sins (1 Corinthians 15:3; 2 Corinthians 5:21, see also Mark 10:45);
- His burial (1 Corinthians 15:4);
- His resurrection on the “third day” (1 Corinthians 15:4);
- His postresurrection appearance to the apostles (1 Corinthians 15:5-8);
- His postresurrection appearances to others, including 500 people, most of whom were still alive when Paul wrote 1 Corinthians (1 Corinthians 15:6), and
- Jesus’ present position at God’s right hand (Romans 8:34).

These facts not only confirm the general reliability of the Gospels; even apart from the Gospels they provide the essential core of teachings about Christ on which Christianity is based. To put it another way, were there no Gospels such as we have, Christianity would not crumble.

Legal Testimony Supporting the Gospel Witnesses

Simon Greenleaf was a professor of law at Harvard University when he was challenged to apply the rules of legal evidence from the book he authored (*A Treatise on the Law of Evidences*, 1853) to the New Testament witnesses and documents. His conclusions are found in his book *The Testimony of the Evangelists* (1874). He wrote,

The narratives of the evangelists are now submitted to the reader’s perusal and examination, upon the principles and by the rules already stated.... If they had thus testified on oath, in a court of justice, they would be

entitled to credit; and whether their narratives, as we now have them, would be received as ancient documents, coming from the proper custody. If so, then it is believed that every honest and impartial man will act consistently with that result, by receiving their testimony in all the extent of its import.⁶

Greenleaf added, “All that Christianity asks of men on this subject, is, that they would be consistent with themselves....The result, it is confidently believed, will be an undoubting conviction of [the Gospels’] integrity, ability, and truth.”⁷ Other attorneys have come to the same conclusion. Thomas Sherlock was the first to use the legal approach in his book *The Tryal of the Witnesses of the Resurrection* (1729). Converted skeptical journalist Frank Morison wrote *Who Moved the Stone?* (1930). Attorney and theologian John Montgomery wrote *Christianity and History* (1964). And more recently, Lee Strobel penned *The Case for Christ* (1998). All agree that from a legal standpoint, using the normal rules of legal evidence, the New Testament witnesses would have stood up in a court of law.

Archaeological Confirmation of the New Testament

No book from ancient times has more archaeological confirmation than the Bible. Noted biblical scholar Nelson Glueck declared, “As a matter of fact...it may be stated categorically that no archaeological discovery has ever controverted a biblical reference. Scores of archaeological findings have been made which confirm in clear outline or exact detail historical statements in the Bible.”⁸

After surveying the evidence, even the secular magazine *US News & World Report* concluded that: “In extraordinary ways, modern archaeology has affirmed the historical core of the Old and New Testaments—corroborating key portions of the stories of Israel’s patriarchs, the Exodus, the Davidic monarchy, and the life and times of Jesus.”⁹ One-time critical biblical scholar W.F. Albright, known as the “Dean of Archaeologists,” not only came to accept the general historical reliability of the Bible, but concluded of the New Testament in particular that “in my opinion, every book of the New Testament was written by a baptized Jew between the forties and the eighties of the first century A.D. (very probably sometime between about 50 and 75 A.D.).”¹⁰

Many minimalist archaeologists (those holding the view that archaeology offers minimal or no support to biblical history) today are not comfortable with using the Bible as a source for locating biblical cities and unearthing artifacts because it contains religious material and biased recording of history. According to them, to take the Bible as a serious and legitimate source to aid archaeologists is “irresponsible.” However, this objection forgets that the Bible itself is an archaeological source from the ancient world that offers details on people, places, and events—and in some cases this information is not found in any other source (for example, Belshazzar’s name in Daniel 5, prior to the discovery of the Nabonidus Cylinder).

In addition, nearly all sources from the ancient world contain religious information and were written by people who had religious views. But these sources are taken as

reliable and deemed important to our understanding of ancient history. What is more, some of the most beneficial historical sources were written by those intimately involved in the events they record (for example, Jewish Holocaust survivors writing about the concentration camps). So, contrary to the minimalist notion of excluding the Bible from archaeological research, it would be “irresponsible” to omit such a valuable and reliable ancient source as the New Testament when informing ourselves of ancient history.

The last half of this book is filled with these kinds of archaeological facts—those that confirm the historical reliability of both Old and New Testaments. So we will not enumerate them here.

Non-Christian Sources Confirm Basics of the Gospel Record

Noted New Testament scholar F.F. Bruce wrote the major work *Jesus and Christian Origins Outside the New Testament*. Summarizing the evidence on this topic, Dr. Gary Habermas shows that these extrabiblical sources contain the basic outline of the Gospel record about the life and teachings of Jesus.¹¹ Sources include Tacitus, Suetonius, Thallus, the Jewish Talmud, and Josephus (see more below). From his work Habermas ascertained 12 facts acknowledged by extrabiblical sources within 20 to 150 years after the death of Jesus. He showed that early Jewish and Roman sources confirm the following beliefs about the life and teaching of Jesus and His followers: 1) He was from Nazareth; 2) He lived a virtuous life; 3) He performed unusual feats; 4) He introduced new teaching contrary to Judaism; 5) He was crucified under Pontius Pilate; 6) His early disciples believed He rose from the dead; 7) His disciples denied polytheism; 8) His disciples worshipped Him; 9) His teachings and disciples spread rapidly; 10) His followers believed they were immortal; 11) His followers had contempt for death; 12) His followers renounced material goods. Consider the following historical source chart:

Non-Christian Sources Within 150 Years of Jesus											
Source	Source date	Jesus existed	Virtuous	Worship	Disciples	Teacher	Crucified	Empty tomb	Disciples' belief in resurrection	Spread	Persecution
Tacitus	115	X			X		X	X*		X	X
Suetonius	117-138	X		X	X			X*		X	X
Josephus	90-95	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	
Thallus	52	X					X*				
Pliny	112	X		X	X	X		X*		X	X
Trajan	112?	X*		X	X					X	X
Hadrian	117-138	X*			X					X	X
Talmud	70-200	X					X				X
Toledoth Jesu	Fifth century	X						X			
Lucian	Second century	X		X	X	X	X				X
Mara Bar-Serapion	First to third century	X	X	X		X	X	X*			
Phlegon	80?	X					X	X	X		

Chart from Norman L. Geisler and William E. Nix, *A General Introduction to the Bible*, rev. ed. (Chicago: Moody Press, 1968, 1986). Used by permission of Moody Press.

*implied

Considering that these were all, as it were, “adversarial witnesses” and that they nonetheless confirmed these major points about Jesus and His early followers, this is good supplementary substantiation of the basic truths of the Gospel record. (For more detail on this subject, see chapter 22).

The Internal Evidence for the Historicity of the New Testament

In addition to the strong external evidence for the reliability of the Gospels, there is also very good internal evidence. In fact, if one knew nothing about the Bible or Christianity but discovered a New Testament in an antique book sale, he could get a strong sense of its credibility just by reading it. Here are several reasons why:

1. The writers did not try to harmonize their accounts, which shows they were not in collusion but were independent witnesses (see the next chapter, “Responding to Recent Criticisms of the Gospels”).
2. The New Testament retained texts that placed Jesus in a bad light. Someone trying to prove that Jesus was God would not have done this.
3. The writers also included difficult passages in the text (which a fraudulent author would not have done).
4. They wrote self-incriminating stories (fraudulent authors do not invent bad stories about themselves).
5. They distinguished Jesus’ words from their own (showing they were reporting, not creating, His words).
6. They did not deny their testimony under persecution or the threat of death (which weeds out the insincere).



The cumulative weight of the multiple and independent lines of testimony is overwhelming support for the historicity of the New Testament. No other book in the world has anything close to this much evidence for its authenticity.