

Lesson 6: The Reliability of the N.T.-Bibliographical Test

Objection 1: The N.T. was written 100–200 years after the life of Christ. How do we know we don't have a distorted picture of his life due to this gap?

Answer:

The N.T. was written within 60 (most books within 30) years of the death of Christ (AD 30).

Evidence:

1. Manuscripts have been found that date within or close to the first century:

One Example: John Ryland Papyrus (dated **AD 125**; fragment of John found in Egypt). The original manuscript must have been written earlier.
2. Early church fathers (Clement, Ignatius) were quoting many of the N.T. books by around AD 100. The books that were quoted had to be in circulation at that time.
3. There is no hint that the N.T. writers knew of the destruction of Jerusalem (AD 70) as a fact that had already happened.
4. According to history, PAUL died in the AD mid- 60s. At the end of Acts he is still alive. Therefore, Acts and the books Paul wrote most likely were written by the mid-60s. Luke wrote the book of Luke before he wrote the sequel, Acts. So the book of Luke is even earlier.

Conclusion: There was not time for myth to grow up around the life of Christ.

I. The Bibliographical Test

- The Bibliographical test evaluates the reliability of manuscripts, looking at the Timespan between original and existing manuscripts, Number of manuscripts, and Quality (how much variation between the readings of the existing manuscripts). This test determines how well a document has been preserved since it was written. This test will determine whether or not we have what was originally written.

Objection 2: “We do not have what was originally written because there is too much time between the original manuscripts and the earliest surviving copies. More time=more copying=more mistakes, and we don't even know what mistakes were made.”

Response:

A. Timespan

The timespan (between the originals and the earliest existing copies) for most classical Greek works is about 1,000 years; the time span for most books in the N.T. is around 90 years.

Author/Work	Timespan
Aristotle	1,400 years
Tacitus	1,000 years
Caesar	950 years
Odyssey	500 years
New Testament	90 years

We don't think the classical literature was significantly corrupted; why should we think that the N.T. was corrupted during the 90-year span?

Objection 3: “Even if there is a short time between the originals and the first copies, there are still **too many differences** among the surviving N.T. manuscripts for us to know what was in the original. All the copying over the years resulted in a huge number of conflicting manuscripts!”

Response:

B. Number

- The more manuscripts we have for comparison, the closer we can get to the original manuscript reading.

5,700-Greek

10,000-Latin

9,300-other versions

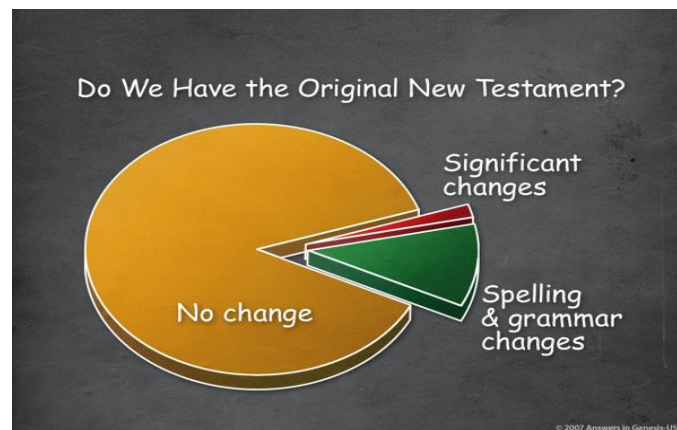
25,000 Total Manuscripts, fragments

- Plus tens of thousands of quotations from the N.T. by the early church fathers.
- The quantity of manuscripts of classical Greek and Roman literature is very small. The piece of ancient literature (besides the Bible) with the greatest quantity of existing manuscripts is Homer's Iliad (643 copies). The manuscript evidence for the N.T. is far superior to the manuscript evidence of classical Greek and Roman literature!

Author/Work	# of Copies
Plato	7
Caesar	10
Tacitus	20
Homer	643
New Testament	5,700 (Greek)

- “The number of manuscripts of the N.T., of early translations from 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 or other of these ancient authorities. This can be said of no other ancient book in the world” (Frederick Kenyon, renowned paleographer and textual critic).

C. Quality



- About 400 differences are significant to the meaning of the N.T. This is less than one per page in an English translation.
- The N.T. is at least 98% pure.
- In spite of errors in the copying, no variant reading harms any doctrine of the N.T. Though a disputed passage may touch on doctrine, every doctrine of the N.T. is taught in its indisputable parts.
- “The Christian can take the whole Bible in his hand and say without fear or hesitation that he holds in it the true Word of God, handed down without essential loss from generation to generation throughout the centuries” (Frederick Kenyon).