

CAN WE TRUST THE TEXT?

Notes supplied by Brian Felushko

- A. What the critics have said.
1. There is no way we can trust the NT documents since we do not have in our possession the original manuscripts, or anything close.
 2. All we possess is copies of copies of copies and over the hundreds of years it can be presumed that much has been added, deleted and/or changed from the original.
 3. Therefore, even if the original writings were accurate and historically reliable, what we possess cannot be trusted.
- B. Again, the facts put the critics to shame.
1. First of all it is important to establish that we possess no original manuscripts of any writing of antiquity.
 - a. All significant literature from the ancient world must be reconstructed into its original form by comparing the manuscripts that have survived.
 - b. And given large numbers of copies that were written not long after the originals makes it possible to reconstruct the original.
 - c. Through the science of textual criticism, the original writings of Homer, Demosthenes, Herodotus, Plato, Tacitus, Caesar and Pliny (to name but a few) have been accurately reconstructed. No one would question that we can be confident that these reconstructed texts accurately represent the original.
 2. When we apply the science of textual criticism to the manuscripts of the NT that we do possess, can we also accurately reconstruct the originals?
 - a. The manuscript evidence that supports the reconstruction of the NT text is far better than anything else in the ancient world.
 - b. In fact, it is better and stronger than the best ten pieces of classical literature combined.
 3. In support of the reconstruction of the NT text there are...
 - a. More manuscripts
 - (1) 5700 hand written Greek manuscripts of the NT
 - (2) 9000 manuscripts in other languages
 - (3) Nearly 15,000 manuscripts compared to 643 for Homer's Iliad (the next best supported classical text)
 - b. Earlier manuscripts
 - (1) Earliest undisputed manuscript – John Rylands fragment – dates between A.D. 117 and 138.
 - (2) Nine disputed fragments from A.D. 50-70 found among the Dead Sea Scrolls from Mark, Acts, Romans, 1 Timothy, 2 Peter & James
 - (3) Oldest surviving complete copies of the NT survive from A.D. 250 & 325.
 - c. More abundantly supported manuscripts
 - (1) The Early Church Fathers (second and third centuries) quoted the NT so much that all but eleven verses can be reconstructed just from their quotations.
 - (2) In fact, there are 32,289 quotations from the NT in the writings of the Early Church Fathers
 - d. Compared to other writings of antiquity, there really is no comparison
 - (1) Homer: 500 years, 643 copies
 - (2) Demosthenes: 1,400 years, 200 copies

- (3) Herodotus: 1,400 years, 8 copies
 - (4) Plato: 1,200 years, 7 copies
 - (5) Tacitus: 1,000 years, 20 copies
 - (6) Caesar: 1,000 years, 10 copies
 - (7) Pliny: 750 years, 7 copies
 - (8) NT: 25-50 years, almost 6,000 copies
4. The shorter the gap and the greater the number of copies, the more accurately the text can be reconstructed.
 - a. If we can consider Homer's Iliad to be accurately reconstructed, then why can't we consider the NT documents to be accurately reconstructed?
 - b. Of the so-called "variants" (where there is more than one possible reading) in the reconstructed NT text only one in 60 has any significance and not one of those has any bearing on any doctrine of the NT.
 - (1) 150,000 known variants
 - (2) Only 400 change the meaning of a passage
 - (3) Only 50 were of any real significance
 - (4) Not even one affected any Bible doctrine
 - (5) Put another way, the reconstructed NT text is 99.5% accurate and that 0.5% in question does not affect a single doctrine of the Christian faith!
 5. Absolutely, the critics should be silenced by the evidence – we have in our possession an accurate copy of the NT text. If not, then we do not possess an accurate copy of any writing of antiquity.

Is the NT historically reliable?

- A. The historical reliability of the NT should be determined by applying the same tests used for any historical document.
 1. If the NT passes the tests for determining whether any document is historically reliable, then it should be deemed historically reliable.
 2. Any belief that the NT is not historically reliable, should it pass these tests, must be passed on personal bias and not on fact.
- B. The questions asked and answered
 1. Do we have early testimony?
 - a. All NT books were written before A.D. 100
 - (1) Clement (A.D. 95) quotes from 11 NT books
 - (2) Ignatius (A.D. 107) quotes from 24 NT books
 - (3) Polycarp (A.D. 110) quotes from 18 NT books
 - b. Most, if not all, were written before A.D. 70
 - (1) Why don't any of them mention the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70?
 - (2) Can you imagine an American writing about Abraham Lincoln and not mentioning the Civil War, unless he wrote of him before the Civil War took place?
 - c. Many were written before A.D. 62
 - (1) Acts must have been written earlier due to the fact that Paul's death is not mentioned?
 - (2) Can you imagine someone writing about Martin Luther King Jr's life and not writing about his death in 1968 unless he wrote before he was assassinated?
 - (3) Luke must have been written before A.D. 62 and Mark also must have been written earlier

- d. Some were written in the 40s and 50s with sources from the 30s
 - (1) Paul's letters obviously had to be written before his death in the early 60's.
 - (2) If you follow the history of his letters, that puts Galatians probably back into the 40s
 - e. These are all certainly early enough to prevent the development of myth and legend about Jesus, since eyewitnesses and contemporaries of Jesus would still be alive.
2. Do we have eyewitness testimony?
- a. Most of the writers of the NT either claim to be eyewitnesses or to have based their testimony on that of eyewitnesses – Acts 2:32; 3:15; 4:81-20; 5:30-32; 10:39-40; 1 Corinthians 15:3-8; 1 Peter 5:1; 2 Peter 1:16; John 19:33-35; John 20:24-30; 1 John 1:1-2; Luke 1:1-2; Hebrews 2:3-4
 - b. The gospels include such incredible details, that have been authenticated as accurate, that can only be attributed to eyewitness testimony
 - (1) 84 facts in the last 16 chapters of Acts that have been confirmed by historical and archaeological research.
 - (2) 59 historically confirmed or provable details are contained in John's gospel
 - (3) The NT writers put historical crosshairs into their accounts by referencing historical figures – at least 30 are named who have been confirmed historically.
3. Do we have testimony from multiple, independent, eyewitness sources?
- a. The NT is not one source, but a compilation of the independent writings of at least nine different authors, who either claimed to be eyewitnesses or to have their testimony based on that of eyewitnesses.
 - b. Each major source includes early and unique material that only eyewitnesses would know.
 - c. Their accounts describe the same basic events but include divergent details, thus proving their reliability as independent eyewitness accounts.
4. Are the eyewitnesses trustworthy?
- a. What reason would these men have for lying? What would they gain – notoriety, popularity, power, wealth, prestige?
 - b. No, in fact they gained only ostracism, opposition, persecution, imprisonment, torture and even death.
 - c. One insane man may die believing that what is false is actually true, but what about 12 men; what about hundreds and thousands of others?
 - d. They obviously believed that what they recorded was the truth and nothing but the truth. They proved it by their willingness to suffer and die rather than renounce their testimony.
5. Do we have corroborating evidence from archaeology or other writers?
- a. Yes, we have already seen that where details have been confirmed they have been proven to be accurate.
 - b. Other writers, such as Josephus, corroborate the reliability of the NT writings.
 - c. No facts presented in the NT documents conflicts or contradicts any known and confirmed historical facts
6. Do we have any enemy attestation?
- a. As we've already seen, even the anti-Christian writers, corroborate the essence of their story and certainly do not contradict it.

- b. The inability of the enemies to stop the preaching of the gospel and the conversion of thousands attests to the veracity of their testimony.
 - 7. Does the testimony contain events or details that are embarrassing to the authors?
 - a. The gospels do not always present the early disciples of Jesus in a positive light.
 - b. They seem dim witted at times; brash and offensive at others; without compassion, selfish, prideful, doubting and faithless.
- C. Ten reasons why we can believe that the NT writers wrote the truth in their documents
1. Their documents include embarrassing details about themselves – as already discussed.
 2. Their documents include embarrassing details and difficult sayings of Jesus
 - a. Many accusations against Jesus are contained in their writings – Beelzebub, insane, blasphemer, etc.
 - b. Some sayings of Jesus that can and have been misinterpreted were left in by the writers – they did not present a sanitized, easily accepted Messiah who fit with people’s perceptions in order to convince the greatest number.
 - c. They simply shared the truth about his life and words and the reactions these engendered.
 3. Their documents include demanding sayings of Jesus
 - a. Jesus taught things that demanded faith, commitment, self-sacrifice, repentance and true conversion.
 - b. These are things that natural man normally reviles and does not eagerly embrace.
 - c. They were not writing to smooth talk anyone into following Jesus – there were no promises of prosperity, wealth and health, in order to allure followers.
 - d. In actuality, their commitment to “telling it like it was” gained them more opponents than proponents.
 4. Their documents carefully distinguish Jesus’ words from their own
 - a. It simply shows a commitment to sharing exactly what Jesus said, nothing more and nothing less.
 - b. They didn’t add and they didn’t subtract and made it so clear what could be attributed to Jesus that virtually all red letter editions of the NT are identical.
 5. Their documents include events related to the resurrection that they would not have invented
 - a. The burial of Jesus was a rich member of the Sanhedrin
 - b. The first witnesses were women
 - c. The conversion of the priests
 - d. The Jews explanation of the empty tomb
 6. Their documents include more than 30 historically confirmed people
 - a. If you’re creating a lie, why would you include 30 real and powerful people, that others would know and by whom details of your story could be denied if not true?
 - b. If details about this individuals were false, their lie could easily have been exposed.
 7. Their documents include divergent details
 - a. Identical details in a “so-called” eyewitness account actually testify to its probably creation.
 - b. The main details are identical, but more subtle details are complementary (not contradictory)
 - c. That is confirmation of true, yet multiple, eyewitness accounts

8. Their documents challenge their readers to check out verifiable facts
 - a. If your story is a lie would you challenge your readers to check out the facts for themselves?
 - b. Either these men were stupid, or they believed they were telling the truth.
9. Their documents describe miracles like other historical events
 - a. There is no attempt to sensationalize or embellish the miracle accounts to make them more attractive or appealing.
 - b. They write up even the most amazing miracles in a matter of fact, let's stick to the facts and only the facts, way.
 - c. In fact, their accounts of miracles seem stark and almost unemotional, even though you know the emotion at witnessing these events must have been intense.
 - d. They wanted the facts to sway people and not the emotion.
10. Their documents show their faith in their accounts in the face of great personal cost
 - a. These were Jews who gave up long-held sacred beliefs and practices and adopted new ones virtually overnight – and so did those who believed their testimony.
 - (1) Becoming a disciple of Jesus did not call for subtle or slight change
 - (2) These people had to turn against what they had been raised to believe and do.
 - b. Here are some of the things they gave up for new beliefs and practices
 - (1) The animal sacrifice system
 - (2) The binding supremacy of the law of Moses
 - (3) Strict monotheism
 - (4) Observing the Sabbath
 - (5) Belief in a conquering Messiah and the physical return of David's kingdom
 - c. And they did so at great and personal cost – they were ostracized, opposed, rejected, persecuted, slandered, mocked, imprisoned, beaten, tortured and martyred – yet refused to recant their testimony!

Conclusion

- A. The NT documents passed with glowing colors all of the tests for historical reliability!
 1. In every way they have been tested, they have passed. There is no proof that they lied, embellished, exaggerated, hid, compromised or even stated incorrectly any fact or detail.
 2. Therefore, in those details of the story for which there are no corroborating witnesses, they must be believed.
 3. It is without logic and only on the basis of preconceived prejudice that one would still insist that the NT documents are historically unreliable – because such rejection cannot be based on fact.
- B. That being the case, then the claims they said Jesus made and the case that he presented for believing his claims, is accurate.
 1. Jesus did claim to be God in the flesh and he did point to the evidence of human testimony, his work, his life fulfilling OT prophecy and his resurrection as proof of his claim.
 2. Any honest and sincere seeker of truth has got to examine the claims of, and the case for, Jesus and that would start by reading, examining and studying the gospel accounts, accepting them as historically reliable in every aspect.

