

Reason 14: The Historicity of the New Testament



Ossuary of Caiaphas

The New Testament claims to be the written record of Jesus' ministry, his teachings, and the formation of his church. Are we able to validate these claims? The New Testament proclaims itself as truth, meaning its words should correspond with fact. The Gospels and Epistles have very specific names individuals, places, and events. Do these New Testament records correspond with historical facts? If the New Testament is not true historically, why should we rely on its contents for spiritual truth?

The New Testament, written by 10 different authors, is a record of the events in their day. One simple test is to compare the New Testament with verifiable historical records. With the rise of humanism and skepticism, the scriptures and their

historicity came under sharp attack in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Critics of the New Testament claimed, its authorship was late, and its contents filled with errors. Sir William Ramsay (1850's) regarded as one of the greatest archaeologists ever was a skeptic of the early dates attributed to the books of the bible. He dated Acts and Luke to the mid-2nd century. However, after doing a topographical study of Asia Minor and using the writings of Luke, he changed his mind, when confronted with the facts. He wrote,

"I found myself brought into contact with the "Book of Acts" as an authority for the topography, antiquities and society of Asia Minor. It was gradually borne upon me that in various details the narrative showed marvelous truth".

How Archeology confirms the Bible?



The ministry of Jesus and the disciples contains concrete facts, which can be verified in history and archeology. In 1986 after a severe drought the water level of the Sea of Galilee dropped, the outline of a boat was revealed in the mud just 5 miles from Capernaum. Jesus centered his ministry in Capernaum and Peter's house was located in the city. The boat was carbon dated between 40 BC and 40 AD. The boat was 26.5 feet long, 7.5 feet wide and 4 feet high and could be rowed or sailed.

This corresponds with the gospel accounts of Jesus and his disciples on the Sea of Galilee. In Luke 5:1-7 we see this type of a boat in service. Therefore, we are able to verify the words with facts. This attests to the historicity of the book.



Another example, the coins used during the first century, attests to the historicity of the books. Jesus' reference to the widow offering (Mark 12:42-44) two copper coins, can be verified by the coins existence as well as the confirmation of Roman and Jewish non-Christian writers in the period. The ability to compare physical evidence with claims allows us to validate the writers. The validation of the New Testament records does not prove inspiration. What it does prove is the historical accuracy of the writer. These facts validate their being there and knowing the environment around them.

We are not able to verify every fact, because some historical records are lost, and not all archeological finds have been uncovered. However, each verified fact and event gives added credibility to the author as being truthful. This evidence counters those who challenge the New Testament as being a fabrication of 2nd and 3rd century writers, "The Higher Criticism". The details of some of the facts are so specific and regional, that unless the writer had intimate knowledge of the details, names, places and words used, they would be proven false. In A.D. 70, when the Temple was destroyed and the Jews dispersed everything changed in Jerusalem, along with the ability to create the scenes without specific knowledge.

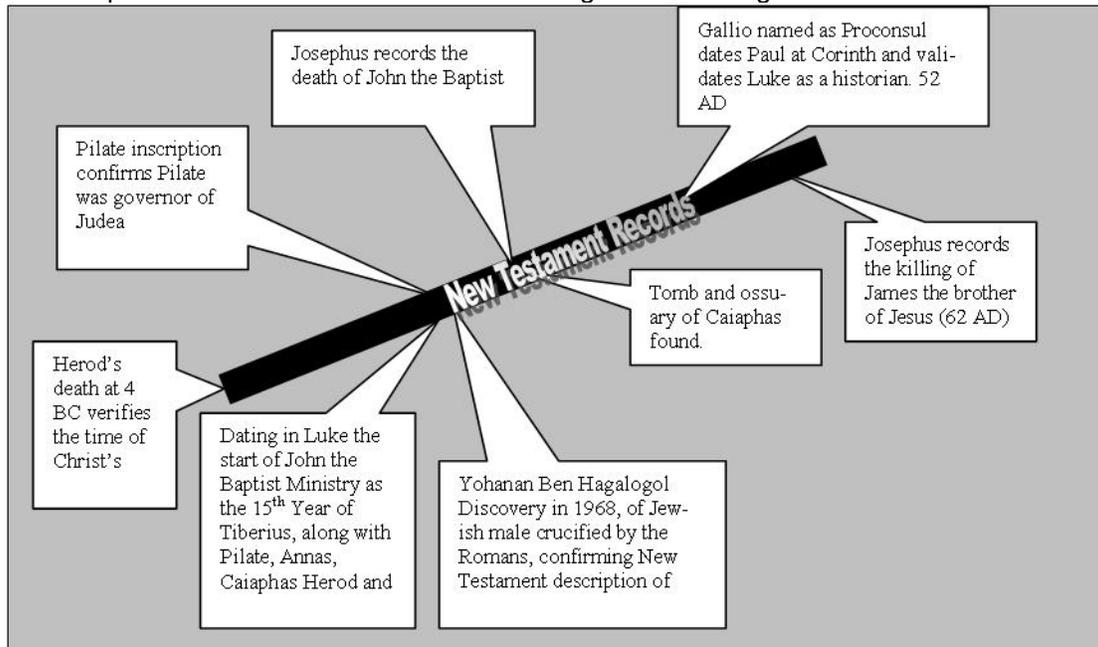
Luke in Acts 18:12, calls Gallio "Proconsul", this was questioned by critical scholars but Luke was proven correct. When the Delphi inscription was found it verified the specific historical claim in Acts. The inscription read:

"As Lucius Junius Gallio, my friend, and the Proconsul of Achaia"¹

Gallio held the post of *Proconsul* for one year from A.D. July 1, 52 and that one year overlapped with Paul ministry in Corinth. This specific information verified the title of Gallio and the year of Paul's ministry in Corinth. This is one example, but this is repeated over and over, as history and archeology continue to verify the New Testament. Examples such as this have caused many skeptics and critics of the New Testament too completely change their viewpoints. Anglican critic, who started the "Death of God" movement, John A. T. Robinson, wrote the book, "*Redating the New Testament*" after he realized the incredible archeological evidence contradicting his earlier position. He re-dated Matthew to A.D. 40 to 60, Mark at A.D. 45 to 60, and Luke at before A.D., 57 to 60 and John from before A.D. 40 to 65.

¹ The New Evidence That Demands A Verdict, Josh McDowell, 1999, Thomas Nelson, Pg. 65

We can extrapolate the discovery of evidence over a time line of New Testament records. The more points on the line that are confirmed the greater the weight of evidence.



Extrapolating New Testament Evidence

What types of evidence validates the historicity of the New Testament?

In examining, the historical evidence for the New Testament the types of evidence can be categorized into three types, *Historical*, *Archeological* and *Documentary*. Each piece of evidence fills in this time line of evidence, confirming the historicity of the New Testament

As we compile the various pieces of evidence both from writers who lived (*Documentary Evidence*) during the time of Jesus and physical evidence (*Archeological Evidence*) that verifies events (*Historical Evidence*) in the bible we can conclude the New Testament is historically truthful.

The history of the New Testament is not on trial, but its claims. The claims the New Testament makes about Jesus are incredible, Is Jesus the Son of God, Did he raise people from the dead? So if we conclude the writers are correct about the "History" then we are forced to answer, are they correct about the person of Jesus?

Documentary Evidence

There are two types of Documentary evidence we can examine; Christian and Non-Christian. The Christian documentary evidence is overwhelming and in its scope and volume compared to other manuscripts.

Christian Documentary Evidence:

- A. *Greek New Testament Manuscripts* number 5366 and date from within 50 years of the autograph for the earliest fragments. The chart below compares the number of Greek New Testament manuscripts with other famous historical books. The New Testament greatly outnumber any other historical book.

| Author | Book | Date Written | Earliest Copies | Time Gap | No. of Copies |
|----------------|-----------------|--------------|--|---|------------------------|
| Homer | Iliad | 800 BC | C. 400 BC | 400 years | 643 |
| Herodotus | History | 480-425 BC | C. 900 AD | 1350 years | 8 |
| Thucydides | History | 460-400 BC | 900 AD | 1300 years | 8 |
| Plato | | 400 BC | 900 AD | 1300 years | 8 |
| Demosthenes | | 300 BC | 900 AD | 1300 years | 7 |
| Caesar | Gallic Wars | 100-44 BC | 900 AD | 1000 years | 10 |
| Livy | History of Rome | 59-17 AD | 4 th Century (Partial), Mostly 10 th Century | 400 years 1000 years | 1 partial 19 copies |
| Tacitus | Annals | 100 AD | 1100 AD | 1000 years | 20 |
| Pliny Secundus | Natural History | 61-113 AD | 850 AD | 750 years | 7 |
| New Testament | | 50-100 AD | 114 Fragments 200 (Books) 250 (Most NT) 325 (Complete NT) | 50 years 100 years 150 years 225 years | 5366 |

B. *Translations of New Testament* writings into other languages

The New Testament was translated into other languages as Christianity spread out from the Roman Empire.

1. Syriac Versions

Syriac Peshitta, translated AD 150-250, there are more than 350 manuscripts dating from the 5th century.

Palestinian Syriac AD 400-450 AD

Philoxenian (AD 508)

Harkleian Syriac (AD 616)

2. Latin Versions

- African Old Latin (Codex Babbianensis 400 AD)
- Codex Corviensis (AD 400-500)
- Codex Vercellensis (AD 360)
- Codex Palatinus (AD 500-600)
- Latin Vulgate (Meaning common or popular) translated by Jerome at the request of Damascus bishop of Rome (AD 366-384)

3. Coptic (Egyptian Versions)

- Sahidic. Beginning of the third century
- Bohairic 4th Century
- Middle-Egyptian Fourth or fifth century.

4. Other Translation

Armenian: (400 AD)

Gothic: Fourth century

Georgian: Fifth century

Ethiopic: Sixth century

Nubian: Sixth century

C. *Early Church Lectionaries*

The second largest group of NT Greek manuscripts are the Lectionaries² which number 2396 dating from the 6th to the 9th century. They contain all portions of New Testament many times over, with the exception of Revelation and Acts.

D. *Early Church Father Quotations*

² Lectionaries were the weekly church reading of the Gospels and Epistles. This system was copied from the Synagogue system of the systematic reading of the Torah and Prophets. The Lectionary manuscripts are documents from which someone would read.

The quotations from the NT manuscripts are so numerous and so widespread by the early church fathers that if there did not exist any NT manuscripts, we could reproduce a New Testament from their writings alone. This validates the transmission, and authority of the NT manuscripts.

| Writer | Gospels | Acts | Pauline Epistles | General Epistles | Revelation | Totals |
|-----------------------------------|---------|------|------------------|------------------|-------------------|--------|
| Justin Martyr (133 AD) | 268 | 10 | 43 | 6 | 3 (266 allusions) | 330 |
| Irenaeus (180 AD) | 1038 | 194 | 499 | 23 | 65 | 1819 |
| Clement (150-212 AD) | 1107 | 44 | 1127 | 207 | 11 | 2406 |
| Origen (185-253 AD) | 9231 | 349 | 7778 | 399 | 165 | 17,992 |
| Tertullian (166-220 AD) | 3822 | 502 | 2609 | 120 | 205 | 7258 |
| Hippolytus (170-235 AD) | 734 | 42 | 387 | 27 | 188 | 1378 |
| Eusebius (324 AD) | 3258 | 211 | 1592 | 88 | 27 | 5176 |
| Grand Total | 19,368 | 1352 | 14,035 | 870 | 664 | 36,289 |

The Specificity of History

The historicity of the New Testament is validated through specific historical citations, which would be difficult if not impossible if the writer did not live in the time he wrote. For example, Chapters 13 to 28 in Acts, authored by Luke lists over 43 specific places, locations and names. The list below is a sampling of the 43 items, listed from *Bakers Encyclopedia of Christian Apologetics*.³

1. A natural crossing between correctly named ports (13:4-5). Mount Casius, south of Seleucia, stands within sight of Cyprus. The name of the proconsul in 13:7 cannot be confirmed, but the family of Sergii Pauli is attested.
2. The proper river port, Perga, for a ship crossing from Cyprus (13:13)
3. The proper location of Lycaonia (14:6)
4. The unusual but correct declension of the *Lystra* and the correct language spoken in Lystra. Correct identification of the two gods associated with the city, Zeus and Hermes (14:12).
5. The proper port, Attalia, for returning travelers (14:25)
6. The correct route from the Cilician Gates (16:1)
7. The proper form of the name *Troas* (16:8)
8. The proper identification of Philippi as a Roman colony. The right location for the river Gangites near Philippi (16:13)
9. Association of Thyatira with cloth dyeing (16:14). Correct designations of the titles for the colony magistrates (16:20, 35, 36, 38).
10. The proper locations where travelers would spend successive nights on this journey (17:1)
11. The presence of a synagogue in Thessalonica (17:1) and the proper title of *politarch* for the magistrates (17:6).
12. The correct explanation that sea travel is the most convenient way to reach Athens in summer with favoring east winds (17:14).
13. The abundance of images in Athens (17:16), and reference to the synagogue there (17:17).
14. Depiction of philosophical debate in the *agora* (17:17). Use in 17:18-19 of the correct Athenian slang epithet for Paul, *spermologos*, and the correct name of the court (*areios pagos*). Accurate depiction of Athenian character (17:21). Correct identification of altar to "An unknown god" (17:23). Logical reaction of philosophers who deny bodily resurrection (17:32). *Areopoites*, the correct title for a member of the court (17:34).
15. Correct identification of the Corinthian synagogue (18:4). Correct designation of Gallio as proconsul (18:12). The *bema* (Judgment seat) can still be seen in Corinth's forum (18:16).
16. The cult of Artemis of the Ephesians (19:24,27). The cult is well attested, and the Ephesian theater was the city meeting-place (19:29)
17. Correct title *grammateus* for the chief executive magistrate and the proper title of honor, *Neokoros* (19:35). Correct name to identify the goddess (19:37). Correct designation for those holding court (19:38). Use of plural

³ Unshakable Foundations, Geisler, 2001, Pg. 275-276, Bethany House

- anthupatoi* in 19:38 is probably a remarkably exact referene to the fact that two men jointly exercised the funtions of proconsul at this time.
18. Use of precise ethnic designation *Beroiaios* and the ethnic term *Asianos* (20:4).
 19. The permanent stationing of a Roman cohort in the Fortress Antonia to suppress disturbances at festival times (21:31). The flight of steps used by guards (21:31,35)
 20. The correct identifications of Ananias as high priest (23:2) and Felix as governor (23:24).
 21. Explanation of the provincial penal procedure (24:1-9)
 22. Agreement with Josephus of the name *Porcius Festus* (24:27)
 23. Note of the right legal appeal by a Roman citizen (25:11). The legal formula of *de quibus cognoscere volebam* (25:18). The characteristic form of reference to the emperor (25:26).
 24. Precise name and place given for the island of Cauda (27:16). Appropriate sailors' maneuvers at the time of a storm (27:16-19). The fourteenth night judged by experienced Mediterranean navigators to be an appropriate time for this journey in a storm (27:27). The proper term for this section f the Adriatic Sea at this time (27:27). The precise term, *bolisantes*, for taking soundings (27:28). The positon of probable approach of a ship running aground before an easterly wind (27:39).
 25. The proper title *protos (te nesou)* fo ra man in Publius's position of leadership on the islands (28:7)

Non-Christian Documents

From early non-Christian historians and writers, we can confirm specific information about Jesus and the early church. Norman Geisler writes the following;⁴

1. Jesus was from Nazareth;
2. He lived a wise and virtuous life;
3. He was crucified in Palestine under Pontius Pilate during the reign of Tiberius Caesar at Passover time, being considered the Jewish king;
4. He was believed by his disciples to have been raised from the dead three days later;
5. His enemies acknowledged that he performed unusual feats they called "sorcery";
6. His small band of disciples multiplied rapidly, spreading even as far as Rome;
7. His disciples denied polytheism, lived moral lives, and worshiped Christ as Divine.

This picture confirms the view of Christ presented in the New Testament Gospels.

These writers include Josephus a Jewish Historian, (37-100 AD), Thallus a Samaritan (52 AD), Tacitus (52 AD), Pliny the Younger (112 AD) the governor of Bithynia in Asia Minor and others.

⁴ Unshakable Foundations, Geisler, 2001, Pg. 269, Bethany House