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'Is Scripture Reliable as an Historical Record?'

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Summarised by Kerry Letheby (Branches HN) from R. Helsby etal this is a helpful study on the reliability and beauty of Scripture.

Study Three – Part 3 – The External Evidence Test?

The third test of historicity is that of external evidence – whether other historical material confirms or denies the internal testimony of the documents themselves. [1]

The evidence from extra-Biblical authors

The historian Eusebius preserves writings of Papias, bishop of Hierapolis (AD 130). [2]

The Elder [apostle John] used to say this also: “Mark, having been the interpreter of Peter, wrote down accurately all that he [Peter] mentioned, whether sayings or doings of Christ, not however, in order. For he was neither a hearer nor a companion of the Lord; but afterwards, as I said, he accompanied Peter ... So then Mark made no mistake ... for he paid attention to this one thing, not to omit anything that he had heard, nor to include any false statements among them. [3]

Iraeneus, Bishop of Lyons in AD 180, who was a student of Polycarp, Bishop of Smyrna (who was a Christian for eighty-six years and was a disciple of John the Apostle), wrote [4]

Matthew published his gospel among the Hebrews [i.e. Jews] in their own tongue, when Peter and Paul were preaching the gospel in Rome and founding the church there. After their departure [i.e. death, which strong tradition places at the time of the Neronian persecution in 64], 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 [this is a reference to John 13:15 and 21:20], himself produced his gospel, while he was living at Ephesus in Asia. [5]

The evidence from martyrs

Polycarp (AD 70-156) -a disciple of John – was martyred at 86 years of age because of his devotion to Jesus Christ and the Scriptures. He was burned at the stake. His death

demonstrated his trust in the accuracy of the Scripture, as he certainly had ample contacts to know the truth. [8] [9]

Ignatius (AD 70-110) – Bishop of Antioch – was martyred for his faith in Christ. He knew all the apostles and was a disciple of Polycarp (above). Ignatius is believed to have been thrown to the lions in the colosseum at Rome. [6] [7]

Archeological Evidence

Discoveries by archaeologists in recent years have vindicated the New Testament. [10] For example,

1. A census, and Quirinius governor at the time of Jesus’ birth? – Luke 2:1-3

It was once argued that Luke was mistaken and that there was no such census; that Quirinius was not governor of Syria at that time and that people did not have to return to their ancestral home. [11] We now know that the Romans had a regular enrolment of taxpayers and held censuses every 14 years (begun by Augustus Caesar). An inscription found in Antioch tells of Quirinius being governor of Syria around 7 B.C. (evidently he was governor twice). [12] A papyrus found in Egypt says concerning the conducting of a census:

“Because of the approaching census it is necessary that all those residing for any cause away from their home should at once prepare to return to their own governments in order that they may complete the family registration of the enrolment...” [13]

2. Who is Lysanias? – Luke 3:1

The only Lysanias known to ancient historians was one who was killed in 36 B.C. This caused some to question Luke’s reliability. [14] However, an inscription was found near Damascus. It speaks of “Freedman of Lysanias the tetrarch” and is dated between 14 and 29 AD. [15]

3. “The Pavement” (Gabbatha)? – John 19:13

For centuries there was no record of the court called “The Pavement” or “Gabbatha”. [16] But William F. Albright in “The Archaeology of Palestine” shows otherwise. This court was the court of the Tower of Antonia. The court was destroyed in 66-70 A.D. during the siege of Jerusalem. It was left buried when the city was rebuilt in the time of Hadrian and was not discovered until recently. [17]

4. Iconium a city of Phrygia? – Acts 14:6

In Acts 14, Luke seems to imply that Lystra and Derbe were in Lycaonia and Iconium was not. This was criticized as being wrong, based on the writings of Romans such as Cicero who indicated that Iconium was in Lycaonia, and archaeologists concluded that the book of Acts was unreliable. [18] But in 1910, Sir William Ramsay found a monument, which showed that Iconium was indeed a Phrygian city. Later discoveries continued to confirm this. [19]

5. The “Politarchs”? – Acts 17:6

Since the term, “Rulers Of The City” (Greek “Politarchs”), is not found in the classical literature of the Greeks, it was assumed that Luke was wrong to refer to such an office. However, some 19 inscriptions have now been found that make use of this title. Five of these are in reference to Thessalonica. [20]

HISTORICAL – GEOGRAPHICAL EVIDENCE

Historical geography seeks to relate events in history to geographic locations. Knowing what has happened in a certain location in the past, reveals why Jesus would do and say something at that location when He was there. [23] The Gospel writers often casually refer to geographical features that indicate how familiar they were with the land. Jesus also seems to have done and said certain things in relationship to His surroundings. [24]

Here are some examples:

At the base of the 9,000-foot high “rock” of Mt Hermon at Caesarea-Philippi, Jesus says to Peter,

“You are Peter [Greek, Petros, a stone], and upon this rock [Greek petra, large rock, bedrock] I will build My church; and the gates of Hades shall not overpower it” (Matthew 16:18). [25]

From Capernaum on the northwest shore of the sea, one could see several cities on top of hills all around the sea. Directly opposite, on the southeast shore was Hoppus, the largest city visible to those in Capernaum. Its primary location was not down by the water but high on a hill overlooking the sea. Several other cities and villages perched on hilltops around the Sea of Galilee. This location adds additional insight into Jesus’ statement,

“You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden” (Matthew 5:14) [26]

Galilee is a volcanic area. Volcanic rock is everywhere, and thorns grow there rapidly in the summer months. When Jesus told His parable of the four soils, His listeners would have related well to what He said. (Matthew 13:1 – 9) [27]

Mustard trees still grow in Israel, and one can readily see that their minute seeds and 15-foot height fit precisely with Jesus’ parable: [28]

“The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, which a man took and planted in his field. Though it is the smallest of all your seeds, yet when it grows, it is the largest of garden plants and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and perch in its branches.” (Matthew 13:31, 32)

In Jerusalem, from the steps on the southern side of the Temple where rabbis often addressed their pupils, the chalk-white tombstones that cover the Mount of Olives are clearly visible. Jesus may well have looked in that direction as He proclaimed: [29]

“Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You are like whitewashed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of dead men’s bones and everything unclean. In the same way, on the outside you appear to people as righteous but on the inside you are full of hypocrisy and wickedness.” (Matthew 23:27)

Jewish cultural evidence

Luke 2:24 speaks of one of many cultural practices mentioned in the Gospel narratives. In obedience to Leviticus 12:2, 6, 8, Joseph and Mary brought the sacrifice required after the birth of a child. Their offering of two turtledoves or pigeons indicates that they were among the poor of the land. [32]

Luke 7:38, speaks of a woman weeping and wetting Jesus’ feet with her tears. Weeping was an important part of Jewish culture. Professional mourners were hired for funerals, and many Jews had ‘tear vases’ where they collected the tears of their grief. [33]

Hebrew marriage customs help to explain what otherwise appears to be a contradiction in Matthew 1:18, 19. In verse 18, Mary is only betrothed to Joseph, whereas in verse 19, Joseph is called her ‘husband’. This makes sense when we realise that engagement among the Hebrews was considered the beginning of marriage, it was as legally binding as marriage itself, and could not be broken off except by a bill of divorce. It therefore makes sense when Joseph is called the “husband” of Mary. [34]

EXTERNAL EVIDENCE TEST CONCLUSION

The New Testament more than satisfactorily passes the External Evidence Test. Not only is there external material that confirms the internal testimony of the documents, but factors such as archeology, historical-geography and Jewish customs all support the accuracy of the New Testament. We can again conclude that historical material strongly confirms the accuracy and reliability of the New Testament documents.

STUDY 3 CONCLUSION

The Bibliographical test enabled us to safely conclude that we have very accurate copies of the New Testament documents, due to –

1. the large number of document copies,
2. the short time period between the original documents and the existing copies, and
3. the negligent number of textual variances between copies,

In fact, the New Testament passes this test better than any other ancient historical document.

The Internal Evidence test enabled us to conclude that the New Testament documents are highly credible (accurate/true) in their historical accounts about the life of Jesus, because –

1. the New Testament authors were either eyewitnesses to the life of Jesus or had first hand information (e.g. interviewed eyewitnesses),
2. the New Testament does not contain 'gospel fictions' or lies,
3. the New Testament does not contain myths, and
4. the New Testament does not contain contradictions.

The External Evidence test enabled us to establish that the content of the New Testament documents is strongly confirmed by additional historical material evidence from extra-Biblical authors, such as –

1. evidence from martyrs,
2. archeological evidence,
3. historical-geographical evidence, and
4. Jewish cultural evidence.

If we are to discard the New Testament as unreliable in its accounts about Jesus, then we must discard almost all ancient literature as being unreliable! [35] We can't apply one standard or test to secular literature and another to the New Testament. We need to apply the same test, whether the literature under investigation is secular or religious

FOOTNOTES

[1] A Ready Defense, Josh McDowell, Here's Life Publishing, Inc., San Bernardino, CA 92402, pg 54

[2] Ibid

[3] Ibid

[4] Ibid

[5] Ibid

[6] Ibid, pg 437

[7] Evidence That Demands A Verdict Volume 1, Josh McDowell, Here's Life Publishing, Inc., San Bernardino, CA 92402, pg 51

[8] A Ready Defense, Josh McDowell, Here's Life Publishing, Inc., San Bernardino, CA 92402, pg 437

[9] Evidence That Demands A Verdict Volume 1, Josh McDowell, Here's Life Publishing, Inc., San Bernardino, CA 92402, pg 51

[10] The "Executable Outlines" Series: Christian Apologetics, Mark A. Copeland
http://www.ccel.org/contrib/exec_outlines/

[11] Ibid

[12] Ibid

[13] Ibid

[14] Ibid

[15] Ibid

[16] Ibid

[17] Ibid

[18] Ibid

[19] Ibid

[20] Ibid

[21] Ibid

[22] Evidence That Demands A Verdict Volume 1, Josh McDowell, Here's Life Publishing, Inc., San Bernardino, CA 92402, pg 65

[23] A Ready Defense, Josh McDowell, Here's Life Publishing, Inc., San Bernardino, CA 92402, pg 81

[24] Ibid

[25] Ibid, pg 82

[26] Ibid, pg 83

[27] Ibid

[28] Ibid, pg 84

[29] Ibid, pg 83

[30] Ibid, pg 81

[31] Ibid, pg 86

[32] Ibid

[33] Ibid

[34] Ibid

[35] Evidence That Demands A Verdict Volume 1, Josh McDowell, Here's Life Publishing, Inc., San Bernardino, CA 92402, pg 73

[36] A Ready Defense, Josh McDowell, Here's Life Publishing, Inc., San Bernardino, CA 92402, pg 55

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Is Scripture Reliable as a Historical Record?

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Apologetics Study EVIDENCES FOR THE CHRISTIAN FAITH Adapted from a study compiled by Richard Helsby by Kerry Letheby (Branches congregation) Study 3 –

IS SCRIPTURE RELIABLE AS A HISTORICAL RECORD? In order to determine the reliability of the New Testament, we need to test it with the same criteria that all historical documents are tested. There are three tests that are usually applied to any ancient documents – **the bibliographical test, the internal evidence test and the external evidence test.** [1]

1. **The Bibliographical test.** This is an examination of the textual transmission by which the documents are handed down to us. In other words, this determines whether or not the text that we have now is the same as what was originally recorded. Has the text been changed over time? Can we be sure that the documents of the New Testament that we now have, are the same as the ones originally recorded? [2]

2. **The Internal evidence test.** This determines whether what is written is credible (accurate/true) and to what extent. Were the writers of the New Testament telling the truth? [3]

3. **The External evidence test.** This determines whether other historical material confirms or denies the internal testimony of the documents. What sources are there, apart from the literature that substantiates its accuracy, reliability, and authenticity? [4]

PART 1 – PUTTING THE BIBLE TO THE BIBLIOGRAPHICAL TEST This is an examination of the textual transmission by which the documents reached us. As we no longer have the original documents, how reliable are the copies we currently have? How can we be sure that the documents we have, are accurate copies of the originals? How can we be sure that there have not been significant changes or errors made in the process of copying over the years? In order to establish that we have accurate copies of the original documents, the Bibliographical test considers the following:

- How many copies of the document in question are available and what variances exist between the copies? This enables us to compare the copies with each other. The more

copies we have the better the comparisons that we can make. [5] If the copies of a document are filled with significant differences, then it would not be possible to know what the original author wrote! But if the variances are few and minor, then the process of copying over the years has been faithful to the original. [6]

- What length of time passed between the original and the earliest copies? [7] If the earliest copies we have were written hundreds of years after the original, a lot of changes could have been made and we wouldn't know about it. But a short interval of time would increase our assurance in the reliability of the copies. [8]

How many copies of New Testament manuscripts are available?

There are now over 5,300 known Greek manuscripts; over 10 000 Latin Vulgate manuscripts and at least 9300 other early versions (e.g. Ethiopic, Slavic, Armenian, Arabic). If we add these all together, there are more than 24 000 manuscript copies of portions of the New Testament in existence today! [9]

Let's compare this amount with the number of copies of other ancient historical writings: [10]

- a) The 'Iliad' by Homer has the second greatest number of manuscript copies of any work of antiquity. There are 643 manuscript copies.
- b) Caesar's "Gallic wars" (10 manuscript copies)
- c) Livy (20 manuscript copies)
- d) Plato's 'Tetralogies' (7 manuscript copies)
- e) Pliny The Younger's 'History' (7 manuscript copies)
- f) Sophocles (193 manuscript copies)

What length of time passed between the original and the earliest copies? Several papyrus fragments, which contain significant portions of the New Testament, have been dated to within 50-150 years of the original New Testament documents. [11] Examples include:

- a) John Ryland's MS (130 AD) contains a portion of the Gospel of John and was found in Egypt
- b) Bodmer Papyrus II (150-200 AD) contains most of John
- c) Chester Beatty Papyri (200 AD) contains major portions of the New Testament

We also have several nearly complete New Testament Greek manuscripts, which were copied within 300-400 years of the originals [12], for example:

- a) Codex Sinaiticus (350 AD), found near Mt. Sinai
- b) Codex Alexandrinus (400 AD), found near Alexandria in Egypt
- c) Codex Vaticanus (325-350AD), located at the Vatican in Rome

In fact, there are 500 different copies of the New Testament that are earlier than 500 AD. Let's again compare this with other classical manuscripts [13]:

- a) The 'Iliad' by Homer – the earliest copy is 500 years removed from the original
- b) Caesar's "Gallic wars" – 1000 years
- c) Livy – 350 years (and the earliest copy is only a fragment).
- d) Plato's 'Tetralogies' – 1200 years.
- e) Pliny the Younger's 'History' – 750 years.

Scholars accept that the writings of the ancient classics are generally trustworthy, even though their earliest manuscripts of ancient classics were written so long after the originals, and the number of existing manuscripts is so small. So in the same way we can also conclude that the New Testament text is also reliable, given that there are far more copies of this than there are of the other writings mentioned[14]

What variances exist between the copies of the New Testament? The process of critically studying a text is known as textual criticism. Textual criticism examines what has crept into the text since it was first written (such as copyists' errors, omissions and additions). Scholars use this process to determine how much of the document we are able to recover and designate as authentic.

With respect to the New Testament, there are some variations between the many thousands of manuscripts available. However, the vast majority of these are very minor (spelling, differences in phraseology, etc.) and modern translations of the New Testament text often note the differences in footnotes. [15]

Textual criticism of the New Testament documents is no different from textual criticism of any other secular texts. [16] It is significant to note that textual criticism has been able to recover the New Testament text with 99% accuracy – that is, 99% of our current copy of the New Testament documents is an accurate copy of the originals! Furthermore, no doctrine of Christianity is dependent on any textual variant. [17]

Comments on Collusion One objection sometimes raised is that the later church conspired to eliminate discrepancies and made purposeful changes to the text of the New Testament. Although we examine this claim more thoroughly in the Internal Evidence Test, it is worth making certain points here.

- No other ancient work is available in so many copies and languages, with all versions agreeing in content. [19]
- The numerous manuscripts were located over a wide geographical distribution (for example Egypt, Palestine, Syria, Turkey, Greece, and Italy). Yet, there are only trifling discrepancies. The differences that do exist are quite minor and are predominately the result of unintentional mistakes. [20] & [21]
- The New Testament documents could not have been corrupted without a great outcry from orthodox Christians. [22]
- The quotations of the New Testament books by the early church Fathers all match the New Testament documents they quote. [23]

- There is no precise time when any proposed falsification could have occurred as the New Testament documents are cited by the church Fathers in regular and close succession. The text could not have been falsified before the church Fathers writings, as then the apostles were still alive and could refute such tampering. [24)
- Also working against any idea that some important text was lost or added is evidence that textual criticism was already in process as early as the second and third century. Origen complains of negligence and audacity by scribes; Jerome takes note of various scribal errors, and so on. They were on guard against any variations. [25)
- The text of the New Testament is every bit as reliable as the text of the classical works of antiquity. To reject the textual reliability of the New Testament would be to reverse all the rules of criticism and to reject all the works of antiquity, since the text of those works is less certain than that of the New Testament. [26)
- There is no solid textual evidence to support the idea that the church made deliberate changes to the New Testament. (27)

Bibliographical Test Conclusion The evidence for our New Testament writings is so much greater than the evidence for many writings of classical authors, the authenticity of which no one dreams of questioning. [28) Most historians accept the textual accuracy of other ancient works on far less adequate manuscript grounds than is available for the New Testament.[29)

Now that we have established the textual reliability of the New Testament, we need to establish whether its accounts are historically reliable. This leads us to the internal and external evidence tests.

QUESTIONS

1. How does a person test the reliability of an historical document? What three tests should be applied to the document? Briefly describe these in your own words.
2. Why is it important the New Testament be a reliable historical document?
3. In the Bibliographical test, how do we establish that we have accurate copies of the original documents?
4. What difference does it make if there are only a few copies and many variances?
5. What difference does it make if our earliest copy of an ancient document is dated hundreds of years after the original was written?
6. Based on this study, how many copies of the New Testament manuscripts are available? How does this compare to ancient literature?
7. What length of time passed between the original and the earliest copies? How does this compare to other ancient literature?
8. What variances exist between the copies of the New Testament? How does this compare to other ancient literature?
9. Why is it important that no core belief of Christianity is dependent on any textual variant?

10. What do you think are the three main arguments against the possibility of later purposeful changes to the text of the New Testament?

11. In your own words, state what the Bibliographical test is, and how and why the New Testament documents pass it so well.

FOOTNOTES [1] 'A Ready Defense', Josh McDowell, Here's Life Publishing, Inc., San Bernardino, CA 92402, pg 43 [2] Ibid [3] 'A Ready Defense', Josh McDowell, Here's Life Publishing, Inc., San Bernardino, CA 92402, pg 51 [4] Ibid, pg 54 [5] The "Executable Outlines" Series: Christian Apologetics, Mark A. Copeland. [6] Ibid [7] Ibid [8] Ibid [9] 'Evidence That Demands A Verdict' Volume 1, Josh McDowell, Here's Life Publishing, Inc., San Bernardino, CA 92402, pg 39 [10] Ibid, pg42 [11] The "Executable Outlines" Series: Christian Apologetics, Mark A. Copeland [12] Ibid [13] Ibid [14] 'A Ready Defense', Josh McDowell, Here's Life Publishing, Inc., San Bernardino, CA 92402, pg 145 [15] The "Executable Outlines" Series: Christian Apologetics, Mark A. Copeland [16] "Jesus. Shattering the Christ-Myth. The Reliability of the Secular References to Jesus", Tekton: Building Blocks for Christian Faith, J. P. Holding, <http://tektonics.org/jesusexist/jesusexisthub.html> [17] 'The New Testament. The Textual Reliability of the New Testament', J. P. Holding [18] Ibid [19] "Handbook of Christian Apologetics", Peter Kreeft & Ronald Tacelli, Monarch Publications, 1995] [20] "Handbook of Christian Apologetics", Peter Kreeft & Ronald Tacelli, Monarch Publications, 1995, pg 194 [21] 'The New Testament. The Textual Reliability of the New Testament', J. P. Holding [22] "Handbook of Christian Apologetics", Peter Kreeft & Ronald Tacelli, Monarch Publications, 1995, pg 195 [23] Ibid [24] "Handbook of Christian Apologetics", Peter Kreeft & Ronald Tacelli, Monarch Publications, 1995, pg 195] [25] 'The New Testament. The Textual Reliability of the New Testament', J. P. Holding, <http://www.tektonics.org/lp/nttextcrit.html> [26] "Handbook of Christian Apologetics", Peter Kreeft & Ronald Tacelli, Monarch Publications, 1995 [27] 'The New Testament. The Textual Reliability of the New Testament', J. P. Holding, <http://www.tektonics.org/lp/nttextcrit.html> [28] The "Executable Outlines" Series: Christian Apologetics, Mark A. Copeland, http://www.ccel.org/contrib/exec_outlines/ [29] 'The New Testament. The Textual Reliability of the New Testament', J. P. Holding, <http://www.tektonics.org/lp/nttextcrit.html>

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