

2 The world's most reliable ancient document

If the history is wrong the claim is wrong



BOOKLET 2

The world's most reliable ancient document

If the history is wrong the claim is wrong

Why Christians believe Christianity to be true

A simple and authentic explanation of things you might not otherwise hear

A Shining Lights Trust (NZ) resource
By Dave Mann ©2023

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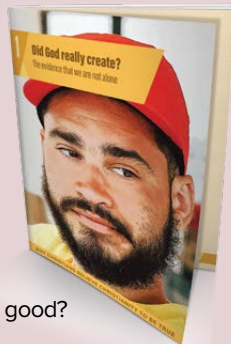


Introduction

Could God be knowable and good?

In our first booklet we looked at reasons why over half the world's population believe there is a God of some kind, with the majority of the rest believing in a more general spiritual realm or reality.

The next logical question is whether this God can be known and is good. It's a big question because evil clearly exists, so why would we assume God to be only good?



2

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Might there be a 'bad' God?

The world is clearly filled with a mix of the things we call 'good' and 'evil'. If the observed world is our only source of information about the Creator, it's not hard to see why many cultures have assumed the Creator to be a mix of the good and bad! This viewpoint would include most of the Eastern religions and also animistic (primitive tribal) religions. Their 'gods' are a reflection of the reality they see.

In contrast, the Christian faith suggests God can be personally known, and is specifically good — and therefore not in any way bad. It is a big claim given that suffering and evil are a part of our everyday reality. How could we know if this is true?

The only way would be if this God were to reveal himself/herself/itself to us within history — and this is exactly what Jews, Christians and Muslims believe has happened!

These faiths believe God intervened in history to reveal what he is like, starting with the man named Abraham.

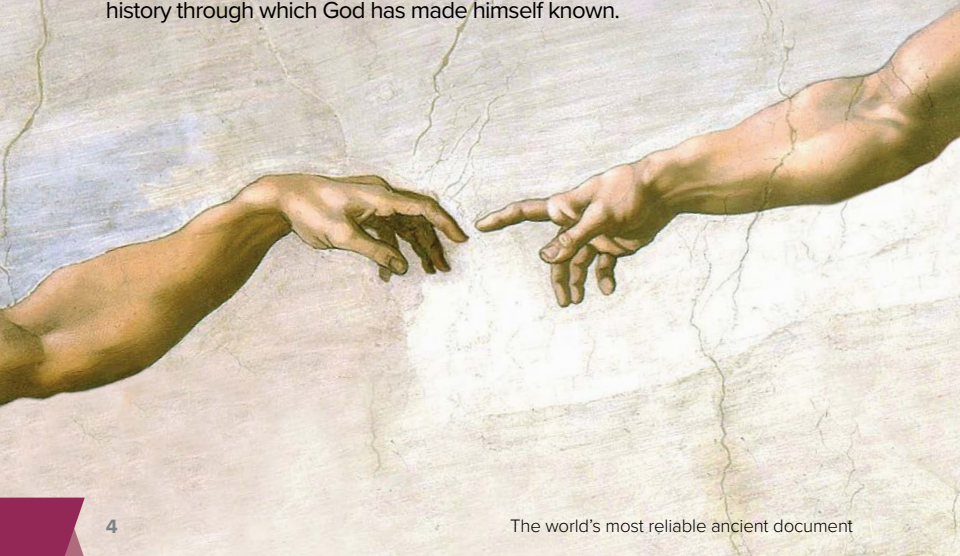
The explanation arising from this includes:

- the original purpose of the creation (us),
- how the creation became corrupted,
- why God didn't just destroy it (and all of us),
- and the end goal and plan that is in play throughout our history.

For this reason, this second booklet is going to look specifically at the reliability of the Bible as a record of history. *This is important because, if the history isn't dependable, there is very little left to support the idea that God might be loving and good!*

Booklet three will continue our study by considering whether God's divine hand might be behind the Bible.

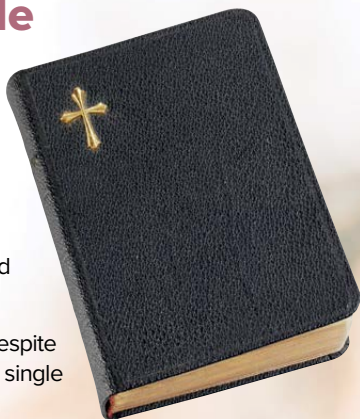
Together, they will explain why Christians trust the Bible as a record of history through which God has made himself known.



Introducing the Bible

The Bible is an amazing and unique book. It was written over a fifteen-hundred-year span by more than forty authors. These authors came from all sorts of backgrounds including kings, military leaders, peasants, philosophers, fishermen, poets, scholars, and shepherds!¹

Yet, the Bible has a cohesiveness about it, despite the variety of contributors over time. It tells a single story when viewed as a whole.



TO SUMMARISE THE MESSAGE OF THE BIBLE IN 150 WORDS

The Bible explains that God made this planet and its people, and he made everything good. However, God gave us free will so there can be love — which we used to create wrong and evil through our choices. This corrupted what was created, including ourselves. The relationships between each of us, between us and God and between us and the plant were all damaged. Instead of condemning or destroying us there and then, God decided to save us. He has reached out to us in history because he wants us to know who he is. God has a plan to save us from the natural consequences of our wrongdoing. That plan was enacted through Jesus, enabling the most significant choice we could ever make in our lives — which is the choice to turn to God.

Some Awards

Incidentally, the Bible has been the world's best seller and the most printed book every year since the invention of the printing press.² It is also the world's most translated book,³ and the most given, purchased, read, and stolen.

Its overarching story is believed by over half of the world's population (Jews, Christians and Muslims). The New Testament, which is about Jesus, is sacred to both Christians and Muslims, but only Christians (representing just over a quarter of the world's population) believe Jesus was the Messiah (or Promised One) from God.



Our context: A history of efforts to undermine the Bible

For the past 200 years, various Western academics and others have given significant effort and focus to attacking and undermining the Christian faith. The entertainment industry and public media have participated, giving prominence to the voice of critics.

Whether we're talking about 'The Lost Gospel of Judas', 'The Lost Tomb of Christ' or the fictional book and movie, 'The Da Vinci Code' — the message is one and the same. They are saying, 'You cannot trust the Bible!'

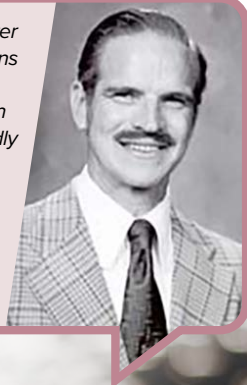
Best-selling atheist authors like Christopher Hitchens, or Bishop John Spong (from a prior generation) are well-known for doubting the reliability or truth of the Christian faith. They represent the 'sceptics', who say 'You can't trust that book!' Their claims are popular, and are often widely published and promoted through public media. This has, however, been to the dismay of Biblical and other experts — who have data that says the opposite!

They have been responding to these attacks. Many of them are notable scholars, working in areas like archaeology and textual criticism (studying ancient documents). They have been generally ignored by popular publications and media.

For example, let us consider Dr Gleason Archer Jr., whose speciality was in studying whether ancient documents could be trusted.

To note the scope of his learning and expertise, Dr Archer learned over thirty languages — most of them from the ‘early Bible’ times in the Middle Eastern world. He taught Biblical criticism at graduate seminary level for over thirty years. He is an expert among experts, and here is what he concluded regarding the Bible:

“As I have dealt with one apparent discrepancy after another and have studied the alleged contradictions between the biblical record and the evidence of linguists, archaeology, or science, my confidence in the trustworthiness of Scripture has been repeatedly verified and strengthened by the discovery that almost every problem in Scripture that has ever been discovered by man, from ancient times until now, has been dealt with in a completely satisfactory manner by the biblical text itself — or else by objective archaeological information.”⁴



How is it even possible that a scholar like this could come to the very opposite conclusion of the popular critics, who are hailed by public media for their genius?

It's an important question because of what is at stake.

Join us as we show you the evidence for the Bible that you may have never heard — while remembering this is important because the Bible might be the book through which the God of the universe has been trying to communicate with us.

Can the Bible really be trusted as a record of history?

We will now consider a dozen different questions that have been asked about the Bible and share the findings of scholars.

I will give examples mostly from the New Testament that you will hopefully find interesting. Books referenced in the endnotes could provide further reading if you wish.

1. HAVE THE DOCUMENTS BEEN CHANGED?

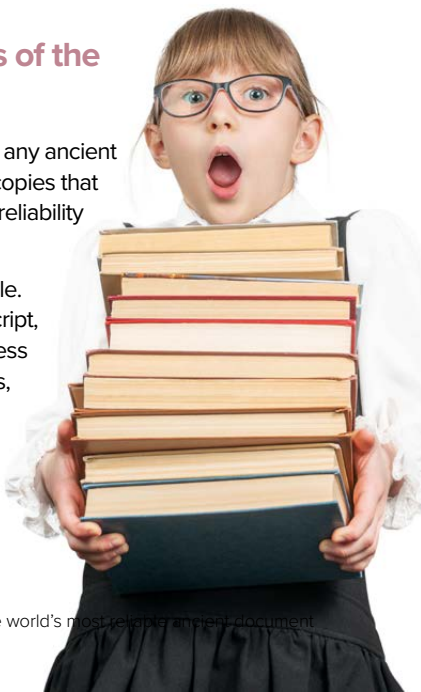
Let's start with four important questions that are used by scholars to assess the reliability of an ancient document.

a. How many ancient copies of the books are there?

There are actually no original documents for any ancient document or 'book'. This is why comparing copies that still exist today is the only way to assess the reliability of any of them.

The logic of this first test for reliability is simple. The more copies you have of an old manuscript, the more material there is from which to assess its reliability. In fact, if you had enough copies, you could potentially even identify copying errors and correct them!

For some data: Biblical scholar F. F. Bruce points out that we have about nine or ten



good copies of Caesar's *Gallic War*, twenty copies of Livy's *Roman History*, two copies of Tacitus' *Annals*, and eight manuscripts of Thucydides' *History*.⁵

Also from ancient times, Homer's *Iliad* (the ancient 'Bible of the Greeks', recording their various mythologies) has the second most copies with an amazing 643 manuscript copies.

The above texts are considered to be reliable records of what was originally written.

The surprising fact for the New Testament is that there are over 5,686 handwritten manuscripts or partial manuscripts in the Greek language alone⁶. When you add in the other languages it was written in back then, there are well over 25,000 copies!

This means there are far more copies of the New Testament than of any other book from the ancient world — which we'd never know if our only source of information was public media!

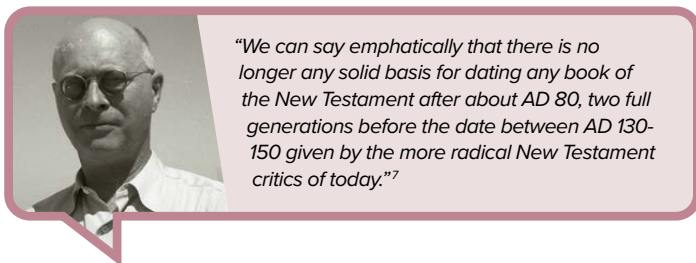
b. How soon after the events took place were the original texts written?

To undermine trust in the Bible's texts, sceptics have tried to suggest the texts had been changed over time. Some suggested the stories might have been passed from person to person — very much like the children's game where they whisper a message around a circle to see how much it changes. Bible sceptics suggest that myths therefore crept into these accounts as they were passed on, distorting the facts.

The problem is that this idea assumes the New Testament books were written a long time after Jesus lived. This is known not to be the case!



To summarise, respected archaeologist William Albright says,



"We can say emphatically that there is no longer any solid basis for dating any book of the New Testament after about AD 80, two full generations before the date between AD 130-150 given by the more radical New Testament critics of today."⁷

Some scholars still believe the dating of the Book of Revelation is later than this, at around AD 90 (though still written by Jesus' disciple John). However, it is significant that it is not only conservative scholars (who conclude we can trust the Bible's message) who are changing their timelines and dating for the New Testament books. For example, liberal theologian John A. T. Robinson changed his chronology of the New Testament books after further investigation, concluding all were written probably between AD 50 and 75.⁸

The point is simple: If most of the books of the New Testament were written within thirty years of the life of Jesus, and all of them were written within 60 years, there is too little time for myths to develop!

We are looking at accounts from eye-witnesses — that were also read and checked by other eye-witnesses!

A truly remarkable short time-gap

There is evidence that the disciples' belief in the resurrection was firmly in place within three to five years of the event itself. 1 Corinthians 15:3-5 is accepted as a 'creedal statement' (a repeated statement of belief) passed on to the Apostle Paul around AD 38. So the creed must have existed earlier than this — placing it within three to five years of Jesus' death. This is evidence that Jesus' earliest followers were convinced of his resurrection basically from the time it happened (details are in the footnotes⁹).



On the basis of the evidence, even radical New Testament critics like Robert Funk (founder of the Jesus Seminar) are willing to admit this creed was indeed written within two to three years of Jesus' death.¹⁰

Gerd Lüdemann, a former Professor of History and Literature of Early Christians at Georg-August-University, Göttingen, Germany, says, "*We can assume that all the elements of the tradition are to be dated to the first two years after the crucifixion of Jesus.*"

James D. G. Dunn, the Emeritus Lightfoot Professor of Divinity at the University of Durham says, "*This tradition we can be entirely confident was formulated as tradition within months of Jesus' death.*"

1 Corinthians 15:3-5

***For what I received I passed on
to you as of first importance:***

***that Christ died for our
sins according to the Scriptures,***

that he was buried,

***that he was raised on the third
day according to the Scriptures,***

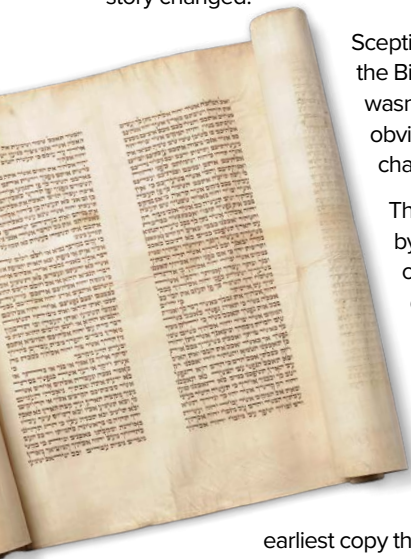
***and that he appeared to
Cephas, and then to the Twelve.***

Any idea that this was all made up later, or that the details changed over time, is therefore ruled out. There simply wasn't enough time for the memory of actual history to be wiped away, with myths replacing it.¹¹

For context, studies on how myths and legends come about show that even 400 years is considered too short a period of time for myth to develop and replace actual history.¹²

c. How soon after the original texts were the documents we have today copied?

This is an important question because the closer a copy is to the original document, the less likely it is that copying errors have been made, or the story changed.



Sceptics of the Christian faith have long dismissed the Bible by saying it was changed over time. If it wasn't changed before it was written down, the obvious next criticism is to say it must have been changed after it was written down!

These kinds of attacks were so common that by the time of the baby boomer generation of the 1960s a culture-wide view was developing that assumed the Bible had been proven to be false.

Let's look at the contrasting evidence.

For Caesar's *Gallic Wars*, the time gap from the time of writing through to the earliest copy that still exists today is 1,000 years. For Livy's *Histories of Rome*, the time gap is over 400 years to a partial copy, and over 1,000 years to a first full copy. For the second most numerous ancient document (in terms of the numbers of ancient copies we have), which is Homer's *Iliad*, the time gap to the first copy is 400 years after it was written.

Note that a 400-year gap between the original writing and the copy of that document we have today therefore means 'very reliable'. The above books are all considered to be reliable copies of what was originally written.

The surprising discovery is that there are undisputed fragments of New Testament books from 50 years or less¹³ after the original was written — like the John Ryland fragment dated between AD117-138.

There are complete copies of books of the New Testament from a little over 100 years later — like the Bodmer Papyri, dated between AD150-200.

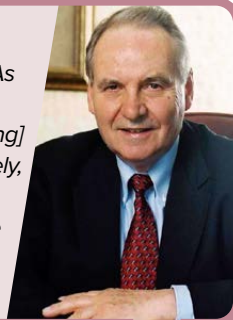


With the accuracy of many individual books of the New Testament already known, scholars then also have most of the New Testament in a single form within 200 years of the original composition — as in the Chester Beatty Papyri, dated AD200-250.¹⁴

Despite the persistent criticism we have all heard about the Bible's reliability, there are copies of the New Testament documents that are closer to when they were first written than for any other ancient work!

“The importance of the sheer number of manuscript copies cannot be overstated. As with other documents of ancient literature, there are no known extant [currently existing] original manuscripts of the Bible. Fortunately, however, the abundance of manuscript copies makes it possible to reconstruct the original with virtually complete accuracy.”¹⁵

— Dr Norman Geisler



d. How accurately have they been copied?

This question can be answered by comparing differences that might exist in the copies of an ancient text.

However, before even looking at any data, we know that the accuracy of copying Biblical texts is going to be as good as it gets for a unique reason. Bernard Ramm, a theologian, explains the seriousness with which the ancient scribes, who copied texts, conducted their work: *“They had special classes of men within their culture whose sole duty was to preserve and transmit these documents with practically perfect fidelity — scribes, lawyers, masorettes. Who ever counted the letters and syllables and words of Plato or Aristotle? Cicero or Seneca?”*¹⁶

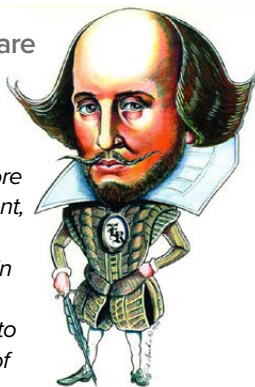
In those days, before the advent of printing presses, the copying of Israel’s religious texts was a very important profession and the need for accuracy was an absolute priority. There is no parallel to this in our modern world.

- In Appendix 1 we have included more details on the kinds of tests scholars do to assess accuracy.

To summarise, while there are differing words in the ancient New Testament texts for which the variant meanings can’t be clearly resolved one way or the other, these affect hardly one-thousandth of the New Testament. Most importantly, none affect any major doctrine or belief — which is the relevant point!

A telling comparison to William Shakespeare

William Shakespeare lived just 300 years ago, yet one author noted, *“It seems strange that the text of Shakespeare, which has been in existence less than two hundred and eight years, should be far more uncertain and corrupt than that of the New Testament, now over eighteen centuries old... With perhaps a dozen or twenty exceptions, the text of every verse in the New Testament may be said to be so far settled by general consent of scholars, that any dispute as to its readings must relate rather to the interpretation of the words than to any doubts respecting the words themselves. But in every one of Shakespeare’s thirty-seven plays there are probably a hundred readings still in dispute, a large portion of which materially affects the meaning of the passages in which they occur.”*¹⁷



An incomparable claim

Let's say we ignored the existence of all 25,000 copies of the New Testament documents mentioned above. The amazing thing is we'd still be able to reconstruct the whole New Testament. How? The answer is through the overwhelming number of New Testament quotations found in the writings of the early Christian writers!¹⁸

Biblical scholar Bruce M. Metzger says,



"Indeed so extensive are these citations that if all other sources for our knowledge of the text of the New Testament were destroyed, they would be sufficient alone for the reconstruction of practically the entire New Testament."¹⁹

How many verses would we not have?

To reveal the exciting Saturday afternoon activities of Sir David Dalrymple (1726 -1792) — he decided to count them! He was asked, *"Suppose that the New Testament had been destroyed, and every copy of it lost... could it*



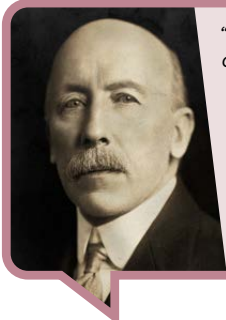
If the history telling the claim is wrong

have been collected together again from the writings of the Fathers [church leaders] of the second and third centuries?" Dalrymple writes, "That question roused my curiosity, and as I possessed all the existing works of the Fathers of the second and third centuries, I commenced to search, and up to this time I have found the entire New Testament, except eleven verses."²⁰



A summary from Sir Frederic Kenyon

Sir Frederic Kenyon was head librarian for the British Museum and one of the leading experts in the field of manuscript evidence in his day. He summarised evidence about the reliability of the Bible, saying,



"The interval then between the dates of the original composition and the earliest extant evidence becomes so small as to be in fact negligible, and the last foundation for any doubt that the Scriptures have come down to us substantially as they were written has now been removed. Both the authenticity and the general integrity of the books of the New Testament may be regarded as finally established."²¹

This book, the Bible, which claims to be a record of God revealing himself to us through history, just happens to be the world's most reliable ancient document!

2. HOW DO WE KNOW THE AUTHORS DIDN'T MAKE IT UP?

Having looked at the written texts, let's now turn to instead look at the people who wrote them.

Just because something is reliably preserved, that doesn't mean it is true.

The *Iliad*, for example, is considered a reliable record of what was originally written — but that quite obviously doesn't mean that the Greek myths it records are true historical accounts.

Could the New Testament be an accurate copy of an inaccurate account?

Here are some of the questions academics have asked, and what was found.

a. The external evidence: What did other writers of Jesus' time have to say about him?

The most important accounts to consider in assessing how accurately any story has been recorded are those written by people who have no possible favourable bias. There are accounts of Jesus' life written by people who did not believe in Jesus as the 'man from God'. The two most well-known of these are Josephus, a first century Roman-Jewish historian, and the traditions recorded in the 'Jewish Talmud'.

Josephus (approx. AD37-100) wrote for the Romans. His account, published AD93, confirms various notable details of Christ's life.²² The Jewish Talmud²³ similarly confirms various details — including a record of Jesus as a miracle-worker — though the Talmud attributes Jesus' power as coming from the devil.

With a dozen sources like this considered,²⁴ third-party evidence exists today for most parts of Jesus' life and work, including that *Jesus lived during the time of Tiberius Caesar. He lived a virtuous life. He was a wonder worker. He had a brother named James. He claimed to be*



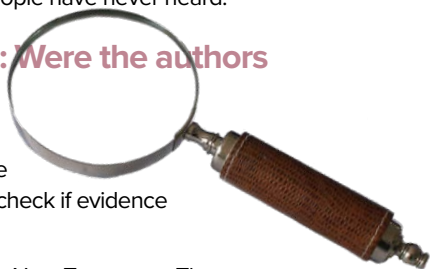
*the Messiah. He was crucified under Pontius Pilate. An eclipse and an earthquake occurred when he died. He was crucified on the eve of the Jewish Passover. His disciples believed that he rose from the dead. His disciples were willing to die for their belief. Christianity spread rapidly as far as Rome. His disciples denied the Roman gods and worshiped Jesus as God.*²⁵

These other accounts give no reason to doubt what is in the Gospel accounts of the New Testament of the Bible.

Yet again, this is the evidence many people have never heard.

b. The internal evidence: Were the authors credible people?

It is a lawyer's job and a judge's job to work out whether a person is telling the truth. As a result, specific tests exist to check if evidence being presented is reliable.



In this section we apply four tests to the New Testament. These tests were put together to evaluate the reliability of texts by David Hume (a noted Bible sceptic).²⁶

- i. How many witnesses were there?
- ii. Did they ever contradict each other?
- iii. Are there specific indications the witnesses were being truthful?
- iv. Were there ulterior motives?

To keep this booklet short we will have to include very few examples in this section.

i. How many witnesses were there?

There were at least eight or nine authors²⁷ to the New Testament books, all of whom were eyewitnesses of the events they wrote about, or who interviewed eyewitnesses.²⁸ However, a great many more people than this claimed to have seen the risen Jesus. For example, in 1 Corinthians 15:3-8, Paul (the author) refers to over five hundred people who saw the resurrected Jesus in a single meeting.



Paul then points out to those who heard his preaching that the eyewitnesses of Jesus and the events he spoke of are still alive — so they could go and speak to them to investigate matters if they desired.²⁹

The suggestion that the story was concocted doesn't add up in this kind of scenario.

ii. Did the witnesses ever contradict each other?

The primary four witnesses are those who wrote about Jesus in the 'Gospels' named after them — Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. These books are found at the beginning of the New Testament. Their accounts are about the life and teachings of Jesus.

Some differences do exist between the four Gospels. Consider the story of Jesus asleep in the boat during the storm. In one account he awakes, calms the storm — then rebukes his disciples for their lack of faith. In another he awakes, rebukes his disciples for their lack of faith — and then calms the storm.³⁰ Which way around was it?

Sceptics have made much of these variations.

However, in literary criticism, as also in any court of law, *certain differences in perspective are expected to exist between witnesses if a story is true.*

Within certain limits, differences actually prove that a story is authentic, as compared to one that has been made up.

The easiest way to test this is therefore to get a lawyer or judge to independently investigate the matter — and this has happened numerous times.³¹

It needs to be understood that, legally, a story told by two people would be considered false if their accounts were too different — or too similar!

New Testament professor Dr Craig L. Blomberg explains:

“If the gospels were too consistent, that in itself would invalidate them as independent witnesses. People would then say we really only have one testimony that everybody else is just parroting.”³²



What the four Gospel accounts provide is four independent eye-witness accounts.³³

It is also important to note that none of the supposed ‘contradictions’ is about anything big, which might affect any major Christian belief.

The writers of the Gospels also seem to have been somewhat aware of each other’s accounts — and certainly would have been in the years following. Yet they did not see a need to edit anything! This is to say, the small differences that Bible sceptics have sought to make much of from the 21st-century Western way of thinking didn’t seem to raise questions in the minds of Jesus’ disciples at all.

So, while talk of contradictions has made headlines in magazines, it’s not a conclusion accepted by many of the scholars who are specialists in these fields.

iii. Are there specific indications the witnesses were being truthful?

To answer this concisely — there are many things in the Bible accounts that suggest the authors were not lying. For example, the authors all held the strong religious belief that lying was wrong, and that God (who they would meet face to face one day when they died) would judge them for every thought, word and deed.

These were followers of Jesus, who was arguably the greatest ethical teacher of all time. To suppose that the disciples of a man who said that to even look at a woman with lust made one guilty of adultery in God's eyes, would then fabricate the record, seems highly unlikely!

Another strong indication that they were writing truthfully is the inclusion of reference to their own failings and weaknesses which make them look bad — like when they argued about who was the greatest disciple.³⁴

They even left embarrassing details in their accounts, like when Luke records how Jesus said to Peter, 'Get behind me Satan.'³⁵ Awkward and inconvenient details like this would not usually appear in a made-up story.

With a range of evidence considered, the idea that the accounts were made-up doesn't stack up.³⁶ Instead it seems that the writers were just honestly telling the story of what they had experienced.

iv. Did they have something to gain if they lied?

In short, the disciples had nothing to gain by making up a story about Jesus and his rising from death — except for their own deaths!

When Jesus died the disciples felt defeated. In those days, people believed that anyone who was crucified was under a curse. But the disciples underwent a truly radical transformation and became totally convinced



Jesus was alive again. They began proclaiming that a person (supposedly cursed) like this was the Messiah from God. They also didn't declare this belief lightly. Instead, they became radically bold and confident, sharing this belief as their central message despite suffering persecution, rejection, punishment, imprisonment, torture, and even ultimately death in many cases!

People will lie or make things up for money and power, but these disciples received neither. Church tradition records that all but one of the remaining disciples eventually died for proclaiming their beliefs in Jesus — and history is yet to show a person dying for something they knew was not true.

They had nothing to gain and everything to lose.

The eye-witnesses of Jesus' life were somehow entirely convinced of what they told!

The independent verification

As already mentioned, independent investigations of this history have been undertaken numerous times by court of law judges, lawyers and others, applying their investigative skills.



Law Professor Simon Greenleaf (1783-1853)

Harvard Law professor, Simon Greenleaf, is a noted legal mind in history. He wrote a book on legal evidence that is still being used today.

Greenleaf was asked to investigate this matter and, having agreed to do so, applied the principles of legal evidence to the New Testament to determine whether the writers were telling the truth.

The surprising conclusion was that, not only did he determine the New Testament writers were telling the truth, he was so compelled by what he discovered that he changed his beliefs and became a Christian.³⁷



Former Chief Magistrate, Clarrie Briese

Clarrie Briese is a former Chief Magistrate of NSW, Australia, now retired. He is well-known in Australia for his work in rooting out corruption no matter where it was found. When he applied his skills to an investigation of the trustworthiness of the Gospels and their writers, he concluded that they had all the hallmarks of reliable testimony.³⁸

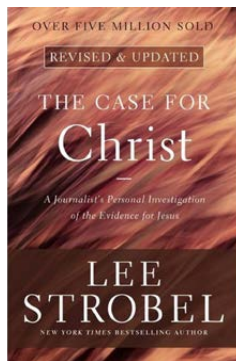


Journalist Lee Strobel

Lee Strobel was a successful journalist — and an atheist. One day his wife told him she had decided to become a Christian. Feeling annoyed, he decided to apply his investigative skills to the story of Jesus and to publish a series of articles about Jesus and the Bible, with every expectation he would prove the accounts unreliable.

To his surprise and disappointment, his study proved the opposite. He later wrote about it in a book titled *The Case for Christ*. He admitted to feeling decidedly grumpy about what he discovered for quite some time — before finally accepting the evidence for what it was. He then turned to God in prayer like his wife had.

Before we conclude our booklet, we will very briefly introduce just one more area of evidence because it is particularly important to a study of the Old Testament — which records history prior to Jesus.



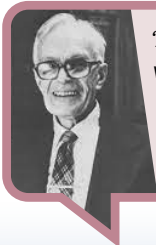
3. ARCHAEOLOGY

As we have seen, many Bible sceptics of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries assumed that the Bible was unreliable. So, many archaeologists expected that details in the Bible relating to people, places and dates would be unreliable. Their work in archaeology was therefore often done with this underlying bias — both wanting and expecting that the Bible's accounts would prove inaccurate. If successful in finding something that proved a detail in the Bible incorrect, they knew this would make headlines in newspapers, which would give their work much-needed profile and help with their funding.

A vast record of archaeological evidence now exists. On the scope of this, archaeologist Donald Wiseman points out, *“The geography of the Bible lands and visible remains of antiquity were gradually recorded, until today more than 25,000 sites within this region and dating to Old Testament times, in their broadest sense, have been located.”*³⁹

In contrast to what was initially expected, archaeological discoveries have consistently confirmed the accuracy of the Bible's historical details.

Archaeologist Miller Burrows of Yale, who is a recognised expert on the Dead Sea Scrolls, commented on this, saying,



*“Archaeology has in many cases refuted the views of modern critics. It has shown in a number of instances that these views rest on false assumptions and unreal, artificial schemes of historical development.”*⁴⁰

To summarise then: many archaeologists started their work with bias — believing the Bible to be inaccurate, and wanting to prove that — but the evidence didn't show this.

Of course, archaeology cannot prove every detail in a written history. Proving things that happened 3,000 years ago is not easy. However, there is a clear pattern where tensions between current archaeology and the Bible exist. Biblical archaeologist Merrill Unger explains:

"...where archaeology and the Bible seem to be in tension, the issue is almost always dating, and the most shaky area in current archaeology... [where] circular reasoning often replaces solid empirical analysis... is that dating."⁴¹



Time and further research could therefore potentially resolve current questions — just like many of the current 25,000 archaeological sites have already done to countless accusations against the Bible that have now been shown to be false.

The significance of archaeology

This topic warrants an entire booklet of its own because of the stories of various digs, and the intriguing comments made by many archaeologists when they discovered the recorded histories to be accurate.

To conclude with a single statement from Nelson Glueck, a famed archaeologist of Jewish descent:

"As a matter of fact, however, it may be stated categorically that no archaeological discovery has ever controverted [denied] a biblical reference. Scores of archaeological findings have been made which confirm in clear outline or exact detail historical statements in the Bible."⁴²



JOSH MCDOWELL'S STORY

Josh McDowell described himself as a 'born again atheist'. He grew up with the philosophy, 'if something doesn't work, chuck it', and his early experiences of church caused him to 'chuck' it!

However, as he searched for meaningful answers to life's big questions, he found that they did not exist amongst academics.

He tells how he sought prestige, but it did not fulfil him. He lived for pleasure, but awoke with headaches. Then he was challenged to investigate Christ and his claims intellectually. Thinking Christianity was a religion for 'weaklings, not intellectuals', McDowell took up the challenge — and soon found himself in intellectual trouble. The popular opinions against Christianity, which he had repeated to others, were not backed up by evidence as he had thought.



It caused turmoil within him. He writes, *I began to realize that I was being intellectually dishonest*. Forced by the evidence to reconsider his scepticism, he finally admitted defeat on the basis of the evidence he'd found. But how did following an invisible God 'work'?

Filled with hatred and bitterness toward his violent drunkard of a father, he now somehow found an ability to forgive and inner peace. From having an exceptionally bad temper, his temperament was now changed, although he admits, not perfectly so. He says, *my life was basically changed in six to eighteen months*.⁴³

McDowell went on to study the evidence for faith in depth, and is a well-known author on this subject today, having written or co-authored more than 70 books.

He says, *Christianity is not something to be shoved down your throat or forced on you. You have your life to live and I have mine. All I can tell you is what I have learned and experienced ...You can laugh at Christianity. You can mock and ridicule it. But it works.*

Conclusion:

The evidence you never heard — what does it mean?

Like the trail of bread crumbs in the children's story, Hansel and Gretel, various evidences combine to point in one direction.

Despite the popular criticisms echoed by public media, the Bible is trusted because the evidence stacks up — and this topic is important because, if the history is accurate, there is a basis for believing the amazing message of that history to be true!

To remind us of where we started this booklet, if this world is a reflection of the God who made it, we'd logically conclude that this God is a mixture of both the good and the bad — like the Eastern religions do. To claim that God is only the good would require a very good explanation!

This is why the Bible is so significant — and also why it has been so attacked. Christians believe that the needed 'very good explanation' for evil and suffering has been given! Our Creator has reached down into history — as recorded in the Bible — to show us what he is like! We therefore have a basis for believing God to be loving and good — and knowable!

Why then does the scepticism towards the Bible continue?

The main reason is because it includes accounts of miracles! It is that simple! If a person rejects the idea of a God or a spiritual realm, then it is only logical to conclude that miracles cannot happen. They therefore feel they 'know for



a fact' the Bible can't be accurate because it includes accounts of miracles.

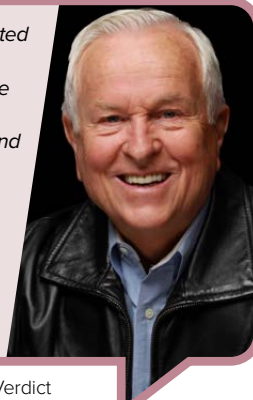
At an academic level, the real topic is the existence of God and miracles — not the reliability of the Bible! Attacking the Bible is therefore something of a smoke screen. Many who are sceptical have their own reasons for wanting to stay sceptical, so they accept and spread arguments that support their desired conclusion. Their conclusions are not, however, the clear result of the evidence.

THE PROBLEM
IS THE
MIRACLES!

They have reached certain conclusions because of their prior beliefs and assumptions — which exclude the possibility of a God or spiritual realm — so 'miracles can't happen'.⁴⁴

For the very simple counter-argument, the logic is simple. If a God does exist, or even just a spiritual realm, miracles are possible — even if they are rare. And to note it, 95% of the world's population are religious at some level! So the logical question isn't whether a miracle could happen — but whether or not it did.

*"For many today, the study of history is incorporated with the ideas that there is no God, miracles are not possible, we live in a closed system, and there is no supernatural. With these assumptions or presuppositions they begin their "critical, open, and honest" investigation of history. When they study the life of Christ and read about His miracles or resurrection, they conclude that it was not a miracle or a resurrection because we know (not historically, but philosophically) that there is no God, we live in a closed system, miracles are not possible, and there is no supernatural,"*⁴⁵



Josh McDowell, Author — Evidence That Demands A Verdict

COMING UP NEXT...

Is there any evidence of a Divine hand behind the Bible?

If a God does exist (Booklet 1), and the historical accounts of the Bible are accurate (Booklet 2), wouldn't it be good to know if God himself is actually behind the Bible?

If this 'divine hand' could somehow be evidenced, it could give us a basis for believing that God's promised plan might even work too!

As it happens, evidence that there is a divine hand behind the Bible can be shown, and that is what the next booklet is about.

Thanks for engaging with this brief investigation into why Christians believe Christianity to be true.



APPENDIX 1

An example of how the accuracy of ancient documents is tested.

(This relates to section 1d of this booklet.)

There is a system for measuring accuracy that gives an ancient text a ‘percentage grade’, based on the number of differences found between the various copies of a text that exist.

Using this measure, Bruce Metzger, the well-respected New Testament scholar, estimated that the *Mahabharata* of Hinduism is copied with about 90 percent accuracy, and Homer’s *Iliad* with about 95 percent.⁴⁶ By comparison, on a first look, just five percent of the New Testament has any variation.⁴⁷

This means, at first glance, that the New Testament is ‘only as good as the best’ — not better. This information is what a Bible sceptic would talk about if discussing the topic.

However, this assessment changes when other factors are considered. In particular, this method hasn’t taken into account the very large number of ancient copies there are of the New Testament — as compared to the other ancient texts. Therefore texts or books for which there are many copies are disadvantaged. For example, imagine there is a variant spelling of a word between different copies. This would be counted as an ‘error’ across all other copies of that document. So, a spelling variation in the Bible that is repeated in 2,000 of the more than 5,300 Greek manuscript copies would record as 2,000 errors against the Bible’s reliability — making that text look worse than it actually is. For comparison, an ancient text for which there are only 9 copies could only record a maximum of 8 errors by this method (or as only 1 error, if you more logically assume the 8 copies to be correct).⁴⁸

In addition, when we look at the differences found in the New Testament texts, the vast majority are grammatical — not in the content or meaning of what is written.

- For example, there are variants of spelling.
- Sometimes the ‘article’ (the word ‘the’) is left out in a sentence.
- Sometimes there are changes in word order ⁴⁹ — which, if counted, fails to recognise that in the Greek language (unlike English), the order of the words in the sentence doesn’t change the meaning.

When these initial differences are considered, the accuracy rises to 97.3 percent by this method of assessment.

It then rises further to over 99 percent if other well-known anomalies are considered — like the fact that some copies don’t include the last twelve verses of the Gospel of Mark.⁵⁰

*“If comparative trivialities such as of order, the insertion or omission of the article (‘the’) with proper names, and the like are set aside, the words in our opinion still subject to doubt can hardly amount to more than a thousandth part of the New Testament.”*⁵¹ B. F. Westcott and F. J. A. Hort

Even more significantly, none of the copying differences affect any major doctrine or belief — which is what is actually important!

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Endnotes

- 1 Josh McDowell, *New Evidence That Demands a Verdict* (Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1999), p1-9.
- 2 As an example, the United Bible Societies' 2008 Scripture Distribution Report showed it alone had distributed more than thirty-nine million Bibles or New Testaments, plus an additional 330 million portions or 'selections' in that year alone.
- 3 Wycliffe Bible Translators have no fewer than six thousand people working on more than eight hundred and fifty different languages on new or revised versions at any point in time.
- 4 Josh McDowell, *New Evidence That Demands a Verdict* (Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1999), p46, quoting from Dr Archer's *Encyclopaedia of Bible Difficulties*.
- 5 F.F. Bruce, *The New Testament Documents: Are They Reliable*, (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1960), p16.
- 6 Note that this number is changing continually, as more ancient documents are uncovered, or discovered in ancient libraries.
- 7 William F. Albright, "Toward a More Conservative View," *Christianity Today*, January, 1963, p359.
- 8 John A.T. Robinson, *Redating the New Testament*, (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1976), p352.
- 9 In summary, 1 Corinthians 15:3-5 is recognised by scholars to be a creed of the early Church. Bible scholar Ralph Martin's studies on this confirm why this is a creed, as opposed to being a statement of Paul's (see Ralph Martin, *Worship in the Early Church* [Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co, 1974], p57-59, as quoted in Josh McDowell, *New Evidence That Demands a Verdict* [Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1999], p128.). Paul indicates he received this from the disciples of Jesus on his visit to Jerusalem three years after his conversion (See Galatians 1:18-19 and Acts 9:26-29). Paul's conversion was in the mid 30's. Thus this visit to Jerusalem was approximately AD38. The creed obviously existed before his visit. We also know that the first martyr (Stephen) died around AD35 because of his belief in Jesus as the risen Lord. It is thus known that believers were already convinced of Jesus' resurrection within three to five years of the event. This is very much an insufficient length of time for myth to have developed.
- 10 Specifically admitting that the Christian formula (creed) that Christ died...and that he was buried...and that he was raised...and that he appeared to Peter and then to James... (as in 1 Corinthians 15) came about 'within two or three years' of Jesus's death — as per the explanation in the previous footnote.
- 11 Paul was writing by the late forties — less than twenty years after Jesus. Acts cannot have been written later than AD62 (i.e., approximately 30 years after Jesus), because it ends with the Apostle Paul under house arrest in Rome (Paul was martyred just a few years later). Luke, a historian, would have included a record of Paul's death had it happened by the time he wrote (and it would have been a better ending to his account rather than leaving us hanging — noting Paul is the main character of the second half of the book of Acts). Acts is Part II of a historical record of events written by Luke, Part I being the Gospel of Luke. Luke introduces Acts by referring to his writing of the Gospel of Luke, so Luke was written earlier (within 30 years). Luke then quotes Mark, so Mark was written earlier again. So this gives us a timing for the writing of the books. Such a small time gap is ...negligible by historical standards. (Craig L. Blomberg as quoted in *The Case for Christ* by Lee Strobel [Zondervan, 1998], p42).
- 12 New Testament scholar Craig L. Blomberg illustrates how mythologies develop with the example of biographies of Alexander the Great, the earliest two biographies being written four hundred years after Alexander, and being trusted by historians as not containing any mythological embellishment. It is only in later biographies, written over the next five hundred years, that legendary material began to develop (Craig L. Blomberg as quoted in *The Case for Christ* by Lee Strobel [Zondervan, 1998], p41). Philosopher William Lane Craig points out the significance of this early gap between the original and the copies. He says, The tests show that even two generations is too short to allow legendary tendencies to wipe out the hard core of historical facts. William Lane Craig, *The Son Rises*, (Chicago: Moody Press, 1981), p101.
- 13 Of special note is the existence of disputed gospel fragments dated as early as AD50. These fragments were found among the Dead Sea Scrolls. See Norm Geisler, *Baker Encyclopedia of Christian Apologetics*, (Grand Rapids, Baker Books, 1999), p. 533. There are nine fragments found from Cave Seven previously dated between 50BC and AD50 and listed under 'not identified', classified as 'Biblical Texts?'. The nine fragments they found from Qumran are: Mark 4:28; Mark 6:48; Mark 6:52,53; Mark 12:17; Acts 27:38; Romans 5:11,12; 1 Timothy 3:16; 4:1-3; 2 Peter 1:15; James 1:23,24. These are not yet discussed in 'mainstream' evidence because some scholars still resist the obvious conclusion — even though none have found any other non-New Testament texts that these fragments could be. See page 547 of *Baker Encyclopedia of Christian Apologetics* for more details.
- 14 Another important manuscript, the Codex Sinaiticus, dated about AD340, can be viewed in the British Library, in a glass case. It contains half of the Old Testament books and all the New Testament, except a few verses.

- 15 Norman Geisler and William E. Nix, *A General Introduction to the Bible* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1986), p386.
- 16 Bernard Ramm, *Protestant Christian Evidences* (Chicago, Moody Press, 1953), p230-231, as cited in Josh McDowell, *New Evidence that Demands a Verdict* (Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1999), p9.
- 17 John Lea, *The Greatest Book in the World*, p 15 as quoted in *New Evidence that Demands a Verdict* by Josh McDowell, (Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1999), p 9.
- 18 From just the works of seven authors from the second to fourth century there are already 36,289 quotations of the New Testament! See Norman Geisler, *Baker Encyclopedia of Christian Apologetics* (Grand Rapids: Maker, 1998), p 532. For a list of the seven early authors see J McDowell, *New Evidence that Demands a Verdict*, (Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1999), p43.
- 19 Metzger, *The Text of the New Testament*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964), p86.
- 20 Sir David Dalrymple, as cited in Charles Leach, *Our Bible, How We Got It* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1898), p35-36.
- 21 Sir Frederic Kenyon, *The Bible and Archaeology*, (New York: Harper, 1940), p288.
- 22 Re which copy of Josephus' work is cited — there is debate over the accuracy of a 4th century copy of Josephus' writing (cited by Eusebius, found in *Ecclesiastical History* 1:1) because there are words added to it in favour of Christian belief (Origen says that Josephus did not believe Jesus to be the Messiah — while the 4th Century copy suggests faith in Jesus. See *Contra Celsum* 2:47; 2:13; F.F. Bruce, *New Testament Documents*, p108). The fourth century Arabic text of Josephus' work, found in the 10th century, could be the correct rendition, and is used in the assessment referenced in this booklet. For more information see Josh McDowell, *New Evidence that Demands a Verdict*, p57.
- 23 There are two versions of the Talmud, the Palestinian and the Babylonian. The latter, in *Sanhedrin* 43a, is the historical reference referred to here.
- 24 See Gary Habermas, *The Historical Jesus*, (Joplin, Missouri, College Press Publishing, 1996), pages 187-218 for a detailed discussion on these ancient non-Christian sources concerning the life of Jesus.
- 25 From a presentation by Norman Geisler, 'Twelve Points That Show Christianity Is True'. Available online at impactapologetics.com (02/06/2006).
- 26 David Hume, *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, edited by Chas. W. Hendel. (New York: Liberal Arts, 1955), p120.
- 27 There were 27 books written by eight or nine authors (depending on whether Paul wrote Hebrews) including: Matthew, an apostle of Jesus; Mark, an associate of the apostle Peter; Luke, an associate of the apostle Paul; John, an apostle of Jesus; Paul, an apostle of Jesus; James, the brother of Jesus; Peter, an apostle of Jesus; Jude, the brother of James; Hebrews, an associate of the apostles (2:3;13:23).
- 28 Two of the gospels were written by men who were not necessarily eyewitnesses themselves, but who interviewed eyewitnesses (Mark, a companion of Peter, and Luke, a companion of Paul.)
- 29 Acts 13:30-31.
- 30 Matthew 8:23–27, Mark 4:35–41, and Luke 8:22–25.
- 31 Four examples are given in the following pages.
- 32 Craig L. Boomberg as quoted in *The Case for Christ* by Lee Strobel (Zondervan, 1998), p58.
- 33 Mark wrote what Peter had said, and Luke, a companion of the Apostle Paul, wrote what he had carefully investigated from original sources. Areas of investigation considered include (1) observations that the authors knew of each other's writings but made no attempt to harmonise small differences —which shows they didn't see them as differences; (2) that most differences are easily 'worked out' — like minor differences caused by one writer telling a partial story for the sake of brevity, thus 'loosely summarising' a detail; (3) studies into Greco-Roman biographies which have proven that they viewed the writing of history differently to 21st century Western culture. For example, a person was considered not to change throughout their life, so things like exact chronology, or giving equal emphasis to all time periods of a person's life, were not considered important. History was recorded not only to tell what happened ('history') but to communicate what could be learnt from it ('ideology') — so small changes in details were not considered contradictions or errors in their culture — as contrasted with how our more analytical modern Western culture thinks. See the work of R.A. Burridge on *Greco-Roman Biographies*, or 'The Christology of Jesus Revisited' by Ben Witherington III, in *To Everyone An Answer*, Eds. Francis J. Beckwith, William Lane Craig and J.P. Moreland (InterVarsity Press, 2004), p145-159.
- 34 Luke 22:24-30.
- 35 Matthew 16:23
- 36 The disciple Peter wrote, We did not follow cunningly devised fables... (2 Peter 1:16).

- 37 Simon Greenleaf, *The Testimony of the Evangelist*. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984). The dating of his conclusion is of note, as it points out that the evidences that demonstrate these are reliable histories are not all new. The debate across the past century has been more due to a worldview that denies the possibility of miracles than the evidences, while media have participated in the misrepresentation of findings to the public.
- 38 creation.com/can-we-believe-the-gospels
- 39 Donald Wiseman, 'Archaeological Confirmation of the Old Testament' in C.F. Henry, *Revelation and the Bible*, vol. 1, (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1979), p301-302.
- 40 Burrows, M. *What Mean These Stones* (New York: Meridian books, 1957), p291 as quoted in Josh McDowell, *New Evidence That Demands a Verdict* (Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1999), p61-62.
- 41 Montgomery, J.W. 'Evangelicals and Archaeology', *Christianity Today* (August 16, 1968. p47-48), as quoted in *ibid*, p61-62.
- 42 See Jeffrey Shelter, 'Is the Bible True?' *US News and World Report*, Oct. 25, 1999, p52.
- 43 Quotes taken from Josh McDowell's personal introduction to *New Evidence that Demands a Verdict*, p xxiii-xxvii.
- 44 A good example of this is Bart Ehrman, who in his debate with Dr. William Lane Craig (reasonablefaith.org) built a good part of his case against the evidence for the resurrection on the philosophical foundation of a rejection of miracles (similar to David Hume's argument popularized by Anthony Flew).
- 45 Josh McDowell, *New Evidence That Demands a Verdict* (Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1999), p xxxvii.
- 46 See Norman Geisler, *Baker Encyclopaedia of Christian Apologetics* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1998), p533.
- 47 Keith Elliot and Ian Moir, *Manuscripts and the Text of the New Testament: An Introduction for English Readers*. (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1995), p8.
- 48 For example, some critics have complained that there are 200,000 errors in the New Testament and so it cannot be trusted. But others have pointed out that the vast majority of these are variant readings, not errors (as per the points included in the main text of this booklet). 'Accusations' based on this data therefore deliberately misrepresent it. Norman Geisler, *Baker Encyclopaedia of Christian Apologetics* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), p 532.
- 49 Liberal New Testament critic, Bart Ehrman, said, 'In fact, most of the changes found in early Christian manuscripts have nothing to do with theology or ideology. Far and away the most changes are the result of mistakes pure and simple — slips of the pen, accidental omissions, inadvertent additions, misspelled words, blunders of one sort or another'. Bart D Ehrman, *Misquoting Jesus*, (HarperCollins, 2005), p55.
- 50 See Steve Morrison's article 'New Testament Manuscripts' (inerrancy.org) for a breakdown on how the 97.3% figure was calculated as opposed to the 99.5% figure that Bruce Metzger came to. The Metzger calculation does not include, for example, many Greek textual variants that were the primary choices of the Biblical scholars who translated the NKJV, including the longer ending of Mark, and the account of the adulteress in John.
- 51 B.F. Westcott and F.J.A. Hort, eds., *The New Testament in the Original Greek*, 1881, vol II, p2.

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As a matter of fact, however, 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.

— Nelson Glueck, archaeologist



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