

# The Historical Reliability of the New Testament Text-Part One

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Christians and skeptical non-Christians have different views concerning the credibility of the Gospels and the rest of the New Testament. For the Christian at least, nothing is more vital than the words of Jesus Himself, who promised, “Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away” (Matthew 24:35). This is a promise of no small import. If His words were not accurately recorded in the Gospels, how can anyone know what He really taught? The truth is, we couldn’t know. Further, if the remainder of the New Testament cannot be established to be historically reliable, then little if anything can be known about what true Christianity really is, teaches or means.

Who is right in this debate, the Christians who claim that the New Testament is historically accurate or the critics of the New Testament who claim otherwise? The latter group, which includes the Jesus Seminar authors, usually approaches the Bible from a thoroughgoing rationalistic materialistic viewpoint, discounting the Bible’s supernatural elements, employing higher critical methods and maintaining that it wasn’t even written until the late first or early second century.

## **The Critical View**

The skeptics’ argument, usually based on the use of higher critical methods such as source, form and redaction criticism<sup>[1]</sup> is often given as follows: by a number of criteria the reliability of the New Testament text may be reasonably doubted. This includes a number of features, such as its dominant “mythological” (supernatural) character; the “findings” of the “criteria of dissimilarity” of tradition criticism and of higher criticism in general such as the probability of textual corruption through either the early church (oral tradition, source or form criticism) or a later editor or redactor (redaction criticism); the fabrication of a fictitious view of Jesus on the basis of erroneous Messianic expectation; the hundreds of thousands of variants in extant texts; the dubious theological embellishments of the Apostle Paul, such as in his view of salvation through Jesus Christ; and the invention of most of the teachings of Christ to suit the spiritual or other needs of the early church, or even the removal of the actual teachings of Christ in later church councils for the purpose of political expediency or theological bias. The Jesus Seminar, for example, widely employs the “dissimilarity principle” to supposedly determine what Jesus actually said. Here, a text

or saying is reliable only when it *contrasts* with the thinking of the early Christians. Odd or unusual sayings are unlikely to have been invented by the Gospel writers and probably are authentic.

Thomas C. Oden provides a common view of Jesus held by most modern scholars:

**Jesus was an eschatological prophet who proclaimed God's coming kingdom and called his hearers to decide now for or against the kingdom. After he was condemned to death and died, the belief emerged gradually that he had risen. Only after some extended period of time did the remembering community develop the idea that Jesus would return as the Messiah, Son of Man. Eventually this community came to project its eschatological expectation back upon the historical Jesus, inserting in his mouth the eschatological hopes that it had subsequently developed but now deftly had to rearrange so as to make it seem as if Jesus Himself had understood himself as Messiah. Only much later did the Hellenistic idea of the God-man, the virgin birth, and incarnation emerge in the minds of the remembering church, who again misremembered Jesus according to its revised eschatological expectation.**

James W. Sire, who cites this view, remarks,

**Oden in the following eight pages shows how and why this "modern view" is seriously at odds with reason.... How such a vacuous implausible interpretation could have come to be widely accepted is itself perplexing enough. Even harder to understand is the thought that the earliest rememberers would actually suffer martyrdom for such a flimsy cause. One wonders how those deluded believers of early centuries gained the courage to risk passage into an unknown world to proclaim this message that came from an imagined revolution of a fantasized Mediator. The "critical" premise itself requires a high degree of gullibility. <sup>[2]</sup>**

The conservative view of Scripture takes quite another approach. It maintains that, on the basis of accepted bibliographic, internal, external and other criteria, the New Testament text can be established to be reliable history in spite of the novel and sometimes ingenious speculations of critics who, while often familiar with the facts, refuse to accept them due to a preexisting bias. Textually, there is simply no legitimate basis upon which to doubt the credibility and accuracy of the New Testament writers. Further, the methods used by the critics (higher critical methods) have been weighed in the balance even of secular scholarship and been found wanting. Their use in biblical analysis is therefore unjustified. Even in a positive sense, the fruit they have born is minuscule while, negatively, they are responsible for a tremendous weight of destruction relative to people's confusion over biblical authority and their confidence in the Bible.

In this sense, the critics conform to the warnings of Chauncey Sanders, associate professor of military history at The Air University, Maxwell Air Force Base, Montgomery, Alabama. In his book *An Introduction to Research in English Literary History*, Sanders warns the literary critic to be certain that he is also careful to examine the evidence *against* his case:

**He must be as careful to collect evidence against his theory as for it. It may go against the grain to be very assiduous in searching for ammunition to destroy one's own case; but it must be remembered that the overlooking of a single detail may be fatal to one's whole argument. Moreover, it is the business of the scholar to seek the truth, and the satisfaction of having found it should be ample recompense for having to give up a cherished but untenable theory.**<sup>[3]</sup>

In order to resolve the issue of New Testament reliability, over the coming months we will present ten facts which cannot logically be denied. (continued next time)

## Notes

1. [↑](#) **Source** criticism, also known as literary criticism, attempts to discover and define literary sources used by the biblical writers...and answer questions relating to authorship, unity and date of Old and New Testament materials....**Form** criticism studies literary forms such as essays, poems, and myths, since different writings have different forms. Often the form of a piece of literature can tell a great deal about the nature of a literary piece, its writer, and its social context....**Redaction** criticism claims that subsequent editors (redactors) changed the text of Scripture. (Dr. Norman Geisler, *Baker Encyclopedia of Christian Apologetics*, Baker Book house, 1999, pp. 86, 87, 635)
2. [↑](#) James W Sire, *Why Should Anyone Believe Anything at All?* (Downer's Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1994), p. 221, citing Thomas C. Oden, *The Word of Life* (New York: Harper and Row, 1989), pp. 223-24.
3. [↑](#) Chauncey Sanders, *An Introduction to Research in English Literary History* (New York: MacMillan, 1952), p. 160. His comments were specifically in reference to the authenticity or authorship of a given text.

