

The Historical Reliability of the New Testament Text-Part Four

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Fact Eight (corroboration from date of authorship).

The fact that both conservatives (F. F. Bruce, John Wenham) and liberals (Bishop John A. T. Robinson) have penned defenses of early dating for the New Testament is a witness to the strength of the data for an early date. For example, in *Redating Matthew, Mark and Luke*, noted conservative British scholar John Wenham presents a convincing argument that the synoptic Gospels are to be dated before 55 A.D. He dates Matthew at 40 A.D. (some tradition says the early 30s); Mark at 45 A.D. and Luke no later than 51-55 A.D.^[1]

German papyrologist Carsten Peter Thiede has argued that the Magdalen papyrus, containing snippets of three passages from Matthew 26, currently housed at Oxford University, are actually the oldest fragments of the New Testament, dating from about 70 A.D. Thiede's book, *Eyewitness to Jesus* (Doubleday, 1995), points out that the Magdalen papyrus is written in Uncial style, which began to die out in the middle of the first century. In addition, the fragments are from a codex,^[2] containing writing on both sides of the papyri, which may have been widely used by Christians in the first century since they were easier to handle than scrolls. Further, at three places on the papyri the name of Jesus is written as KS, which is an abbreviation of the Greek word *kyrios* or Lord. Thiede argues that this shorthand is proof that early Christians considered Jesus a sacred name just as the devout Jews shortened the name of God to YHWH. This would indicate a very early belief for the deity of Christ.

New papyrus discoveries, Thiede believes, will eventually prove that all four gospels, even the problematic one ascribed to John, were written before A.D. 80 rather than during the mid-second century. He argues that a scroll fragment unearthed at the Essene community of Qumran in 1972 almost certainly contains a passage from Mark's gospel and can be accurately dated to A.D. 68. In Thiede's opinion, recent research has established that a papyrus fragment of *Luke* in a Paris library was written between A.D. 63 and A.D. 67.^[3]

Even liberal bishop John A. T. Robinson argued in his *Redating the New Testament* that the entire New Testament was written and in circulation between 40 and 65 A.D.^[4] And liberal Peter Stuhlmacher of Tubingen, trained in Bultmann's critical methodology of form criticism, says, "As a Western scripture scholar, I am inclined to doubt these [Gospel]

stories, but as *historian*, I am obligated to take them as reliable.... The biblical texts as they stand are the best hypothesis we have until now to explain what really happened.”^[5]

Indeed, it is becoming an increasingly persuasive argument that all the New Testament books were written before 70 A.D.—within a single generation of the death of Christ, and probably earlier. Given Jesus’ miracles, claims and controversy, which began early in His ministry, it is inconceivable that His disciples would not have recorded Jesus’ words as He spoke them or immediately after. Even before He began His public ministry there had to be stories circulating about Him, such as about the unique circumstances surrounding His birth, the visit by the shepherds, His presentation in the temple, the visit by the Magi, His escape to Egypt, the return to Nazareth, the event in the temple as a boy and so on. At His baptism the Holy Spirit descended on Him as a dove and He went to the desert to be tempted by Satan. His first miracle in Cana, the changing of water to wine, His cleansing of the temple, the healing of a nobleman’s son and so on were all done in the first six months or so of His public ministry. Even the people of His hometown tried to kill Him at Nazareth (Luke 4:16-30).^[6] It is likely the Gospels would have been constructed from these accounts as soon as necessary, which could have been as early as 40 A.D. or even earlier.

The implications of this are not small. A New Testament written between 40-70 A.D. virtually destroys the edifice on which higher critical premises regarding the New Testament are based. If true, insufficient time elapsed for the early Church to have embellished the records with their own particularist views. What the New Testament reports, it reports accurately.

Fact Nine (corroboration from critical methods themselves).

Even critical methods indirectly support New Testament reliability. Although higher critical theories in general reject biblical reliability *a priori*, nevertheless, when such theories “are subjected to the same analytical scrutiny as they apply to the New Testament documents, they will be found to make their own contribution to validating the historicity of those records.”^[7]

Fact Ten (confirmation from legal testimony and skeptics).

We must also concede the historicity of the New Testament when we consider the fact that many great minds of legal history have, on the grounds of strict legal evidence, accepted the New Testament as reliable history—not to mention also the fact that many brilliant skeptical intellects, of both history and today, have converted to Christianity on the basis of the historical evidence (Saul of Tarsus, Athanagoras, Augustine, George Lyttleton, Gilbert West, C. S. Lewis, Frank Morison, Sir William Ramsay, John Warwick Montgomery and others).

Lawyers, of course, are expertly trained in the matter of evaluating evidence, and they are perhaps the most qualified in the task of weighing data critically. Is it coincidence that so many of them throughout history have concluded in favor of the truth of the Christian religion? What of the “father of international law,” Hugo Grotius, who wrote *The Truth of the Christian Religion* (1627)? What of the greatest authority in English and American common-law evidence in the nineteenth century, Harvard Law School professor Simon Greenleaf, who wrote *Testimony of the Evangelists* in which he powerfully demonstrated the reliability of the Gospels?^[8] What of Edmund H. Bennett (1824-1898), for over 20 years the dean of Boston University Law School, who penned *The Four Gospels From a Lawyer’s Standpoint* (1899)?^[9] What of Irwin Linton, who in his time had represented cases before the Supreme Court, and who wrote *A Lawyer Examines the Bible* in which he stated:

So invariable had been my observation that he who does not accept wholeheartedly the evangelical, conservative belief in Christ and the Scriptures has never read, has forgotten, or never been able to weigh—and certainly is utterly unable to refute—the irresistible force of the cumulative evidence upon which such faith rests, that there seems ample ground, for the conclusion that such ignorance is an invariable element in such unbelief, And this is so even though the unbeliever be a preacher, who is supposed to know this subject if he know no other.^[10]

Finally, what of the eminent Lord Chancellor Hailsham, who twice held the highest office possible for a lawyer in England (that of Lord Chancellor), and who wrote *The Door Wherein I Went*, in which he upholds the singular truth of the Christian Religion?^[11] What of hundreds of contemporary lawyers who, on the grounds of strict legal evidence, accept the New Testament as historically reliable?^[12]

Certainly, such men are well acquainted with legal reasoning and have just as certainly concluded that the evidence for the truthfulness of the Scriptures is beyond reasonable doubt. It is also a fact that on the basis of legal evidence, no competent jury should fail to bring in a positive verdict for either the reliability of the New Testament or the Resurrection.

Apologist, theologian and lawyer John Warwick Montgomery asks people to consider several things: the “ancient documents” rule (that ancient documents constitute competent evidence if there is no evidence of tampering and they have been accurately transmitted); the “parol evidence” rule (Scripture must interpret itself without foreign intervention); the “hearsay rule” (the demand for primary-source evidence); and the “cross-examination” principle (the inability of the enemies of Christianity to disprove its central claim that Christ resurrected bodily from the dead in spite of the motive and opportunity to do so). All these, writes Montgomery, coalesce directly or indirectly to support the preponderance of evidence for Christianity, while the burden of proof proper (the legal

burden) for disproving it rests with the critic, who, in 2,000 years, has yet to prove his case.^[13] We must, then, emphasize that to reject the New Testament accounts as true history is, by definition, to reject the canons of legitimate historical study. If this cannot be done, the New Testament must be retained as careful historical reporting.

The New Testament has thus proven itself reliable in the crucible of history, while the New Testament critic has been unable to prove his case. The implications of this are tremendous. Legal scholar J. N. D. Anderson observes in *Christianity: The Witness of History*:

...it seems to me inescapable that anyone who chanced to read the pages of the New Testament for the first time would come away with one overwhelming impression—that here is a faith firmly rooted in certain allegedly historical events, a faith which would be false and misleading if those events had not actually taken place, but which, if they did take place, is unique in its relevance and exclusive in its demands on our allegiance. For these events did not merely set a “process in motion and then themselves sink back into the past. The unique historical origin of Christianity is ascribed permanent, authoritative, absolute significance; what happened once is said to have happened once for all and therefore to have continuous efficacy.”^[14]

Notes

1. [↑](#) John Wenham, *Redating Matthew, Mark and Luke*, (Downers Grove, IL, 1992), pp. 115-19, 136, 183, see pp. xxv, 198, 147, 200, 221, 223, 238-39, 243-45.
2. [↑](#) “**CODEX [COE dex]**— the forerunner of the modern book. A codex was formed by folding several sheets of papyrus in the middle and sewing them together along the fold.” (*Nelson’s New Illustrated Bible Dictionary*)
3. [↑](#) John Elson, “Eyewitness to Jesus?” *Time*, April 8, 1996, p. 60.
4. [↑](#) John A. T. Robinson, *Redating the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1976).
5. [↑](#) In Richard S. Ostling, “Who Was Jesus?”, *Time*, August 15, 1988, p. 41, emphasis added.
6. [↑](#) See the chronological “Life of Christ” chart in *The NIV Study Bible*, red letter edition, Zondervan 1985, pp. 1480-1481.
7. [↑](#) F. F. Bruce “Are the New Testament Documents Still Reliable?”, p. 55, cf., Craig Blomberg, *The Historical Reliability of the Gospels* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1987), pp. 247, 253.

8. [↑](#) Reprinted in J. W. Montgomery, *The Law Above the Law* (Minneapolis, MN: Bethany, 1975), appendix, pp. 91-140.
9. [↑](#) Reprinted in *The Simon Greenleaf Law Review*, Vol. 1 (Orange, CA: The Faculty of the Simon Greenleaf School of Law, 1981-1982), pp. 15-74.
10. [↑](#) Irwin Linton, *A Lawyer Examines the Bible* (San Diego: Creation-Life-Publishers, 1977), p. 45.
11. [↑](#) *The Simon Greenleaf Law Review*, vol. 4 (Orange, CA: The Faculty of the Simon Greenleaf School of Law, 1984-1985), pp. 28-36.
12. [↑](#) See our *Ready With An Answer*.
13. [↑](#) John Warwick Montgomery, *The Law Above the Law* (Minneapolis: Bethany, 1975), pp. 87-88.
14. [↑](#) 204. J. N. D. Anderson, *Christianity: The Witness of History* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1970), pp. 13-14.

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