

[Behold His Glory – The True History Behind the Nativity Story](#)

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As we all know, or should know, Jesus is the Reason for the Season.

This Christmas, however, we can have total faith in the Bible's record of the Nativity Story, the virgin birth of Jesus Christ. Christianity is true as well as historical, factual and intellectually sound, not to mention emotionally, spiritually and philosophically profound and powerful.

Top scholars, historians and experts have repeatedly confirmed that the Bible is the most historically and intellectually reliable ancient text in the whole world, including the Bible's account of the life and teachings of Jesus Christ and the apostles and disciples who wrote the New Testament documents. Consider, for example, the work of numerous top scholars, historians and experts such as C.S. Lewis, Gary Habermas, F.F. Bruce, William Lane Craig, John A.T. Robinson, John Warwick Montgomery, Bruce Metzger, Simon Greenleaf, Stuart C. Hackett, J. Gresham Machen, Ronald Nash, Edwin Yamauchi, Craig Blomberg, John Wenham, Lee Strobel, Paul Maier, and N.T. Wright.

These people are wonderfully astute thinkers, investigators and writers. They have refuted all of the important lies, half-truths and silly comments against Jesus, Christianity and the Bible made by non-Christians and even by some allegedly former Christians.

Not only can you have complete faith in the New Testament documents and what they say about the virgin birth, divinity, crucifixion, resurrection, and teachings of Jesus Christ, but you can also rely on what they say about non-Christian places, people and events, such as the names and titles of Roman government officials. In fact, the New Testament writer Luke (the books of LUKE and ACTS), the medical companion of Paul, an apostle appointed by Jesus Christ Himself and accepted by Christ's other major apostles, including Peter, specifically says in LUKE 1:3 that he "carefully investigated everything" he writes in LUKE and ACTS to Theophilus and other assumed readers.

In a court of law, the burden of proof for denying the credibility of an eyewitness falls on those who wish to undermine that credibility. An eyewitness should therefore be given the benefit of the doubt "unless we have clear evidence to the contrary." Since, however, the New Testament books make great demands on people and their lifestyles, it seems fair to ask what is the evidence to support the historical reliability of these ancient documents.

Historians use two standard tests for determining the reliability of an ancient document like the New Testament documents.

The first test is the bibliographic test. This test asks three questions: 1) How many copies and fragments of copies do we have of a particular document? 2) Are the copies basically the same, or do they show a wide variety of differences, indicating they have undergone an extensive amount of editing or redaction? 3) What is the time gap between the dates of the copies we have and the approximate date on which the document was probably written? The more copies we have, the less editing they have undergone, and the closer the time gap, the more accurate they seem to be and the more reliable the text of the document is.

Using this test, how does the New Testament stack up?

As biblical scholar John A.T. Robinson and other scholars attest, the New Testament books were probably written between 40 A.D. and 70 A.D., although some scholars believe the Apostle John wrote John and Revelation about 95 A.D. or so. The

earliest complete copies we have, excluding small fragments, some of which are dated from about 44 A.D. to 130 A.D., can be dated between 300 and 400 A.D., or 260-360 years later. In total, however, we have more than 5,000 Greek copies and fragments, 10,000 Latin Vulgate copies and fragments, and 9,000 other versions of the New Testament dated between 40 and 1200 A.D. In comparison, we have only 643 manuscripts (copies and fragments) of Homer's *Iliad*, written about 900 BC, with the earliest extant copy dated 400 BC, 500 years later. Also, we have only ten copies of Julius Caesar's *Gallic Wars*, written 58 to 50 BC, with the earliest copy dated 900 A.D., a gap of almost 1,000 years, and only 21 copies or fragments of the works of Tacitus, written about 100 A.D., with the earliest copy or fragment dated 1000 A.D., a span of 900 years.

According to New Testament scholar Bruce Metzger, only 40 lines, or about 400 words, of the 20,000 lines in the New Testament documents are seriously in doubt. In contrast, Homer's *Iliad* contains approximately 15,600 lines, but 764 lines have been questioned by scholars. As, Christian scholar and philosopher Norman L. Geisler writes, "The New Testament writings are superior to comparable ancient writings. The records for the New Testament are vastly more abundant, clearly more ancient, and considerably more accurate in their text."

Copies of manuscripts are not the only source of our knowledge about the New Testament documents, however.

Before the Council of Nicea in 325 A.D., the writings of the Ante-Nicene church fathers contain about 32,000 citations of the New Testament text. "Virtually the entire New Testament could be reproduced from citations contained in the works of the early church fathers," says Christian philosopher J. P. Moreland. Furthermore, although every church father does not quote every book of the New Testament, every book is quoted as authoritative and authentic by some important church father. This indicates that the New Testament writings were "recognized as apostolic [originating from Jesus Christ's own appointed church leaders] from the very beginning."

There is no reason, therefore, to doubt the accuracy of the copies of the New Testament. The bibliographic test clearly shows that the text of the New Testament has not been significantly altered by the Christian church. We can trust that the translations we now have are as close to the original writings as possible.

The second test historians use to determine the reliability of an ancient document is the external test. In this test, historians look at what external sources say about the document.

We have already mentioned the testimony of the early church fathers with regard to the bibliographic test. Their testimony also satisfies the external test.

For instance, several second century fathers affirm that the book of John in the New Testament was written by the Apostle John. These writers include Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria, Theophilus of Antioch, and Tertullian of Carthage.

The testimony of Irenaeus is important "because he had been a student of Polycarp, bishop of Smyrna (martyred in 156 A.D. after being a Christian for 86 years), and Polycarp in turn had been a disciple of the Apostle John himself." Not only does Irenaeus affirm the authorship of John's gospel, he also reports that Matthew produced his gospel for the Jews, perhaps in Aramaic, while Peter and Paul were founding the Christian church in Rome (about 55 A.D.). Irenaeus also writes that Mark, Peter's disciple, set down his gospel after Peter's death, around 65 A.D., and that Paul's friend Luke wrote his gospel sometime thereafter. In a letter to his colleague Florinus, quoted by church historian Eusebius, Irenaeus mentions how both he and Florinus had heard Polycarp talk about what John and other witnesses had told Polycarp about Jesus.

According to Papias, bishop of Hierapolis, writing between 130 and 140 A.D., the Apostle Matthew compiled a collection of Jesus' sayings in Aramaic, which Papias says many people later translated into Greek. Papias also testifies that the Apostle John told Papias that Mark composed his gospel on the basis of information supplied by the Apostle Peter himself.

Finally, we have the Apostle Paul's testimony in his own letters, which are among the earliest of all New Testament writings. Paul's letter to the Galatians has been dated as early as 48 A.D. The dates of his other letters may be established as follows: 1 and 2 Thessalonians, 50 A.D.; 1 and 2 Corinthians, 54-56 A.D.; Romans, 57 A.D.; and Philippians, Colossians, Philemon, and Ephesians, around 60 A.D. Many scholars, including many liberal ones, believe that Paul's description of the

Phonetic, and Etruscans, around 60 A.D. Many scholars, including more liberal ones, believe that Paul's description of the resurrection of Jesus Christ in 1 Corinthians 15 can be traced back to an ancient catechism from the early to middle 30s A.D.! There are many other early creedal passages in the New Testament documents like this one from 1 Corinthians, such as Philippians 2:6-11 and John 1:1-18.

The New Testament documents are also consistent with the external evidence from ancient non-Christian sources. Even the Jewish Talmud contains references to Jesus Christ and five of the disciples. These references say Jesus was a sorcerer who led the people astray and who came to add things to the Jewish law. Eventually, they say, Jesus was executed on the eve of Passover for heresy and for misleading the Jewish people. Following his death, his disciples healed the sick in his name.

Although portions of his text are in doubt, Jewish historian Josephus, who wrote about 90 A.D., mentions John the Baptist, Jesus Christ, and James, the brother of Jesus. According to New Testament scholar F. F. Bruce, we have "very good reason for believing" that Josephus confirms the dates of Christ's ministry, his reputation for practicing "wonders" of some kind, his kinship to James, his crucifixion by Pilate, his messianic claim, and the fact that his disciples believed Jesus rose physically from the dead.

Cornelius Tacitus, the "greatest Roman historian in the days of the Empire," refers to Jesus Christ's execution under Pilate and relates Roman Emperor Nero's persecution of Christians after the great fire ravaged Rome in 64 A.D. Also, writing in 112 A.D., C. Plinius Secundus (Pliny the Younger), governor of Bithynia in Asia Minor, wrote to Emperor Trajan asking for advice about how to deal with troublesome Christians. In his letter, Pliny reports that the Christians meet on a fixed day to pray to Christ as God and promise each other to follow certain moral standards. He also says they refuse to curse the name of Jesus. The evidence from Pliny, and others, clearly shows that the Early Christians did indeed worship Jesus Christ as God. This worship is confirmed by the writings of Ignatius, a major leader of the early Christian church.

The New Testament writings are themselves full of references to secular history in the first century. Archeological evidence confirms many of these references to historical events and persons and to political factions, geographical areas, social differences, etc. For instance, the Apostle John in his gospel displays accurate knowledge about buildings and landscapes in Jerusalem and the surrounding countryside before 70 A.D. Luke, the author of the third gospel and the book of Acts, has been especially cited for his sense of the historical context in the first century A.D. His books contain many references to the imperial history of Rome and a detailed chronicle of the Herod family. Luke is also very accurate in his use of various official titles in the Roman Empire, no mean feat considering the fact they sometimes changed titles in a short period of time during switchovers in administrations.

Luke's description of the founding and rise of the Christian church in Acts also matches what we know from other historical writings and archeology. Acts itself contains several instances where the apostles and various local churches receive reports from other Christians about efforts to spread the message of Jesus Christ. This habit of giving reports adds to the historical credibility of the New Testament accounts. Thus, as St. Paul notes in Chapter 26 of Acts, all these things were not done in a corner, they were common knowledge.

The writers of the New Testament, most of whom knew Jesus personally, had a strong motive to obey the warnings of the Roman and Jewish authorities to stop preaching about Jesus. Instead, these men did the opposite and risked their lives and physical well-being to preach the good news of Jesus Christ's resurrection. They preached repeatedly and openly in the Jewish synagogues, leaving themselves vulnerable to the hostile Jewish religious leadership.

"The disciples could not afford to risk inaccuracies," says historian John Warwick Montgomery, "which would at once be exposed by those who would be only too glad to do so." Yet they never hesitated to confront Jewish leaders, hostile pagan forces, and even the Roman authorities. They endured rejection, persecution, torture, and even death. If their testimony was full of holes, how could they have gotten away with such bad testimony? If the resurrection of Jesus Christ did not occur, how do we account for the empty tomb and the resurrection appearances by Jesus?

The Jews and pagans who opposed the apostles had the means, motive, and opportunity to completely refute the evidence

for Jesus Christ's resurrection and the content of His teachings, yet they never could shake the eyewitness testimony of the first Christian evangelists. These hostile witnesses failed to produce the kind of solid evidence that would overturn the first Christians' testimony about Jesus Christ, including the meaning of Jesus Christ's life and sacrificial death on the cross. Thus, the eyewitnesses among Christ's disciples passed the test of their own cross-examination with flying colors!

According to the New Testament documents, Jesus Christ proved his claim to be God by his bodily resurrection from the dead and gave his disciples "many convincing proofs that he was alive (Acts 1:3)." He appeared to more than 500 people at one time, most of whom were still living over 15 years later, when the Apostle Paul wrote his first letter to the Corinthian church (see 1 Corinthians 15:1-6). He also appeared to nonbelievers and hostile skeptics like his brother James, the Apostle Paul and the Apostle Thomas. He also gave special authority and power to all of his apostles, who themselves performed public miracles.

Finally, the New Testament writings are internally consistent. None of the documents deny the resurrection and most of them explicitly proclaim it. Although the documents contain passages that are difficult to interpret or create questions about the text, many books have been written which clear up these textual problems. Among the best ones are John W. Haley's *Alleged Discrepancies of the Bible* (Springdale, PA: Whitaker House) and *Encyclopedia of Bible Difficulties* by Gleason Archer (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982).

The fact is, the New Testament documents do agree with one another. They do not contradict each other. All of them teach the following: Jesus underwent a public execution. His death was certified by the Roman authorities. He was placed in a private tomb, the location of which was known. Jesus then appeared to his female disciples and to the male apostles. He commanded them to lead all people into repentance, belief and forgiveness of sins in the name of the Triune God (Matthew 28:18-20). The internal consistency of these documents in these matters is beyond reproach.

When all is said and done, the evidence for the historical reliability of the New Testament documents is in fact better than the evidence for Julius Caesar or any other historical figure in the ancient world.

"We are confronted with a hard core of historical fact," writes F. F. Bruce: "(a) the tomb was really empty; (b) the Lord appeared to various individuals and groups of disciples both in Judea and Galilee; (c) the Jewish authorities could not disprove the disciples' claim that He had risen from the dead." Adds Bruce Metzger, "The evidence for the resurrection of Jesus Christ is overwhelming. Nothing in history is more certain than that the disciples believed that, after being crucified, dead, and buried, Christ rose again from the tomb on the third day, and that at intervals thereafter he met and conversed with them."

Thus, we can have complete trust and faith not only in what the Bible teaches us about Jesus Christ and His life, death and resurrection, and in the basic story presented by "The Nativity Story" movie.

Christianity is the only religion that can be verified objectively by historical evidence. The New Testament's depiction of the life and teachings of Jesus Christ does not violate the basic laws of logic. It fits the facts. Turn away from sin and evil. Submit your heart, mind and strength to the Triune God, by the power of Jesus Christ's sacrificial death on the Cross.

As the Apostle John writes in John 1:14, "The Word of God became flesh and took up residence among us. We observed His glory, the glory as the One and Only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth."

Jesus Christ died for your sins. Turn away from your sins, confess with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, and you will indeed be baptized and filled with the power of the Holy Spirit and receive eternal life.

Endnotes

1. Bob Passantino, "Contend Earnestly for the Faith: How Far Can We Trust the Bible?" (Costa Mesa, CA: Answers in Action).
2. Norman L. Geisler, *Christian Apologetics* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1989), 308.
3. J. P. Moreland, *Scaling the Secular City: A Defense of Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1987), 136.

4. Norman L. Geister and William E. Nix, *From God to Us: How We Got Our Bible* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1974), 108.
5. John Warwick Montgomery, *Where Is History Going?* (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 1969), 48.
6. F. F. Bruce, *The New Testament Documents: Are They Reliable?* (Madison, Wisconsin: InterVarsity Press, 1987), 100-102.
7. Bruce, 112.
8. Bruce, 117.
9. Montgomery, 51.
10. Bruce M. Metzger, *The New Testament: Its Background, Growth, and Content*, 2nd edition (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1983), 127f.
11. Bruce, 65.
12. Metzger, 126.

For more information about the New Testament, see also the following:

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Note: For even more info, there are some other great Christian apologetics websites with other valuable resource materials, including William Lane Craid's www.reasonablefaith.org . www.eaui.org

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