

## **Can the New Testament Documents Be Trusted?: A Brief Historical and Biblical Assessment**

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### **Introduction**

The Bible is under immense well coordinated and sustained consistent attack in these degenerate days. Pundits of all stripes litter the stage claiming to know better than the original authors or those that inherited from them. Part of this crowd claims that the Bible is not reliable, much worse it's validity. While some argue that only the Old Testament (i.e. the Hebrew Bible) is true, others contend that everything whether Old or New Testament is a piece of writing of human origin. What is the Christian to make of these arguments? How are we to respond to such criticism? In as much as the subject of entire Biblical canon defence is essential, warranted and called for, this paper focuses on the new Testament because it is out of this Testament that we get the message of Jesus and His ministry. A consideration of the Hebrew Bible or Old Testament is therefore outside the scope of this paper although may be alluded to.

### **What the New Testament is all about**

What is the New Testament? What makes up the New Testament and when was it compiled or finally set up as a complete canon? For starters, it is prudent to state from the beginning that when we talk about 'Old' or 'New' with respect to the Testaments, we do not for a moment suggest that one is obsolete while the other is current and therefore useful. What we simply mean is that one is the culmination or outworking of the other. What was foretold in the Old Testament is revealed and fulfilled in the New. What was unclear in the Old Testament is clear in the New (Pink 2021). By 'Testament' we mean an agreement. In the Old Testament, God made or entered several covenants about how He was to relate with His people the Nation of Israel but in the New Testament, we also have a new agreement where God is dealing with the whole world regardless of where one hails as a result of the New covenant that Jesus entered during the Last supper, sealed by His death on the cross (Pink 2021). Therefore, the New Testament is the new covenant in Jesus Christ where the church becomes the focus of God's love, attention and salvation rather than a specific nation (i.e. Israel) per se (Vlach 2021; Pink 2021). This assertion is emotive and controversial because various schools of thought (and hermeneutical

approaches) come to the fore but for now, we focus on what the Testament itself is all about (Vlach 2021). The New Testament is said to consist of the four gospels, history (i.e. Acts), the epistles and letters right across from Matthew to Revelation. This Testament came to be collated and closed sometime in the fourth century, although the books were already accepted as authentic, authoritative and inspired by the Church (Bruce 2003). While it is true that different lists of canons existed over time, with the earliest known list by Marcion (circa 85-160 AD; of sinope/Pontus) the heretic, several canons would be generated over time until the final complete canon was established. The human inspired authors of the respective parts of the New Testament are varied but they all testified to the same message, albeit, in different fashions. The New Testament is the final revelation from God about the salvation we enjoy in Jesus Christ and contains some aspects which are now fulfilled while other remain yet future. For instance, Revelation is prophetic and, in a sense, apocalyptic using a different genre from, say, the epistles of Paul which are basically doctrinal in nature and relatively easier to decipher and understand. The New Testament is thus a love letter for the saint. If we are to trust the scriptures, we need evidence to that end. This evidence however is not the usual scientific empirical evidence as spiritual matters are outside the realm of naturalistic science. That notwithstanding, the Bible is able to stand rigorous scrutiny and still stand the test of time. Below are some of the evidences that we can turn to prove the reliability of the scriptures.

### **Internal evidence**

There is evidence that is found within the New Testament that suggests and proves that the scriptures are inspired, authoritative and accurate (Young 1963; Warfield 1915). This means that the scriptures are both a correct historical narrative of what actually happened but carry a true theological message for the world. The gospels all have Jesus as the central figure of their message which in many senses is the same, despite being told from different perspectives. In fact, some scholars like FF Bruce suggest the synoptic gospels were used as source documents of the others though this theory has not been entirely proved. The fourth gospel, John is written in a slightly different style but talks about Jesus none the less. Taken together, these document state who Jesus was, what he taught and stood for. On many occasions than one, they assume and assert that Jesus actually walked the earth, just as told by the narratives. Some people claim otherwise but their claim is weak in the light of these four gospels, accepted and believed by the early church. If they had been false accounts, they could not have survived serious scrutiny.

The next internal evidence are the epistles, largely written by Paul and other apostles. In thirteen letters, the apostle Paul dwells on the subject of Christ as well as other equally important aspects that affected the Church. The issues raised are real and not imagined, which affected real churches and people.

Paul's Christology is one of the clearest that we encounter in the entire canon. But there are other epistles such as by James, Jude, and Peter which equally point to the fact of Christ's existence, life and ministry. They are addressed to real people in actual places. The three letters of John are another source of internal evidence as they address various practical issues as relates to the Christian faith.

The New Testament does have a historical book-the book of Acts. This book, written by Dr Luke narrates the progress of the church in roughly the first 30 years. It mentions places, names people as well as significant events that took place.

The last evidence in the New Testament is both prophetic and apocalyptic. The Book of Revelation is here alluded to. Despite it being written in a different genre using symbols, signs and numbers, the book holds a lot of truth that is valuable to the church of today. Its hidden message is relevant for today's and tomorrow's church. Even this somewhat difficult book centres on Jesus Christ as well.

A careful reading of these writings all point to Christ and how that God has provided salvation for the whole world.

### **External evidence**

External evidence for the New Testament is evidence that can be summoned to prove the veracity and validity of the New Testament. There are several aspects that can be turned to in case someone is in doubt. The first are the archaeological findings. As time has progressed, more and more evidence is coming to the fore proving many hitherto debated or disputed matters. For instance, the book of Acts mentions some place names or titles which have been proved through the work of archaeology. Then there are symbols, signs and plaques that have been found that prove what the Bible claims. There are records, books, writings of ancient historians such as Josephus are all available for all to see proving that that New Testament is truly a correct reliable historical record. Some prophetic statements in the New Testament have been proved true when they took place. Take for example the destruction of the Temple which eventually took place in AD 70 and has been documented for all to see.

### **Basis for the New Testament reliability**

The basis for the reliability of the New Testament is because it is both Historical and Theological. God inspired its writing and is accurate to the minutest detail.

### **What Others have Written about the New Testament Documents**

The New Testament documents are some of the most attested documents there are, many times surpassing the famed writings of say ancient philosophers like Plato, Aristotle or Homer among others. Their existence and use across history and during the very first century is beyond dispute. By that token, many have taken the pen to demonstrate their reliability especially in the face of continued attacks from different walks of life. E.J. Young has written a very helpful book on the nature of scripture, it's authority, inspiration or revelation. In that book, he proves that the Bible in totality is inspired both plenary and verbal, meaning not only the very words but ideas right across the Bible. This implies inerrancy, veracity, validity and authoritativeness of the inspired page. No contradiction or misinformation in the word of God. The book *Thy word is Truth* is worth a careful reading. Then we have BB Warfield on inspiration of scripture whose work is well worth digging into. In addition to the two sources thus far mentioned, we need to turn to the work of Dr. F.F. Bruce. His work most helpfully contributed to this discussion. In his work not only on the epistles but the entire New Testament, Bruce summons evidence upon evidence to prove his case that for a fact, the New Testament is reliable and thus can be trusted. While acknowledging that other spurious works existed, especially outside the Apostolic era, the Doctor shows from early sources how that in their writings, the church fathers and apologists, put together, literary quotes almost the entire New Testament! We have a mine of external and internal evidence to prove our case.

Of course, there is equally a fair share of Liberal theologians like Dr Funk and his Jesus Seminar advocating for a broader canon and in the same breath ripping the existing gospel narratives apart. He joins the 2<sup>nd</sup> century heretic Marcion in proposing a canon of his own. Still others exist that claim that the New Testament, and the entire Bible for that matter, has never been closed. This implies that new revelation and books are welcome to be added to the canon. This, in itself, flies in the face of inspiration or a closed canon. While Christians should be wary of pundits like Funk and others, they can rest at ease because historical evidence is on our side, although presuppositionally, we do not need any external evidence as inspiration guarantees inerrancy.

### **Key Lessons from the New Testament Documents Consideration**

Several lessons could be inferred or deduced from the discussion points highlighted above. We pick some key points for our home taking:

1. The New Testament is complete with its 27 books.
2. The New Testament tells the story of Jesus and how he has saved the world.
3. The New covenant is revealed in this testament.

4. Although we cannot tell all the authors of the said 27 books, we know that each of these books is inspired and accepted by the early Church as scripture.
5. Other pseudo works existed in later centuries but these do not have divine stamp of inspiration.
6. According to 2 Timothy 3, all scripture is inspired and thus inerrant. The New Testament is fully reliable.
7. According to FF Bruce, the New Testament has literary thousands of ancient early sources proving their originality and reliability. These sources also demonstrate how the early Church accepted the 27 books as authoritative.
8. Compared to other ancient works, the New Testament is one of the best attested works both internally and externally.
9. Christians have all the more reason to be confident that what they have in their hands is the very word of God, albeit, in different versions. The original autographs remain one while translations may differ in slant not theological truth.
10. As we read the Bible, we know God has spoken in His Son in these last days (Hebrews 1:1-3).

## **Conclusion**

The New Testament is a true record of God and can be relied upon. The New Testament is one unit, reliable, trust worthy and inspired by God. The Christian therefore has reason to be confident that what they have held and believed is for a fact the very word of God.

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