

# THE RELIABILITY OF THE BIBLE<sup>1</sup>

## THREE TESTS TO APPLY TO ANY HISTORICAL DOCUMENT TO DETERMINE ITS RELIABILITY<sup>2</sup>:

### 1. THE BIBLIOGRAPHICAL TEST.

Definition: "The bibliographical test is an examination of the textual transmission by which documents reach us. In other words, since we do not have the original documents, how reliable are the copies we have in regard to the number of manuscripts (MSS) and the time interval between the original and existing copies?"

### **BIBLIOGRAPHIC TEST FOR THE RELIABILITY OF THE NEW TESTAMENT:**

**Manuscript Evidence of the New Testament** - There are now more than 5,300 known Greek manuscripts of the New Testament. Add over 10,000 Latin Vulgate and at least 9,300 other early versions and **we have more than 24,000 manuscript copies of portions of the New Testament in existence. No other document of antiquity even begins to approach such numbers and attestation.** In comparison, the Iliad by Homer is second with only 643 manuscripts that still survive. The first complete preserved text of Homer dates from the thirteenth century.

**The New Testament Compared With Other Works of Antiquity** - F.F. Bruce in *The New Testament Documents* vividly pictures the comparison between the New Testament and ancient historical writings: "...For Caesar's *Gallic Wars* (composed between 58-50 B.C.) there are several extant MSS, but only nine or ten are good and the oldest is some 900 years later than Caesar's day... Of the fourteen books of the *Histories of Tacitus* (ca A.D. 100) only four and a half survive; of the sixteen books of his *Annals*, ten survive in full and two in part. The text of these extant portions of his two great historical works depends entirely on two MSS, one of the ninth century and one of the eleventh"... Greenlee states, "Since scholars accept as generally trustworthy the writings of the ancient classics even though the earliest MSS were written so long after the original writings and the number of extant MSS is in many instances so small, it is clear that the reliability of the text of the New Testament is likewise assured."

**The Textual Comparison** - Geisler and Nix make a comparison . . . "Next to the New Testament there are more extant manuscripts of the *Iliad* (643) than any other book. Both it and the Bible were considered 'sacred,' and both underwent textual changes and criticism of their Greek manuscripts... Only 40 lines (or 400 words) of the New Testament are in doubt whereas 764 lines of the *Iliad* are questioned. This five percent textual corruption compares with one-half of one percent of similar emendations in the New Testament"... That textual variations do not endanger doctrine is emphatically stated by Sir Frederick Kenyon (one of the great authorities in the field of New Testament textual criticism): "...No fundamental doctrine of the Christian faith rests on a disputed reading . . . It cannot be too strongly asserted that in substance the text of the Bible is certain: Especially is this the case with the New Testament. The number of manuscripts of the New Testament, of early translations of it, and of quotations from it in the oldest writers of the Church, is so large that it is practically certain that the true reading of every doubtful passage is preserved in some one or other of these ancient authorities. **THIS CAN BE SAID OF NO OTHER BOOK IN THE WORLD.**"

**Manuscript Reliability Supported by Various Versions** - Another strong support for textual evidence and accuracy is the ancient versions. For the most part, ancient literature was rarely translated into another language... (But) Syriac and Latin versions (translations) of the New Testament were made around A.D. 150. **This brings us back very near to the time of the originals.** There are more than 15,000 existing copies of various versions.

**Manuscript Reliability Supported by Early Church Fathers** - Sir David Dalrymple was wondering about the preponderance of Scripture in early writing when someone asked him, "Suppose that the New Testament had been destroyed, and every copy of it lost by the end of the third century, **could it have been collected together again from the writings of the Fathers of the second and third centuries?**" After a great deal of investigation Dalrymple concluded: "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.**"

### **BIBLIOGRAPHIC TEST FOR THE RELIABILITY OF THE OLD TESTAMENT:**

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<sup>1</sup> By Rev. Mike Edwards. Originally compiled Papua New Guinea, 1999, revised & expanded, April 2010, Panama City, Florida. **Note:** The main outline and the material on pages 1-3 and 8 is basically a compilation of verbatim quotes from "*A Ready Defense*" by Josh McDowell (Thomas Nelson Publishers: Nashville, TN, 1999, pp. 42-55), while much of the material on pages 4-6 is taken from Lee Strobel, "*The Case for Christ*" (Zondervan Publishing House: Grand Rapids, MI, 1998, pp. 78-91). All underlining, bolding, etc., have been added by me-mwe.

**The Talmudists (A.D. 100-500)** - During this period a great deal of time was spent in cataloging Hebrew civil and canonical law. The Talmudists had quite an intricate system for transcribing synagogue scrolls. Samuel Davidson describes some of the disciplines of the Talmudists in regard to the Scriptures. These minute regulations are as follows:

- A synagogue roll must be written on the skins of clean animals,
- prepared for the particular use of the synagogue by a Jew.
- These must be fastened together with strings taken from clean animals.
- Every skin must contain a certain number of columns, equal throughout the entire codex.
- The length of each column must not extend over less than forty-eight or more than sixty lines; and the breadth must consist of thirty letters.
- **The whole copy must be first lined; and if three words be written without a line, it is worthless.**
- The ink should be black, neither red, green, nor any other color, and be prepared according to a definite recipe.
- An authentic copy must be exemplar (pattern), from which the transcriber ought not in the least deviate.
- No word or letter, not even a *yod*, must be written from memory, the scribe not having looked at the codex before him...
- Between every consonant the space of a hair or thread must intervene,
- between every new parashah, or section, the breadth of nine consonants,
- Between every book, three lines.
- **The fifth book of Moses must terminate exactly with a line;** but the rest need not do so.
- Besides this, the copyist must sit in full Jewish dress,
- wash his whole body,
- not begin to write the name of God with a pen newly dipped in ink,
- **and should a king address him while writing that name, he must take no notice of him.'**

**Why don't we have more old MSS?** - The very absence of ancient MSS, when the rules and accuracies of the copyists are considered, confirms the reliability of the copies we have today... Gleason Archer, in comparing the manuscript variations of the Hebrew text with pre-Christian literature such as the *Egyptian Book of the Dead*, states that it is amazing that the Hebrew text does not have the phenomenon of discrepancy and MSS change of other literature of the same age. He writes: **"Even though the two copies of Isaiah discovered in Qumran Cave 1... were a thousand years earlier than the oldest dated manuscripts previously known (A.D. 980), they proved to be word for word identical with our standard Hebrew Bible in more than ninety-five percent of the text. The five percent of variation consisted chiefly of obvious slips of the pen and variations of spelling.** Even those Dead Sea fragments of Deuteronomy and Samuel which point to a different manuscript family from that which underlies our received Hebrew text do not indicate any differences in doctrine or teaching. They do not affect the message of revelation in the slightest." . . . Frederic Kenyon . . . expands on the above and on the destruction of older copies: **"The same extreme care which was devoted to the transcription of manuscripts is also at the bottom of the disappearance of the earlier copies.** When a manuscript had been copied with the exactitude prescribed by the Talmud, and had been duly verified, it was accepted as authentic and regarded as being of equal value with any other copy. *If all were equally correct, AGE GAVE NO ADVANTAGE TO A MANUSCRIPT;* on the contrary, age was a positive disadvantage, since a manuscript was liable to become defaced or damaged in the lapse of time. A damaged or imperfect copy was at once condemned as unfit for use."

**The Massoretic Period (A.D. 500-900)** - The Massorettes (from *Massora*, "Tradition") were well disciplined, and they treated the text "with the greatest imaginable reverence, and devised a complicated system of safeguards against scribal slips." Sir Frederic Kenyon says: ". . . **They numbered the verses, words, and letters of every book. They calculated the middle word and the middle letter of each. They enumerated verses which contained all the letters of the alphabet, or a certain number of them; and so on.** These trivialities, as we may rightly consider them, had yet the effect of securing minute attention to the precise transmission of the text . . . The Massorettes were indeed anxious that not one jot nor tittle, not one smallest letter nor one tiny part of a letter of the Law should pass away or be lost."

### **The Witness of the Dead Sea Scrolls to the Reliability of the Hebrew Scriptures**

**What are the Dead Sea Scrolls?** - The Scrolls are made up of some 40,000 inscribed fragments. From these fragments more than 500 books have been reconstructed.

**The Value of the Scrolls** - The oldest complete Hebrew MS we possessed was from A.D. 900 onward. How could we be sure of their accurate transmission since the time of Christ in A.D. 32? Thanks to archaeology and the Dead Sea

Scrolls, we now know. One of the scrolls found was a complete MSS of the Hebrew text of Isaiah. It is dated by paleographers around 125 B.C. This MSS is more than 1,000 years older than any MSS we previously possessed. The impact of this discovery is in the exactness of the Isaiah scroll (125 B.C.) with the Massoretic text of Isaiah (A.D. 916) 1,000 years later. **Of the 166 words in Isaiah 53, there are only seventeen letters in question. Ten of these letters are simply a matter of spelling, which does not affect the sense. Four more letters are minor stylistic changes, such as conjunctions. The remaining three letters comprise the word "light" which is added in verse 11, and does not affect the meaning greatly.** Furthermore, this word is supported by the LXX (Septuagint) and IQ Is (first cave of Qumran, Isaiah scroll). **Thus, in one chapter of 166 words, there is only one word (three letters) in question after a thousand years of transmission-and this word does not significantly change the meaning of the passage.** F.F. Bruce says, "An incomplete scroll of Isaiah, found along with the other in the first Qumran cave, and conveniently distinguished as 'Isaiah B,' agrees even more closely with the Massoretic text."

(Note: See *Evidence That Demands a Verdict*, pp. 58-60, for additional comments on how the Old Testament Text is further substantiated by the Septuagint, Samaritan Text, Jewish Targums, Mishnah, Gemarah, Midrash, and other ancient literature-mwe).

**2. THE INTERNAL EVIDENCE TEST** - The bibliographic test (above) has determined only that the text we have now is essentially what was originally recorded. Definition: One has still to determine whether that written record is credible and to what extent. That is the problem of internal criticism, which is the second test of historicity listed by C. Sanders. At this point the literary critic continues to follow Aristotle's dictum: "*The benefit of the doubt is to be given to the document itself, and not arrogated by the critic to himself.*" In other words, as John W. Montgomery summarizes: "One must listen to the claims of the document under analysis, and not assume fraud or error unless the author disqualified himself by contradictions or known factual inaccuracies."

Dr. Louis Gottschalk, former professor of history at the University of Chicago, outlines his historical method in a guide used by many for historical investigation. Gottschalk points out that **the ability of the writer or the witness to tell the truth is helpful to the historian to determine credibility. This "ability to tell the truth" is closely related to the witnesses' nearness both geographically and chronologically to the events recorded. The New Testament accounts of the life and teaching of Jesus were recorded by men who had been either eyewitnesses themselves or who related the accounts of eyewitnesses of the actual events or teachings of Jesus (Luke 1:1-3; II Peter 1:16; I John 1:3; John 19:35; Luke 3:1) . . .** This closeness to the recorded accounts is an extremely effective means of certifying the accuracy of what is retained by a witness. **The historian, however, also has to deal with the eyewitness who consciously or unconsciously tells falsehoods even though he is near to the event and is competent to tell the truth."**

**The New Testament accounts of Jesus began to be circulated within the lifetimes of those alive during his life. These people could certainly confirm or deny the accuracy of the accounts.** In advocating their case for the gospel, the apostles had appealed (even when confronting their most severe opponents) to common knowledge concerning Jesus. They not only said, "*Look, we saw this*" or "*We heard that*"; but in addition they turned the tables around and right in front of adverse critics said, "*You also know about these things . . . You saw them; you yourselves know about it.*" (Acts 2:22; 26:24-28) One had better be careful when he says to his opposition, "*You know this also,*" because if he isn't right in the details, it will be shoved right back down his throat . . . F.F. Bruce (said)... "Had there been any tendency to depart from the facts in any material respect, the possible presence of hostile witnesses in the audience would have served as a further corrective."

Historian Will Durant, who has spent his life analyzing records of antiquity, says "**the literary evidence indicates historical authenticity** regarding the New Testament - Despite the prejudices and theological preconceptions of the evangelists, **they record many incidents that mere inventors would have concealed-** [1] the competition of the apostles for high places in the kingdom, [2] their flight after Jesus' arrests, [3] Peter's denial, [4] the failure of Christ to work miracles in Galilee, [5] the references of some auditors to His possible insanity, [6] His early uncertainty as to His mission [sic], [7] His confessions of ignorance as to the future, [8] His moments of bitterness [sic], [9] His despairing cry on the cross; no one reading these scenes can doubt the reality of the figure behind them."

(Note: See part II of "*A Ready Defense*" by Josh McDowell "*Answering the Bible's Critics*", where almost all of the topics may be applied toward the internal evidence test.)

**3. THE EXTERNAL EVIDENCE TEST.** Definition: The third test of historicity is that of external evidence-whether other historical material confirms or denies the internal testimony of the documents themselves. **In other**

**words, what sources are there, apart from the literature under analysis that substantiates its accuracy, reliability, and authenticity?** Gottschalk argues that “conformity or agreement with other known historical or scientific facts is often the decisive test of evidence, whether of one or more witnesses.” (McDowell)

Two friends of the apostle John confirm the internal evidence from John’s accounts. **The historian Eusebius preserves writings of Papias**, bishop of Hierapolis (A.D. 130): The Elder (Apostle John) used to say this also:

*“Mark, having been the interpreter of Peter, wrote down accurately all that he (Peter) mentioned, whether sayings or doings of Christ, not, however, in order . . . . Mark made no mistake . . . for he paid attention to this one thing, not to omit anything that he had heard, nor to include any false statement among them.”*

**Irenaeus, Bishop of Lyons** in A.D. 180, who was a student of Polycarp, Bishop of Smyrna (who had been a Christian for eighty-six years and was a disciple of John the Apostle), wrote:

*“Matthew published his gospel among the Hebrews (i.e., Jews) in their own tongue, when Peter and Paul were preaching the gospel in Rome and founding the church. After their departure (i.e., death, which strong tradition places at the time of the Neronian persecution in A.D. 64), Mark, the disciple and interpreter of Peter, himself handed down to us in writing the substance of Peter’s preaching. Luke, the follower of Paul, set down in a book the gospel preached by his teacher. Then John, the disciple of the Lord, who also leaned on His breast (this is a reference to John 13:25 and 21:20), himself produced his gospel, while he was living in Ephesus in Asia.”* (McDowell)

**Josephus: The “James” passage. Yamauchi states:** “As you can imagine from his collaboration with the hated Romans, Josephus was extremely disliked by his fellow Jews. But he became very popular among Christians, because in his writings he refers to James, the brother of Jesus, and to Jesus himself . . . in Antiquities he describes how a high priest named Ananias took advantage of the death of the Roman governor Festus - who is also mentioned in the New Testament—in order to have James killed: ‘He convened a meeting of the Sanhedrin and brought before them a man named James, the brother of Jesus, who was called the Christ, and certain others. He accused them of having transgressed the law and delivered them up to be stoned.’”

**Yamauchi:** ***“I know of no scholar who has successfully disputed this passage.”*** L.H. Feldman noted that if this had been a later Christian addition to the text, it would have likely been more laudatory of James. So here you have a reference to the brother of Jesus—who had apparently been converted by the appearance of the risen Christ, if you compare John 7:5 and 1 Corinthians 15:7—and corroboration of the fact that some people considered Jesus to be the Christ, which means “the Anointed One” or “Messiah.” (Strobel, p. 78)

**Josephus: A second “debated” passage.** Strobel continues: “I knew that Josephus had written an even lengthier section about Jesus, which is called the *Testimonium Flavianum*. I knew too that this passage was among the most hotly disputed in ancient literature because on its surface it appears to provide sweeping corroboration of Jesus’ life, miracles, death, and resurrection. But is it authentic? Or has it been doctored through the years by people favorable to Jesus? I asked Yamauchi for his opinion...”

**Yamauchi:** *“This is a fascinating passage . . . but yes, it is controversial . . . scholarship has gone through three trends about it,”* he said. “For obvious reasons, the early Christians thought it was a wonderful and thoroughly authentic attestation of Jesus and his resurrection. They loved it. Then the entire passage was questioned by at least some scholars during the Enlightenment. **But today there’s a remarkable consensus among both Jewish and Christian scholars that the passage as a whole is authentic, although there may be some interpolations** . . . Interpolations - meaning early Christian copyists [possibly] inserted some phrases that a Jewish writer like Josephus would not have written . . . for instance, the first line says, “*About this time there lived Jesus, a wise man.*” That phrase is not normally used of Jesus by Christians, so it seems authentic for Josephus. But the next phrase says, “*If indeed one ought to call him a man.*” This implies Jesus was more than human, which appears to be an interpolation . . . It goes on to say, “*For he was one who wrought surprising feats and was a teacher of such people as accept the truth gladly. He won over many Jews and many Greeks.*” That seems to be quite in accord with the vocabulary Josephus uses elsewhere, and it’s generally considered authentic. But then there’s this unambiguous statement, “*He was the Christ.*” That seems to be an interpolation - it is unlikely Josephus would have flatly said Jesus was the Messiah here, when elsewhere he merely said he was considered to be the Messiah by his followers. The next part of the passage - which talks about Jesus’ trial and crucifixion and the fact that his followers still loved him—is unexceptional and considered genuine. Then there’s this phrase: “*On the third day he appeared to them restored to life.*” Again, this is a clear declaration of belief in the Resurrection, and thus it is unlikely that Josephus wrote it. So these three elements seem to have been

interpolations.’

**“What’s the bottom line?”** I asked. **Yamauchi:** *“That the passage in Josephus probably was originally written about Jesus, although without those three points I mentioned. **But even so, Josephus corroborates important information about Jesus:** that he was the martyred leader of the church in Jerusalem and that he was a wise teacher who had established a wide and lasting following, despite the fact that he had been crucified under Pilate at the instigation of some of the Jewish leaders.”*

**Strobel:** *“So in your assessment, **how significant are these two references by Josephus?**”*

**Yamauchi:** *“**Highly significant**...especially since his accounts of the Jewish War have proved to be very accurate. For example, they’ve been corroborated through archaeological excavations at Masada as well as by historians like Tacitus. He’s considered to be a pretty reliable historian, and his mentioning of Jesus is considered extremely important.” (Strobel, pp. 79-81)*

**Strobel:** *“. . . [Tacitus was] the most important Roman historian of the first century and I [Strobel] wanted to discuss [with Dr. Yamauchi] what Tacitus had to say about Jesus and Christianity. **‘Could you spell out what he corroborates?’**”*

**Yamauchi:** *“**Tacitus recorded what is probably the most important reference to Jesus outside the New Testament . . . in A.D. 115** he explicitly states that Nero persecuted the Christians as scapegoats to divert suspicion away from himself for the great fire that had devastated Rome in A.D. 64: *‘Nero fastened the guilt and inflicted the most exquisite tortures on a class hated for their abominations, called Christians by the populace. Christus, from who the name had its origin, suffered the extreme penalty during the reign of Tiberius at the hands of one of our procurators, Pontius Pilatus, and a most mischievous superstition, thus checked for the moment, again broke out not only in Judaea, the first source of the evil, but even in Rome . . . accordingly, an arrest was first made of all who pleaded guilty: then, upon their information, an immense multitude was convicted, not so much of the crime of firing the city, as of hatred against mankind.’*”*

J.N.D. Anderson speculates that when Tacitus says this “mischievous superstition” was “checked for the moment” but later “again broke out” he was unconsciously bearing testimony to the belief of early Christians that Jesus had been crucified but then rose from the grave. **Yamauchi:** *“This has certainly been the interpretation of some scholars . . . regardless of whether the passage had this specifically in mind, it does provide us with a very remarkable fact, which is this: crucifixion was the most abhorrent fate that anyone could undergo, and **the fact that there was a movement based on a crucified man has to be explained. How can you explain the spread of a religion based on the worship of a man who had suffered the most ignominious death possible? Of course the Christian answer is that he was resurrected. Others have to come up with some alternative theory if they don’t believe that, but none of the alternative views, to my mind, are very persuasive . . . this is an important testimony by an unsympathetic witness to the success and spread of Christianity, based on a historical figure – Jesus - who was crucified under Pontius Pilate . . . and it’s significant that Tacitus reported that an ‘immense multitude’ held so strongly to their beliefs that they were willing to die rather than recant.**” (Strobel, pp. 82-83).*

**Pliny the Younger:** **A Roman, he also referred to Christianity in his writings.** He was the nephew of Pliny the Elder, the famous encyclopediast who died in the eruption of Vesuvius in A.D. 79. Pliny the Younger became governor of Bithynia in northwestern Turkey. Much of his correspondence with his friend, Emperor Trajan, has been preserved to the present time . . . In book 10 of these letters he specifically refers to the Christians he has arrested:

*“I have asked them if they are Christians, and if they admit it, I repeat the question a second and third time, with a warning of the punishment awaiting them. If they persist, I order them to be led away for execution; for, whatever the nature of their admission, I am convinced that their stubbornness and unshakable obstinacy ought not to go unpunished . . . They also declared that the sum total of their guilt or error amounted to no more than this: they had met regularly before dawn on a fixed day to chant verses alternately amongst themselves in honor of Christ as if to a god, and also to bind themselves by oath, not for any criminal purpose, but to abstain from theft, robbery, and adultery . . . This made me decide it was all the more necessary to extract the truth by torture from two slave-women, whom they called deaconesses. I found nothing but a degenerate sort of cult carried to extravagant lengths.”*

**Strobel:** *“**How important is this reference?**” I asked.*

**Yamauchi:** *“**Very important. It was probably written about A.D. 111, and it attests to the rapid spread of Christianity, both in the city and in the rural area, among every class of persons, slave women as well as**”*

**Roman citizens, since he also says that he sends Christians who are Roman citizens to Rome for trial. And it talks about the worship of Jesus as God, that Christians maintained high ethical standards, and that they were not easily swayed from their beliefs.”** (Strobel, pp. 83-84)

**Darkness on the earth at the crucifixion of Christ?** One of the most problematic references in the New Testament is where the gospel writers claim that the earth went dark during part of the time that Jesus hung on the cross . . . ***if darkness had fallen over the earth, wouldn't there be at least some mention of this extraordinary event outside the Bible?*** Dr. Gary Habermas has written about a historian named Thallus who in A.D. 52 wrote a history of the eastern Mediterranean world since the Trojan War. Although Thallus's work has been lost, it was quoted by Julius Africanus circa A.D. 221 - and it made reference to the darkness that the gospels had written about!

**Yamauchi:** In this passage Julius Africanus says, “*Thallus, in the third book of his histories, explains away the darkness as an eclipse of the sun—unreasonably, as it seems to me.*” So Thallus apparently was saying yes, there had been darkness at the time of the Crucifixion, and he speculated it had been caused by an eclipse. Africanus then argues that it couldn't have been an eclipse, given when the Crucifixion occurred . . . [note] what scholar Paul Maier said about the darkness in a footnote in his 1968 book Pontius Pilate. . . *This phenomenon, evidently, was visible in Rome, Athens, and other Mediterranean cities. According to Tertullian . . . it was a 'cosmic' or 'world event.'*” Phlegon, a Greek author from Caria writing a chronology soon after 137 A.D., reported that in the fourth year of the 202<sup>nd</sup> Olympiad [sic] (i.e., 33 A.D.) “[there was] *the greatest eclipse of the sun*” and that “*it became night in the sixth hour of the day (i.e., noon) so that the stars even appeared in the heavens. There was a great earthquake in Bithynia, and many things were overturned in Nicaea.*” Yamauchi [concludes] “So there is, as Paul Maier points out, non-biblical attestation of the darkness that occurred at the time of Jesus' crucifixion. Apparently, some found the need to try to give it a natural explanation by saying it was an eclipse.” (Strobel, pp. 84-85)

**Evidence regarding Pilate:** “Some critics have questioned the accuracy of the gospels because of the way they portray him [i.e. Pilate]. While the New Testament paints him as being vacillating and willing to yield to the pressures of a Jewish mob by executing Jesus, other historical accounts picture him as being obstinate and inflexible. *'Doesn't this represent a contradiction between the Bible and secular historians?'*”

**Yamauchi gave a very interesting answer:** “*No, it really doesn't . . . Maier's study of Pilate shows that his protector or patron was Sejanus and that Sejanus fell from power in A.D. 31 because he was plotting against the emperor. . . this loss would have made Pilate's position very weak in A.D. 33, which is most likely when Jesus was crucified . . . so it would certainly be understandable that Pilate would have been reluctant to offend the Jews at that time and to get into further trouble with the emperor. That means the biblical description is most likely correct.*” (Strobel, p. 85)

**Other Jewish Accounts:** We've looked at Josephus and various Roman historical writings that attest to Jesus Christ's existence, death, resurrection, etc. Were there other Jewish accounts?

**Strobel comments:** “*I asked . . . about references to Jesus in the Talmud, an important Jewish work finished about A.D. 500 that incorporates the Mishnah, compiled about A.D. 200.*”

**Yamauchi:** “*Jews, as a whole, did not go into great detail about heretics. There are a few passages in the Talmud that mention Jesus, calling him a false messiah who practiced magic and who was justly condemned to death. They also repeat the rumor that Jesus was born of a Roman soldier and Mary, suggesting there was something unusual about his birth.*”

**Strobel:** “*So in a negative way, these Jewish references do corroborate some things about Jesus.*”

**Yamauchi:** “*Yes, that's right. Professor M. Wilcox put it this way in an article that appeared in a scholarly reference work: 'The Jewish traditional literature, although it mentions Jesus only quite sparingly (and must in any case be used with caution), supports the gospel claim that he was a healer and miracle-worker, even though it ascribes these activities to sorcery. In addition, it preserves the recollection that he was a teacher, and that he had disciples (five of them [sic]), and that at least in the earlier Rabbinic period not all of the sages had finally made up their minds that he was a 'heretic' or a 'deceiver.'"*” **It is important to note that again, these are antagonistic witnesses who are attesting to Jesus Christ's existence, miracles, healings, & unusual birth [!], and that some of the highest religious leaders were not certain He was a heretic** [think Nicodemus (John 3) and Joseph of Arimathea (John 19:38)-mwe]. (Strobel, pp. 85-86)

**But why are there not even more secular witnesses?** Atheists, skeptics, unbelieving professors, etc, regularly disparage the above historical witnesses, claiming there should be far more, if Jesus really lived and was who He claimed He was. Lee Strobel during an interview with famed scholar & Egyptologist Edwin Yamauchi addresses that question: “*Although we were finding quite a few references to Jesus outside the gospels, I was wondering why there were not even more of them. While I knew that few historical documents from the first century have survived, I asked, ‘Overall, shouldn’t we have expected to find more about Jesus in ancient writings outside the bible?’*”

**Yamauchi: “When people begin religious movements, it’s often not until many generations later that people record things about them. But the fact is that we have better historical documentation for Jesus than for the founder of any other ancient religion.”**

[Strobel]: “That caught me off guard. ‘Really? Can you elaborate on that?’”

**Yamauchi:** “*For example, although the Gathas of Zoroaster, about 1000 B.C., are believed to be authentic, most of the Zoroastrian scriptures were not put into writing until after the third century A.D. The most popular Parsi biography of Zoroaster was written in A.D. 1278. The scriptures of Buddha, who lived in the sixth century B.C., were not put into writing until after the Christian era, and the first biography of Buddha was written in the first century A.D. Although we have the sayings of Muhammad, who lived from A.D. 570 to 632, in the Koran, his biography was not written until 767—more than a full century after his death. So the situation with Jesus is unique - and quite impressive in terms of how much we can learn about him aside from the New Testament.*” (Strobel, pp. 86-87) By the way, the above statement convincingly exposes the blatant bias of individuals like Dr. Richard Baldwin of Gulf Coast Community College, who I was asked about last year. In his “history notes” he constantly questions and challenges the veracity of the Old Testament writings and Israel’s religious & doctrinal beliefs, while evidencing unquestioning faith in Zoroastrianism’s history and credibility! This is especially hypocritical when most of Zoroastrianism’s history, biographical information and beliefs were not written down until 1300 years AFTER Zoroaster lived! Do I smell a biased, anti-Christian agenda Dr. Baldwin?

**Let’s summarize the secular historical situation:** “Pretend we didn’t have any of the New Testament or other Christian writings. Even without them, what would we be able to conclude about Jesus from ancient non-Christian sources, such as Josephus, the Talmud, Tacitus, Pliny the Younger, and others? We would still have a considerable amount of important historical evidence; in fact, it would provide a kind of outline for the life of Jesus . . . *We would know that first, Jesus was a Jewish teacher; second, many people believed that he performed healings and exorcisms; third, some people believed he was the Messiah; fourth, he was rejected by the Jewish leaders; fifth, he was crucified under Pontius Pilate in the reign of Tiberius; sixth, despite this shameful death, his followers, who believed that he was still alive, spread beyond Palestine so that there were multitudes of them in Rome by A.D. 64; and seventh, all kinds of people from the cities and countryside - men and women, slave and free - worshipped him as God.*” (Strobel, p. 87)

**A familiar retort by atheists & skeptics:** For any open-minded and honest seeker for truth, the above facts are more than sufficient to provide a solid historical foundation for putting one’s faith in Jesus Christ. However various atheists and skeptics, such as the aforementioned professor at GCCC, often respond: “*But where are the eye witnesses? All of the sources you have quoted from lived and wrote a generation or more after Christ. None of them were eye-witnesses!*” One atheist said it like this: “You’re correct that there are secular historical references to Jesus . . . But there is one *monumental* flaw in this argument: Not one of these secular writers was born until decades *after* Jesus’ alleged crucifixion. Thus, none of these writers could possibly provide *firsthand* knowledge of anything having to do with the life of Jesus. Their historical references to Jesus do provide evidence that the Christ *legend* was extant during the period in which they wrote. But that’s about it.”(sic) [*Italics in the original*]<sup>3</sup> **So . . . how do we respond?**

**First,** I would remind you that by A.D. 61, people throughout the Roman Empire, both in cities and the countryside, were being tortured and killed because of their belief in this “*legend*.” For it to have spread across the entire Roman Empire by that early date means that people were believing and telling the story of Christ and His resurrection almost immediately after Christ’s death, not “*decades after Jesus’ alleged crucifixion*.” That being the case, if the story being told was “make believe” or a mere legend, people who were alive right then and had witnessed everything (especially in Israel, where Christ was despised by the entire religious leadership) would have exposed it for the lie that it was and would have squelched it immediately.

**Second,** as McDowell has rightly observed: “*All of the apostles with one exception, died an ignominious death, rather*

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<sup>3</sup> Mills, p. 51.

than renounce their faith in a resurrected Christ. Yes, throughout history you can find people who died for a lie—but they thought it was the truth. If Christ did not rise from the dead, these men not only knew it was a lie, but they died for a lie. I would challenge you to find 12 men in history that not only died for a lie, but also knew that it was a lie! They sealed their testimony with their blood.”<sup>4</sup>

**Third** and most importantly, **we DO have eye-witnesses of Christ’s resurrection!** But before getting to that, let me digress for a moment. **Have you noticed how atheists and skeptics try to set the rules for this debate in their favor, so that Christians are forced to play on an unlevel playing field?** How so? At the outset when addressing the subject of Christ’s life, death, and resurrection and the historical evidence for it, *they first insist on throwing out all of the biblical writings.* It’s like playing volleyball and your opponent insisting that you play with one hand tied behind your back. If you’re really skilled you may *still* be able to win, but it’s a totally unfair way to play volleyball. We need to ask the question: **“Why do skeptics *pooh-pooh* and rule out all the New Testament documents as evidence *out of hand?*”** As documented earlier in this paper, the biblical writings - both the Old & New Testament - **enjoy unbelievable bibliographical attestation ten to fifty times greater than any other piece of ancient literature—** both in terms of *quantity* of the manuscripts and in their *closeness to the writing of the originals!* No other person of history or writing of antiquity is even in the same ballpark! The bogus arguments of higher critics notwithstanding, the manuscript evidence and accuracy of the biblical documents is so far ahead of anything else, so as to be laughable. We have a copy of part of the Gospel of John dating from within 25-35 years of the writing of the original! Mark was written around A.D. 50, and recent evidence indicates Matthew may have been written just as early or very shortly thereafter. Yet skeptics like Professor Baldwin “*diss*” the biblical writings, while at the same time exhibiting incredible faith and trust in the alleged writings of Zoroaster, Socrates, etc - individuals for whom we have only a miniscule number of copies of their writings—with the earliest copies dated hundreds & hundreds of years after their deaths.

I would suggest that this intellectually schizophrenic behavior is only explainable due to the fact that the evidence from the biblical sources is too hard for critics to answer. It’s sort of like Bill Clinton’s lawyers using legal tricks to try to keep a blue dress from being allowed as evidence in the courtroom, or O.J. Simpson’s lawyers seeking to ban the prosecution from being permitted to present the testimony of a pair of *Bruno Magli* shoes. When lawyers have a weak case they work extra hard to try and exclude contrary evidence. Today’s biblical critics & “higher critics” regularly use that technique and have become virtual experts at “*lawyering the truth*” and *excluding contrary data* as well as Clinton & Simpson’s sleazy lawyers ever did!

**BUT... let’s get back to the question of eyewitness testimony to the reality of Jesus Christ & His resurrection.** The big surprise—at least for some: **We DO have testimony to the veracity of Jesus Christ & his resurrection that was written as early, or earlier, than any of the four gospel writers!** Where, you ask.

**Answer: The writings of the apostle Paul!** I would like to begin this section with an extensive quotation in defense of the credibility and authenticity of the apostle Paul & his writings by the renowned Greek and New Testament scholar Dr. F.F. Bruce:

“The earliest of the New Testament writings, as they have come down to us, are the letters written by the apostle Paul up to the time of his detention in Rome (c. AD 60-62) ...**from the hand of Paul we have ten Epistles written between 48 and 60.** This man Paul was a Roman citizen of Jewish birth (his Jewish name was Saul), born somewhere about the commencement of the Christian era in the city of Tarsus in Cilicia, Asia Minor. His birthplace, ‘*no mean city*’, as he said himself (Acts xxi. 39), was in those days an eminent centre of Greek culture, which did not fail to leave its mark on Paul, as may be seen in his speeches and letters. He received an education in Jerusalem under Gamaliel\*<sup>5</sup>, the greatest Rabbi of his day and a leader of the party of the Pharisees. He rapidly attained distinction among his contemporaries by the diligence of his studies and the fervor with which he upheld the ancestral traditions of the Jewish nation\*. He may even—though this is uncertain—have been a member of the Sanhedrin, the supreme court of the nation.

“This zeal for the law brought him into conflict with the early Jerusalem Christians, especially with those who belonged to the circle of Stephen, whose teaching he must have heard in the synagogue where the Cilician Jews met\*, and who early realized, with exceptionally far-sighted comprehension, that the gospel cut at the roots of the traditional Jewish ceremonial law and cultus...we find Paul...proceeding to uproot the new movement which, in his eyes, stood revealed by Stephen’s activity as a deadly threat to all that he counted dear in Judaism\*...until his encounter with Jesus on the road to Damascus **convinced his mind and conscience of the reality of His resurrection**, and therewith of the validity of the Christians’ claims, whereupon he became the chief herald of the faith of which he formerly made havoc.

<sup>4</sup> Taken from the film, “*What’s Up Josh?*”

<sup>5</sup> Info on him &/or the other starred (\*) words may be found [in order] in the following N.T. passages: Acts 22:3; Gal. 1:13-ff; Acts 6:9 [Acts 7:58, 8:1-ff, 9:1-ff, 22:4, 26:9-ff, I Cor. 15:9, etc.]; Col. 1:15-ff; Gal. 4:4; Rom. 9:5; Rom. 1:3; Gal. 4:4; I Cor. 11:23-ff; [Phil. 2:8; I Cor. 1:23; Gal. 3:13, 6:14, etc.]; I Thess. 2:15; Gal. 1:17-ff; Gal. 2:9; I Cor. 9:5; I Cor. 7:10-ff; [I Cor. 9:14; I Tim. 5:18; cf. Lk. 10:7]; I Cor. 11:24-25; I Cor. 15:11.



**It is reasonable to believe that the evidence which convinced such a man of the out-and-out wrongness of his former course, and led him so decisively to abandon previously cherished beliefs for a movement which he had so vigorously opposed, must have been of a singularly impressive quality. The conversion of Paul has for long been regarded as a weighty evidence for the truth of Christianity. Many have endorsed the conclusion of the eighteenth-century statesman George, Lord Lyttelton, that '*the conversion and apostleship of St. Paul alone, duly considered, was of itself a demonstration sufficient to prove Christianity to be a divine revelation*'.<sup>6</sup>**

“Here, however, we are chiefly concerned with the information we can derive from his Epistles. These were not written to record the facts of the life and ministry of Jesus; they were addressed to Christians, who already knew the gospel story. Yet in them we can find sufficient material to construct an outline of the early apostolic preaching about Jesus. While Paul insists on the divine pre-existence of Jesus\*, yet he knows that He was none the less a real human being\*, a descendant of Abraham and David\*; who lived under the Jewish law\*; who was betrayed, and on the night of His betrayal instituted a memorial meal of bread and wine\*; who endured the Roman penalty of crucifixion\*, although the responsibility for His death is laid at the door of the representatives of the Jewish nation\*; who was buried, rose the third day, and was thereafter seen alive by many eyewitnesses on various occasions, including one occasion on which He was so seen by over five hundred at once, of whom the majority were alive nearly twenty-five years later [I Cor. 15:4-ff]. In this summary of the evidence for the reality of Christ’s resurrection, Paul shows a sound instinct for the necessity of marshalling personal testimony in support of what might well appear an incredible assertion.

Paul knows of the Lord’s apostles\*, of whom Peter and John are mentioned by name\*...He knows that the Lord’s brothers and apostles, including Peter, were married\*...He quotes sayings of Jesus on occasion—e.g., His teaching on marriage and divorce\*, and on the right of gospel preachers to have their material needs supplied\*; and the words He used at the institution of the Lord’s Supper\*. Even where he does not quote the actual sayings of Jesus, he shows throughout his works how well acquainted he was with them. In particular, we ought to compare the ethical section of the Epistle to the Romans (12: 1 - 15:7), where Paul summarizes the practical implications of the gospel for the lives of believers, with the Sermon on the Mount, to see how thoroughly imbued the apostle was with the teaching of his Master. Besides, there and elsewhere Paul’s chief argument in his ethical instruction is the example of Christ Himself. And the character of Christ as understood by Paul is in perfect agreement with His character as portrayed in the Gospels...In short, the outline of the gospel story as we can trace it in the writings of Paul agrees with the outline which we find elsewhere in the New Testament, and in the four Gospels in particular. Paul himself is at pains to point out that the gospel which he preached was one and the same gospel as that preached by the other apostles\*—a striking claim, considering that Paul was neither a companion of Christ in the days of His flesh nor of the original apostles, and that he vigorously asserts his complete independence of these.”<sup>7</sup>

**Returning now to our question of eye-witness testimony to the resurrection of Christ:** First, we note that Paul wrote the epistle of I Corinthians at least by A.D. 54-55 (a date commonly accepted by the vast majority of scholars and textual critics). In that epistle **Paul boldly claimed that Jesus Christ miraculously rose from the dead - an astounding message that he fearlessly preached all over the Roman Empire - at great personal cost and sacrifice, and documented in the historically unimpeachable record of the book of Acts** (cf. II Cor. 11). In that letter Paul had the audacity to challenge those who didn’t believe him to go and check it out and ask the witnesses themselves! He told his readers that if they didn’t believe him, **“go and ask some of the more than 500 witnesses - nearly all of whom he said were still alive at the time of his writing!”** (I Cor. 15:4). A person doesn’t make daring, defiant statements like that unless they’re *very sure* their story is true, because people *will* take you up on your challenge! All a person had to do was to go check out Paul’s story. I have no doubt that some did! But at the end of the day, no one could deny the testimony of the eyewitnesses and the undeniable evidence: an empty tomb and the post-resurrection appearances.

**THAT is exactly why Christianity spread so quickly across the Roman Empire i.e. because of the irrefutable**

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<sup>6</sup> “In [regard to] his ‘*Observations on the Conversion of St. Paul*’...Dr. Samuel Johnson wrote: ‘He had, in the pride of juvenile confidence, with the help of corrupt conversation [i.e. behavior], entertained doubts of the truth of Christianity; but he thought the time now come when it was no longer fit to doubt or believe by chance, and applied himself seriously to the great question. His studies being honest, ended in conviction. He found that [Christianity] was true; and what he had learned he endeavored to teach... by *Observations on the Conversion of St. Paul*; a treatise to which infidelity has never been able to fabricate a specious answer’” (Johnson, ‘*Lives of the Poets: Lyttelton*’), quoted by Bruce, p. 77. For an excellent summary of Lyttelton’s arguments & paper, see “*Observations on the Conversion and Apostleship of St. Paul-Analyzed & Condensed by Rev. J.L. Campbell*” in “*The Fundamentals*”, R.A. Torrey, A.C. Dixon, et al editors (Baker Book House: Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1909, 1970), pp. 353-366. <sup>7</sup> F. F. Bruce, M.A., D.D., F.B.A. “*The New Testament Documents*” (Inter-Varsity Press: Leicester, England, 1943, 5<sup>th</sup> revised edition, 1997), pp. 76-79. (Note: Dr. Bruce was until his death Rylands Professor of Biblical Criticism and Exegesis in the University of Manchester, England)

**eyewitness testimonies.** Even in courts today, if you have just *two* eye-witnesses you should have no problem establishing the veracity of a story and getting a conviction. **Christianity had over 500 eye-witnesses - the majority of whom were still alive at the time Paul wrote and were available for questioning!** I would also remind you that Matthew states that the Jewish leaders resorted to bribing the Roman soldiers to lie about the empty tomb and say that the body had been stolen *while they were asleep!* I'd call that desperation! A desperation rivaled only by the atheists and skeptics of our day who, rather than honestly evaluate the evidence, **a priori try to disallow it.** (By the way, the failure of those Roman guards to secure a tomb normally meant *automatic death for every one of them!*). But let us now return to the third main point of this paper:

### **THE EXTERNAL EVIDENCE FOR THE RELIABILITY OF SCRIPTURE:**

**Archaeology also provides extremely powerful external evidence for the historical reliability of Scripture.** It contributes to biblical criticism, not in the area of inspiration and revelation, but **by providing evidence of accuracy about events that are recorded.** Archaeologist Joseph Free writes: "*Archaeology has confirmed countless passages which have been rejected by critics as unhistorical or contradictory to known facts.*" A.N. Sherwin-White, a classical historian, writes that "*for Acts the confirmation of historicity is overwhelming . . . any attempt to reject its basic historicity even in matters of detail must now appear absurd. Roman historians have long taken it for granted.*" (McDowell)<sup>8</sup>

[Note: For extensive documentation by some of the greatest archaeologists of history, as well as scores of amazing evidences and illustrations of the historical reliability of the Old & New Testaments, see for example: "*Evidence That Demands a Verdict*" and "*More Evidence That Demands a Verdict*" both by Josh McDowell; "*Heritage of Evidence in the British Museum*" by Peter Masters; "*A Survey of Old Testament Introduction*" by Gleason Archer; "*Is the Higher Criticism Scholarly*" & "*A Scientific Investigation of the Old Testament*" both by Robert Dick Wilson; "*The New Testament Documents: Are They Reliable*" by F. F. Bruce; "*Unger's Bible Handbook*" by Merrill Unger; "*The Case for Christ*" by Lee Strobel; "*Archaeology & the Bible*" by Donald J. Wiseman & Edwin Yamauchi; "*Peoples of the OT World*" by Alfred Hoerth, Gerald Mattingly & Edwin Yamauchi; "*Bible and Spade*" (the archaeological magazine of the Associates for Biblical Research); etc.]

#### **Other Lines of Evidence which supply powerful testimony to the Bible via "The External Evidence Test":**

- (1) **Fulfilled Old Testament Prophecies** (e.g. Cyrus; Daniel's 70 weeks; Ancient cities; the Jewish people).
- (2) **Fulfilled Messianic Prophecies**
- (2) **The Reliability of Historical Geography.** (see for instance, Pfeiffer & Vos, "*The Wycliffe Historical Geography of Bible Lands*" as well as various writings by scholars such as Edwin Yamauchi, Kenneth Kitchen, etc.)
- (3) **Fulfilled New Testament Prophecies.**
- (4) **Jewish & Middle Eastern Cultural Evidences.** (Consult almost any standard work on "Manners & Customs" of Bible lands & customs).
- (5) **The Historical Accuracy of Biblical Books—especially historical books such as Acts** (e.g. geographical place names, historical personages, titles, etc.).

**For additional evidence in support of the historical existence of Jesus Christ &/or credibility of the Bible see:** Bruce, F.F. "*Jesus and Christian Origins outside the New Testament*" (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1974); Habermas, Gary. "*The Historical Jesus*" (Joplin, MO: College Press, 1996); McDowell, Josh, and Bill Wilson. "*He Walked Among Us*" (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1994); Busenitz, Nathan, "*Reasons We Believe*" (Crossway: Wheaton, IL, 2008); Sproul, R. C. "*Reason to Believe*" (Zondervan: Grand Rapids, MI, 1978); etc.

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<sup>8</sup> (See pp. 92-117 in "*A Ready Defense*" for an extensive listing of some of the archeological discoveries that [often very dramatically] support the Bible & its statements).