

The New Testament & Historical Reliability: How the Bible Compares to Your Text Books

Some have criticized the Bible saying it is untrustworthy because it has been rewritten countless times over the years. They say that the version of the Bible we have today is nothing like what was originally written as it has been doctored by people seeking to transmit myths.

They are correct in that we do not have the original documents (known as autographs) for any biblical book. All we have are manuscripts (copies) – often copies of copies of copies. The reasons for this are simple. First, the Bible was written on perishable parchment. Papyrus, vellum and paper are all perishable and do not last forever, so the Bible was recopied out of necessity. Second, people wanted to share the word of God with others, so they made copies of the manuscripts in their possession. Those receiving the copies often made even more to share with others, and so on and so fourth. The New Testament was transmitted widely and rather quickly when a letter was sent to a church or an individual and copies were made and distributed to others. As a result, the sheer number of ancient copies we have is staggering. There are literally thousands we've found distributed over a large geographical area that were used in the daily life of the early church.

Historians use three criteria to evaluate the reliability of an ancient historical text:

1. **The number of manuscripts available.** The greater the number of manuscripts, the better the ability to compare and reconstruct the original.
2. **The time interval between the date of the original writing and the composition of the copy.** The shorter the time between when the original was written and when the copy was made, the fewer times the manuscript would have been recopied.
3. **The quality of the manuscripts.** This criteria is concerned with the legibility of words.

Secular historians have a high degree of confidence that Julius Caesar conquered Gaul because we possess 10 ancient manuscripts of Caesar's writings on *The Gallic Wars*. We have a high degree of confidence that Socrates lived, taught philosophy, and was executed by drinking hemlock because we possess 7 ancient manuscripts of Plato's *Tetralogies*. The history books we use in our high schools and universities today were written using these ancient sources authoritatively and often without question. The New Testament is treated quite differently.

This chart illustrates how the manuscript witness of the New Testament compares to that of the sources used in writing modern history books:

AUTHOR	WHEN WRITTEN	EARLIEST COPY	TIME SPAN	# OF COPIES
Caesar	100-44 B.C.	A.D. 900	1,000 Years	10
Plato	427-347 B.C.	A.D. 900	1,200 Years	7
Tacitus	A.D. 100	A.D. 1100	1,000 Years	20
Thucydides	460-400 B.C.	A.D. 900	1,300 Years	8
Herodotus	480-425 B.C.	A.D. 900	1,300 Years	8
Aristotle	384-322 B.C.	A.D. 1100	1,400 Years	49
Homer	900 B.C.	400 B.C.	500 Years	643
N.T.	A.D. 40-100	A.D. 125	25 Years	24,000+

By all standards of scholarly accuracy and reliability, the Bible stands head and shoulders above every other ancient work. The bottom line is this: when we open the pages of the Bible, we are reading the most accurately transmitted ancient book of all time. What we read in the Bible is what God wanted to convey.

Sources:

Hal Seed & Dan Grider, *The God Questions*, Outreach: Vista, CA, pages 55-60.

Christian Apologetics & Research Ministry, *Manuscript Evidence for Superior New Testament Reliability*, <http://carm.org/manuscript-evidence> (Accessed July, 2011).