

# Reliability of the New Testament

When evaluating ancient documents, historians do not rely on assumptions, tradition, or blind faith. Instead, they apply consistent and widely accepted methods used across all historical disciplines. These methods are:

1. **The Bibliographical Test** – How accurately was the text preserved?
2. **The Internal Evidence Test** – Does the content demonstrate credibility?
3. **The External Evidence Test** – Is the text supported by independent sources?

These criteria are applied to all ancient works—from Plato to Julius Caesar—without exception. When applied to the New Testament, the results are not merely strong; they are **exceptional within the field of ancient literature**.

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## 1. The Bibliographical Test

### How Well Was the Text Preserved?

#### A. Manuscript Quantity

The New Testament is supported by more surviving manuscripts than any other ancient document.

- Greek manuscripts: ~5,800+
- Latin manuscripts: ~10,000+
- Other early translations (Coptic, Syriac, Armenian, etc.): ~9,000+

Total: **Over 20,000–25,000 manuscripts**

For comparison:

- Plato: ~7 manuscripts
- Tacitus: ~20 manuscripts
- Caesar (*Gallic Wars*): ~10 manuscripts
- Homer (*Iliad*): ~1,800 manuscripts

This vast quantity allows scholars to compare texts across time and geography, dramatically increasing confidence in reconstructing the original wording.

#### References:

(Reference: <https://www.csntm.org/Manuscripts.aspx>)

(Reference: <https://www.britannica.com/topic/biblical-literature/The-text-of-the-New->

Testament)

(Reference: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Biblical\\_manuscript](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Biblical_manuscript))

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## B. Time Gap Between Original and Copies

The reliability of a text increases when the gap between its original composition and earliest surviving copies is small.

- New Testament: ~25–100 years (early fragments)
- Plato: ~1,300 years
- Caesar: ~950 years

One of the earliest known fragments, **Papyrus P52**, dates to around AD 125 and contains a portion of the Gospel of John.

### References:

(Reference: [https://manuscripts.csntm.org/manuscript/View/GA\\_P52](https://manuscripts.csntm.org/manuscript/View/GA_P52))

(Reference: <https://www.britannica.com/topic/New-Testament>)

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## C. Why This Matters

If historians accept the reliability of works with fewer manuscripts and much larger time gaps, then it is reasonable—by the same standard—to consider the New Testament **at least as reliable, if not more so**.

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## 2. Textual Transmission

### Why the New Testament Is Not a “Telephone Game”

A common objection claims that the Bible has been copied so many times that it must be unreliable. This is often compared to the “telephone game,” where a message becomes distorted as it is passed along.

This analogy fails for several reasons.

#### A. Multiple Independent Transmission Streams

The New Testament was copied in different regions simultaneously, including:

- Alexandria (Egypt)
- Antioch (Syria)
- Rome

These independent lines of transmission allow scholars to compare manuscripts and detect variations.

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## B. Cross-Checking and Reconstruction

Because thousands of manuscripts exist, scholars can:

- Compare wording across copies
- Identify scribal errors
- Reconstruct the original text with high confidence

This is not a fragile chain—it is a **robust network of verification**.

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## C. Early and Widespread Distribution

The New Testament spread rapidly throughout the Roman Empire. This made it impossible for any single authority to alter the text universally without detection.

### References:

(Reference: <https://www.csntm.org/History/Transmission>)

(Reference: <https://www.bibleodyssey.org/en/tools/bible-basics/what-is-textual-criticism>)

(Reference: <https://www.britannica.com/topic/textual-criticism>)

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## 3. Textual Variants

### Do Differences in Manuscripts Undermine Reliability?

It is often claimed that there are approximately **400,000 textual variants** in the New Testament. While this number is frequently used to cast doubt, it requires proper context.

#### A. Why the Number Is So High

The number is large because:

- There are thousands of manuscripts

- Every minor difference is counted
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## **B. The Nature of Variants**

Over **99% of textual variants** are minor and include:

- Spelling differences
- Word order variations
- Grammatical changes

Example:

“Jesus Christ” vs. “Christ Jesus” (same meaning in Greek)

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## **C. Meaningful Variants**

Less than **1% of variants are both meaningful and viable**, and none affect central Christian doctrines.

Even critical scholars acknowledge that the vast majority of variants are insignificant.

### **References:**

(Reference: <https://ehrmanblog.org/are-there-400000-variants-in-the-new-testament-for-members/>)

(Reference: <https://zondervanacademic.com/blog/what-are-textual-variants>)

(Reference: <https://www.britannica.com/topic/New-Testament/Text-and-canon>)

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## **D. Key Insight**

Textual variants do not weaken the New Testament. Instead, they demonstrate:

- Transparency in transmission
  - Abundant manuscript evidence
  - The ability to reconstruct the original text
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## **4. Internal Evidence Test**

### **Does the Content Demonstrate Credibility?**

## A. Historical Accuracy (The Gospel of Luke)

The Gospel of Luke demonstrates detailed knowledge of:

- Political titles
- Geographic locations
- Cultural customs

Archaeological discoveries have repeatedly confirmed Luke's accuracy.

Example: The **Pontius Pilate inscription**, discovered in 1961.

### References:

(Reference: <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Pontius-Pilate>)

(Reference: <https://www.livius.org/articles/person/pontius-pilate/pilate-stone/>)

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## B. Accurate Naming Patterns

Studies show that the names in the Gospels match real first-century Jewish naming frequencies.

Common names such as:

- Simon
- Joseph
- Mary

appear in proportions consistent with archaeological data.

### References:

(Reference: <https://www.cambridge.org/core/books/jesus-and-the-eyewitnesses/6C0F3D89C5E0F8D6E38A0E4C0A1E6F8E>)

(Reference: <https://www.tyndalehouse.com/explore/articles/statistical-evidence-for-the-reliability-of-the-gospels/>)

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## C. Undesigned Coincidences

Independent accounts often include details that unintentionally confirm one another.

Example:

- John 6: Jesus asks Philip about food
- Luke 9: The event occurs near Bethsaida

- John 1: Philip is from Bethsaida

These connections are subtle and unlikely to be fabricated.

**References:**

(Reference: <https://www.reasonablefaith.org/writings/question-answer/what-are-undesigned-coincidences>)

(Reference: <https://truthfaithandreason.com/undesigned-coincidences-in-the-gospels/>)

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## **D. Criterion of Embarrassment**

The New Testament includes details that would be counterproductive if invented:

- Peter denies Jesus
- The disciples flee
- Women are first witnesses of the resurrection

In first-century culture, women's testimony held less legal weight, making this detail particularly significant.

**References:**

(Reference: <https://www.britannica.com/topic/criterion-of-embarrassment>)

(Reference: <https://www.bibleodyssey.org/en/passages/main-articles/women-witnesses>)

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## **5. External Evidence Test**

### **Archaeological and Historical Support**

#### **A. Confirmed Figures and Events**

Archaeology confirms many individuals mentioned in the New Testament:

- Pontius Pilate
- Caiaphas
- Herod the Great
- Nebuchadnezzar
- Cyrus

**References:**

(Reference: <https://www.britannica.com/topic/biblical-archaeology>)

(Reference: <https://www.history.com/topics/religion/bible>)

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## B. The Dead Sea Scrolls

Discovered in 1947, these manuscripts provide strong evidence for the accurate transmission of the Old Testament.

- Over **95% agreement** across 1,000 years
- Differences mostly in spelling

### References:

(Reference: <https://www.deadseascrolls.org.il/>)

(Reference: <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Dead-Sea-Scrolls>)

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## 6. Eyewitness Testimony and Martyrdom

The New Testament authors claimed to be eyewitnesses to the events they recorded. Many endured persecution and death.

### Key Distinction:

- People may die for what they **believe is true**
- People do not willingly die for what they **know is false**

Roman historian Tacitus confirms early Christian persecution.

### References:

(Reference: <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Tacitus-Roman-historian>)

(Reference: <https://www.livius.org/articles/person/tacitus/tacitus-works/>)

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## 7. Addressing Apparent Contradictions

### Do Differences Undermine Reliability?

One of the most common objections to the New Testament is the presence of **apparent contradictions**. However, it is essential to distinguish between:

- **True contradictions** (mutually exclusive claims)
- **Differences in perspective** (common in eyewitness accounts)

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## A. Eyewitness Variation Is Expected

In real-world testimony, witnesses:

- Emphasize different details
- Recall events differently
- Include or omit information

Perfect agreement would suggest **collusion**, not authenticity.

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## B. Complementary Accounts

Example:

At the resurrection:

- One Gospel mentions one angel
- Another mentions two

These accounts are not contradictory—one simply focuses on the speaking figure.

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## C. Partial Reporting

Example: The inscription on the cross is recorded differently across Gospels. These are likely **partial quotations of a longer statement**, not contradictions.

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## D. Literary Practices of the Time

Ancient authors often arranged events:

- Thematically rather than chronologically
- For emphasis rather than strict sequencing

### References:

(Reference: <https://www.britannica.com/art/biblical-literature/New-Testament-literature>)

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## **E. Textual vs. Original Differences**

Some variations arise from copying, not from original contradictions. Textual criticism helps identify and resolve these.

### **References:**

(Reference: <https://www.csntm.org/What-is-Textual-Criticism>)

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## **F. Key Insight**

Apparent contradictions:

- Reflect independent testimony
  - Are expected in authentic historical accounts
  - Do not undermine core claims
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## **8. The Cumulative Case**

When all evidence is considered together:

### **Bibliographical Evidence**

- Massive manuscript support
- Early copies

### **Internal Evidence**

- Realistic details
- Consistency across accounts
- Inclusion of difficult details

### **External Evidence**

- Archaeological confirmation
- Historical alignment

The New Testament stands as:

**The most well-preserved and historically supported document from antiquity.**

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# Final Conclusion

If the New Testament is:

- Well-preserved
- Historically grounded
- Internally credible
- Externally supported

Then the central question shifts from:

**“Can we trust the text?”**

to:

**“What do we do with what it claims?”**

As C. S. Lewis wrote:

“Christianity, if false, is of no importance, and if true, of infinite importance.”

## References:

(Reference: <https://www.cslewis.com/us/>)