

# The New Testament

**New Testament Doctrine:** Christians see the New Testament as the fulfillment of the promises of the Old Testaments ...

\* As it **Relates** and **Interprets** the **New Covenant** ...

\* by Showing the New Covenant is represented in the life and death of Jesus

\* Linking God to the believers of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the promised Messiah.

**New Testament Reliability:** The reliability of the New Testament documents hinge on their historicity, genuine character, accuracy, transmission, and supernatural claims.

## SUMMARY

The reliability of the New Testament documents faces several challenges.

1) Is the Jesus of the Synoptic Gospels (*Matthew*, *Mark*, and *Luke*) a real, historical character, or are these accounts more of a fictional narrative?

\* **Synoptic Gospels:** The Gospels of *Matthew*, *Mark*, and *Luke* in the New Testament, which present similar narratives of the life, ministry and death of Jesus Christ.

\* Since the 1780s the first three books of the New Testament have been called the Synoptic Gospels because they are so similar in structure, content, and wording that they can easily be set side by side to provide a synoptic comparison of their content.

2) Does John's Gospel contradict the Jesus of the Synoptic Gospels?

\* The Gospel of John has a different arrangement and offers a somewhat different perspective on Christ as it was written much later & **mainly focuses on Jesus' divinity**.

3) Is early church history as recorded in the Book of Acts historically accurate and coherent?

4) Are the New Testament Epistles written by the individuals purported to be their authors?

5) Do other writings exist that should be added to the New Testament canon?

6) How can we be sure that the original documents have been faithfully copied and made available to us today?

7) Can we trust the reliability of books that record supernatural events like the resurrection of Jesus?

\* Even though many people feel that the distinctively Christian Scriptures combined into our New Testament can hardly be trusted in what they teach ...

\* Ironically, there has never been more evidence readily available that actually supports their reliability.

Historical research can never confirm or refute theological claims (Jesus died for humanity's sins), but without historical facts (Jesus lived & died) the theology has a shaky foundation.

## Historicity of the Synoptic Gospels

\* The Synoptic Gospels (*Matthew*, *Mark* and *Luke*) contain the primary material scholars use in the "quest of the historical Jesus".

\* Likely written within one generation of Jesus' death in A.D. 30, while eyewitnesses of his ministry were still alive, and by those who were either close companions of Jesus or close associates of those companions.

\* *Luke 1:1-4* suggests a careful, historical process of composition, and the overall genre of the Synoptics most closely resembles ancient biographies rather than novels or works of fiction.

\* *Luke 1:1-4*<sup>1</sup> *Inasmuch as many have taken in hand to set in order a narrative of those things which have been fulfilled among us,*<sup>2</sup> *just as those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word delivered them to us,*<sup>3</sup> *it seemed good to me also, having had perfect understanding of all things from the very first, to write to you an orderly account, most excellent Theophilus,*<sup>4</sup> *that you may know the certainty of those things in which you were instructed.*

- \* The Oral Cultures of the 1<sup>st</sup> Century Jewish and Roman world cultivated sophisticated skills of memorization – many could not read or write so memory was important
  - \* They were thus able to pass on information accurately by word-of-mouth for long periods of time in ways largely unparalleled in our world today.
  - \* Apparent contradictions among parallel Gospel accounts can usually be explained by the historical conventions of the day. In a world without “quotation marks”, or any felt need for them, communicating another person’s intent in one’s own words was acceptable.
  - \* Sometimes the gospel writers detailed different portions of a larger whole, sometimes they use different degrees of precision, and they regularly arrange their material topically as well as chronologically.
- \* At least a dozen extra-biblical references in non-Christian (Jewish, Greek, and Roman) sources in the earliest centuries of the Christian era (Josephus, Thallus, Suetonius, Tacitus, Pliny, Mara ben Serapion, Lucian, and several Talmudic tractates) confirm the main details of the Synoptics:
  - \* Jesus’ birth out of wedlock
  - \* Jesus intersection with the ministry of John the Baptist
  - \* The existence of his brother James
  - \* Jesus gathering of disciples, including five who are named
  - \* Jesus disagreement with the Jewish leaders in interpretations of the law
  - \* Jesus working “wondrous feats,”
  - \* His being deemed “a sorcerer who led Israel astray.”
  - \* It is told that he was crucified under Pontius Pilate (and thus between A.D. 26-36)
  - \* That his followers believed he was the Messiah and believed that he had been resurrected
  - \* That his death did not put an end to their beliefs
    - \* Instead, Jesus’ followers rather quickly began meeting together and “singing hymns to him as if he were God.”

### **Historicity of John’s Gospel**

- \* A large majority of John’s Gospel contains different but NOT contradictory information to what the Synoptics present.
  - \* Whereas Matthew and Luke most likely knew, used and supplemented Mark, there does not appear to be any literary relationship between John and any of the Synoptics.
- \* John’s Gospel was most likely written a generation later (in the 90s rather than the 60s), by one of the closest followers of Jesus
  - \* He used his own expressions influenced by a lifetime of preaching about Jesus
  - \* He selected information that had not been previously highlighted in writing.
- \* John was writing to a community of Christians in and around Ephesus wrestling with challenges like:
  - \* Hostile local synagogues who were increasingly excommunicating members who acknowledged they worshiped Jesus
  - \* Teaching by a Greek “Christian” movement known as Gnosticism that denied Jesus’ real physical nature.
- \* It is only from John that we learn about Jesus’ roughly three-year ministry, because several of his trips to Jerusalem at festival times are described and can be dated.
  - \* John doesn’t do this to help us reconstruct a chronology of Jesus’ life, but because of his theological conviction that Jesus’ teaching on those occasions showed that he was the fulfillment of the true meaning of the various Jewish feasts (Passover, Unleavened Bread, First Fruits, Weeks).
- \* What we learn about the chronology of Jesus’ life emerges incidentally
  - \* Such details, then, are not likely invented but more likely accurate.
- \* Geographical and topographical references are also more abundant in John, and they have been consistently corroborated by archeological finds

- \* The Pools of Bethesda and Siloam (John 5:2; 9:7,11)
- \* Solomon's Portico/Porch (John 10:3)      \* Jacob's well (John 4:6,12)
- \* Gabbatha-The Pavement (John 19:13)      \* Bethany (John 11:1,18)
- \* Even John's very different style and contents of Jesus' teaching does appear on occasion in the Synoptics.
  - \* John 14:6<sup>6</sup> *Jesus said to him, "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me.*
  - \* Matt 11:27<sup>27</sup> *All things have been delivered to Me by My Father, and no one knows the Son except the Father. Nor does anyone know the Father except the Son, and the one to whom the Son wills to reveal Him.*
  - \* Luke 10:22<sup>22</sup> *All things have been delivered to Me by My Father, and no one knows who the Son is except the Father, and who the Father is except the Son, and the one to whom the Son wills to reveal Him.*

### Historicity of Acts

- \* Acts is a theologically rich and artistically refined work of history.
- \* The number of characters and places in this selective account of key events in the first generation of church history that have been confirmed is staggering.
  - \* From non-Christian works alone, we know of:
    - \* Annas   \* Claudius      \* Gamaliel      \* Caiaphas      \* James      \* Gallio      \* Agrippa I
    - \* Agrippa II      \* Felix   \* Drusilla      \* Festus      \* Bernice      \* Many Others.
- \* Every city and location which has been excavated has been shown to be as Acts describes them, complete with specific synagogues, theaters, stoa (porch), ports, roads, rivers, and more.
- \* Particularly significant is how Luke gets right the names of the rulers in the various locations, especially since in some instances they varied quite a bit in a given region or from one time period to the next.
  - \* These include:
    - \* Sanhedrin      \* The Italian Regiment      \* Tetrarchs      \* Proconsuls      \* Magistrates
    - \* Politarchs      \* The Areopagus      \* City Clerk and the "Chief Man" (on island of Malta)
- \* The fact that we can generate a plausible, detailed chronology of the events depicted in Acts, in comparison with Paul's letters, and thereby chart his missionary journeys as coherent and sensible travels, further suggests Acts is historical.

### Authorship of New Testament Epistles

- \* A significant question: Were the New Testament epistles really penned by the individuals to whom they are attributed?
  - \* Almost all scholars agree that Romans, 1 & 2 Cor, Gal, Phil, 1 Thess and Philemon are genuinely Pauline.
  - \* Some doubt surrounds Col and 2 Thess      \* A bit more doubt, with Ephesians
  - \* The greatest skepticism is with the Pastoral Epistles. 1 & 2 Tim, Titus
- \* It is interesting that the complaints about 2 Thess and Eph often center on their being too *similar* to 1 Thess and Col, while the style of the Pastorals is said to be too *different* from the undisputed ones of Paul.
  - \* Paul's use of scribes (Rom 16:22) and/or possible co-authors (note those in addition to Paul mentioned in the first verses of 1 & 2 Cor, Col, and 1 & 2 Thess) must also be factored in.
- \* An interesting dimension of a number of Paul's letters, penned in the 50s, especially Romans, 1 Cor and 1 Thess, are the quotations of and allusions to Jesus' teachings that Paul could not have gotten simply by consulting a Gospel, since few had yet been written & in circulation.
- \* These references thus show that a reliable oral tradition of Jesus' teachings was circulating.
  - \* Topics ranged from Divorce and Remarriage (1Cor 7:10; Matt 19:9)
  - \* Receiving Money for Ministry (1Cor 9:14; Luke 10:7)
  - \* The "words of institution at the Last Supper" (1Cor 11:23-25; Luke 22:19-20)

- \* The return of Christ (*1Thess 5:2-4; Matt 24:42-44*)
- \* Non-Retaliation and Enemy Love (*Rom 12:17-20; Luke 6:27b-28a*)
- \* To name a few
- \* *Hebrews* through *Revelation* does not present as many issues
- \* A good case can be made that *James* and *Jude* were indeed written by half-brothers of Jesus, perhaps as early as the late 40s and certainly by the 60s.
  - \* James' letter is filled with allusions to Jesus' teachings, especially from the Sermon on the Mount, again most likely before James could have consulted written accounts.
- \* *Hebrews* is anonymous in all of its early manuscripts, and the early church debated whether to attribute it to Paul or to one of his associates.
  - \* However, the apparent allusions to the expulsion of Jews from Rome in 49
    - \* *Heb 10:34*<sup>34</sup> *for you had compassion on me in my chains, and joyfully accepted the plundering of your goods, knowing that you have a better and an enduring possession for yourselves in heaven.*
  - \* And the fact that none of the Roman Christians had yet been martyred
    - \* *Heb 12:4*<sup>4</sup> *You have not yet resisted to bloodshed, striving against sin.*
      - \* No longer the case after 64, suggest it should be dated between these specific years.
- \* *1 & 2 Peter* are dramatically different in style and contents from each other
  - \* Suggesting to many that the second of these letters comes from someone other than Peter in a different context at a much later date.
    - \* A scribe however may be responsible for the polished Greek of *1 Peter*, while *2 Peter* seems to be deliberately put in a flowery, Asiatic style for the rhetorical emphasis it would generate.
  - \* Alternately, *2 Peter 1:15* "may" suggest that this letter was completed posthumously by one of Peter's disciples.
    - \* *2 Pet 1:12-15*<sup>12</sup> *For this reason I will not be negligent to remind you always of these things, though you know and are established in the present truth.* <sup>13</sup> *Yes, I think it is right, as long as I am in this tent, to stir you up by reminding you,* <sup>14</sup> *knowing that shortly I must put off my tent, just as our Lord Jesus Christ showed me.* <sup>15</sup> *Moreover I will be careful to ensure that you always have a reminder of these things after my decease.*
- \* *1 John* is entirely anonymous, while *2 & 3 John* are attributed simply to "the elder," but their styles and contents are very similar.
- \* Revelation is attributed to a prophet named John (*Rev. 1:1,4,9; 22:8*), and despite differences, mostly related to contents and style, is still more similar in style to the other writings the early church attributed to John than to any other documents we know about.

### Books Outside the New Testament Canon

- \* Why distinguish the 27 canonical books from the Gnostic literature of the day?
  - \* Do you recall the 3 main criteria early Christian used to determine inclusion in the Canon?
    - 1) \_\_\_\_\_: "\_\_\_\_\_" (books coming from apostles or their close associates – 1<sup>st</sup> Century Works),
    - 2) \_\_\_\_\_: "\_\_\_\_\_" (**Widely Accepted as Authoritative and Relevant**, not just limited to one location or sect within emerging Christianity),
    - 3) \_\_\_\_\_: "Inspired" (having the ring of truth and used by the Spirit for distinctively edifying and maturing purposes).
- \* Much of the Gnostic literature involves Jesus supposedly offering select followers secret, mysterious or obscure teachings after his resurrection
  - \* Often involving the cosmology of the universe

- \* With little similarity to the topics discussed in the canonical texts
- \* Without the connected narrative form that characterizes the New Testament Gospels.

### Transmission of the New Testament Manuscripts

\* We know that there may be as many as \_\_\_\_\_ textual variants in the \_\_\_\_\_ fragmentary, partial or complete copies of these texts in Greek and other ancient languages spanning more than \_\_\_\_\_ centuries before the invention of the printing press (Gutenberg in 1454)

\* On average there were only \_\_\_\_\_ unique variants per manuscripts, and the vast majority of these involved variations in

- \* The Spelling of Words
- \* The Use or Non-Use of an Article, Conjunction or Particle
- \* Slight Variations in Syntax.

\* The vast majority also came from the most recent centuries during the period of copying texts by hand.

\* Only about 1500 merit inclusion in the textual footnotes of the United Bible Societies' Greek New Testament, while typical English translations often include about 300-400 of the most interesting in their footnotes.

\* Readers can see for themselves that very few affect significant issues of meaning.

\* Two that involve more than 1 or 2 verses are:

\* Mark 16:9-20 (The Appearance & Ascension of Jesus – Debated as to whether this was a part of the original text)

\* John 7:53-8:11 (The Woman Caught in Adultery – The earliest Greek manuscripts do not include this story)

\* It seems plausible that these were not original to the Gospels that now contain them.

\* Most importantly, no doctrine or ethical teaching of Christianity depends solely on one or more disputed texts.

### The Question of Miracles

\* Can we possibly believe in documents as filled with miracles as the New Testament?

\* Claims about miracles should neither be written off as impossible nor uncritically accepted

\* They should be tested like any other historical affirmations.

\* What sets the New Testament miracles apart from accounts in many other kinds of literature is their consistent link to the arrival or inauguration of God's reign in the person of Jesus

\* Matt 12:28<sup>28</sup> *But if I cast out demons by the Spirit of God, surely the kingdom of God has come upon you.*

\* Luke 11:20<sup>20</sup> *But if I cast out demons with the finger of God, surely the kingdom of God has come upon you.*

\* Claims about similarities with other ancient miracle stories break down on careful inspection;

\* The closest parallels are all post-Christ, each too late to have influenced the NT writers.

\* Partially similar pre-Christian parallels usually cluster around gods or goddesses or heroes from some dim, mythical past and are not attached to recent people known to have lived real human lives.

\* Especially the case when one examines the resurrection of Jesus, the most spectacular and significant of the foundational Christian miracles.

\* The support for the reliability of the New Testament is exceedingly substantial and easily sustains our Christian faith.

\* No evidence however could ever be so overwhelming as to *compel* one to believe

\* **Salvation comes by Grace through Faith Alone.**