

Notes for the Ones Called-Out to Meet

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The Importance of Credible Testimony

by Dan Trygg

"Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile an account of the things accomplished among us, ² just as they were handed down to us by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and servants of the word, ³ it seemed fitting for me as well, having investigated everything carefully from the beginning, to write it out for you in consecutive order, most excellent Theophilus; ⁴ so that you may know the exact truth about the things you have been taught."

Luke 1:1-4

"Therefore, we having so great a cloud of witnesses being placed around us..."

Hebrews 12:1

"For the testimony concerning Jesus is the spirit of prophecy..."

Revelation 19:10

"The testimony of God is this, that He has testified concerning His Son. ¹⁰ The one who believes in the Son of God has the testimony in himself; the one who does not believe God has made Him a liar, because he has not believed in the testimony that God has given concerning His Son. ¹¹ And the testimony is this, that God has given us eternal life, and this life is in His Son.

¹² He who has the Son has the life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have the life."

1 John 5:9-12

We talked about the historical nature of Biblical faith. **The Bible is a record of God's working in history, as He interacted with people, and prepared to bring about His plan to redeem humankind** from the ravages of sin. Written over a period of 1500 years, by more than 40 authors, the consistent theme throughout it all is that **God has taken initiative to invite people to follow Him, so that He could work in partnership with them to bring about a blessing that would reach many people**, all over the world. He called people to Himself, ...to be a people who would trust and follow Him..., so that He could reveal His character, His grace, and His purpose to humankind. Throughout the centuries, we see that those who followed Him benefitted from His care and provision, and those who disregarded Him and His way experienced the negative consequences of their disobedience. **Through it all, He was laying down important clues regarding His plan of redemption, and information to identify the Messiah-Redeemer, when He would come.** As the angel told the apostle John, "The testimony concerning Jesus is the spirit of prophecy." It all points to Him. God communicated information to people through *centuries*, pointing to Jesus of Nazareth as the Promised One.

Of course, all of these testimonies would be of little value, if they were not tied to historical events and persons. **The testimony of a witness is only as credible as the witness.** These witnesses lived many, many years ago, on the other side of the world from us, in a very different culture. **Is there some way to evaluate the credibility of their testimony, or the reliability of their witness?** Were they real people? Do we have a record of their lives outside of the Bible? **Moreover, their testimony comes to us mostly through the writings of the Old and New Testaments. Are those documents reliable and trustworthy?** Have they been compromised through the centuries of copying and transmission? Is there some way to evaluate *their* credibility? **What about the testimony of some other sources, that present conflicting stories or accounts? Are they credible? Why, or why not?** How can we evaluate these ancient writings? What makes some sources, and their claims, more reliable than others?

These are very important considerations to take into account. **Let's focus today on the credibility of the Bible texts**, because the testimony that is conveyed through them relies upon the reliability of the accuracy of the process of transmission of the record of what was said, done, or recorded. Just out of the gate, let me state that *there are no other ancient documents that have anywhere near the quantity and quality of textual evidence and support, as what establishes the Biblical texts, especially the NT writings.* **How can we evaluate the quality of an ancient writing?**

(1.) The number of manuscripts. Before Johannes Gutenberg invented the printing press in 1436, all writings that were important enough to be preserved had to be copied by hand. Aside from some ancient writings preserved on clay tablets, or stone, **most documents were written upon scrolls made from animal skins (parchment, vellum), or sometimes a type of paper made from reeds (papyrus).** **The codex, or book form, was not invented until the time of Christ, but was not widely used until the second century.** *In fact, it was the Christians who began to prefer the use of the codex over scrolls.* Most writing was necessarily brief. *The Christian interest in reading the entire scriptures, gave them the motivation to bind writings together into a collection.* As the Christian movement spread, there was a desire for local groups to have a copy of the inspired writings within their group. In addition, because animal skins and papyrus tended to degrade with age and use, there was a need to make copies to keep a good quality text available for use by the group. Older copies were often stored away in a library, or in a private home. *There was high value placed upon the scriptures, so special care was accorded to their careful copying and preservation.* As a result, **we have an extensive number of ancient manuscripts of the NT books and letters. By contrast, other ancient writings have very few ancient manuscripts (mss.) that precede the printing press.** For example, the writings of Aristotle (384-322 BC) exist in only 49 manuscript copies; the history written by Livy (59 BC-17 A.D) survive in only 150 mss. copies; the works of Greek playwright Sophocles (497-406 BC) and the works of Plato (470-399 BC) each survive in about 200 mss. Caesar's *The Gallic War*, which was

penned about 50 BC survived through only 251 manuscript copies. What about the NT? **As of 2017, we have 5,856 partial and complete mss. copies of the NT.** Plus, the NT was translated into other languages as the gospel was brought to other countries (19,300+ mss.). **We can reconstruct what the original Greek text would have been from the translations into other languages. All combined, we have over 24,600+ mss. copies of the NT. There are also 2,400 lectionaries** (quotations of Bible passages used in church services) as well as hundreds of quotations made in the letters of early church fathers. ***Virtually the entire NT text can be reconstructed from the letters of the early church fathers in the second and third centuries. This is far more textual evidence than any other book of ancient history!*** The runner-up is Homer's epic poem, the *Iliad*, which has 1,900 mss. copies and fragments to support it.

(2.) How early are the manuscripts? A second serious consideration in evaluating the quality of an ancient writing, as far as its reliability, has to do with the time span between when the original was authored, and the earliest mss. we have. **Generally, the smaller the time span between the original and the copy, the more likely it is to be accurate.** The mss. of Caesar, Plato, and Aristotle are dated over 1,000 years after these men lived. The copy of the *Iliad* by Homer is over 600 years after he wrote. Sophocles scored the best of our sampling. The earliest mss. copy of his writing is just under 200 years after he lived. **What about the NT?** We have a portion of John's gospel, found in Egypt, that dates to 125 AD. A fragment of Mark 6 was found among the Dead Sea scrolls, and is dated to the first century. A fragment of Matthew 26 is dated to 66 AD. That is within 20 years of the original! Moreover, we have over 120 Greek mss. that date within the first three centuries. In addition, the **quotations by early church fathers** (Clement of Rome, Polycarp, Ignatius of Antioch) **were authored in the late first and early second centuries.** This is another external witness to what the text would have been. For example, Polycarp, bishop of Smyrna and disciple of the apostle John, quoted or referred to 18 of the NT books directly. Together, **the quotations of these three men demonstrate that 25 of the 27 books in our NT were already in circulation by 95 AD. Clearly, these NT writings were written by eyewitnesses, or those who lived within the lifespan of those who had been eyewitnesses of Jesus and the apostles, and were circulated in that period of time.**

By contrast, the Gnostic writings (Coptic gospels, Gospel of Thomas, Apocryphon of John, James, Apocalypse of Peter, Gospel of Judas, Gospel of Mary, Gospel of Philip, Gospel of Peter, Gospel of Marcion, etc.) **were written much later (200-400 AD), by people who were not eyewitnesses.** They present fanciful and erroneous ideas that are not consistent with the earlier teachings of the NT and early church fathers and other writings from the first century. They were written by heretical groups, promoting false ideas, projecting these ideas back upon biblical personages. They pretend to be written by apostles of Jesus to appeal to people. ***They lacked credibility and were rejected by those who held to the testimony of the NT.***

(3.) How accurate are the texts? Dr. Don Bierle of FaithSearch International refers to this as **"the distortion factor"**. The question is, "If we compare the manuscripts with each other, from the oldest to the newest, how well did they maintain accuracy?" For example, if we compare texts of the Hindu epic about the development of their religion from 400 BC to 200 AD, we find that the manuscripts display a 10.3% rate of distortion or change in the texts. In copies of Homer's *Iliad*, there is a demonstrable rate of distortion and variation between texts of 4.9%. By contrast, **99.8% of the NT is not affected by distortion.** There is less than 0.20% of change or difference between texts. There are five "problem passages" in the NT: (1.) Mark 16:9-20 is not found in the earliest mss. (2.) John 7:53-8:11 is a "floating passage". It is found in different places, and probably was not part of John's original gospel. (3.) John 5:3,4 is not in the earliest mss. (4.) Acts 8:37 is not in the earliest mss. And, (5.) 1 John 5:7, the last portion of the verse does not occur in the earliest mss. **NONE** of these passages change any doctrines, nor affect the gospel message. ***The textual accuracy of the NT is better than any other document of ancient history. We can depend on the fact that our NT is essentially unchanged from what was written by the eyewitnesses and apostolic writers from the first century.***

What About The Textual Accuracy of the Old Testament? The manuscript evidence for the Hebrew Old Testament writings is less numerous. **The Jews so highly valued the inspired text of the scriptures that, when a new copy was made, the old or worn copy was destroyed.** Like we do with an old flag, worn out or blemished copies were burned. So, before 1947, the oldest Hebrew manuscripts we had were dated to 900 AD. We know, however, that the Jews were very meticulous in their copying procedures. **Professional scribes sat in groups to make multiple copies. They would carefully write each letter, count up the letters in a verse or paragraph, and find the middle letter of a page of text, and used other techniques to check and crosscheck to make sure the scriptures were copied accurately.** Being a scribal copyist was a very high calling, and great care was taken to ensure accuracy. In 1947, a shepherd boy discovered ceramic jars containing scrolls in a cave by the Dead Sea. They have been dated from between the third century BC to the end of the first century AD. A search of nearby caves discovered over 15,000 scrolls and fragments of texts, 40% of which were copies of Biblical mss. **The Dead Sea scrolls pushed back our textual exemplars by over a thousand years. What was discovered was that the meticulous copying practices of the Hebrew scribes were amazingly accurate!** For example, in the 24 foot long, 66 chapter scroll of Isaiah, only *three letters* were different. This difference was inconsequential to the meaning. Again, ***we can depend on the accuracy of the text of our Bibles.***