IS THE NEW TESTAMENT RELIABLE?

When Johannes Gutenberg introduced movable type to Europe in the 1450's, he not only created a method that could mass produce writings relatively easily, but he also made the copying of books by hand obsolete—a method that was almost guaranteed to introduce errors into texts. That means for 1400 years or so the New Testament was highly vulnerable to corruption—both intentional and unintentional. If the New Testament is a document that records the eyewitness testimony of the life and teachings of Jesus, the accurate transmission of these documents over time is a real problem. How can we possibly know that what we now call the New Testament is in fact what was originally written? After all, we don't have the original writings.

To deal with the issue of recovering the original text of ancient writings, a discipline called textual criticism was developed. In textual criticism all the existing copies of a manuscript are compared to each other and certain techniques are then used to suggest which of the copies are the more primitive ones. For example, when a variation is found in the texts, the earlier copies are preferred to the later ones since the change was probably introduced sometime after the early copies. Also, the shorter versions of manuscripts are given more weight than longer ones. This is because the scribes who made the copies were far more likely to add to the text for clarification or comment on the passages than to subtract from the text. When faced with variations themselves, the scribes frequently put what they believed to be authentic in the main body of the text and then document the variation in the margins of the page. A third technique is to prefer the reading of the majority of the texts. And a fourth guideline is to prefer the more difficult reading, since the easier reading was likely the result of a scribe trying to fix what he saw as a problem. Each of these techniques is a general rule, not a strict standard.

The scribes copied the books in two ways. One way was for each scribe to have the book they wished to copy sitting in front of them. Then they tediously copied word for word the text of the book. The other method required someone to read aloud from the book while several scribes took dictation. This was a much faster way to produce copies but had an obvious problem. The problem was that certain words sound exactly the same, or very similar, but can be written two different ways. This is true of English as well. "To" and "too" or "here" and "hear," for instance, are indistinguishable by sound.

Because the New Testament canon was not officially recognized until late in the fourth century, the scribes probably treated what they were copying with less reverence than was given to the Old Testament. The New Testament books were treated like other valuable letters and histories until the canon was finally formed. This means the variations we find in the manuscripts were largely introduced into the texts before the fifth century.

A common misconception about the New Testament is that it was transmitted like links in a chain, each book being copied, which was then copied by someone else, which was then copied by someone else, and so on. This is often likened to the "telephone game" where one person whispers a message to another, then that person whispers it to another, and it goes around the room. By the time it reaches the last person the message is often corrupt.

But this is not how the New Testament writings were handed down. The books of apostolic origin were considered authoritative very early on and, as a result, the books were highly valued. But each church did not have each book. So when a church received a document from an apostle, they shared the book by making a number of copies to send to other churches. The recipients also made multiple copies and sent them to other churches, and so on. We even see Paul directing that his letters be shared in Colossians 4:16. As a result, the number of copies grew in an exponential way, with each copy spawning a number of copies.

Because textual criticism relies entirely on existing manuscripts, the more manuscripts we have the more accurately the original text can be recovered. Also, the older the copies we have the better the standard by which to judge the later ones. In order to understand the confidence we are able to place in the New Testament as being true to the original writings, we're going to look at some other books from ancient history.

Plato wrote his Tetralogy in the early to mid 4th century BC. The earliest oldest copy we have is from AD 900, 1300 years later. We know of only seven manuscripts.

Aristotle wrote in the mid to late 4th century BC. The most copies we have of any one work in the original language is 49. The oldest copy is dated AD 1100, 1400 years later.

Next to the New Testament, Homer's Illiad has the next greatest manuscript of all ancient writings. Homer wrote the Illiad around 900 BC. The oldest copy we have is from 400 BC—a 500 year span. The total number of manuscripts has recently topped 2200 and the readings agree about 95% of the time.

In the case of the New Testament, if we limit ourselves to only the original language manuscripts, we have over 5,600 copies, including fragments. About 100 of these are on papyri, an early form of paper. Papyrus isn't very durable and so we don't have very many of them. About 300 copies are called uncials and are written using all capital letters on vellum or animal skins. About 3000 of the copies are called minuscules and are written using cursive or lower-case letters on vellum or paper. The remaining copies come from lectionaries, which were books that collected scripture for reading during worship services.

In addition to original language manuscripts of the New Testament, there are a large number of early translations. We have about 8,000 Latin Vulgates, a Latin translation made by Jerome in the 4th century. And we have 9,300 other early versions in languages such as Coptic, Syriac, Armenian, and Nubian. If we include these in the pool of material that can be used to recover the original text of the New Testament then we have over 24,000 copies to work with – an astonishing amount by the standards of ancient writings.

The third piece of the puzzle used in recovering the text is the citations of Scripture in the writings of the early church fathers. Their writings quote the New Testament over 36,000 times and include all but 11 verses of the New Testament.

Most of these manuscripts were found in monastery libraries around the Mediterranean. Here are a few of the more important finds. The oldest complete New Testament is called Codex Sinaiticus. It was found in a monastery on Mt. Sinai in 1859 and also contains about half the Old Testament. It dates from AD 350, over 40 years before the canon was officially recognized.

Codex Vaticanus is dated AD 325 to 350 and contains almost the entire New Testament.

The oldest fragments were written on papyrus, but it was cheap and easily fell apart. We have a little over 100 fragments, half of which date from the 2nd and 3rd century. The Chester Beatty Papyrus dates to AD 180-200. One codex comprises the complete writings of Paul including Hebrews, and another collects all four gospels and Acts. A third collection of papyri contains Revelations.

The Bodmer Papyrus is a copy of most of John from AD 150 to 200. Another fragment contains the oldest known fragment of Luke.

The oldest universally accepted fragment of the New Testament was found in Egypt in 1920. It is from John's Gospel and is dated AD 125 to 130. If John wrote his gospel shortly before AD 70, then the span between writing and the copy is 60 years or so. If John wrote the book around AD 80 to 85, then the span is 50 years or less.

There are two notable copies whose dates are currently being debated. The Magdalen Papyri, also called the Jesus Papyri, is a set of five fragments that contain parts Matthew, originally dated as 3rd or 4th Century AD, have recently be dated prior to AD 70.

The other was found as a part of the Dead Sea scrolls. It has been dated between 50 BC and AD 50. The text is highly disputed because the content that is preserved on this very small fragment contains mostly common words, but a case has been made for identifying it as a fragment from Mark.

Even if we exclude the last two disputed copies from consideration, compared with other writings of the ancient world, the New Testament has an enormous amount manuscripts and an extremely short period of time between the writing and the oldest copy.

When the original language manuscripts are compared with each other, we find there are about 200,000 variants or errors in 10,000 different places. A variant is a disagreement between texts. These variants and errors can be divided into two categories: unintentional and intentional.

The vast majority of variants are unintentional and can be sorted into three categories.
Misspellings - Each time a word is misspelled at a certain point in the text, it is counted as an error. For example, if a verse has the same misspelled word in 537 copies that counts as 537 errors or variants.

Orthographical Variants - Orthographical variants refer to the way words are spelled differently in different places. The difference between the way we spell "color" in America and the way its spelled in England is an orthographical difference. Both spellings are correct, but each is preferred in a different geographical location.

Homonyms – These are errors that occurred when the reader said one word but the scribe wrote a homonym, a word that sounds the same but that has a different spelling and means something different.

The other kinds of errors found in scripture are intentional errors called interpolations. These are

deliberate changes to the text by the scribes. It was probably not the scribe's intention, however, to corrupt the text. They would sometimes try to correct what they saw as an error or to clarify or improve the text in some other way.

A good example of an intentional error is found in Mark 1:1-3:

HCSB

> The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.
> As it is **written in Isaiah the prophet**: Look, I am sending My messenger ahead of You, who will prepare Your way. Other mss add before You
> A voice of one crying out in the wilderness: "Prepare the way for the Lord; make His paths straight!"

KJV

> The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God;
> As it is **written in the prophets**,
> Behold, I send my messenger before thy face,
> which shall prepare thy way before thee.
> The voice of one crying in the wilderness,
> Prepare ye the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.

Note that the HCSB attributes the quote to the Isaiah, but the NKJV attributes the quote to "the prophets." Apparently at some point a scribe recognized the quote was not just from Isaiah 40:3 but also from Malachi 3:1 and wanted to correct the attribution. Although we don't know whether Mark did this intentionally or not, it was not unusual when quoting more than one source to only site the major one.

The difference also illustrates another principle used in recovering the original writing: prefer the more difficult reading. Between the two versions of Mark 1:1-3 it is easier to explain the difference as a correction from "Isaiah" to "the prophets" than to explain it as a corruption from "the prophets" to "Isaiah." The more difficult reading is "Isaiah," therefore it is considered to have a higher probability of being the original.

Earlier I said we had 200,000 variants or errors in 10,000 different places. This sounds like a huge problem, but really it is incredibly good news! Because of the large number of variants, we are able to confidently recover the original text to a very high degree of certainty. One way that helps is recover the text is to read the quotations of scripture in the church fathers. If their quote contains a variant, then we know in what part of the world the variant came from and the time period when it appeared. Also, in addition to over 5600 original language manuscripts, we have over 15,000 copies of early translations. And these translations preserve the errors of the copy they were translated from, which, again, is a great help for figuring out which reading was favored in different locations and when.

If the oldest occurrence of a variant is found in Augustine, for example, we would know the error was from no later than the late fourth or early fifth centuries and was known in North African copies. If a different error from the same time period is preserved by Chrysostom, we would know that the error was found in copies in the Byzantine region. And if a variant is found in Justin Martyr's writings, we know the variant was no later than the mid-second century and known to the Romans.

These features allow scholars to divide the copies into three major text types, each with their own peculiarities. The Western text type is named for the versions found around Rome. The Byzantine text type encompasses modern Turkey, Greece, and the Middle East. The Alexandrian text type is named for the copies found in North Africa.

The Alexandrian text type has the oldest manuscripts. It is the text type found in most of the papyri and dates back to the second (and possibly first) century. The vast majority of English translations, such as the HCSB, are based on the Alexandrian text type since it is considered by most experts today to be the oldest form of the New Testament.

The text type with by far the most copies is the Byzantine. These manuscripts were written on vellum, which is much more durable than papyrus. The Byzantine texts date from the ninth century onward. The King James Version is based on this text type. This accounts for the variation seen between the King James Version and almost any other major English translation.

Whether or not the Byzantine is the latest and the Alexandrian is the earliest text type is still somewhat debated. The majority opinion is that the Byzantine is a combination of the Alexandrian and Western types since it is characterized by harmonizing interpolations and smoothing out the wording. But the argument that at least some parts of the Byzantine text date just as far back as the other text types does have some good points.

As useful as these tools are, there are some parts of the New Testament where we are just not sure what the original writing said. About 400 words fall into this category and make up about forty verses. However, no essential doctrine is based on any of these verses. As a result, scholars can recover 97 to 99% of the original content of the New Testament with certainty.

As it turns out, rather than being disadvantaged by not having the original writings, we find ourselves in a position of good fortune. If we had the originals, a critic of the writings would only need to call into question one document. Instead, a critic needs to deal with over 5,600 documents that agree substantially 99.5% of the time. This ultimately carries as much or more weight than having the originals.

Because the New Testament claims to document real history one of the ways we can test for its reliability is to compare the writings with archaeological finds. Interestingly, much information about the Mediterranean world at that time that was once found only in the New Testament has now been corroborated. Titles, names of local rulers, time periods, and landmarks that were once thought to be in error or even fictional are now considered to be fact.

Some important finds include The Pilate Stone, the Gallio or Delphi inscription, the Caiaphas Ossuary (a box used to bury the bones of Caiaphas), the Sergius Paulus Inscription (documenting the existence of Paul's first convert on Cyprus), the Pool of Siloam; the Pool of Bethesda; and an inscription documenting Lysanius as the Tetrarch of Abilene (at the time John the Baptist began his ministry according to Luke).

In addition to archaeological finds, there are a number of writings from non-Christian sources that corroborate the New Testament. Some of the more important writings include Jewish Roman historian Josephus (AD 37 to 100), Roman historian Tacitus (AD 55 to117), a letter to the Emperor Trajan from Pliny the Younger, Governor of Bithynia in Asia Minor from 109-111, and Second century Greek satirist Lucian.

Just from the four non-Christian citations quoted above we learn that Jesus was a real person who lived in Palestine during the time of Tiberius and Pontius Pilate. He had a reputation for working wonders and teaching radical doctrine. He was worshiped as God. His followers met on a certain day of the week and exhibited an extreme devotion, even to the point of enduring torture and welcoming death. There was a communal culture that cared for the welfare of all believers. His followers were bound by oath to adhere to a high ethical standard.

So we see that there is no reason to think that the New Testament we use has been changed or corrupted. Using the tools of textual criticism, we can recover the original text of the New Testament with an extremely high degree of certainty. And we see that the content of the New Testament is corroborated by archaeological finds and other ancient documents. Thus, we can have confidence that what we have is what was originally written.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES:
***Apologetics Study Bible* Articles:**

How Can We Know the Bible Includes the Correct Books? by Norman L. Geisler, 724.
Is the New Testament Trustworthy? By Darrell L. Bock, 1452
Does the New Testament Misquote the Old Testament? By Paul Copan, 1408
Has Historical Criticism Proved the Bible False? By Thomas R. Schreiner, 1467
How Has Archaeology Corroborated the Bible? By Walter C. Kaiser Jr., 1148

Doug Powell, *The Holman QuickSource Guide to Christian Apologetics*
Chapter 7, Is the New Testament Reliable?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How would you answer someone who says we can't trust the New Testament because there are 200,000 errors in the original language copies?
2. What would some potential problems be if we had the original writings?
3. Given that there is 1-3% of the text we can't be certain of, would you base a doctrine a single passage of scripture?
4. Do other things that you trust your life with have a higher or lower degree of certainty than the text of the New Testament?
5. If the New Testament authors could read our Bibles, do you think they would recognize their own work?