

05-07-Jn-Truth

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INTRODUCTION

Remember Pilot's question to Jesus? "What is truth?" We showed you that the Scriptures are a truth we can live and die by. We even made the claim that the Scriptures are absolute truth. Remember what the Psalmist said?

Psalms 1:1-2 (NIV)

[1] Blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked or stand in the way of sinners or sit in the seat of mockers.

[2] But his delight is in **the law of the LORD**, and on his law he meditates day and night.

Last week I said that we can and should live by the truth of Scripture. It is the Word of God, the Bible, and it holds the truth about how we came to be, how God interacts with us, and the stand we are to take on the issues of life that we encounter each day. This proclamation was not unique with the Psalmist. You will find it throughout the Scriptures. For example, in his second letter to Timothy, Paul says it like this...

BODY

2 Timothy 3:16-17 (NIV)

[16] All Scripture is **God-breathed** and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, [17] so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.

But how can I know for sure that the Scriptures are reliable?

Last week we talked about truth. We talked about a source of truth that we could live and die by. Now it is great to think that there might be some authoritative source of truth that we might rely on as absolute truth, but how do we know for sure? There are several ways to know this, but one of the most important is the reliability of the documents we have that are the source for that truth, specifically the documents that contain the books of the New Testament. If they are not reliable, if I cannot have confidence in them, then there will always be a nagging doubt about that truth. So how reliable are the ancient documents we have of the New Testament. To answer this question we must apply the same principles that scholars apply to any ancient documents or manuscripts to determine their reliability. So let's consider several Greek documents, many of which were contemporary with the writing of the New Testament. In doing this we will answer the question, "How reliable are ancient manuscripts?" For example, we will consider,

- *The Iliad*, written by Homer, in about 800 B.C.
- *The Annals of Imperial Rome*, written by Tacitus, the Roman historian in about A.D. 116.
- *The Jewish War*, written by the historian Josephus, also in the first-century.
- *The New Testament*, by multiple authors and written in the first-century.

The answer to the question of reliability will be very important for an individual to considering if they are going to accept the ancient manuscripts of the Scriptures as truth to live and die by.

Bruce Metzger, PH.D., is professor emeritus at Princeton Theological Seminary after a forty-six-year career of teaching the New Testament. He is considered one of the world's foremost experts on ancient documents. He is chairman of the New Revised Standard Version Bible Committee. On his desk is a tin canister that contains the ashes of an RSV Bible that had been torched in a 1952 bonfire during a protest by a fundamentalist preacher who did not like the translation of the KJV rendering of the word 'fellows' changed to 'comrades' in the RSV translation, in Hebrews 1:9. The preacher thought the members of the RSV translation committee were communists because they used the word comrades.

We might chuckle about that, but it brings us face to face with an important question as we consider accepting the Scriptures as absolute authority and truth in our lives.

If all we have are copies of copies of copies, how can we have any confidence that the New Testament we have today bears any resemblance whatsoever to what was originally written? Dr. Metzger gives us some concrete answers by talking about the methods that are used to scrutinize the authenticity of all ancient documents.

1. Copies that agree with each other, especially if they emerge from different geographical areas, allow you to cross-check them to figure out what the original document was like. The only way they'd agree would be where they went back genealogically in a family tree that represents the descent of the original manuscripts. The more manuscripts you have of an ancient document the more certain you can be about the reliability of the text you have set down as the text of the original manuscript. For example, if we had fifty hand written copies of an old document, and forty-seven of them rendered a paragraph word for word, but three of the copies had a different wording, we would consider the forty-seven copies more reliable or closer to the original document. Compared to any ancient document, we have a mountain of early copies of the New Testament.
2. The age of the copies we have of an ancient manuscript tells us how close they are to the originals. The closer a copy is to the original, the more reliable it will be. The age of the copies we have of the New Testament go back to within a couple of generations from the writing of the originals. With other ancient texts we have there might be five, eight, or ten centuries elapse between the original and the earliest surviving copies.

3. Not only do we have Greek manuscripts, we also have translations of the gospels into other languages at a relatively early time -- into Latin, Syriac, and Coptic. Beyond that we have secondary translations made a little later, like Armenian, Gothic Georgian, Ethiopic; a great variety. So even if we had no Greek manuscripts today, by piecing together the information from these translations from a relatively early date, we could actually reproduce the contents of the New Testament. In addition to that, even if we lost all the Greek manuscripts and the early translations, we could still reproduce the contents of the New Testament from the multiplicity of quotations in commentaries, sermons, and the letters of the early church fathers.

But how does this compare with other well-known works of antiquity?

If great multiplicity of manuscripts is important, what do we have available to look at today?

- Tacitus, the Roman historian who wrote his *Annals of Imperial Rome* in about A.D. 116. His first six books exist today in only one manuscript, and it was copied about A.D. 850. (more than 700 years) Books eleven through sixteen are in another manuscript dating from the eleventh century. (more than a 1000 years) Books seven through ten are lost. There is a lot of time between the time that Tacitus sought his information and wrote it down and the only existing copies.
- Josephus, a first-century historian, we have nine Greek manuscripts of his work *The Jewish War*, and these copies were written in the tenth, eleventh, and twelfth centuries. There is also a Latin translation from the fourth century and medieval Russian materials from the eleventh or twelfth century
- *The New Testament*, there are more than five thousand documented manuscripts. We have copies of the New Testament that are written within 25 years of the actual events.
- The runner-up is *Homer's Iliad* which was a bible of the ancient Greeks. There are fewer than 650 Greek manuscripts of it today. It was composed about 800 B.C. and the copies we have come from the second and third century. That's about 1000 years.

Another important factor would be the reliability of the authors of ancient manuscripts. What about Homer?

From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia

ca. 8th century BC

Homer ([ancient Greek](#): Ὅμηρος, *Homēros*) is a legendary ancient Greek [epic poet](#), traditionally said to be the author of the epic poems the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. The ancient Greeks generally believed that Homer was a historical individual, but modern scholars are skeptical: no reliable biographical information has been handed down from [classical antiquity](#), and the poems themselves manifestly represent the culmination of many centuries of oral story-telling and a well-developed "formulaic" system of poetic

composition. According to [Martin West](#), "Homer" is "not the name of a historical poet, but a fictitious or constructed name."^[1] The poems are now widely regarded as the culmination of a long tradition of [orally composed poetry](#), but the way in which they reached their final written form, and the role that an individual poet, or poets, played in this process is disputed. By the reckoning of scholars like [Geoffrey Kirk](#), both poems were created by an individual genius who drew much of his material from various traditional stories. (Bruce Metzger writes, "In antiquity men memorized Homer as later they were to memorize the Scriptures. Each was held in the highest esteem and quoted in defense of arguments pertaining to heaven, earth, and Hades. Homer and the Bible served as primers from which different generations of school boys were taught to read." [Josh McDowell, Evidence That Demands a Verdict, Volume II]) Others, like Martin West, hold that the Homer epics were composed by a number of poets. [Gregory Nagy](#) maintains that the epics are not the creation of any individual; rather, they slowly evolved towards their final form over a period of centuries and, in this view, are the collective work of generations of poets. (This is very different from the New Testament. When the canon of the New Testament was formed they required a known author, and the author had to be an apostle or a direct associate with an apostle. "Basically, the early church had three criteria," he said. "First, the books must have apostolic authority — that is, they must have been written either by apostles themselves, who were eyewitnesses to what they wrote about, or by followers of apostles. So in the case of Mark and Luke, while they weren't among the twelve disciples, early tradition has it that Mark was a helper of Peter, and Luke was an associate of Paul.", [Lee Strobel, The Case for Christ])

When I first learned these facts, and as I have studied the updated information over the nearly 40 years, it has been a great confirmation of my faith in Christ. You see as a Roman Catholic growing up I learned that the Scriptures were the word of God. They were an absolute authority and truth that I could live and die by. But when I was in the Catholic Church the layman could not read the Scriptures for themselves. The priests read and interpreted the scriptures for the laity. When I first gave my life over to Christ as an adult it was in the Protestant church and I was told I could read the Word for myself. I could not find enough time to read all that I wanted to read of the Scriptures. It has been an exciting adventure these 28 years since I gave my life to Christ.

But with the possibility for every individual to read the scriptures for themselves, there also came the possibility that people would question its reliability. When I got into college, in preparation for the ministry, I came face to face with those who called the validity of Scripture into question. For the first time in my life I heard that there were those who said that the Scriptures were not reliable. This sent me on a quest to discover all of the facts I could to confirm or criticize my faith in the Scriptures as the inspired words of God. I can tell you, with every bit of confidence, that after 38 years of study, I have come to believe with the utmost confidence that the Scriptures are the inspired words of God. I do my best to live my life by them. I plan to die with confidence in them. And I stake my eternal existence on them.

Often truth in the scriptures is presented as a contrast against a falsehood or evil. John used several of these contrasts. One of them which is important in considering the Scriptures as truth, is a contrast between the Spirit of truth and the spirit of falsehood. This is very important, considering the fact that the Church teaches that the Scriptures are the inspired words of God. Listen to what John has to say...

1 John 4:1-6 (NIV)

[1] Dear friends, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world. [2] This is how you can recognize the Spirit of God: Every spirit that acknowledges that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, [3] but every spirit that does not acknowledge Jesus is not from God. This is the spirit of the antichrist, which you have heard is coming and even now is already in the world.

[4] You, dear children, are from God and have overcome them, because the one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world. [5] They are from the world and therefore speak from the viewpoint of the world, and the world listens to them.

[6] We are from God, and whoever knows God listens to us; but whoever is not from God does not listen to us. This is how we recognize the Spirit of truth and the spirit of falsehood.

Here are some important truths from this passage:

Not every voice in your head is the voice of the Holy Spirit

Then John goes on to say, this is how you test the spirits in your head.

A spirit that acknowledges that Jesus Christ (Messiah) came in the flesh is from God.

Every spirit that does not make this acknowledgement is the spirit of the antichrist who is in the world now.

The one who is in you is greater than the one in the world. Remember that we have said that when we confess and believe in Christ, His Spirit comes to live within us. That is the reference John is making here.

The world listens to them (the one in the world speaks from the viewpoint of the world) [consider the source]

There is a spirit of truth and a spirit of falsehood

CONCLUSION

Let's look at the ancient documents again.

Graphs: Time between original documents and existing copies: (# of existing copies slide)

Tacitus - 700 years / 1

Josephus - 1100 years / 9

Homer - 1000 years / 650

New Testament - 25 years / 5000+

What will it take to bring you to have the utmost confidence in the Scriptures as the inspired words of God?

If you believe that the Scriptures are the inspired words of God, what do you do with them in your weekly routine?

In my study this week I asked myself a couple of important questions. Why did so many copies of the New Testament survive? Why is there an overwhelming mountain of documents? I believe there are two reasons:

1. Because it changed the lives of the people who came into contact with it and believed it.
2. Because it was God-breathed. What you and I are looking at on that screen is a miracle.

Because the Scriptures are old we tend to think that people who lived thousands of years ago were not as smart as we are. After all, look at the advances in science and technology we have now. To think like this is to ignore two important facts.

1. The more detail we discover in science and technology, the more we realize that the facts of science being discovered today support and often prove the truth of the Scriptures more than they prove the theories of ungodly men and women.
2. We must never lose sight of the fact that the Scriptures are God-breathed.

John warned us about the real issue here. This is an issue that deals with a Spirit of truth verses a spirit of falsehood.

Let us pray...