

Has the Bible been Faithfully Preserved?

In January 2015, *Newsweek* ran a cover story entitled: “The Bible: So Misunderstood it’s a Sin.” Kurt Eichenwald, the author of this piece, argued that the Bible is nothing more than a collection of massively corrupted documents with no divine supervision or intent behind them. In a paragraph entitled, “Playing Telephone with the Word of God,” he observes the following:

No television preacher has ever read the Bible. Neither has any evangelical politician. Neither has the pope. Neither have I. And neither have you. At best, we’ve all read a bad translation—a translation of translations of translations of hand-copied copies of copies of copies of copies, and on and on, hundreds of times.¹

If this author from *Newsweek* is correct, then Christianity is in serious trouble. But is he correct? The truth is, there are many scholars working in this field of New Testament studies. In their research, many have concluded that we can know the original words of the New Testament with a high degree of certainty. What is the basis for these claims? Let’s dig a little deeper to find out.

Manuscripts, Manuscripts, and More Manuscripts.

When scholars examine ancient writings, one of the main things they are looking for is how many manuscripts are available. Why? Because the more manuscripts they have available to them, the better they are able determine the original meaning. In some cases, these scholars are limited to just a very few ancient manuscripts—like three or seven. In more rare cases, scholars have dozens, hundreds, or even thousands of manuscripts available to examine. Consider the following list for example:

- Plato (ancient Greek philosopher—4th century B.C.): 219 Manuscripts.
- Tacitus (1st century Roman historian): 31 Manuscripts.
- Suetonius (1st century Roman historian): 300 Manuscripts.
- Homer’s *Iliad* (ancient Greek drama): 2,300 Manuscripts.²

In terms of ancient manuscripts, these writers rank on the higher end of the list. Compared to ancient figures like Julius Caesar or Aristotle, there is a considerable amount of manuscript support in their favor. But, they are not at the top of the list. In fact, there’s one ancient collection of documents that typically doesn’t get recognized for its staggering manuscript support: The New Testament.

In fact, the manuscript support for the New Testament is so abundant that scholars have to break down the manuscripts by their language. Consider the following:

- Greek: 5,600 manuscripts.
- Latin: about 10,000 manuscripts.
- Other Languages (Coptic, Syriac, Gothic, and others): 10,000 manuscripts.³

¹ Kurt Eichenwald, “The Bible: So Misunderstood it’s a Sin,” *Newsweek*, December 23, 2015, <http://www.newsweek.com/2015/01/02/thats-not-what-bible-says-294018.html>.

² This chart is adapted from Jonathan Morrow, *Questioning the Bible: 11 Major Challenges to the Bible’s Authority* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2014), 96..

³ Daniel B. Wallace, “Has the New Testament Text Been Hopelessly Corrupted?” in *In Defense of the Bible: A Comprehensive Apologetic for the Authority of Scripture*, ed. Steven B. Cowan and Terry L. Wilder (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2013), 146.

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In total, we have around 20,000 handwritten manuscripts for The New Testament, giving it first rank among any ancient collection of documents in terms of manuscript support. Moreover, the manuscripts we have for The New Testament also appear much *earlier* in history than the other documents do.

For example, the earliest manuscript we have for Plato's writings comes to us from 1,300 years after it was first written.⁴ Homer's *Iliad* is better, but even its earliest copy is around 400 years after it was originally written.⁵ By contrast, the earliest New Testament manuscripts are within 100–300 years of the original. Dan Wallace points out, "If we are comparing the same period—300 years after composition—the average classical author has no literary remains at all."⁶

And yet, even with *less* and *later* manuscripts, scholars are able to say with a reasonable degree of certainty what Plato, Homer, and other ancient authors originally wrote. If this is the case for *other* ancient documents, then why wouldn't it be true for the New Testament?

If skeptical scholars are going to be consistent when they question our ability to know the original message of The New Testament, then they must question our ability to know the original message of *every other ancient writing*—for which there is much *later* and much *less* evidence. Wallace concludes:

In terms of extant manuscripts, the New Testament [scholar] is confronted with an embarrassment of riches. If we have doubts about what the [original] New Testament said, those doubts would have to be multiplied by at least a hundred-fold for the average classical author. And when we compare the New Testament manuscripts to the very best that the classical world has to offer, it still stands head and shoulders above the rest... Further, if the radical skeptics applied their principles to the rest of the Greco-Roman literature, they would thrust us back in the Dark Ages, where ignorance was anything but bliss. Their arguments only sound impressive in a vacuum.⁷

Back to the Original

All of this is significant, because the abundance of manuscripts enables New Testament scholars to get back to the original reading. This is significant, because through the centuries, sometimes copyists made slight mistakes and sometimes, the manuscripts the manuscripts we have are less than perfect—partially ripped, torn, or missing letters. The more manuscripts a document has, the better scholars are able to determine the original meaning by comparing these variant readings. We do this all the time actually.

Have you ever been the victim of auto correct? Have you ever texted back and forth with someone who apparently has bigger thumbs than the rest of us? In one way or another, we've all been either the victims or the perpetrators of very confusing text messages. Imagine you are in a text-message conversation with a friend who can't seem to get his message right, so he sends you the following three messages:

⁴ Murrow, *Questioning the Bible*, 97.

⁵ Murrow, *Questioning the Bible*, 97.

⁶ Wallace, "Has the New Testament Been Hopelessly Corrupted?" 148.

⁷ Wallace, "Has the New Testament Text Been Hopelessly Corrupted?" 151, 152.

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- Let's meet at Starbucks tomorrow near *Mane* Street
- Let's meet at Starbucks tomorrow near Main *Steer*
- Let's meet at *Starbakes* tomorrow near Main Street

When you look at these messages, there appear to be variants with the words: Main, Street, and Starbucks. In other words, there are differences across the messages with regard to these three words. But, just ask yourself: is there any confusion about what the sender of this message is trying to say? Even with three different messages containing three unique errors in them, the original message is clear: "Let's meet at Starbucks tomorrow near Main Street." How do you know this? Because you have multiple statements to compare with each other.

In the same way, scholars are able to compare the multiple copies of passages in the New Testament to determine their original meaning, even with the presence of variant readings. Consider the following example:

- I will never leav# you or forsake you
- I will never leave yo# or forsake you
- I will never leave you or f#rsake you

In each of these cases, you have a variant reading, but these variants in no way jeopardize our ability to know that the original message read, "I will never leave you or forsake you." Is this example a valid analogy to the variants in our New Testament manuscripts? Absolutely. In fact, a majority of the variants are so insignificant, the problem of the variants virtually evaporates when put under the microscope.

In over 2,000 years of historical transmission, the New Testament shows itself to be faithfully preserved with a high degree of accuracy. While only the originals are without error, the current reconstructions of the original are still incredibly reliable. How reliable? Estimates vary, but the leading textual scholars in recent decades have estimated The New Testament is presently reconstructed with 98%–99.5% accuracy.⁸

Biblical scholar, Douglas Stuart once noted, "99 percent of the original words in the New Testament are recoverable with a very high degree of certainty...we may be confident that we are able to read, reflect upon, and act upon what is practically equivalent to the original itself."⁹

For the remaining percentage that is uncertain, there is *no single doctrine or command* that is in question. The small percentage of uncertainty remains in passages like Romans 5:1 where some manuscripts read, "let us have peace with God," while others read, "we have peace with God."

In other words, there is no confusion across our manuscripts with regard to core beliefs like the virgin birth, the deity of Christ, the Trinity, or any other essential Christian doctrine. Even the atheist New Testament scholar, Bart Ehrman, acknowledges this. In his own words:

Most of the changes found in our early Christian manuscripts have nothing to do with theology or ideology. Far and away the most changes are the results of mistakes, pure and

⁸ The sources for these figures come from Norman L. Geisler and Frank Turek, *I Don't Have Enough Faith to be an Atheist* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2004), 229.

⁹ Douglas Stuart, "Inerrancy and Textual Criticism," in *Inerrancy and Common Sense*, ed. Roger R. Nicole and J. Ramsey Michaels (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980), 115, 116.

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simple—slips of the pen, accidental omissions, inadvertent additions, misspelled words, blunders of one sort or another...Essential Christian beliefs are not affected by the textual variants in the manuscript tradition of the New Testament.¹⁰

Conclusion

When it comes down to it, the short answer to our question is *yes*—the Bible has been faithfully preserved through the centuries. As scholars examine the various manuscripts, the degree of similarity is incredible—more than for any other ancient document. The Bible you read today may have been originally written thousands of years ago, but the same Bible you read today is almost identical to the one that was written originally.

In the end, perhaps an important lesson to be learned here is that we shouldn't rely on *Newsweek* as our primary source for information regarding Church History. Instead, we should do the work of reading it for ourselves. Especially given the resurgence of Christian Apologetics in our current day, the amount of good, accessible information on this subject is *incredible*. Believers today have all the information we need graciously make a defense for the hope within us (2 Timothy 2:15; 1 Peter 3:15).

¹⁰ Ehrman, *Misquoting Jesus*, 55, appendix

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Appendix 1: What about Other Gospels?

In his *Newsweek* article, Eichenwald noted that there were “many Gospels in circulation” during the time the church councils voted on how the New Testament would be assembled. If you’ve seen or read *The Davinci Code*, you may remember this same argument being made. The point of the argument is that there are other Gospels that should be in our New Testament, but that were left out to push a political agenda. And yet, once again, this is simply not the case.

First, there was no church council that decided on how the New Testament was to be assembled or which books “counted” as Scripture. Rather, the entire collection of New Testament documents were already being circulated in various communities long before a church council ever convened. These communities recognized a bulk of these documents as God’s Word for decades, even centuries before there was any church council.¹¹

As Charles Hill, an expert in this subject, observes, “At the dawn of the fourth century the four Gospels...had long been functioning as the church’s acknowledged sources for the life and teaching of Jesus.”¹² The best scholarship on this subject shows us that the certainty of four—and only four—Gospels was highly developed in the conscious of the early church prior to any council’s decisions. These councils merely *affirmed* what was already believed by the early Christian communities.

These early Christian communities believed God had spoken through Jesus Christ and His apostles and were developing their communities around the message they taught. But, they never formally met for a council because the threat of persecution was so great. Eventually, the persecution stopped because Constantine declared Christianity an accepted religion. Only then did Christian scholars begin to meet at formal councils.

At these meetings, the primary issues were not about *which books* belong in the Bible, but rather about *which doctrines* the Bible clearly taught. In other words, the New Testament was already *the assumed source of written authority* to guide and adjudicate these theological issues.

Eichenwald is correct at this point when he notes that these councils debated the deity of Christ, the Trinity, and more. But he gets it wrong when he stretches this out to say that whole communities had their own Gospels that were equally valid, but eventually exiled and persecuted by the Roman church. This is simply historical fiction.

On the contrary, there were indeed various Gospels in circulation during the first few centuries of the church, but they were never considered to be of equal status with the New Testament Gospels. *The Gospel of Thomas*, *The Gospel of Peter*, *The Gospel of Mary Magdalene*, and others, are real historical documents that scholars have known about for years.

But they’ve also known that these documents come primarily from a group in the 2nd–4th centuries known as Gnostics who believed that salvation is not found by placing one’s faith in Christ, but rather by accessing secret spiritual knowledge (Greek: *gnosis*).

These documents have become known as the “apocryphal documents.” New Testament scholar, Mark Strauss helpfully comments:

¹¹ Andreas J. Kostenberger and Michael J. Kruger, *The Heresy of Orthodoxy: How Contemporary Culture’s Fascination with Diversity Has Reshaped Our Understanding of Early Christianity* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2010), 127–175.

¹² C.E. Hill, *Who Chose the Gospels? Probing the Great Gospel Conspiracy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 227

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There are more than four ancient documents which claim to be Gospels, or which contain stories of Jesus... Yet while these writings might preserve an occasional authentic saying or story about Jesus, they are for the most part unreliable late compositions... Their greater value is in providing data concerning the first three centuries of church history, especially the second-century movement known as Gnosticism. The sensational claim that the apocryphal gospels depict the “real Jesus” but were suppressed and silenced by the orthodox church does not hold up under critical scrutiny.¹³

Charles Hill also comments:

It may be a well-guarded secret, but serious historians do not really believe that the teachings of the historical Jesus are better traced through the *Gospel of Judas*, the *Gospel of Mary*, the *Gospel of Phillip*, or even the *Gospel of Thomas* than through Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John.¹⁴

¹³ Mark Strauss, *Four Portraits, One Jesus: A Survey of Jesus and the Gospels* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007), 32.

¹⁴ *Ibid.* 234

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Appendix 2: What Happened at the Council of Nicaea?

Many have also been convinced by another argument in the *The Davinci Code* which claims that the Roman Emperor Constantine presided over the Council in order to force certain books into the Bible that would give him a political advantage over the church. Dan Brown argues:

Constantine upgraded Jesus' status almost four centuries after Jesus' death... thousands of documents already existed chronicling His life as a mortal man. To rewrite the history books Constantine knew he would need a bold stroke. From this sprang the most profound moment in Christian history... Constantine commissioned and financed a new Bible, which omitted those gospels that spoke of Christ's human traits and embellished those gospels that made him godlike. The earlier gospels were outlawed, gathered up, and burned.¹⁵

However, these claims are completely unfounded. As we've already seen, the best scholarship on the subject shows that the four Gospels we have were considered the best, most reliable sources for the life and ministry of Jesus. There were no genuine Christian communities who believed they should be reading about, preaching, or worshipping Jesus based on the information they received from other Gospels.

Moreover, while Constantine was present at the council meeting, the meeting had nothing to do with which books were to be included in the New Testament. Rather, it was to settle a theological dispute about the deity of Christ (known as the Arian controversy).¹⁶

Constantine's presence at the council was as the chief magistrate who called and assembled the council, but it was for the purposes of promoting unity amongst the Christian church. Because Rome was now dominated by the Christian religion, a severe theological division could mean more persecution and war, of which the empire had already had its fare share. History shows us he had no say in answering this question, leaving him completely out of the question concerning the deity of Christ or which books to include in the New Testament.

Rather, as we've seen, the canon of Scripture developed within the conscious of the early church as God was delivering His revelation through the ministry of the apostles.¹⁷ Nicaea didn't even address the issue of Scripture, because there was an already established belief about which documents were inspired by God. It was only later at the councils of Hippo in 393 AD and Carthage of 397AD that issued a formal statement on the books that were canonical.¹⁸

¹⁵ Dan Brown, *The Da Vinci Code* (New York: Doubleday, 2003), 234.

¹⁶ See James R. White, "What Really Happened at Nicaea?" *Christian Research Institute Online*, June 10, 2009, accessed August 13, 2015 <http://www.equip.org/article/what-really-happened-at-nicaea/>

¹⁷ White, "What Really Happened at Nicaea?"

¹⁸ Norman Geisler, "The Canonicity of the Bible" in *Systematic Theology in One Volume* (Minneapolis, Minn.: Bethany House, 2011), 383–402.