

## How Reliable is the New Testament?

By Dr. G. H. Visscher

How do we know that the book in our hands that we call the Bible is really the Word of God, an accurate reflection of what God intended to say to his people? That is a significant question that can arise for any observant reader of the New Testament, especially since the pages of the NT often have footnotes that refer to other ancient versions or manuscripts, or variant readings. The Bible did not drop out of the sky, all complete; like any other ancient book, it was passed on from human authors through human scribes to human messengers and later through human publishers. It is often correctly asserted that “we don’t have the original manuscripts on which the authors actually first wrote, the so-called *autographa*.” If these things are so, how sure indeed can we be about the accuracy of what we do have?

The answer? Very sure. Fully confident.

### Quantity of Manuscripts

While we might wish for one single perfect copy of Scripture falling out of the sky, what we actually have received is no less astounding. Whereas today we have no more than about 20 ancient copies of famous writers such as Plato, Aristotle, or Tacitus, there are about 5700 manuscripts of the New Testament, about 20,000 manuscripts from other early translations (Latin, Coptic, Syriac, etc), and over a million quotations from early church fathers. As one respected NT scholar wrote: “In comparison with the average ancient Greek author, the NT copies are well over a thousand times more plentiful. To put this another way, if the average-sized MS were two and a half inches thick, all of the copies of the average Greek author would stack up four feet high, while the copies of the NT would stack up over a *mile* high. This is ... an embarrassment of riches.”<sup>i</sup> The challenge for New Testament scholars is not that they do not have enough evidence, but they have too much and need to wade through all this material to make the best choices in those instances where there is any dispute. Meanwhile though, there is no doubt that in this vast amount of material the original reading can be found in each instance.

### Quality of Manuscripts

Also the quality of the manuscripts of the NT is considerably better than that of any other ancient manuscript. We know beyond a doubt what the NT says in 99.5 percent of the text. The variants in the other .5 % have appeared because of the challenges before the early scribes, challenges either in hearing what a lead scribe would say, in reading the writing of another, or judgement about comments made in the margins of a manuscript. The largest number of the variants is actually due to variations in spelling and word order. In seminary, future pastors are taught the techniques that can be used to determine a preferred reading regarding this small number of variants. It is also noteworthy that there is not one single point of

doctrine that rests on a manuscript problem. Again, a position of strength rather than weakness!

### **The Time Span of Manuscripts**

Also on another front, the providence of God in providing his Word is evident. With respect to other ancient manuscripts, there is usually a time gap of about 1,000 years between the actual writing of the document and any of the copies available. With biblical manuscripts, however, we are again in a much stronger position. While most NT books were written before 70 AD, many respected scholars believe that we have papyrus manuscripts which date back already to the first half of the second century – within 100 years of the first writing! The earliest, Papyrus 52 (or P<sup>52</sup>) is probably to be dated as early as 100-150 A.D.<sup>ii</sup> There are about 15 significant manuscripts that should be dated in the second century.<sup>iii</sup> This also means, by the way, that whereas in the past many have suggested that priority ought to be given to the Majority text behind, e.g., the NKJV, this Majority text should really be seen as of historical interest in the textual tradition, but not of decisive value in determining the original reading because it does not really surface until the fourth century.<sup>iv</sup>

### **The Process**

Another aspect that encourages us to acknowledge the authority of Scripture is received from a greater awareness of the process. Many would suggest that it was only after several subsequent centuries that people began to realize that these 27 books made up a New Testament alongside of an Old Testament. The evidence, again, lies elsewhere. Luke appears to be very aware that he is writing Scripture (1:2). Peter places the writings of Paul on par with that of the Old Testament (2 Peter 3:16). Paul at one point (1 Tim. 5:18) references what “Scripture says” and then quotes from Deut. 25:4 and from Luke 10:7. Paul and others write about their own writings as writings that have the authority of Scripture (1 Thess. 5: 27; 2 Cor. 10:9, Rev. 1:3). At an early point already, the NT community was reading and accepting these writings as divinely authored Scripture; this is confirmed, for example, by Justin Martyr who writes in the middle of the second century and places the apostles in one line with the prophets: “And on the day called Sunday, all who live in cities or in the country gather together to one place, and the memoirs of the apostles or the writings of the prophets are read, as long as time permits; then, when the reader has ceased, the president verbally instructs, and exhorts to the imitation of these good things” (1 Apol. 67.3). No less intriguing in all of this is the fact that even the scribes who were occupied with copying the manuscripts of gospels and letters were engaged in organized, sacred activity as they developed a significant number of capitalized abbreviations especially for well-known divine names (called “Nomina Sacra”).<sup>v</sup>

### **Providence and Inspiration**

When one adds to all these factors the inspiration of the Holy Spirit and the awareness that the providence of God also encompasses the transmission of Scripture, one does not need to doubt that what we have in our hands today is the

Word of God. Yes, God used fallible human beings; but He so directed all things that we receive His infallible Word today. Paul makes the claim that “all” or “every” Scripture “is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting, and training in righteousness . . .”(2 Tim. 3:16). And when Peter reflects on what he has received from the Lord Jesus, he boldly says “we did not follow cleverly invented stories . . . prophecy never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God, as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit” (2 Peter 1:21). The infinite God has written his church a love letter; those who love him in return can and will read and cherish it.

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<sup>i</sup> Daniel B. Wallace, “Laying a Foundation: New Testament Textual Criticism,” *Interpreting the New Testament Text: introduction to the Art and Science of Exegesis*. Edited by D.L. Bock and B. M. Fanning. (Crossway Books, 2006), 43.

<sup>ii</sup> See Wallace, p. 39 and also chapter three of Philip Comfort, *Encountering the Manuscripts: An Introduction to New Testament Paleography and Textual Criticism* (Broadman & Holman, 2005). The latter is a standard textbook for NT Text Criticism at the Canadian Reformed Theological Seminary; for the reader with interest in this area, it is an excellent introduction regarding the process of dating, copying, and circulating in the early Christian community.

<sup>iii</sup> Wallace, p. 39. This also means, by the way, that whereas in recent decades many have suggested that priority ought to be given to the Majority text behind the NKJV, this Majority text should really be seen as of historical interest in the textual tradition, but not of decisive value in determining the original reading.

<sup>iv</sup> See Daniel B. Wallace, “The Majority Text Theory: History, Methods, and Critique,” *The Text of the New Testament in Contemporary Research*. Edited by Bart D. Ehrman and Michael W. Holmes. (Eerdmans, 1995) 297-320.

<sup>v</sup> See chapter four of P. Comfort’s text referenced above for a fascinating discussion of this practice.