There are many great apologetic books that you could leave with students if only they would read them. But they probably won’t. They might, however, skim through a magazine. So we compiled the most convincing apologetics for the existence of God and the best evidence for Jesus into two highly graphic magazines and had the designers of Relevant magazine make it look really cool.

Y-Origins deals with proofs for the existence of God ranging from arguments from Intelligent Design to the nature of man (mind, aesthetics, morality, etc.).


ORDER ONLINE AT CRUPRESS.COM
In July 2000 ABC News anchor Peter Jennings was in Israel broadcasting a television special on Jesus Christ. His program, “The Search for Jesus,” explored the question of whether the Jesus of the New Testament was historically accurate. Jennings featured opinions on the Gospel accounts from DePaul professor John Dominic Crossan, three of Crossan’s colleagues from the Jesus Seminar, and two other Bible scholars. (The Jesus Seminar is a group of scholars who debate Jesus’ recorded words and actions and then use red, pink, gray, or black beads to cast votes indicating how trustworthy they believe statements in the Gospels are.)

Some of the comments were stunning. There on national TV Dr. Crossan not only cast doubt on more than 80 percent of Jesus’ sayings but also denied Jesus’ claims to divinity, his miracles, and his resurrection. Jennings clearly was intrigued by the image of Jesus presented by Crossan.

While Jennings may have an undiscerning eye when it comes to theology, he knows what makes for a good news program. And searching for true Bible history is always news, which is why every year Time and Newsweek go on a cover story quest for Mary, Jesus, Moses, or Abraham. Or—who knows?—maybe this year it will be “Bob: The Untold Story of the Missing 13th Disciple.”
A serious investigation of the issues related to the historical Jesus cannot be conducted through sound-bite analysis. And we’re prepared to admit that neither is a magazine article. Yet, these summaries are sufficient to show we can only summarize scholars’ conclusions.

A serious investigation of the issues related to the historical Jesus cannot be conducted through sound-bite analysis. Instead, sound bites about Jesus frequently throw together like an episode of Survivor, hopelessly convoluting the issue rather than bringing clarity.

But Jennings’s report did focus on one issue that ought to be given some serious thought. Crossan implied that the original accounts of Jesus were embellished by oral tradition and were not written down until after the apostles were dead. Thus they are largely unreliable and fail to give us an accurate picture of the real Jesus. How are we to know if this is really true?

A serious investigation of the issues related to the historical Jesus cannot be conducted through sound-bite analysis. In this magazine we have tried to go beyond the sound bites and examine the evidence. But we’re prepared to admit that a magazine article can only summarize scholars’ conclusions. Yet, these summaries are sufficient to show that sound bites about Jesus frequently do more to distort historical truth than enlighten. There actually is considerable scholarly consensus regarding the Jesus of the New Testament.

LOST IN TRANSLATION

So, what does the evidence show? We begin with two simple questions: When were the original documents of the New Testament written? And who wrote them?

The importance of these questions should be obvious. If the accounts of Jesus were written after the eyewitnesses were dead, no one could verify their accuracy. But if the New Testament accounts were written while the original apostles were still alive, then their authenticity could be established. Peter could say of a forgery in his letter, “Hey, I didn’t write that.” And Matthew, Mark, Luke, or John could respond to questions or challenges aimed at their accounts of Jesus.

The New Testament writers claimed to be rendering eyewitness accounts of Jesus. The apostle Peter stated it this way in one letter: “We were not making up clever stories when we told you about the power of our Lord Jesus Christ and his coming again. We have seen his majestic splendor with our own eyes” (2 Peter 1:16).

A major part of the New Testament is the apostle Paul’s 13 letters to young churches and individuals. Paul’s letters, dated between the mid 40s and the mid 60s (12 to 33 years after Christ), constitute the earliest witnesses to Jesus’ life and teaching. Will Durant wrote of the historical importance of Paul’s letters, “The Christian evidence for Christ begins with the letters ascribed to Saint Paul. … No one has questioned the existence of Paul, or his repeated meetings with Peter, James, and John; and Paul explicitly admits that these men had known Christ in the flesh.”

BUT IS IT TRUE?

In books, magazines, and TV documentaries, the Jesus Seminar suggests the Gospels were written as late as a.d. 130 to 150 by unknown authors. If those later dates are correct, there would be a gap of approximately 100 years from Christ’s death (scholars put Jesus’ death between a.d. 30 and 33). And since all the eyewitnesses would have been dead, the Gospels could only have been written by unknown, fraudulent authors.

So, what evidence do we have concerning when the Gospel accounts of Jesus were really written? The consensus of most scholars is that the Gospels were written by the apostles during the first century. They cite several reasons that we will review later in this article. For now, however, note that these primary forms of evidence appear to build a solid case for their conclusions:

• numerous writings of early Christian sources, such as Clement of Rome, Ignatius, and Polycarp
• discovered copies of Gospel fragments carbon-dated as early as a.d. 117

A.D. New Testament
59 a.c.—a.d. 17
Paul—4th cent.
most—10th cent.
50–100 fragment—c. 114
books—c. 200
complete—c. 325
5, 366

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>AUTHOR</th>
<th>BOOK</th>
<th>WRITTEN</th>
<th>EARLIEST COPIES</th>
<th>GAP FROM ORIGINAL</th>
<th>NUMBER OF COPIES</th>
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<tr>
<td>Homer</td>
<td>Iliad 800 b.c.</td>
<td>c.430 b.c.</td>
<td>400 yrs.</td>
<td>643</td>
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<tr>
<td>Herodotus</td>
<td>History 480–425 b.c.</td>
<td>c.500 a.d.</td>
<td>1,350 yrs.</td>
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<td>Thucydides</td>
<td>History 460–400 b.c.</td>
<td>c.500 a.d.</td>
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<td>Plato</td>
<td>400 a.d.</td>
<td>c.500 a.d.</td>
<td>1,300 yrs.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Demosthenes</td>
<td>300 a.c.</td>
<td>c.1100 a.d.</td>
<td>1,400 yrs.</td>
<td>260</td>
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<tr>
<td>Caesar</td>
<td>Gallic Wars 100–44 a.c.</td>
<td>c.500 a.d.</td>
<td>1,000 yrs.</td>
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<td>Pliny Secundus</td>
<td>Natural History a.d. 61–113</td>
<td>c.650 a.d.</td>
<td>750 yrs.</td>
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<tr>
<td>New Testament</td>
<td>a.d. 50–100</td>
<td>fragment—c.114</td>
<td>+ 50 yrs.</td>
<td>5,368</td>
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The notoriously skeptical scholar John A. T. Robinson dates the New Testament earlier than even most conservative scholars.

In Redating the New Testament Robinson asserts that most of the New Testament was written between a.d. 40 and 65. That puts its writing as early as seven years after Christ lived. If that is true, any historical errors would have been immediately exposed by both eyewitnesses and the enemies of Christianity.

So let’s look at the trail of clues that takes us from the original documents to our New Testament copies today.

WHO NEEDS KINKO’S?

The original writings of the apostles were revered. Churches studied them, shared them, carefully preserved them and stored them away like buried treasure.

But, alas, Roman confiscations, the passage of 2,000 years, and the second law of thermodynamics have taken their toll. So, today, what do we have of those original writings? Nothing. The original manuscripts are all gone (though each week Bible scholars, no doubt, tune in to Antiques Roadshow hoping one might emerge).

Yet the New Testament is not alone in this fate; no other comparable document from ancient history exists today either. Historians aren’t troubled by the lack of original manuscripts if they have reliable copies to examine. But are there ancient copies of the New Testament available, and if so, are they faithful to the originals?

As the number of churches multiplied, hundreds of copies were carefully made under the supervision of church leaders. Every letter was meticulously penned in ink on parchment or papyrus. And so, today, scholars can study the surviving copies (and the copies of copies, and the copies of copies of copies—you get it), to determine authenticity and arrive at a very close approximation of the original documents.

In fact, scholars studying ancient literature have devised the science of textual criticism to examine documents such as The Odyssey, comparing them with other ancient documents to determine their accuracy. More recently, military historian Charles Sanders Sanders augmented textual criticism by devising a three-part test that looks at not only the fairness of the copying but the credibility of the authors. His tests are these:

1. The bibliographical test
2. The internal evidence test
3. The external evidence test

Let’s see what happens when we apply these tests to the early New Testament manuscripts.

“Luke is a historian of the first rank…. This author should be placed along with the very greatest historians… Luke’s history is unsurpassed in trustworthiness.”

Sir William Ramsey, Archaeologist

BIBLIOGRAPHICAL TEST

This test compares a document with other ancient history from the same period. It asks:

- How many copies of the original document are in existence?
- How large of a time gap is there between the original writings and the earliest copies?
- How well does a document compare with other ancient history?

Imagine if we had only two or three copies of the original New Testament manuscripts. The sampling would be so small that we couldn’t possibly verify accuracy.

On the other hand, if we had hundreds or even thousands, we could easily weed out the errors of poorly transmitted documents.

Not only is the number of manuscripts significant, but so is the time gap between when the original was written and the date of the copy.

When counting translations into other languages, the names is the staggering 24,000—dating from the 2ND to 4TH centuries. Compare that with the second-best-document-est ancient historical manuscript, Homer’s Iliad, with 643 copies. And remember that most ancient historical works have far fewer existing manuscripts than that one does (usually fewer than 10). New Testament scholar Bruce Metzger remarked, “In contrast with these figures [of other ancient manuscripts], the textual critics of the New Testament is embarrassed by the wealth of his material.”

TIME GAP

Not only is the number of manuscripts significant, but so is the time gap between when the original was written and the date of the copy. Over the course of a thousand years of copying, there’s no telling what a text could evolve into—I wonder what Jesus meant by “blessed are the cheesemakers.” But over a hundred years, that’s a different story.

German critic Ferdinand Christian Baur (1792–1860) once contended that John’s Gospel was not written until about a.d. 160.
Biblical archaeologist William Albright concluded on the basis of his research that all the New Testament books were written while most of the apostles were still alive. He wrote, “We can already say emphatically that there is no longer any solid basis for dating any book after about A.D. 90; two full generations before the date of between A.D. 130 and 150 given by the more radical New Testament critics of today.” Elsewhere Albright put the writing of the entire New Testament at “very probably sometime between about 90 A.D. and 75 A.D.”

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4. The time gap test

In 1844 the German scholar Constantine Tischendorf was searching for New Testament manuscripts in the library of the monastery of St. Catherine at Mount Sinai. The German scholar with both a kind and locked heart had never seen Greek manuscripts before, Tic. The scholar asked the librarian about them and was horrified to learn that the pages had been discarded to be used as fuel. Two basketloads of such papers had already been burned!

Tischendorf’s enthusiasm made the monks wary, and they would not allow him any more manuscripts. However, they did allow Tischendorf to take the 43 pages he had discovered. Fifteen years later, Tischendorf returned to the Sinai monastery, this time with Napoleon the Great and Alexander I. Once his heart was filled with manuscripts, he asked a monk to conduct his own search-paleograph and examined the remaining portions of the manuscripts he had already been burned.

Codex Sinaiticus is one of the earlier complete manuscripts of the New Testament at hand, and it is among the most important. Some speculate that it is one of the 50 Bibles the emperor Constantine gave to Ethiopia as protector of the Greek Church. In 1933 the Soviet Union sold the manuscript to the British Museum for £100,000.

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In fact, there is a nearly complete copy of the Bible called, Codex Vaticanus, that was written only about 250 to 300 years after the apostles’ original writing. The oldest known complete copy of the New Testament in ancient uncial script is named, Codex Sinaiticus, now housed at the British Museum. Like Codex Vaticanus, it is dated from the fourth century. Vaticanus and Sinaiticus, going back to early in Christian history, are like other early biblical manuscripts in that they differ minimally from each other and give us a very good picture of what the original documents must have said.

Even critical scholar John A. T. Robinson has admitted, “The wealth of manuscripts, and above all the narrow interval of time between the writing and the earliest extant copies, make it by far the best attested text of any ancient writing in the world.”

Professor of law John Warwick Montgomery affirmed, “To be skeptical of the resultant text of the New Testament books is to allow all of classical antiquity to slip into obscurity, for no documents of the ancient period have been confirmed by Archaeological Details. Historians love details in a document because they make it easy to verify reliability. Paul’s letters are filled with details. And the Gospels abound with them. For example, both Luke’s Gospel and his Book of Acts were written to a nobleman named Theophilus, who was undoubtedly a well-known individual at the time. If these writings had been mass inventions of the apostles, phony names, places, and events would have quickly been spotted by their enemies, the Jewish and Roman leaders. This would have become the Watergate of the first century. Yet many of the New Testament details have been proved true by independent verification. Classical historian Colin Hemer, for example, “identifies 84 facts in the last 16 chapters of Acts that have been confirmed by Archaeological research.”

In the previous few centuries, skeptical Bible scholars attacked both Luke’s authorship and its dating, asserting that it was written in the second century by an unknown author. Archaeologist Sir William Ramsey was convinced they were right, and he began to investigate. After extensive research, the archaeologist reversed his opinion. Ramsey conceded, “Luke is a historian of the first rank… This author should be placed along with the very greatest historians. … Luke’s history is unsurpassed in respect of its trustworthiness.”
The point is this: If the New Testament records were made and circulated so closely to the actual events, their portrayal of Jesus is most likely accurate. But external evidence is not the only way to answer the question of reliability; scholars also use internal evidence to answer this question.

INTERNAL EVIDENCE TEST

Like good detectives, historians verify reliability by looking at internal clues. Such clues-some motives of the authors and their willingness to disclose details and other features that could be verified. The key internal clues these scholars use to test for reliability are the following:

- consistency of eyewitness reports
- details of names, places, and events
- letters to individuals or small groups
- traits embarrassing to the authors
- the presence of irrelevant or counterproductive material
- lack of relevant material

Let’s take as an example the movie Friday Night Lights. It purports to be based on historical events, but like so many movies loosely based on actual events, it leaves you constantly questioning. Did things really happen that way? So, how would you determine its historical reliability?

One clue would be the presence of internal event material. Let’s say that in the middle of the film, the coach, for no apparent reason, gets a phone call informing him that his mother has brain cancer. The event has nothing to do with the plot and is never mentioned again. The only explanation for the presence of this irrelevant fact would be that it actually happened and that the director had a desire to be historically accurate.

Another example, same movie. Following the flow of the drama, we want the Permian Panthers to win the state championship. But they don’t. This feels counterproductive to the drama, and immediately we know it’s there because in real life Permian lost the game. The presence of counterproductive material is also a clue to historical accuracy.

Finally, the use of actual towns and familiar landmarks such as the Houston Astrodome leads us to take as history those elements of the story, because they’re too easy to corroborate or falsify.

These are but a few examples of how internal evidence leads either toward or away from the conclusion that a document is historically reliable. We’ll look briefly at the internal evidence for the historicity of the New Testament.

WHAT’S IN THERE

Several aspects of the New Testament help us determine its reliability based on its own content and qualities.

Consistency. Plurality documents either leave out eyewitness reports or are inconsistent. Phony documents either leave relevant material or are too consistent. Too much consistency is suspicious of collusion. It would be like conspirators trying to agree on every detail said exactly the same thing, it would raise suspicions of collusion. It would be like co-conspirators trying to agree on every detail of their scheme. Too much consistency is as doubtful as too little.

Eyewitnesses to a crime or an accident generally get the big events right but see it from different perspectives. Likewise, the four Gospels describe the events of Jesus’ life from different perspectives. Yet, regardless of these perspectives, Bible scholars are amazed at the consistency of their accounts and the clear picture of Jesus and his teaching they put together with their complementary reports.
Acts chronicles Paul’s missionary voyages, listing places he visited, people he saw, messages he delivered, and persecution he suffered. Could all these details have been fabricated? Roman historian A. N. Sherwin-White wrote, “For Acts the confirmation of historicity is overwhelming. Any attempt to reject its basic historicity must now appear absurd. Roman historians have long taken it for granted.”

From the Gospel accounts to Paul’s letters, the New Testament authors openly described details, even citing the names of individuals who were alive at the time. Historians have verified at least thirty of these names.

Letters to small groups. Most forged texts are from documents both general and public in nature, like this magazine article (no doubt countless forgeries are already circulating on the black market). Historical expert Louis Gottschalk notes that personal letters intended for small audiences have a high probability of being reliable.19 Which category do the New Testament documents fall into?

Embarrassing features. Most writers don’t want to publicly embarrass themselves. Historians have therefore observed that documents containing embarrassing revelations about the authors are generally to be trusted. What did the New Testament authors say about themselves?

Surprisingly, the authors of the New Testament presented themselves as all too humanly dismayed, cowardly, and fault-ridden. For example, consider Peter’s thorough denial of Jesus or the disciples’ arguments over which of them was the greatest—both stories recorded in the Gospels. As suspect as the apostles were in the early church, inclusion of this kind of material doesn’t make sense unless the apostles were reporting truthfully.

In The Story of Civilization, Will Durant wrote about the apostles, “These men were hardly of the type that one would have chosen to tell the world. The Gospels realtationally differentiate their characters, and honestly expose their faults.”20

Well, some of them were clearly intended to be circulated widely. Yet large portions of the New Testament consist of personal letters written to small groups and individuals. These documents, at least, would not be considered prime candidates for falsification.

Counterproductive or irrelevant material. The Gospels tell us that the empty tomb of Jesus was discovered by a woman, even though in Israel the testimony of women was considered to be virtually worthless and was not even admissible in court. Jesus’ mother and family are recorded as stating their belief that he had lost his mind. Some of Jesus’ final words on the cross are said to have been “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” And so goes the list of incidents recorded in the New Testament that are counterproductive if the intent of the author were anything but the accurate transmission of the life and teachings of Jesus Christ.

Lack of relevant material. It is ironic (or perhaps logical) that few of the major issues facing the first-century church—the Gentile mission, spiritual gifts, baptism, leadership—were addressed directly in the recorded words of Jesus. If his followers were simply generating the material to encourage the growing church, it is inexplicable why they would not have made up instructions from Jesus on these issues. In one case, the apostle Paul flabbily stated about a certain subject, “On this we have no teaching from the Lord.”

EXTERNAL EVIDENCE TEST

The third and final measure of a document’s reliability is the external evidence test, which asks, “Do historical records outside the New Testament confirm its reliability?” So, what did non-Christian historians say about Jesus Christ?

“All over, at least seventeen non-Christian writings record more than fifty details concerning the life, teachings, death, and resurrection of Jesus, plus details concerning the early church.”21 This is astounding, considering the lack of other history we possess from this time period. Jesus is mentioned by more sources than the conquests of Caesar during this same period. It is even more astounding since these confirmations of New Testament details date from 20 to 150 years after Christ, “quite early by the standards of ancient historiography.”22

The reliability of the New Testament is further substantiated by over 36,000 extra-biblical Christian documents (sources from church fathers of the first three centuries) dating as early as ten years after the last writing of the New Testament23. If all the copies of the New Testament were lost, you could reproduce it from these other letters and documents with the exception of a few verses.24

Boston University professor emeritus Howard Clark Kee concludes, “The result of the examination of the sources outside the New Testament that bear … on our knowledge of Jesus is to confirm his historical existence, his unusual powers, the doctum of his followers, the continued existence of the movement after his death … and the penetration of Christianity … in Rome itself by the later first century.”25

The external evidence test thus builds on the evidence provided by other tests. In spite of the conjecture of a few radical skeptics, the New Testament portrait of the real Jesus Christ is virtually smudgeproof. Although there are a few dissection such as the Jesus Seminar, the consensus of experts—regardless of their religious beliefs—confirms that the New Testament we read today faithfully represents both the words and events of Jesus’ life.

Clark Pinnock, professor of interpretations at McMaster Divinity College, summed it up well when he said, “There exists no document from the ancient world witnessed by so excellent a set of textual and historical testimonies. … An honest [person] cannot dismiss a source of this kind. Skepticism regarding the historical credentials of Christianity is based upon an irrational basis.”26

ENDNOTES

1 According to jesusseminar.org, “The Jesus Seminar was organized under the auspices of the Wartburg Institute to review the quest of the historical Jesus. At the close of debate on each agenda item, Fellows of the Seminar vote, using colored beads to indicate the degree of authenticity of Jesus’ words or deeds.”


6 McDowell, 33-68.

7 McDowell, 34.


9 McDowell, 38.

10 Metzger, 39.

11 Metzger, 36-41.


13 Quoted in McDowell, 36.


15 Quoted in Geisler and Turek, 266.

16 Quoted in McDowell, 61.

17 Quoted in McDowell, 64.

18 Geisler and Turek, 269.

19 J. P. Moreland, 136-137.

20 Geisler and Turek, 276.

21 Durant, 563.


23 ibid.

24 ibid.

25 Metzger, 96.

26 Quoted in McDowell, 135.

Well, some of them were clearly intended to be circulated widely. Yet large portions of the New Testament consist of personal letters written to small groups and individuals. These documents, at least, would not be considered prime candidates for falsification. Counterproductive or irrelevant material. The Gospels tell us that the empty tomb of Jesus was discovered by a woman, even though in Israel the testimony of women was considered to be virtually worthless and was not even admissible in court. Jesus’ mother and family are recorded as stating their belief that he had lost his mind. Some of Jesus’ final words on the cross are said to have been “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” And so goes the list of incidents recorded in the New Testament that are counterproductive if the intent of the author were anything but the accurate transmission of the life and teachings of Jesus Christ.

Embarrassing features. Most writers don’t want to publicly embarrass themselves. Historians have therefore observed that documents containing embarrassing revelations about the authors are generally to be treated. What did the New Testament authors say about themselves? Surprisingly, the authors of the New Testament presented themselves as all too frequently disommited, cowardly, and faithless. For example, consider Peter’s thrustful denial of Jesus or the disciples’ arguments over which of them was the greatest—both stories recorded in the Gospels. As suspect for the apostles was crucial in the early church, inclusion of this kind of material doesn’t make sense unless the apostles were reporting truthfully.

In The Story of Civilization, Will Durant wrote about the apostles, “These men were hardly of the type that one would have chosen to remodel the world. The Gospels realistically differentiate their characters, and honestly expose their faults.”

The third and final measure of a document’s reliability is the external evidence test, which asks, “Do historical records outside the New Testament confirm its reliability?” So, what did non-Christian historians say about Jesus Christ?

The external evidence test thus builds on the evidence provided by other tests. In spite of the conjecture of a few radical skeptics, the New Testament portrait of the real Jesus Christ is virtually unassailable.

Although there are a few dissension among the Jesus Seminar, the consensus of experts, regardless of their religious beliefs, confirms that the New Testament we read today faithfully represents both the words and events of Jesus’ life.

Clark Pinnock, professor of interpretations at McMaster Divinity College, summed it up well when he said, “These exist no document from the ancient world witnessed by so excellent a set of textual standards of ancient historiography.”

The reliability of the New Testament is further substantiated by over 36,000 extrabiblical Christian documents (quotes from church leaders of the first three centuries) dating as early as ten years after the last writing of the New Testament. If all the copies of the New Testament were lost, you could reproduce it from these other letters and documents with the exception of a few verses.

ENDNOTES

1 According to jesusseminar.org, “The Jesus Seminar was organized under the auspices of the Walter Inew Institute to renew the quest of the historical Jesus. At the close of debate on each agenda item, Follows of the Seminar vote, using colored beads to indicate the degree of authenticity of Jesus’ words or deeds.”


5 Jesus is men¬tioned more than sixty times by the early church.”22 This is astounding, considering the lack of other history we possess from this time period. Jesus is men¬tioned by more sources than the conquests of Caesar during this same period. It is even more astounding since these confirmations of New Testament details date from 20 to 150 years after Christ, “quite early by the standards of ancient historiography.”

6 The New Testament’s reliability is the external evidence test. At the close of a quest of the historical Jesus. At the close of debate on each agenda item, Follows of the Seminar vote, using colored beads to indicate the degree of authenticity of Jesus’ words or deeds.”

7 McDowell, 39.

8 Metzger, 37.


10 McDowell, 36.

11 McDowell, 36.

12 McDowell, 61.

13 McDowell, 64.

14 Geisler and Turek, 269.


16 Ibid.

17 Ibid.

18 McDowell, 38.

19 McDowell, 36-41.

20 Geisler and Turek, 276.

21 Durant, 653.


23 Ibid.


