ARE THE BIBLICAL DOCUMENTS RELIABLE? • Jimmy Williams

Introduction
How do we know that the Bible we have today is even close to the original? Haven’t copiers down through the centuries inserted and deleted and embellished the documents so that the original message of the Bible has been obscured? These questions are frequently asked to discredit the sources of information from which the Christian faith has come to us.

Three Errors To Avoid
1. Do not assume inspiration or infallibility of the documents, with the intent of attempting to prove the inspiration or infallibility of the documents. Do not say the Bible is inspired or infallible, simply because it claims to be. This is circular reasoning.
2. When considering the original documents, forget about the present form of your Bible and regard them as the collection of ancient source documents that they are.
3. Do not start with modern “authorities” and then move to the documents to see if the authorities were right. Begin with the documents themselves.

Procedure for Testing a Document’s Validity
In his book, Introduction in Research in English Literary History, C. Sanders sets forth three tests of reliability employed in general historiography and literary criticism. These tests are:

1. Bibliographical (i.e., the textual tradition from the original document to the copies and manuscripts of that document we possess today).
2. Internal evidence (what the document claims for itself)
3. External evidence (how the document squares or aligns itself with facts, dates, persons from its own contemporary world).

It might be noteworthy to mention that Sanders is a professor of military history, not a theologian. He uses these three tests of reliability in his own study of historical military events.

We will look now at the bibliographical, or textual evidence for the Bible’s reliability.

The Old Testament
For both Old and New Testaments, the crucial question is: “Not having any original copies or scraps of the Bible, can we reconstruct them well enough from the oldest manuscript evidence we do have, so they give us a true, undistorted view of actual people, places, and events?”

The Scribe
The scribe was considered a professional person in antiquity. No printing presses existed, so people were trained to copy documents. The task was usually undertaken by a devout Jew. The Scribes believed they were dealing with the very Word of God and were therefore extremely careful in copying. They did not just hastily write things down. The earliest complete copy of the Hebrew Old Testament dates from c. 900 A.D.
The Massoretic Text
During the early part of the tenth century (916 A.D.), there was a group of Jews called the Massoretes. These Jews were meticulous in their copying. The texts they had were all in capital letters, and there was no punctuation or paragraphs. The Massoretes would copy Isaiah, for example, and when they were through, they would total up the number of letters. Then they would find the middle letter of the book. If it was not the same, they made a new copy. All of the present copies of the Hebrew text which come from this period are in remarkable agreement. Comparisons of the Massoretic text with earlier Latin and Greek versions have also revealed careful copying and little deviation during the thousand years from 100 B.C. to 900 A.D. But until this century, there was scant material written in Hebrew from antiquity which could be compared to the Masoretic texts of the tenth century A.D.

The Dead Sea Scrolls
In 1947, a young Bedouin goat herdsman found some strange clay jars in caves near the valley of the Dead Sea. Inside the jars were some leather scrolls. The discovery of these “Dead Sea Scrolls” at Qumran has been hailed as the outstanding archeological discovery of the twentieth century. The scrolls have revealed that a commune of monastic farmers flourished in the valley from 150 B.C. to 70 A.D. It is believed that when they saw the Romans invade the land they put their cherished leather scrolls in the jars and hid them in the caves on the cliffs northwest of the Dead Sea.

The Dead Sea Scrolls include a complete copy of the Book of Isaiah, a fragmented copy of Isaiah, and fragments of almost every book in the Old Testament. The majority of the fragments are from Isaiah and the Pentateuch (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy). The books of Samuel, in a tattered copy, were also found and also two complete chapters of the book of Habakkuk. In addition, there were a number of non-biblical scrolls related to the commune found.

These materials are dated around 100 B.C. The significance of the find, and particularly the copy of Isaiah, was recognized by Merrill F. Unger when he said, “This complete document of Isaiah quite understandably created a sensation since it was the first major Biblical manuscript of great antiquity ever to be recovered. Interest in it was especially keen since it antedates by more than a thousand years the oldest Hebrew texts preserved in the Masoretic tradition.”

The supreme value of these Qumran documents lies in the ability of biblical scholars to compare them with the Massoretic Hebrew texts of the tenth century A.D. If, upon examination, there were little or no textual changes in those Massoretic texts where comparisons were possible, an assumption could then be made that the Massoretic Scribes had probably been just as faithful in their copying of the other biblical texts which could not be compared with the Qumran material.

What was learned? A comparison of the Qumran manuscript of Isaiah with the Massoretic text revealed them to be extremely close in accuracy to each other: “A comparison of Isaiah 53 shows that only 17 letters differ from the Massoretic text. Ten of these are mere differences in spelling (like our “honor” and the English “honour”) and produce no change in the meaning at all. Four more are very minor differences, such as the presence of a conjunction (and) which are stylistic rather than substantive. The other three letters are the Hebrew word for “light.” This word was added to the text by someone after “they shall see” in verse 11. Out of 166 words in this chapter, only this one word is really in question, and it does not at all change the meaning of the passage. We are told by biblical scholars that this is typical of the whole manuscript of Isaiah.”

The Septuagint
The Greek translation of the Old Testament, called the Septuagint, also confirms the accuracy of the copyists who ultimately gave us the Massoretic text. The Septuagint is often referred to as the LXX because it was reputedly done by seventy Jewish scholars in Alexandria around 200 B.C. The LXX appears to be a rather literal translation from the Hebrew, and the manuscripts we have are pretty good copies of the original translation.
Conclusion
In his book, Can I Trust My Bible, R. Laird Harris concluded, “We can now be sure that copyists worked with great care and accuracy on the Old Testament, even back to 225 B.C. Indeed, it would be rash skepticism that would now deny that we have our Old Testament in a form very close to that used by Ezra when he taught the world of the Lord to those who had returned from the Babylonian captivity.”

The New Testament
The Greek Manuscript Evidence
There are more than 4,000 different ancient Greek manuscripts containing all, or portions, of the New Testament that have survived to our time. These are written on different materials.

Papyrus and Parchment
During the early Christian era, the writing material most commonly used was papyrus. This highly durable reed from the Nile Valley was glued together much like plywood and then allowed to dry in the sun. In the twentieth century many remains of documents (both biblical and non-biblical) on papyrus have been discovered, especially in the dry, arid lands of North Africa and the Middle East.

Another material used was parchment. This was made from the skin of sheep or goats, and was in wide use until the late Middle Ages when paper began to replace it. It was scarce and more expensive; hence, it was used almost exclusively for important documents.

Examples
1. Codex Vaticanus and Codex Sinaiticus
These are two excellent parchment copies of the entire New Testament which date from the 4th century (325-450 A.D.).

2. Older Papyrii
Earlier still, fragments and papyrus copies of portions of the New Testament date from 100 to 200 years (180-225 A.D.) before Vaticanus and Sinaticus. The outstanding ones are the Chester Beatty Papyrus (P45, P46, P47) and the Bodmer Papyrus II, XIV, XV (P46, P75).

From these five manuscripts alone, we can construct all of Luke, John, Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, 1 and 2 Thessalonians, Hebrews, and portions of Matthew, Mark, Acts, and Revelation. Only the Pastoral Epistles (Titus, 1 and 2 Timothy) and the General Epistles (James, 1 and 2 Peter, and 1, 2, and 3 John) and Philemon are excluded.

3. Oldest Fragment
Perhaps the earliest piece of Scripture surviving is a fragment of a papyrus codex containing John 18:31-33 and 37. It is called the Rylands Papyrus (P52) and dates from 130 A.D., having been found in Egypt. The Rylands Papyrus has forced the critics to place the fourth gospel back into the first century, abandoning their earlier assertion that it could not have been written then by the Apostle John.

4. This manuscript evidence creates a bridge of extant papyrus and parchment fragments and copies of the New Testament stretching back to almost the end of the first century.

Versions (Translations)
In addition to the actual Greek manuscripts, there are more than 1,000 copies and fragments of the New Testament in Syrian, Coptic, Armenian, Gothic, and Ethiopic, as well as 8,000 copies of the Latin Vulgate, some of which date back almost to Jerome’s original translation in 384-400 A.D.

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Church Fathers

A further witness to the New Testament text is sourced in the thousands of quotations found throughout the writings of the Church Fathers (the early Christian clergy [100-450 A.D.] who followed the Apostles and gave leadership to the fledgling church, beginning with Clement of Rome [96 A.D.]).

It has been observed that if all of the New Testament manuscripts and Versions mentioned above were to disappear overnight, it would still be possible to reconstruct the entire New Testament with quotes from the Church Fathers, with the exception of fifteen to twenty verses!

A Comparison

The evidence for the early existence of the New Testament writings is clear. The wealth of materials for the New Testament becomes even more significant when we compare it with other ancient documents which have been accepted without question.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Author/Work</th>
<th>Author's Lifespan</th>
<th>Date-Events</th>
<th>Written</th>
<th>Earliest Manuscript</th>
<th>Lapse-Event to Writing</th>
<th>Lapse-Event to MS</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Matthew, Gospel</td>
<td>ca. 0-70?</td>
<td>4 BC-30 AD</td>
<td>50 - 65/75</td>
<td>ca. 200</td>
<td>&lt;50 years</td>
<td>&lt;200 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mark, Gospel</td>
<td>15-90?</td>
<td>27-30 AD</td>
<td>65/70</td>
<td>ca. 225</td>
<td>&lt;50 years</td>
<td>&lt;200 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Luke, Gospel</td>
<td>10-80?</td>
<td>5 BC-30 AD</td>
<td>60/75</td>
<td>ca. 200</td>
<td>&lt;50 years</td>
<td>&lt;200 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John, Gospel</td>
<td>10-100</td>
<td>27-30</td>
<td>90-110</td>
<td>ca. 130</td>
<td>&lt;80 years</td>
<td>&lt;100 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paul, Letters</td>
<td>0-65</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>50-65</td>
<td>ca. 200</td>
<td>20-30 years</td>
<td>&lt;200 years</td>
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<tr>
<td>Josephus, War</td>
<td>37-100</td>
<td>200 BC-70</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>ca. 950</td>
<td>10-300 years</td>
<td>900-1200 years</td>
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<td>Josephus, Antiquities</td>
<td>37-100</td>
<td>200 BC-65</td>
<td>95</td>
<td>ca. 1050</td>
<td>30-300 years</td>
<td>1000-1300 years</td>
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<td>Tacitus, Annals</td>
<td>56-120</td>
<td>AD 14-68</td>
<td>100-120</td>
<td>ca. 850</td>
<td>30-100 years</td>
<td>800-850 years</td>
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<tr>
<td>Suetonius, Lives</td>
<td>69-130</td>
<td>50 BC-95</td>
<td>120</td>
<td>ca. 850</td>
<td>25-170 years</td>
<td>750-900 years</td>
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<tr>
<td>Pliny, Letters</td>
<td>60-115</td>
<td>97-112</td>
<td>110-112</td>
<td>ca. 850</td>
<td>0-3 years</td>
<td>725-750 years</td>
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<td>Plutarch, Lives</td>
<td>50-120</td>
<td>500 BC-70</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>ca. 950</td>
<td>30-600 years</td>
<td>850-1500 years</td>
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<tr>
<td>Herodotus</td>
<td>485-425 BC</td>
<td>46-478 BC</td>
<td>430-425 BC</td>
<td>ca. 900</td>
<td>50-125 years</td>
<td>1400-1450 years</td>
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<tr>
<td>Thucydides</td>
<td>460-400 BC</td>
<td>431-411 BC</td>
<td>410-400 BC</td>
<td>ca. 900</td>
<td>0-30 years</td>
<td>1300-1350 years</td>
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<tr>
<td>Xenophon,</td>
<td>430-355 BC</td>
<td>401-399 BC</td>
<td>385-375 BC</td>
<td>ca. 1350</td>
<td>15-25 years</td>
<td>1750 years</td>
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<td>Polybius</td>
<td>200-120 BC</td>
<td>220-168 BC</td>
<td>150 BC</td>
<td>ca. 950</td>
<td>20-70 years</td>
<td>1100-1150 years</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Where a slash occurs, the first date is conservative, and the second is liberal.

**New Testament manuscripts are fragmentary. Earliest complete manuscript is from ca. 350; lapse of event to complete manuscript is about 325 years.

Conclusion

In his book, The Bible and Archaeology, Sir Frederic G. Kenyon, former director and principal librarian of the British Museum, stated about the New Testament, “The interval, then, between the dates of original composition and the earliest extant evidence becomes so small as to be in fact negligible, and the last foundation for any doubt that the Scriptures have come down to us substantially as they were written has now been removed. Both the authenticity and the general integrity of the books of the New Testament may be regarded as finally established.”

To be skeptical of the 27 documents in the New Testament, and to say they are unreliable is to allow all of classical antiquity to slip into obscurity, for no documents of the ancient period are as well attested bibliographically as these in the New Testament.

B. F. Westcott and F.J.A. Hort, the creators of The New Testament in Original Greek, also commented: “If comparative trivialities such as changes of order, the insertion or omission of the article with proper names, and
the like are set aside, the works in our opinion still subject to doubt can hardly mount to more than a thousandth part of the whole New Testament.” In other words, the small changes and variations in manuscripts change no major doctrine: they do not affect Christianity in the least. The message is the same with or without the variations. We have the Word of God.

About the Author
James F. Williams is the founder and past president of Probe Ministries International, and currently serves as Minister at Large. He holds degrees from Southern Methodist University (B.A.) and Dallas Theological Seminary (Th.M.). He also has pursued inter-disciplinary doctoral studies (a.b.d.) in the humanities at the University of Texas at Dallas.

During the past thirty-five years, he has visited, lectured, and counseled on more than 180 university campuses in the United States, Canada, Europe, and the former Soviet Union. He has also served on the faculties of the American, Latin American, and European Institutes of Biblical Studies. Jimmy can be reached via E-mail at jwilliams@probe.org.