

Highlights from Dallas Theological Seminary Professor Daniel Wallace's recent discussions about the accuracy of the New Testament we have today

People have always wondered how accurate are the Bible translations available to them, but lately there have been several attacks on the accuracy of the Bible in works from liberal scholars as well as from atheists [e.g Dan Brown's *Da Vinci Code*]. These attacks have left many, believers and non-believers alike, wondering whether the Bible as we have it today accurately reflects the original scripture writings. While we can never be 100% certain, text-critical scholars assert that the answer is yes, we do have an accurate Bible today.

Doubters like to make out that as time goes on, we get farther and farther from the true content of the text, because we end up with a copy of a copy of a copy, etc. But this is misleading: when a copy was made, they did not destroy the original; thus, the original would still exist even when several generations of copies had been made. Also, because of increasingly successful archaeological exploration, we are finding older and better manuscripts all the time. The seventeenth century translators of the King James Version relied on six manuscripts dating from the tenth century onward. Today, we have over 5700 manuscripts [including fragments] dating back to the early second century! So we are actually getting closer to knowing the original text, not farther away. We have over 100 manuscripts dating to within 300 years of the originals, compared to zero for most other Greco-Roman authors. For most ancient authors, there is a need to conjecture some content because of inadequate manuscript evidence, but this is not so for the New Testament: we can be sure that the original content is available in the manuscript data.

Doubters say we still cannot know for certain what the original texts said. But consider how these same people regard secular history from the same time period. We depend on three historians for our understanding of Roman culture during the first century – Livy, Tacitus, and Suetonius – and of their works we have less than 300 manuscripts total, and these copies are from hundreds of years after the originals were written. In contrast, over forty-percent of the New Testament is available to us on copies dating to only a few decades after the original writing. The oldest fragment found so far, P52, has been independently dated from AD90-150. Also, for the average classical Greek author we have less than twenty copies of any given work still in existence. We could stack all of our copies of all the classical Greek writers and the pile would come to about four feet in height. For the New Testament, we have over 5700 Greek manuscripts, which would pile up to over a mile in height. The truth is that the New Testament is better verified with textual evidence, by far, than any other document of antiquity. If we approached other historical documents with the same skepticism as doubters approach the New Testament, we would have to abandon any hope of using writings for historical purposes, instead trying to reconstruct history solely on the basis of non-literary archaeological finds, resulting in throwing out 95% of what currently is accepted as historically accurate for these time periods.

Doubters like to claim that Christians did not consider Jesus to be divine until the Council of Nicaea in AD325, as though Emperor Constantine made this theological adjustment. However, we have several manuscripts that are dated over a century before that Council which clearly attest to the divinity of Christ, including both patristic writings [those of the early church authorities] and early copies of scriptures written by various authors, such as John 1.1; 20.28; Hebrews 1.8; Romans 9.5; and 2 Peter 1.1.

Doubters point out that there are a great number of variants among the New Testament manuscripts. This again is misleading: we have such a great number of variants because we have such a great number of manuscripts. We have over 5700 Greek manuscripts [including fragments] and over 10,000 early Latin manuscripts. The gospels have the most copies, then Paul's letters, and the least copies available is for Revelation. We also have over 1,000,000 quotations of the scriptures from the patristic writers. In fact, even if we lost all the Greek and Latin manuscripts of the scriptures, we could reconstruct the scriptures from the patristic quotations. Furthermore, 99% of the variants in the New Testament manuscripts make no difference. 70% are a matter of spelling differences. Most other variations are differences in diction or word order which do not change the meaning of the statement. There are some variants that would be meaningful but are not viable because we have ample evidence against them from the other manuscripts. Less than 1% of the variants are both meaningful and viable, and there is not one major Christian doctrine that is threatened by any of these variants.

The New Testament is the best textually attested document of antiquity. From a text-critical perspective, there is great reason to believe that the New Testament we have today does accurately reflect the original writings, and is reliable as the foundation of Christian beliefs.