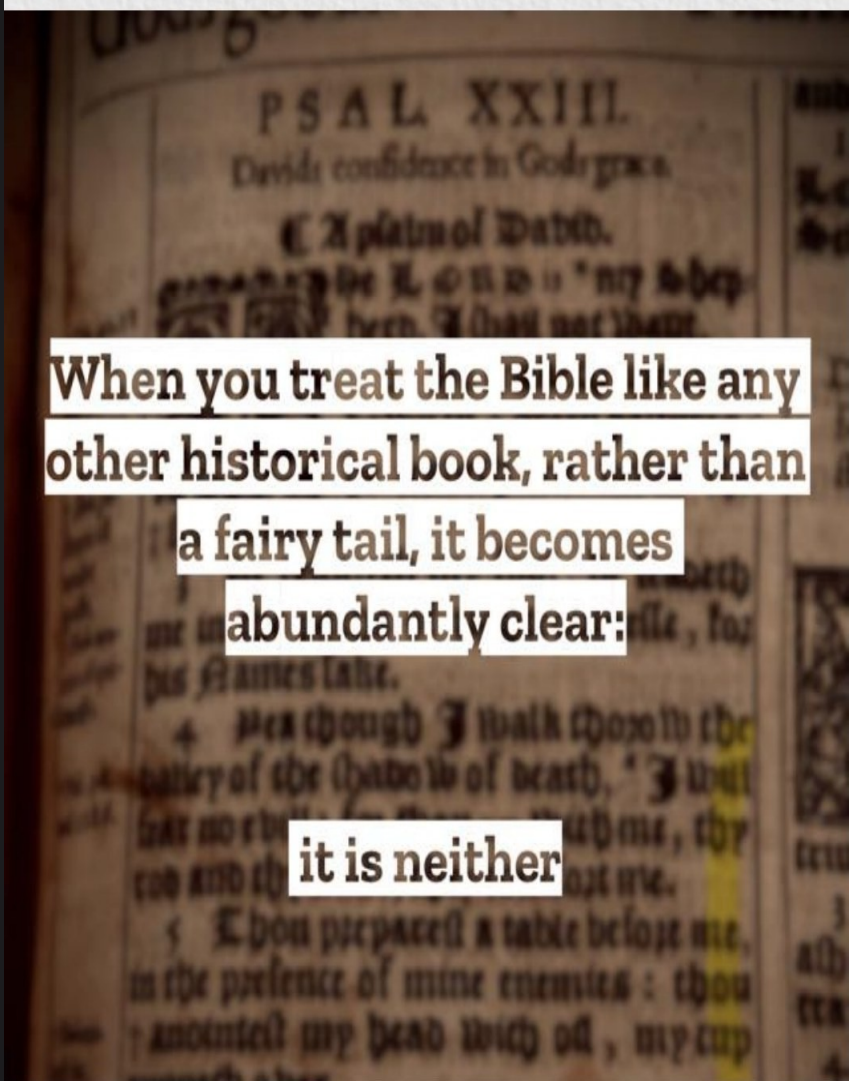


Reliability of the Bible

A Book Like No Other

Joshua Witt



When you treat the Bible like any
other historical book, rather than
a fairy tale, it becomes
abundantly clear:

it is neither

What does Scripture claim about itself?

"The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever." Isaiah 40:8

Permanent

Matthew 24:35

"Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away."

God-breathed

2 Timothy 3:16–17

"All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work."

Accurate

John 14:26

"But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you."

Paul's letters are Scripture too: *Peter says some things in Paul's letters are hard to understand, "which the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction, as they do the other Scriptures."* **2 Peter 3:15–16**

Scripture claims divine origin, permanence, and Spirit-enabled accuracy in recording Jesus' words. The rest of this talk tests whether the record bears that out.

Scripture quotations are from the ESV® Bible (The Holy Bible, English Standard Version®), © 2001 by Crossway. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Even Peter found Paul hard to follow

"There are some things in them that are hard to understand..." 2 Peter 3:16, on Paul's letters

"Because of the angels"?

1 Corinthians 11:10

"That is why a wife ought to have a symbol of authority on her head, because of the angels."

Head coverings, fine. But what do angels have to do with it? Paul doesn't say, and scholars still debate it.

Baptized for the dead?

1 Corinthians 15:29

"Otherwise, what do people mean by being baptized on behalf of the dead? If the dead are not raised at all, why are people baptized on their behalf?"

Mentioned once, never explained. One study catalogued about 40 interpretations.

Hard to understand is not the same as unreliable: Peter still ranks Paul's letters with "the other Scriptures."

2 Peter 3:16; 1 Corinthians 11:10; 15:29 (ESV). Interpretations: B. M. Foschini, "Those Who Are Baptized for the Dead," Catholic Biblical Quarterly 12-13 (1950-51).

Unashamed, and ready to give a reason

Unashamed

Romans 1:16

"For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek."

Ready

1 Peter 3:15

"But in your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect."

Believe

Romans 10:9

"If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved."

The top 5 best sellers, combined

ALL-TIME BEST SELLERS (COPIES SOLD)

A Tale of Two Cities 200M

Harry Potter & the Philosopher's Stone 120M

And Then There Were None 100M

The Hobbit 100M

Alice's Adventures in Wonderland 100M

Combined 620M

The Bible: ~6 billion printed (est.)



Top 5 combined: 620 million



≈ 10%

Even all five together come to only about a tenth of the Bibles printed.

Each square = 600 million copies

A book for the whole world

8 Billion

people on earth

6 Billion

Bibles printed (est.)

80 Million

Bibles printed every
year

4,190

languages with
Scripture

COPIES SOLD IN THE US, 2024

Bibles sold



#1 new book, 2024



Americans bought over 11 times as many Bibles as copies of 2024's best-selling book.

Sources: Guinness World Records (Bibles printed); Circana BookScan via Publishers Weekly (2024 US print sales, both bars); SIL ProgressBible (languages, Oct 2026).

The uniqueness of the Bible

Its continuity and diversity are remarkable.

3 languages

Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek, rooted in real cultures and history

3 continents

Its authors came from Africa, Asia and Europe

40+ authors

With diverse backgrounds and perspectives

66 books

39 Old Testament and 27 New Testament, in many genres

1,500 years

Written over some fifteen centuries and many generations

1 story

Creation, fall and redemption, told by many authors

“Unhitch” the Old Testament?

THE CLAIM

“Peter, James, Paul elected to unhitch the Christian faith from their Jewish scriptures, and my friends, we must as well.”

“When the Church launched, the foundation of the faith of the early Christians was not a book (they didn’t have one) ... it wasn’t the Bible (there wasn’t one), and it wasn’t the Old Testament.”

Andy Stanley, North Point Community Church, “Aftermath” series, part 3 (2018)

To be fair: he also called the Jewish scriptures “divinely inspired,” and said critics missed his context (Acts 15: Gentiles and the law of Moses).

WHAT THE EARLY CHURCH ACTUALLY DID

Luke 24:27 · Jesus

“Beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself.”

1 Corinthians 15:3–4 · the earliest creed

Christ died and was raised “in accordance with the Scriptures.”

Acts 15:15 · the very council Stanley cites

“With this the words of the prophets agree, just as it is written” (then quoting Amos 9).

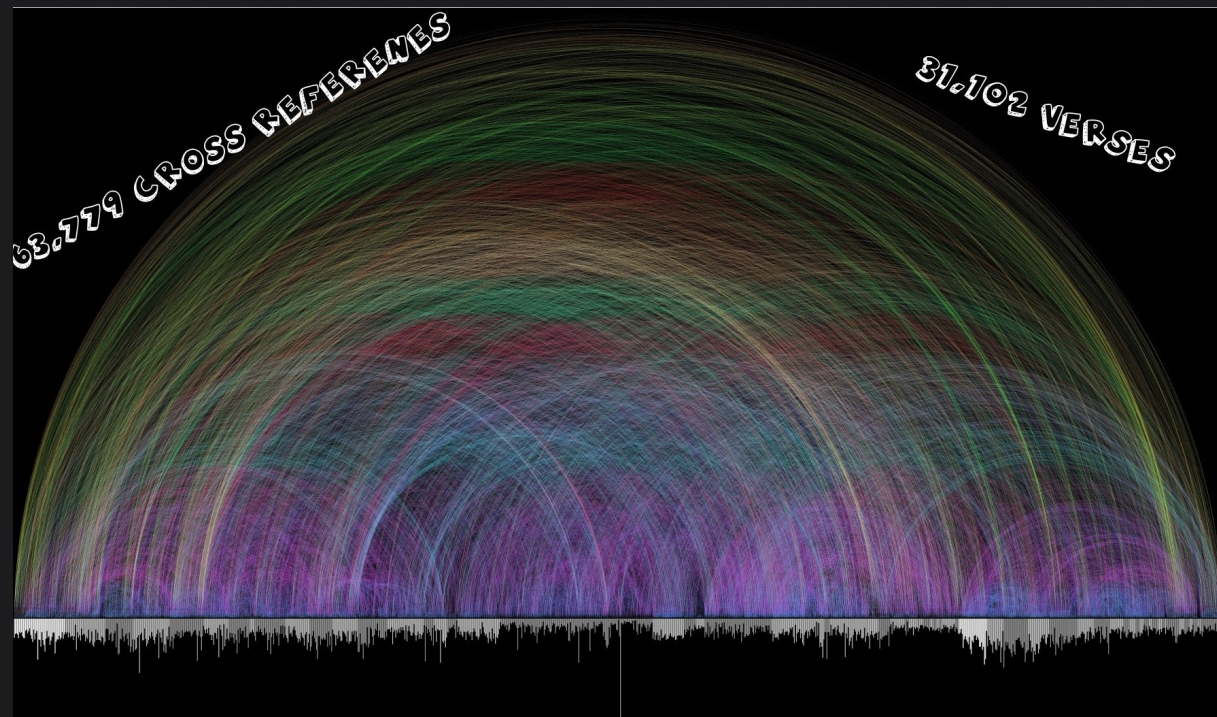
Acts 17:11 · the Bereans

They checked Paul by “examining the Scriptures daily to see if these things were so.”

They had no bound Bible yet, but they had Scripture: the Old Testament, read as pointing to Christ.

Stanley quotes as reported by M. Gryboski, The Christian Post (9 May 2018), and E. Hall, Crosswalk.com (11 May 2018). Scripture: ESV.

63,779 cross-references in 31,102 verses



Visualization: Chris Harrison and Christoph Römhild, "Bible Cross-References" (2007), chrisharrison.net

The minimal facts

Gary Habermas surveyed 1,400+ scholarly publications on the resurrection (1975–2005), later 3,400+, across the whole critical spectrum. These facts are granted by most of them:

1 Jesus died by crucifixion

Virtually all scholars. Crossan: “as sure as anything historical can ever be”

2 The disciples sincerely believed the risen Jesus appeared to them

Virtually unanimous. Lüdemann: “historically certain”

3 Paul, the church’s persecutor, converted after a perceived appearance

Virtually all; rests on Paul’s own letters (1 Cor 15:8; Gal 1:13–16)

4 James, Jesus’ skeptical brother, converted after a perceived appearance

A large majority of the scholars who address it

+1 The empty tomb

About 75% of scholars writing on it (roughly 3 to 1)

Habermas, “Resurrection Research from 1975 to the Present,” JSHJ 3.2 (2005): 135–53; Habermas & Licona, The Case for the Resurrection of Jesus (2004)

What even skeptics grant

Gerd Lüdemann

Atheist New Testament scholar

"It may be taken as historically certain that Peter and the disciples had experiences after Jesus' death in which Jesus appeared to them as the risen Christ."

What Really Happened to Jesus (1995), 80

Paula Fredriksen

Jewish historian, Boston University

The disciples' conviction that they had seen the risen Christ is "historical bedrock, facts known past doubting."

Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews (1999), 264

Agreed: the disciples sincerely believed they saw Jesus alive.

Disputed: the cause. Skeptics say visions or hallucinations, not a real resurrection.

Habermas & Licona, The Case for the Resurrection of Jesus (2004), 49–50

P.O.W.: the disciples claimed Jesus rose

Habermas & Licona's memory aid for the nine early sources showing the disciples proclaimed the resurrection

P

Paul

- Knew Peter, James and John, and confirmed their message matched his (Gal 1:18–19; 2:1–10; 1 Cor 15:11)
- A former persecutor: a hostile witness turned by his own experience

O

Oral tradition

- Early creeds: 1 Cor 15:3–7, within about 2–5 years of the crucifixion
- Sermon summaries in Acts (e.g., Acts 2, 13) preserving the earliest preaching

W

Written tradition

- All four Gospels report the claim, within about 70 years of the event
- Apostolic fathers who knew the apostles, Clement of Rome and Polycarp, confirm it

Nine independent sources: among the best-attested claims in ancient history.

Habermas & Licona (2004), 51–62; Gal 1:18–19; 2:1–10; 1 Cor 15:3–11; Acts 2:22–36; 13:26–39; 1 Clement 42; Polycarp, Philippians 9

The earliest Christian creed

"For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day ... and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve." 1 Corinthians 15:3–5 (ESV), continuing to 500+ at once, James and all the apostles

HOW WE KNOW IT'S A CREED, NOT PAUL'S OWN WORDS

- "Delivered ... received": technical terms for handing on fixed oral tradition
- Stylized parallel structure and non-Pauline wording ("the twelve," Aramaic "Cephas")
- Paul received it, likely on his visit with Peter and James, c. AD 35–38 (Gal 1:18–19)

2–5 yrs

after the crucifixion, before any New Testament book was written.
Lüdemann: within two years.
Dunn: "within months."

Resurrection belief was the church's message from the start, naming living eyewitnesses who could be questioned.

1 Cor 15:3–7 (ESV); Habermas & Licona (2004), 52–53, 260; Lüdemann, The Resurrection of Jesus (1994), 38; Dunn, Jesus Remembered (2003), 855

James: from skeptic brother to martyr

BEFORE

A skeptic

"For not even his brothers believed in him." [John 7:5](#)

His family said, "He is out of his mind." [Mark 3:21](#)



TURNING POINT

An appearance

"Then he appeared to James."
[1 Cor 15:7](#)

Soon after, Jesus' brothers pray with the disciples. [Acts 1:14](#)



AFTER

A leader and martyr

Leader of the Jerusalem church, a "pillar". [Gal 2:9](#); [Acts 15](#)

Stoned to death c. AD 62, per Josephus. [Antiquities 20.200](#)

Skeptical family members don't die proclaiming their brother is the risen Lord unless something convinced them. The recorded cause is the appearance.

John 7:5; Mark 3:21, 31–35; 6:3–4 (ESV); Habermas & Licona (2004), 67–69; Josephus, Antiquities 20.9.1 (20.200); Hegesippus in Eusebius, Church History 2.23

The women and the empty tomb

Eyewitnesses to the burial

They watched Joseph of Arimathea bury Jesus and “saw where he was laid.” (Mark 15:47; Luke 23:55)

They came back on purpose

They prepared spices and returned Sunday morning to finish anointing the body. (Mark 16:1; Luke 24:1)

“Wrong tomb” fails

Proposed by Kirsopp Lake (1907), now nearly abandoned: the authorities could have produced the body from the right tomb, and never did.

The criterion of embarrassment

Women’s testimony carried little legal weight in 1st-century Judaism. Inventors of a legend would have chosen male witnesses.

The women knew exactly where Jesus was buried. The tomb they found empty was the right one.

Mark 15:47; 16:1; Luke 23:55–56; 24:1; Kirsopp Lake (1907), 250–53; W. L. Craig, *Reasonable Faith*, 3rd ed. (2008), 371–72; Habermas & Licona (2004), 72–73; Josephus, *Antiquities* 4.8.15

Enemy attestation: the stolen-body charge

You only accuse someone of stealing a body if the tomb is empty. The charge admits there was no body.

Matthew 28:11–15

The earliest Jewish response

Guards were paid to say “His disciples came by night and stole him away ... and this story has been spread among the Jews to this day.”

Justin Martyr, c. AD 155–160

A century later

Jewish leaders sent messengers around the Mediterranean saying the disciples stole the body.

Tertullian, c. AD 197

Still circulating

He mocks claims that the body was stolen by the disciples or “removed by a gardener”: critics still conceding an empty tomb.

What enemies never said: *“The body is still in the tomb.” That one answer would have ended Christianity at once.*

Matthew 28:11–15 (ESV); Justin Martyr, Dialogue with Trypho 108; Tertullian, De Spectaculis 30; Habermas & Licona (2004), 70–71

Historians on the empty tomb

Michael Grant

Classical historian

"The historian ... cannot justifiably deny the empty tomb." The evidence "is firm and plausible enough to necessitate the conclusion that the tomb was indeed found empty."

Michael Grant, *Jesus: An Historian's Review of the Gospels* (1977), p. 176

William Wand

Former Oxford University historian

"All the strictly historical evidence we have is in favour of it, and those scholars who reject it ought to recognise that they do so on some other ground than that of scientific history."

J. W. C. Wand, *Christianity: A Historical Religion?* (1972), pp. 93–94

Both quoted in Gary R. Habermas, *On the Resurrection*, vol. 1: Evidences, p. 633

The earliest written witnesses

c. AD 30/33	●	Crucifixion	Jesus executed in Jerusalem under Pontius Pilate
c. AD 30–35	●	The creed forms (oral)	“died ... buried ... raised ... appeared”
c. AD 50–51	●	1 Thessalonians	Earliest NT book: “Jesus died and rose again” (4:14)
c. AD 53–55	●	1 Corinthians	Paul writes the creed down (15:3–7)
c. AD 57	●	Romans	“God raised him from the dead” (10:9)
c. AD 65–70	●	Gospel of Mark	Peter’s preaching via Mark (Papias): “He has risen” (16:6)
c. AD 90–95	●	Gospel of John	Eyewitness-based (21:24); the risen Jesus is touched and eats breakfast
c. AD 95–96	●	1 Clement	Knew Peter and Paul: apostles preached “with full assurance through the resurrection” (42.3)
c. AD 107–110	●	Ignatius	En route to martyrdom: “he ate and drank with them” (Smyrnaeans 3)

The whole chain, from event to creed, letters, Gospels and church fathers, spans one living memory. The earliest biographies of Alexander the Great came 300+ years after his death.

“For I know that after his resurrection also he was still possessed of flesh, and I believe that he is so now. When, for instance, he came to those who were with Peter, he said to them, ‘Lay hold, handle me, and see that I am not an incorporeal spirit.’ And immediately they touched him, and believed ... And after his resurrection he ate and drank with them, as being possessed of flesh.”

Ignatius of Antioch, Letter to the Smyrnaeans 3.1–3, c. AD 107–110, written on his way to execution in Rome

Pagan “resurrections” vs. Jesus

Figure	Earliest source for a “rising”	Why it’s not a parallel
Osiris	Pyramid Texts, c. 2400 BC	Revived only to rule the underworld as lord of the dead; never returns to earthly life
Tammuz	Sumerian texts, c. 2000–1700 BC	A seasonal cycle, half of each year in the underworld; a vegetation myth, not history
Dionysus	Diodorus Siculus, 1st c. BC	Mythic rebirth in timeless myth; no tomb, no witnesses
Adonis	Rising first attested c. AD 150+ (Lucian)	His death was mourned from c. 600 BC; the rising appears only after Christianity
Attis	After AD 150; Hilaria festival 3rd–4th c.	The resurrection claim is post-Christian: possibly borrowed from Christianity
Mithras	None in any source	No death-and-resurrection story exists in the Mithraic evidence
Jesus	Creed c. AD 30–35; letters AD 50s	A one-time bodily resurrection of a historical man: datable, touched, ate food, named living witnesses

Pre-Christian myths offer underworld rule and crop cycles; the ones that truly “rise” come after Easter.

T. N. D. Mettinger, *The Riddle of Resurrection* (2001); Habermas & Licona (2004), 90–92; Lucian, *De Dea Syria* 6; Diodorus Siculus 3.62; 1 Cor 15:3–7; Luke 24:39–43; Acts 1:3

From stone inscription to empty tomb

Resurrection belief was not a later invention. Every link is granted by mainstream scholarship.

1

Paul wrote 1 Corinthians

One of the seven letters even skeptics accept as his

3

15:3–7 is an earlier creed

Near-consensus: “delivered / received,” stylized form, non-Pauline wording

5

So it existed by the mid-30s

Within about 2–5 years of the crucifixion (Lüdemann: within two)

2

c. AD 53–55

Anchored by the Gallio inscription at Delphi (Gallio governed AD 51–52; Acts 18:12–17)

4

Paul received it early

He met Peter and James in Jerusalem c. AD 35–38 (Gal 1:18–19)

6

Its content is the resurrection

Died, buried, raised the third day, seen by Peter, the Twelve, 500+, James

The resurrection was the church's founding message while eyewitnesses lived. Legend needs generations to displace history; here there is no gap at all.

Gallio inscription, SIG³ 801D; Habermas & Licona (2004), 52–53, 260; Lüdemann (1994), 38; Dunn (2003), 855; A. N. Sherwin-White, Roman Society and Roman Law in the NT (1963), 188–91

A lawyer's verdict

Simon Greenleaf

1783–1853

- Dane Professor of Law at Harvard
- Author of A Treatise on the Law of Evidence, a standard legal text of his day
- Tested the Gospel writers by the rules of evidence used in court

METHOD (§ 3)

"We propose to test the veracity of these witnesses, by the same rules and means which are there employed [in courts]."

VERDICT (§ 30)

"It was therefore impossible that they could have persisted in affirming the truths they have narrated, had not Jesus actually risen from the dead."

CONCLUSION (§ 42)

"The result, it is confidently believed, will be an undoubting conviction of their integrity, ability, and truth."

Simon Greenleaf, An Examination of the Testimony of the Four Evangelists by the Rules of Evidence Administered in Courts of Justice (2nd ed., 1847)

Prophecy fulfilled: the fall of Tyre

THE PREDICTION, c. 587–586 BC

“Your stones and timber and soil they will cast into the midst of the waters.”

Ezekiel 26:12. Tyre would become “a bare rock ... a place for the spreading of nets” (26:4–5, 14).

THE FULFILLMENT, 332 BC

Alexander the Great’s engineers scraped mainland Tyre’s ruins into the sea.

“He demolished what was called Old Tyre and set many tens of thousands of men to work carrying stones to construct a mole.” Diodorus Siculus 17.40

Oddly specific

Armies burn and loot cities. They don’t throw a city’s rubble into the sea.

Securely dated

Ezekiel wrote during the Babylonian exile, about 250 years before Alexander.

Best ancient source

Arrian’s Anabasis (2.18–24), drawn from Ptolemy and Aristobulus, who marched with Alexander.

Ezekiel 26:3–14 (ESV); Arrian, Anabasis of Alexander 2.18–24; Diodorus Siculus, Library of History 17.40–46 (Loeb); Curtius Rufus 4.2–4; Robin Lane Fox, Alexander the Great (1973), 181–92; Daniel I. Block, The Book of Ezekiel 25–48 (1998)

“A place for the spreading of nets”

THE PROPHECY (ESV)

Ezekiel 26:4

“I will scrape her soil from her and make her a bare rock.”

Ezekiel 26:5

“She shall be in the midst of the sea a place for the spreading of nets, for I have spoken, declares the Lord GOD.”

Ezekiel 26:14

“I will make you a bare rock. You shall be a place for the spreading of nets.”

TYRE TODAY



~700

fishermen work about 270 boats from Tyre's ancient harbor today (AP, 2024)

Ezekiel 26:4–5, 14 (ESV); Associated Press, “Fishers at a Lebanese port hope ceasefire with Israel means normal life is returning” (Nov. 2024); World Bank, Cultural Heritage and Urban Development project, Tyre fishing harbor (2016). Photo: fishing nets on boats in Tyre harbor, Vyacheslav Argenberg (2008), Wikimedia Commons, CC BY 4.0

Prophecy fulfilled: the fall of Nineveh

THE PROPHECY: NAHUM, c. 663–612 BC

Nahum 1:8

"With an overwhelming flood he will make a complete end of the adversaries."

Nahum 2:6

"The river gates are opened; the palace melts away."

Nahum 2:9

"Plunder the silver, plunder the gold! There is no end of the treasure."

Nahum 3:13, 15

"Fire has devoured your bars ... There will the fire devour you."

THE FULFILLMENT, 612 BC

Babylonians and Medes besieged Nineveh for three months.

"They carried off the vast booty of the city and the temple and turned the city into a ruin heap."

Babylonian Chronicle (BM 21901), British Museum

Excavators found burned palaces and the bodies of defenders at the city gates. Nineveh was never rebuilt.

Dating: Nahum describes the fall of Thebes (663 BC) as past (3:8–10) and the fall of Nineveh as still to come.

Nahum 1:8; 2:6, 9; 3:8–15 (ESV); Fall of Nineveh Chronicle, BM 21901, trans. A. K. Grayson, Assyrian and Babylonian Chronicles (1975), no. 3

Isaiah 53: written before Jesus

THE GREAT ISAIAH SCROLL

c. 125 BC

- Found at Qumran in 1947
- All 66 chapters of Isaiah, including chapter 53
- Copied over a century before Jesus was born
- Isaiah wrote c. 700 BC, centuries before crucifixion came into use

Isaiah 53 (ESV)

"He was despised and rejected by men"
(53:3)

"He was pierced for our transgressions"
(53:5)

Together, 53:3 and 53:5 describe crucifixion, yet Isaiah wrote c. 700 BC, about two centuries before its first recorded use (Persia, 519 BC)

*"Like a lamb that is led to the slaughter
... he opened not his mouth"* (53:7)

*"They made his grave with the wicked
and with a rich man in his death"* (53:9)

"Numbered with the transgressors"
(53:12)

Fulfilled in Jesus

Rejected, then given the most shameful death: Cicero said the very name of the cross should be far from Romans' "thoughts, eyes, ears"

Nailed to a cross; his side pierced (John 19:34; 20:25)

Silent before Pilate (Mark 15:5; Acts 8:32–35)

Crucified between criminals, buried in a rich man's tomb (Matt 27:38, 57–60)

Jesus applies this verse to himself (Luke 22:37)

This copy existed generations before Jesus, so these words cannot be later Christian additions.

Isaiah 53:3–12 (ESV); Great Isaiah Scroll (1QIsa-a), Israel Museum, Shrine of the Book; radiocarbon 356–103 BC, handwriting c. 150–100 BC

Doubted, then dug up

People and places once known almost only from the Bible, later confirmed by archaeology

The Hittite empire

Genesis 23; 2 Kings 7:6

Doubted: Not their existence but their power. F. W. Newman: "No Hittite kings can have compared in power with the king of Judah."

Found 1906: Hattusa, Turkey: an imperial archive, including a treaty with Pharaoh Ramesses II as an equal

Belshazzar

Daniel 5

Doubted: Whether he existed at all. No record outside Daniel named him; ancient historians said Nabonidus was the last king.

Found 1854: A cylinder from Ur names him Nabonidus's eldest son; later texts show he ruled Babylon for his father

Sargon II

Isaiah 20:1

Doubted: Isaiah calls him "Sargon the king of Assyria," but scholars debated until the 1860s whether he was a separate king or another name for a known one.

Found 1843: Botta uncovers his palace at Khorsabad, Iraq, with inscriptions recording his capture of Ashdod (Isaiah 20:1)

The house of David

1 Samuel–1 Kings

Doubted: Whether King David was real. Philip Davies (1992) argued Israel's early history was largely a later literary creation.

Found 1993: Tel Dan Stele (9th c. BC): an Aramean king boasts of defeating the king of the "House of David"

Doubts: Newman, History of the Hebrew Monarchy, in W. Wright, Empire of the Hittites (1884); Holloway in Mesopotamia and the Bible (2003), 70–71; Berossus in Josephus, Against Apion 1.20; P. R. Davies, In Search of 'Ancient Israel' (1992)

The Exodus: doubted, but the setting fits

THE DOUBT

Israel Finkelstein & Neil Asher Silberman, *The Bible Unearthed* (2001): *the Exodus saga is "neither historical truth nor literary fiction."*

Ze'ev Herzog, Tel Aviv University (Haaretz, 1999): *the Israelites did not live in Egypt or make an exodus.*

Their reason: no trace of a mass migration or 40 years in Sinai.

EVIDENCE THAT FITS THE STORY

Avaris tomb: a high Semitic official buried in Egypt's Delta, c. 1800–1700 BC; some argue it was Joseph

Brooklyn Papyrus (c. 1750 BC): Semitic servants in Egypt, one named Shiphrah (Exodus 1:15)

Beni Hasan painting (c. 1890 BC): Semitic travelers from Canaan shown arriving in Egypt

Pi-Ramesses: the store city "Raamses" of Exodus 1:11, next to Avaris

Egyptian names: Moses, Phinehas and Hophni are Egyptian, not Hebrew, names

Merneptah Stele (c. 1208 BC): "Israel" already a people in "Asiatic" or "Semitic": people from Canaan and Syria, not specifically Jews. Israel's ancestors were among them, but no find names an Israelite.

This evidence supports the historicity of the Exodus, though it does not completely prove it.

Three ways to approach the text

1 Textual Skepticism

2 Textual Absolutism

3 Textual Confidence

The road between the two ditches



Textual skepticism: four claims

1

The Bible was made in AD 325 by Constantine and the Council of Nicaea

2

The church left out other gospels

3

We can't know what the Gospels originally said

4

The Gospels are myths written long after the events

What Nicaea was really about

Constantine called the council in AD 325 to settle a dispute over who Jesus is.

1

Arius and the divinity of Christ

Arius taught the Son was created. The council affirmed He is fully God in the Nicene Creed.

2

The date of Easter

Set one common date for the whole church to celebrate it.

3

20 canons on church order

Rules for bishops and clergy, and for restoring Christians who had lapsed.

WHAT IT DID NOT DO

Decide the canon

The churches recognised the books gradually:

c. 180

Irenaeus: four Gospels only

late 100s

Muratorian list: most of the NT

367

Athanasius: first list of our exact 27

393–397

Hippo and Carthage affirm the list

“The Council of Nicaea had nothing to do with the Canon.” Bill Mounce, *Why I Trust My Bible*

Truth: recognised, not invented

Every book was weighed by three tests. Later gospels, like Thomas and Peter, failed them:



1. Apostolic authority

Written by an apostle or a close associate of one



2. Widespread use

Read and used widely across the early church



3. Orthodoxy

Agrees with the rest of the books

"The canon is a list of authoritative books more than it is an authoritative list of books."

Bruce M. Metzger, interviewed in Lee Strobel, *The Case for Christ* (Zondervan, 1998), ch. 3

Three tests: Metzger's criteria (1987), as summarized in H.J. de Jonge, "The New Testament Canon" (Leiden University, 2001), p. 16.

LIE

“We don’t know what the original manuscripts said.”

Bart Ehrman says there are “more variations among our manuscripts than there are words in the New Testament.”

Bart Ehrman, *Misquoting Jesus* (2005), p. 90

Let’s look at the evidence.



1,000 years apart, the same message

BEFORE 1947

Masoretic Text

Our oldest Hebrew copies: c. AD 900–1000. Trusted, but late.



going back about 1,000 years

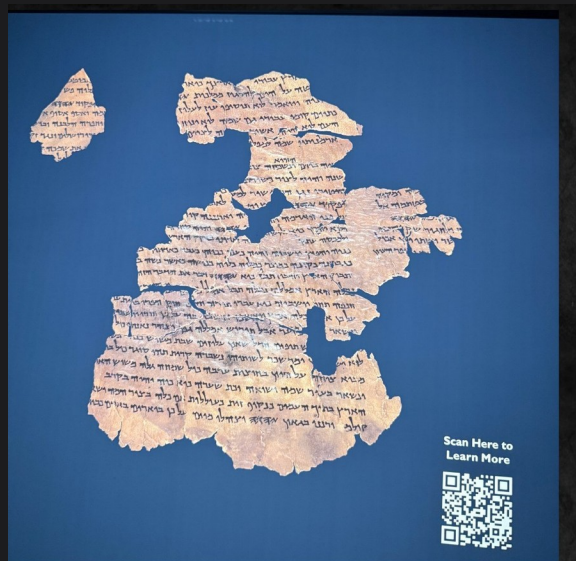
FOUND 1947–1956

Dead Sea Scrolls

Copies from c. 250 BC – AD 68, found near Qumran.

The Isaiah scrolls from Cave 1 “proved to be word for word identical with our standard Hebrew Bible in more than 95 percent of the text.”

Gleason L. Archer, A Survey of Old Testament Introduction (Moody, 1964), p. 19



New Testament manuscripts

138,000

words in the Greek New
Testament

400,000

textual variants among
manuscripts

70%

of variants are spelling
differences

More variants exist because we have far more copies, not because the text is less certain.

Sorting the 400,000 variants

Meaningful, not
viable

Meaningful and
viable

<1%

Only variants that both
change the meaning and
could plausibly be original
matter.

**That is less than 1% of all
variants.**

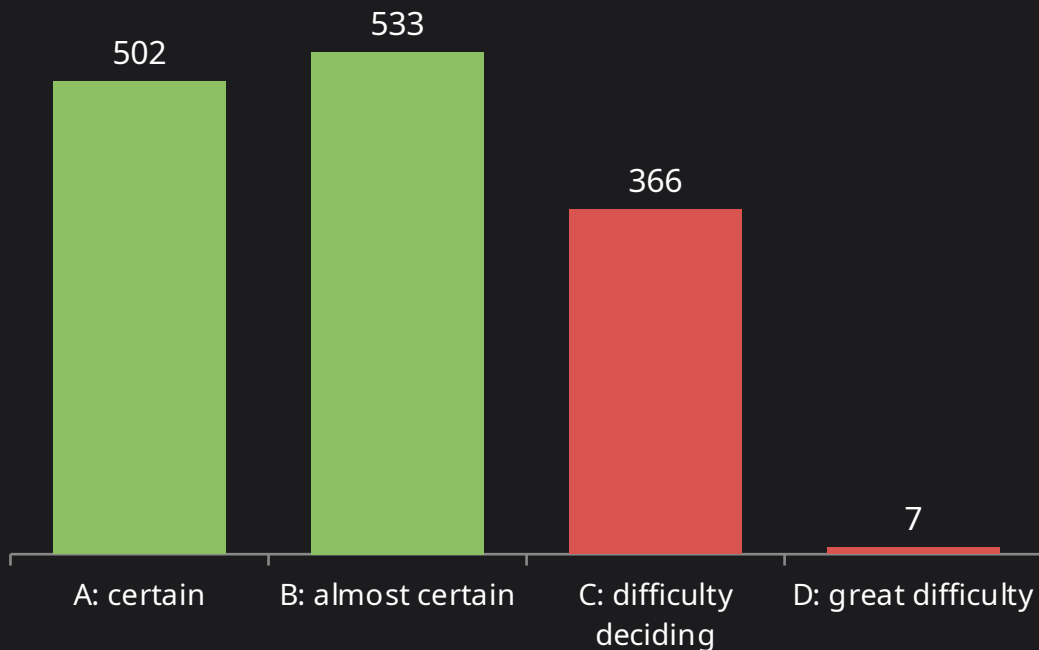
Not meaningful, not
viable

Viable, not
meaningful

Daniel B. Wallace, JETS 49/2 (2006), p. 330;
interview with Justin Taylor, The Gospel
Coalition (2012)

1,408 meaningful and viable variants

How confident was the UBS text committee about each one?



373

places with significant doubt
(C + D)

0.09%

of the 400,000 variants: less
than a tenth of one percent

Source: William D. Mounce, *Why I Trust the Bible* (Zondervan, 2021), from the UBS Greek New Testament's ratings

Witnesses to the text

25,000+

manuscript copies, and more being found

5,800+

in the original Greek

1 Million+

New Testament quotations by early church fathers

Counts: Daniel B. Wallace, interview with Justin Taylor, The Gospel Coalition (2012)

"If you did not have any of these other witnesses, we could reconstruct virtually the entire New Testament many, many times over on the basis of these quotations by the Church fathers alone."

Daniel B. Wallace, lecture at SymposiaChristi, Purdue University (2016)



Bible reliability compared

Work	Written	Earliest copy	Time span (yrs)	Copies
Homer, Iliad	900 BC	400 BC	500	~1,800
Plato	427–347 BC	AD 900	1,300	210
Aristotle	384–322 BC	AD 1100	1,400	40
Caesar, Gallic Wars	100–44 BC	AD 900	1,000	251
Tacitus, Annals	AD 56–120	AD 1000	900	31
Herodotus, History	484–425 BC	AD 100	600	109
Livy, History of Rome	59 BC–AD 17	AD 300	400	90
New Testament	AD ~50–100	Portions AD 100–150; entire NT c. AD 300	29–100	5,838 Greek MSS

Source: EvangelicalBible.com. NT also: 18,524 early translations; ~42,000 OT scrolls and codices.

If we stacked the manuscripts...

AVERAGE CLASSICAL WORK

~15 copies

STACKED

~4 ft

about the height of a
pulpit

NEW TESTAMENT: GREEK ONLY

5,800 manuscripts

STACKED

~1,400 ft

almost the Empire State
Building (1,454 ft)

NEW TESTAMENT: ALL LANGUAGES

~25,800 manuscripts

STACKED

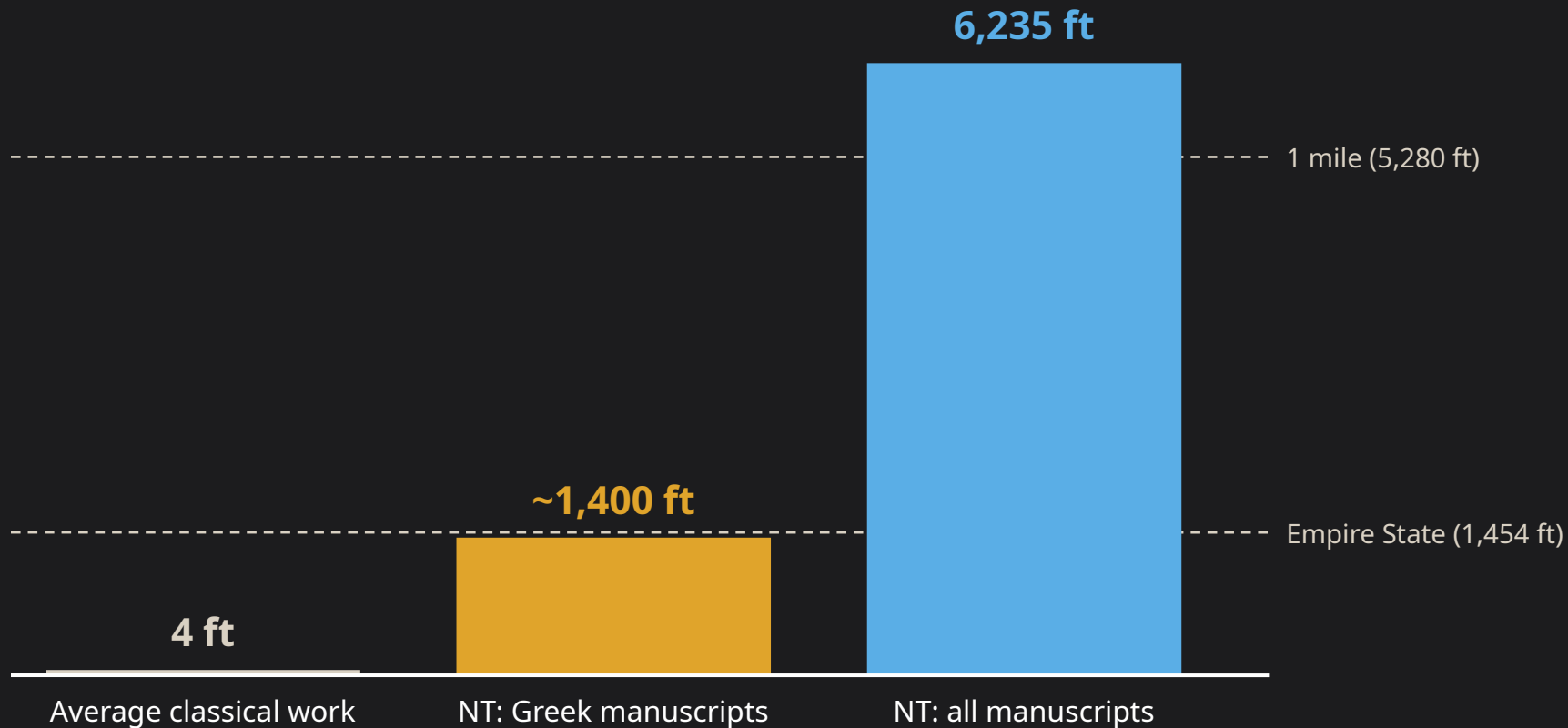
6,235 ft

over a mile: more than 4
Empire State Buildings

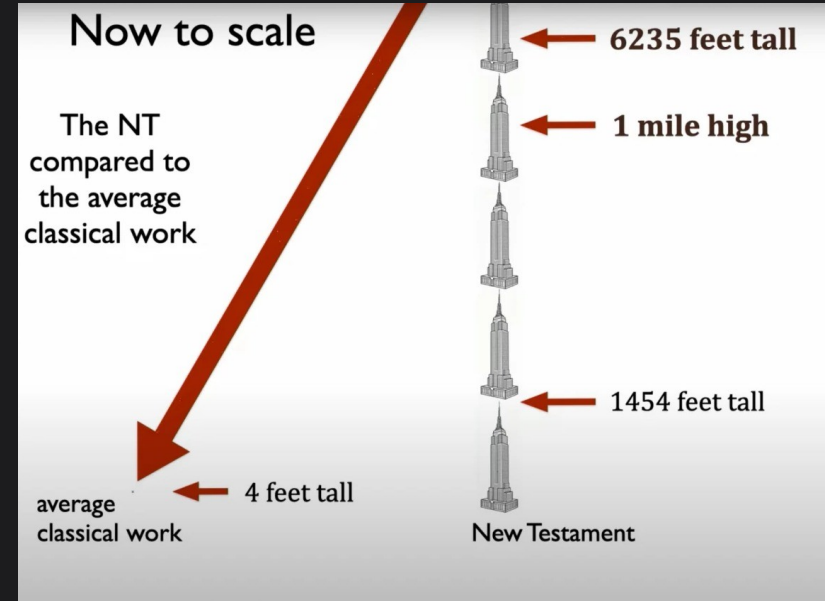
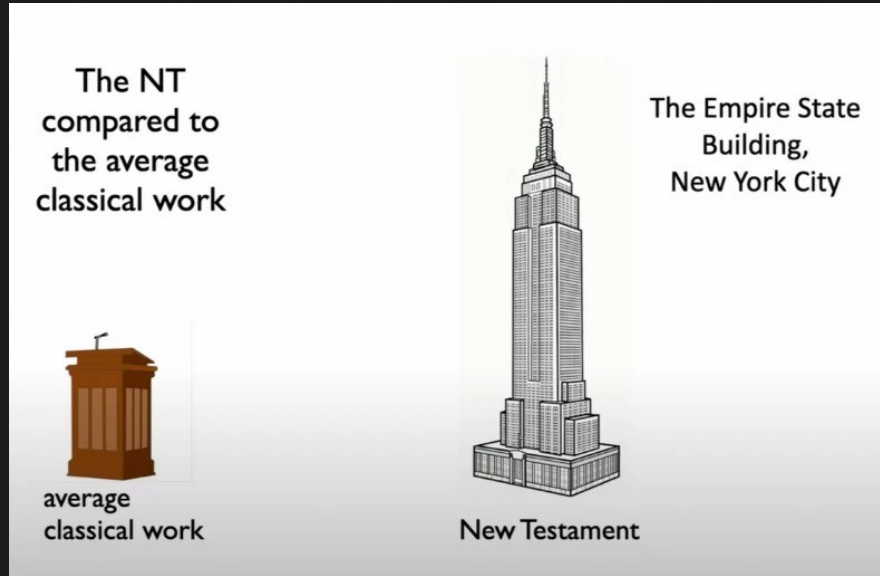
Method: Wallace measured 20 Greek manuscripts in the National Library of Greece: on average 239 leaves and 2.9 inches thick.

Daniel B. Wallace, "How Tall Would a Stack of New Testament Manuscripts Be?" (2023); lecture "Is What We Have Now What They Wrote Then?"

Now to scale



A pulpit next to the New Testament stack



Classical work: about 4 ft of manuscripts. New Testament: about 6,235 ft, over a mile high.

Images: Daniel B. Wallace, "Is What We Have Now What They Wrote Then?", lecture, Dallas Theological Seminary ([youtube.com/watch?v=n5AKPiBZcis](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n5AKPiBZcis))

New Testament vs. classical authors

1,000×

more evidential

1,000×

more material
evidence

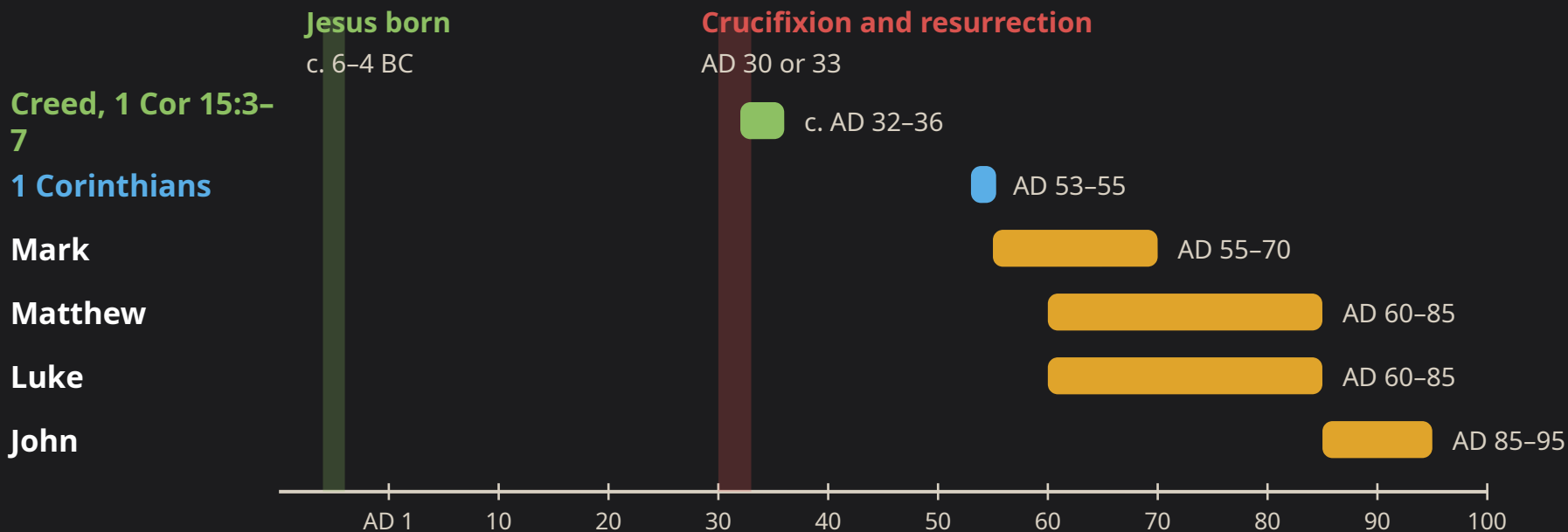
1,000

years earlier, as much
as

"We have more than 1,000 times the manuscript data for the NT than we do for the average Greco-Roman author."

Daniel B. Wallace, interview with Justin Taylor, The Gospel Coalition (2012); Wallace, "Textual Criticism," BiblicalTraining.org, lesson 3

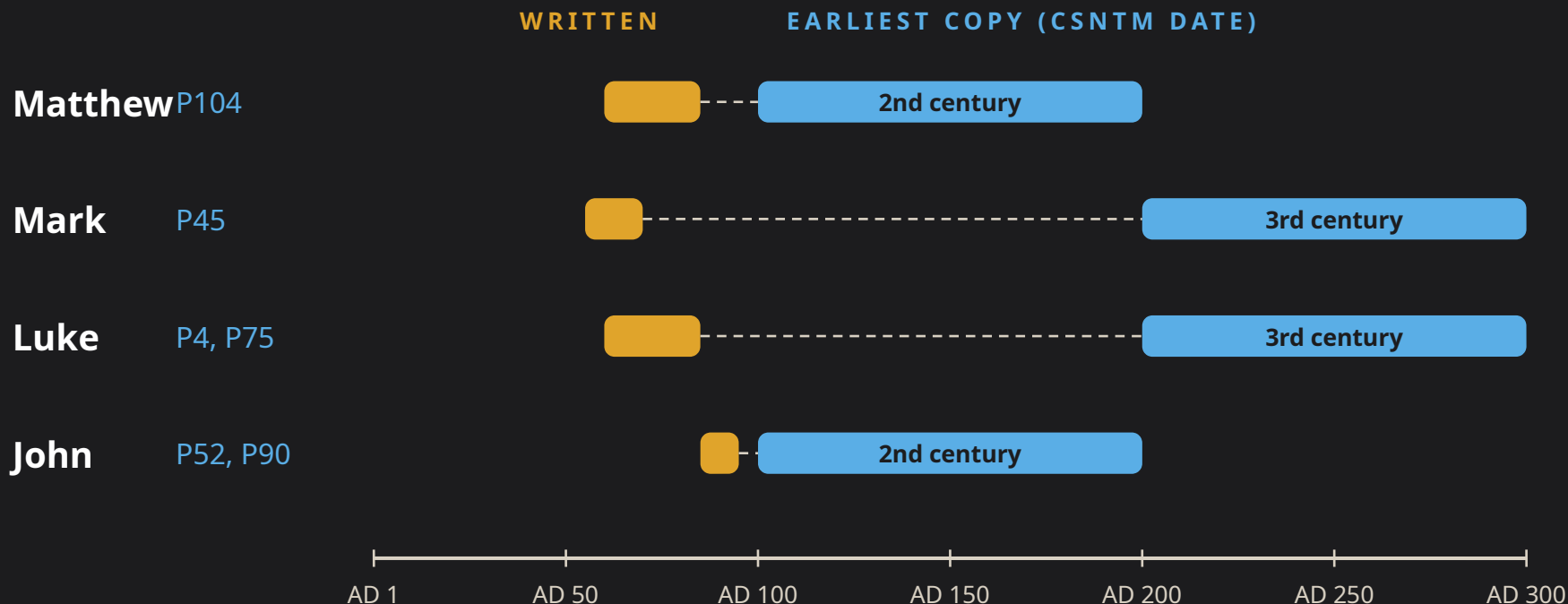
When were the Gospels written?



"Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve." 1 Corinthians 15:3-5 (ESV)

"He appeared to more than five hundred brothers at one time, most of whom are still alive." 1 Corinthians 15:6 (ESV)

Written vs. earliest surviving copy



The gap ranges from decades to about two centuries. For the average classical author it is 500 to 1,000 years.

Manuscript dates: Center for the Study of New Testament Manuscripts (CSNTM), manuscripts.csntm.org

Earliest copies: Acts to Revelation

Book	Earliest manuscript	Approx. date
Acts	P45 (Chester Beatty I)	c. AD 200–250
Romans–Philemon (most of Paul) + Hebrews	P46 (Chester Beatty II)	c. AD 200
2 Thessalonians	P30 (P.Oxy. 1598)	3rd century
1 Timothy	P133 (P.Oxy. 5259)	3rd century
2 Timothy	Codex Sinaiticus	c. AD 330–360
Titus	P32	c. AD 200
Philemon	P87	c. AD 250
James	P23 (P.Oxy. 1229)	c. AD 200–250
1–2 Peter, Jude	P72 (Bodmer); P78 (Jude)	c. AD 250–300
1 John	P9 (P.Oxy. 402)	3rd century
2–3 John	Codex Vaticanus	c. AD 325–350
Revelation	P98 (disputed); P115	c. AD 150–275

P46

nine of Paul's letters in one book,
about 140 years after he wrote

Sinaiticus

earliest complete New Testament,
c. AD 330–360

40–150 yrs

gap from writing to earliest copy
for the New Testament; 700–1,400
years for Tacitus, Caesar and Plato

Dates per the Gregory-Aland registry (INTF, Münster); handwriting-based dates carry ± 25 –50 years. Habermas & Licona (2004), 33; Wallace, ed., *Revisiting the Corruption of the New Testament* (2011)

Even the skeptic agrees

The question

"Why do you believe these core tenets of Christian orthodoxy to be in jeopardy based on the scribal errors you discovered in the biblical manuscripts?"

Ehrman's response

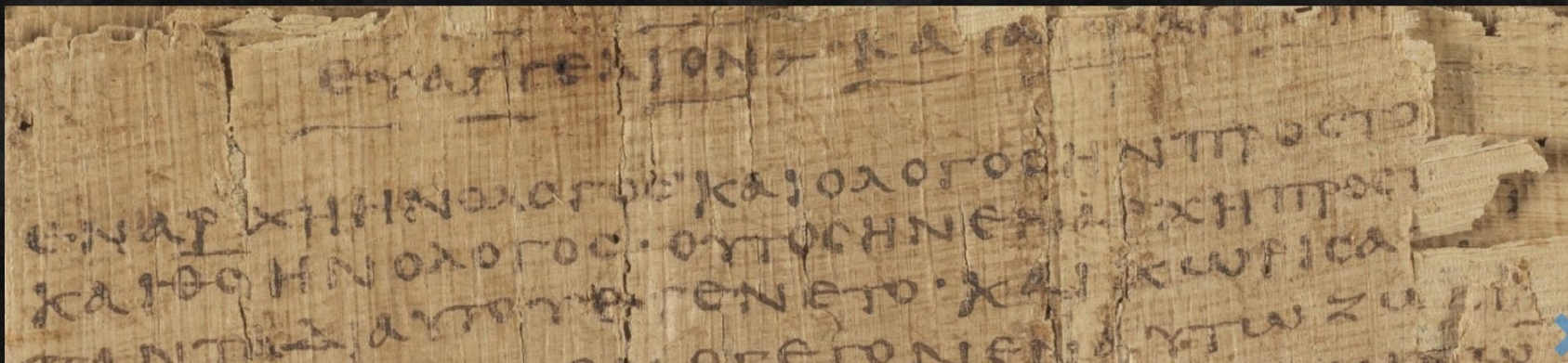
"Essential Christian beliefs are not affected by textual variants in the manuscript tradition of the New Testament."

Bart Ehrman, *Misquoting Jesus* (appendix to paperback edition, p. 252)

“In the beginning was the Word...”

1:1 Ἐν ἀρχῇ ἦν ὁ λόγος καὶ ὁ λόγος ἦν πρὸς τὸν θεόν καὶ θεὸς ἦν ὁ λόγος

**IN THE BEGINNING WAS THE WORD, AND THE WORD
WAS WITH GOD, AND THE WORD WAS GOD.**



Every manuscript of John 1:1 says the same thing: **“the Word was God.”**

LIE

“We don’t even know who wrote the Gospels. The names were added much later.”

TRUTH

Our earliest manuscripts have the names of the authors written on them.

The Gospels were always attributed

~180 AD

Irenaeus (2nd century)
attributes the Gospels to:

Matthew

Mark

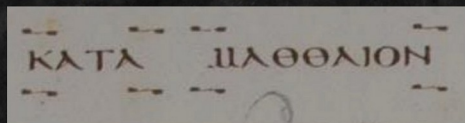
Luke

John

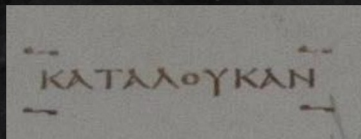
In the early church, the authorship of the four Gospels was never debated.

The names are on the manuscripts

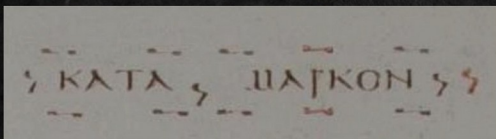
**VATICANUS 4TH CENTURY
ACCORDING TO MATTHEW**



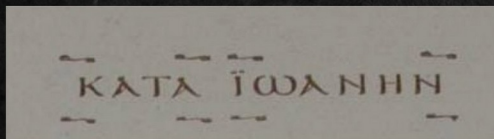
ACCORDING TO LUKE



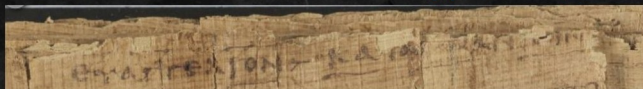
ACCORDING TO MARK



ACCORDING TO JOHN



P66 2-3 CENTURY "εὐαγγέλιον >_ κατα [ι]ωαννην" GOSPEL



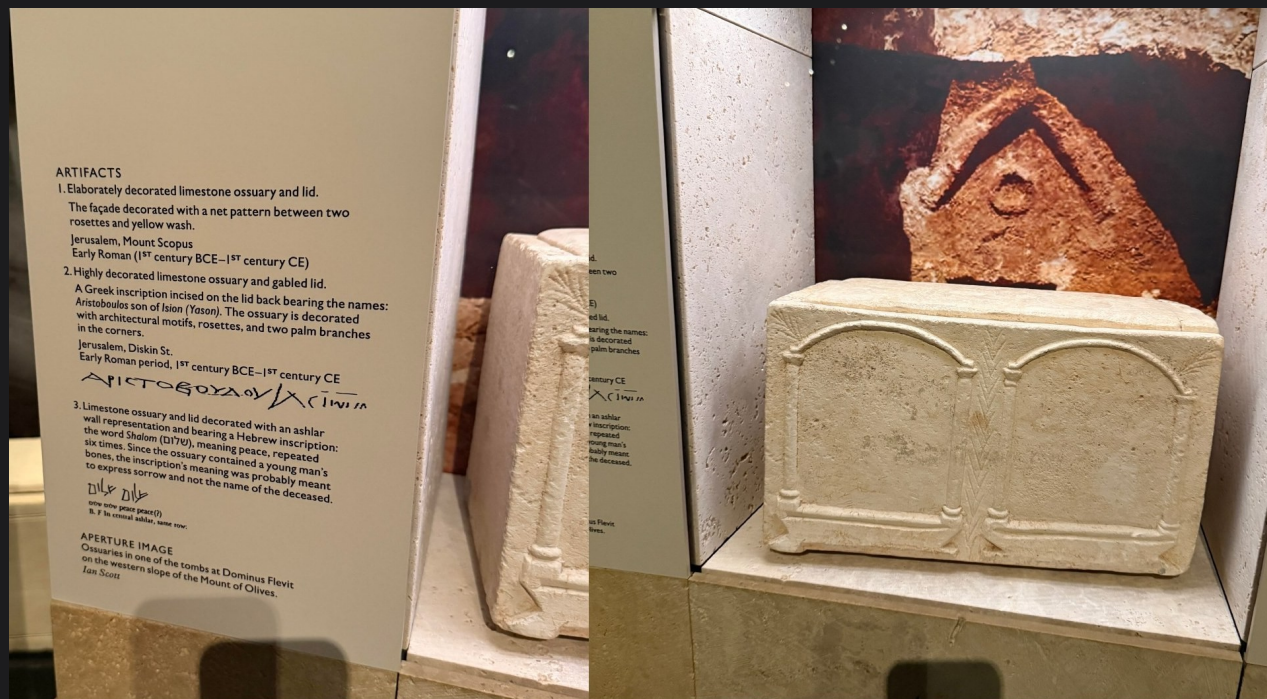
ACCORDING TO JOHN

"There are no anonymous copies of the Gospels, and there are no copies of the canonical Gospels under different names."

Craig A. Evans, *Jesus and the Manuscripts* (2020), p. 53, quoted in Mounce, *Why I Trust the Bible*

"These titles were added sometime before the end of the first century." William D. Mounce, *Why I Trust the Bible* (2021), citing Martin Hengel

First-century names, set in stone



Limestone ossuaries from 1st-century Jerusalem carry the personal names common at the time.

The names fit the time and place

THE DATA

Dr. Tal Ilan

Her Lexicon of Jewish Names in Late Antiquity (2002) catalogues Jews in Palestine, 330 BC to AD 200, from ossuaries, Josephus, the Dead Sea Scrolls and more: 2,953 name occurrences.

MOST COMMON MEN'S NAMES

Simon, Joseph, Lazarus, Judas, John, Jesus

the same names that fill the Gospels

Men named...	Palestine (Ilan)	Gospels & Acts
Simon or Joseph	16%	18%
One of the 9 most common names	41.5%	40.3%
A name no one else had	8%	4%

Fiction gets this wrong. A 2024 statistical study found the Gospels' names fit the real population as well as Josephus does, and better than ancient fictional texts or well-researched modern historical novels.

Sources: Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*, 2nd ed. (2017), pp. 71–72; Tal Ilan, *Lexicon of Jewish Names in Late Antiquity*, Part I (2002); van de Weghe & Wilson, “Why Name Popularity is a Good Test of Historicity” (2024)

Mark names his eyewitnesses

INCLUSIO

Peter first and last

Mark 1:16 Simon is the first disciple named

Mark 16:7 “tell his disciples and Peter” is the last

Ancient writers bracketed a story with their main eyewitness. Mark marks Peter as his source, as early church tradition also says.

NAMES ONLY MARK GIVES

Person	Mark	Matthew / Luke
Blind man at Jericho	“Bartimaeus, son of Timaeus” (10:46)	unnamed (Matt 20:30; Luke 18:35)
Man who carried the cross	Simon, “father of Alexander and Rufus” (15:21)	Simon only (Matt 27:32; Luke 23:26)

Why name them? They were known people, some still alive, whom Mark’s first readers could ask. Mark mentions Alexander and Rufus as if his readers already knew them.

“Again these features of the New Testament data would be difficult to explain as the result of random invention of names within Palestinian Jewish Christianity and impossible to explain as the result of such invention outside Jewish Palestine. All the evidence indicates the general authenticity of the personal names in the Gospels.”

Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses* (2nd ed.), p. 84

Tacitus: Rome's great historian

Born AD 56, died c. 120

Roman senator, consul and governor of Asia

The Annals

History of the Roman Empire, AD 14 to 68

31 copies

Earliest is 900 years after he wrote, yet historians trust him

WHAT OTHERS SAY

"probably the greatest historian ... who wrote in the Latin language"

"the philosophic historian whose writings will instruct the last generations of mankind"

"Tacitus I consider as the first [greatest] writer in the world without a single exception."



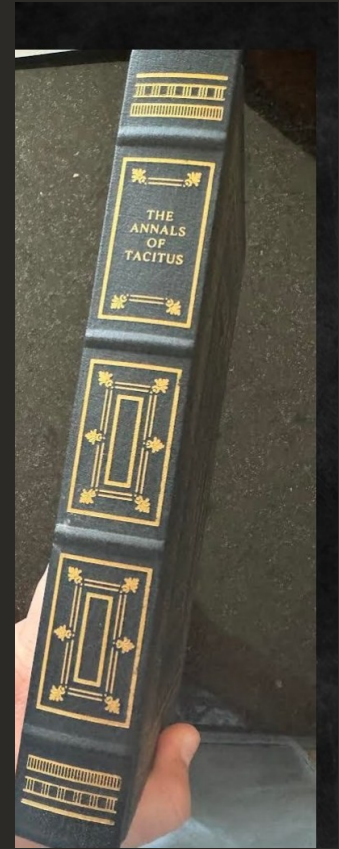
Encyclopaedia Britannica, "Tacitus"

Edward Gibbon, *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, ch. 12

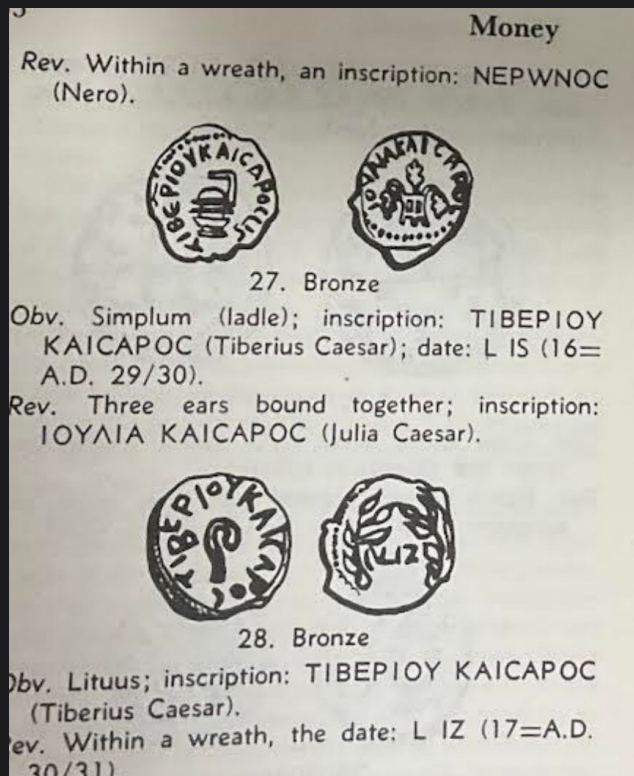
Thomas Jefferson, letter to his granddaughter, 1808

"...Nero fastened the guilt and inflicted the most exquisite tortures on a class hated for their abominations, called Christians by the populace. Christus, from whom the name had its origin, suffered the extreme penalty during the reign of Tiberius at the hands of one of our procurators, Pontius Pilatus..."

Tacitus, Annals 15.44 (c. AD 116)



Coins struck under Pontius Pilate



The Pilate Stone

Found 1961

At Caesarea Maritima, the Roman capital of Judea, where Pilate governed

The inscription

"[Pon]tius Pilatus ... [Praef]ectus Iuda[ea]e": Pontius Pilate, Prefect of Judea (AD 26–36)

Why it matters

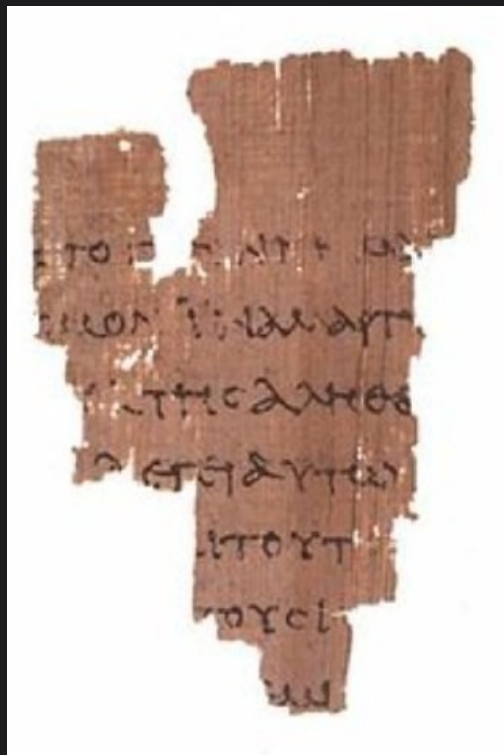
The first inscription with Pilate's name, carved in his lifetime. It confirms his title: prefect.

Where it is now

The Israel Museum, Jerusalem



P52: the earliest Gospel fragment



DATE

2nd century

c. AD 100–150 by its first editor;
some scholars now say up to c. 200

THE FRAGMENT

- Credit-card size, from a codex (book)
- Bought in Egypt, 1920; published 1935
- John Rylands Library, Manchester

WHAT IT RECORDS: JOHN 18:31–33, 37–38

Jesus on trial before Pilate:

Pilate asks, "Are you the King of the Jews?" Jesus answers, "You say that I am a king. For this purpose I was born..." Pilate: "I find no guilt in him."

Within decades of John being written, copies of Jesus' trial before Pilate were already circulating in Egypt. The Pilate Stone confirms he governed Judea at the time.

“Not one stone shall be left”

*“Do you not see all these things?
Assuredly, I say to you, not one stone
shall be left here upon another, that shall
not be thrown down.”*

Matthew 24:2

This stone from the Temple Mount enclosure was likely thrown from the southwest corner during the brutal siege of AD 70.



Textual absolutism: the other ditch

Insisting that only one manuscript tradition, one translation or one translation method is the true Word of God.



One translation

KJV-Onlyism: the 1611 King James is the only true English Bible



One Greek text

Textus Receptus only: Erasmus's 1516 text, built from a handful of late manuscripts



One method

Only word-for-word translations count, though every version translates for meaning

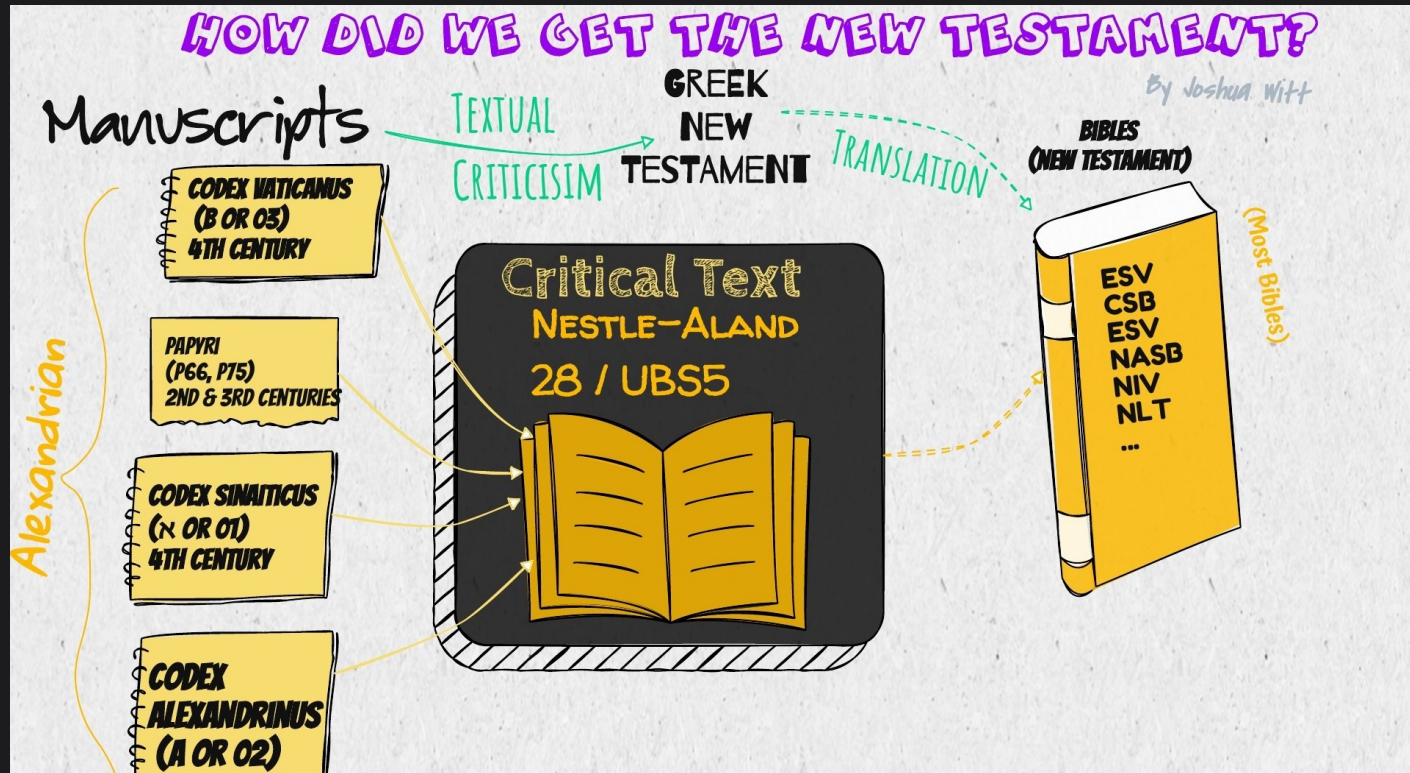
THE KJV TRANSLATORS THEMSELVES DISAGREED

"The very meanest translation of the Bible in English ... containeth the word of God, nay, is the word of God."

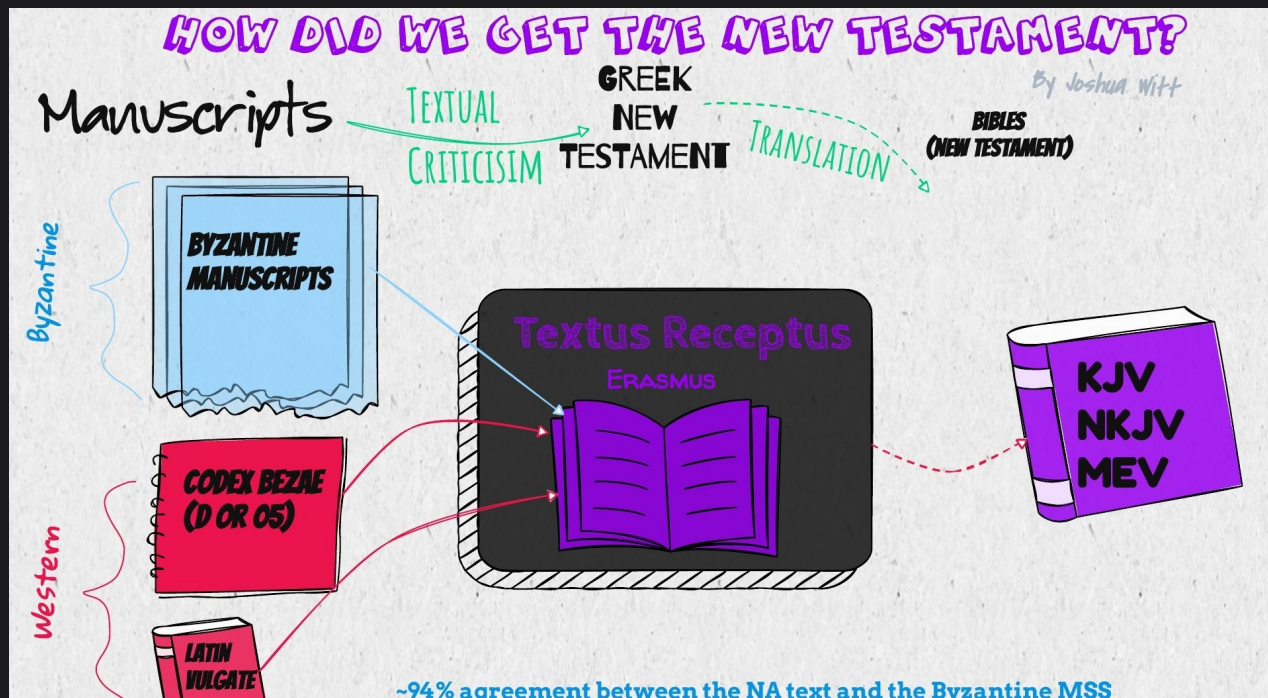
"The Translators to the Reader," preface to the King James Version (1611)

"We have an embarrassment of riches in our English Bible translations." Mark Ward, Authorized (2018) author, blog post 2015

How did we get the New Testament?



The Byzantine and Western lines



~94% agreement between the Nestle-Aland text and the Byzantine manuscripts

Translation carries meaning, not just words

GERMAN

Wie viel Uhr
ist es?



WORD FOR WORD

How much
clock is it?



MEANING

What time is
it?

Uhr (clock) is “removed” and **time** is “added”, yet nothing is lost: that is the only accurate translation. Word for word would be wrong. Translation is about meaning, and it is complex.

“Every version gives priority to meaning over form.”

“Every version uses interpretation when translating ambiguities.”

Dave Brunn, *One Bible, Many Versions: Are All Translations Created Equal?* (IVP, 2013), pp. 189–90

Same story, different words

The Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke) often tell the same event in different words. Mounce explains why:

Translation

Jesus spoke Aramaic; the Gospels are written in Greek

Simplification

Writers summarized and compressed long accounts

Paraphrase

The very voice of Jesus, not always his very words

Approximation

Round numbers and general descriptions

"GET UP, TAKE YOUR MAT AND GO HOME"

Gospel	"Mat"	"Go"
Matthew 9:6	klinē: a bed or couch	hypage
Mark 2:11	krabattos: a mattress, a poor person's bed	hypage
Luke 5:24	klinidion: a small bed, like a stretcher	poreuou

Different words, the same meaning: all three are rightly translated "take your mat and go home."

By the numbers

5,800+

Greek manuscripts of the New Testament

1,000×

more manuscript data than the average classical author

< 1%

of 400,000 variants both change the meaning and could be original

1 million+

New Testament quotations in the church fathers

1,000 yrs

older: Dead Sea Isaiah scrolls, over 95% word for word the same

Decades

from John's Gospel to its earliest copy, P52; 500+ years for classical authors

≈ 5 yrs

from the crucifixion to the creed Paul records in 1 Corinthians 15

500+

witnesses to the risen Jesus, most still alive when Paul wrote

4,190

languages with at least some Scripture

Treated like any other historical book, it is neither a fairy tale nor just another book.