Is the New Testament True?
Do we Have an Accurate Copy?

"It cannot be too strongly asserted that in substance the text of the Bible is certain: Especially is the case with the New Testament."
— SIR FREDERICK KENYON

MEMORY VERSE

For the king knows about these matters, and I speak to him also with confidence, since I am persuaded that none of these things escape his notice; for this has not been done in a corner. (Acts 26:26).

FOR REVIEW:

Why is it important to establish the existence of a theistic God before trying to discover if the New Testament documents are true?

Here's a summary:
For the Bible to be true, truth must exist. The Bible can't be true if there is no truth. (Of course, if there is no truth then anything that atheists say isn't true either!) We saw that it's self-defeating to claim that there is no truth. Truth exists and we can know it.

For the Bible to be true, God must exist. There can't be a Word from God if there is no God. We established that a theistic God exists from the Cosmological, Teleological, and Moral Arguments (and there are several other arguments for God as well).

For the Bible to be true, miracles must be possible. We have shown that miracles are not only possible, the greatest miracle in the Bible has already occurred (see Genesis 1:1) and we have scientific and philosophical evidence for it.

REVIEW OF THE CONCLUSIONS FROM THE EVIDENCE SO FAR:

1. Does Truth Exist? Yes, it's self defeating to say it doesn't.
2. Does God Exist? Yes, as evidenced by the:
    a. Beginning of the universe (Cosmological Argument)

b. Design of the universe (Teleological Argument/Anthropic Principle)
c. Design of life (Teleological Argument)
d. Moral Law (Moral Argument)

3. Are Miracles Possible? Yes, since God exists miracles are possible. In fact, the greatest miracle—the creation of the universe out of nothing—has already occurred.

Our task now is to discover if any other miracles since the creation have occurred. That will tell us which theistic religion, if any, is true. Is it Judaism, Christianity, Islam or some other theism? For this, we begin with a look at the New Testament documents.

TWO QUESTIONS

There are two questions we need to investigate to discover if the New Testament documents are reliable history:

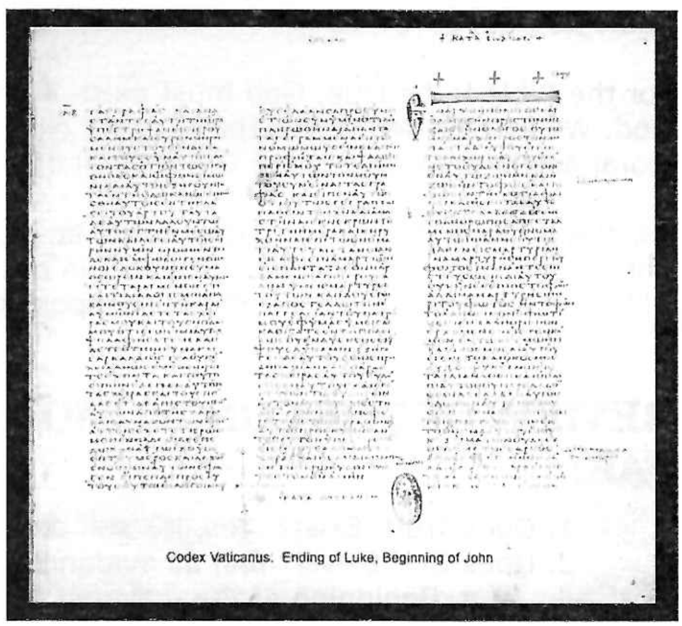
1. Do we have an accurate copy of the original New Testament documents?
2. Do the original New Testament documents tell the truth?

In this lesson, we will address only the first question.

DO WE HAVE AN ACCURATE COPY?

1. Briefly explain how well scholars can reconstruct the original New Testament documents from the manuscript copies.

Codex Vaticanus, end of Luke
4th Century



FASCINATING FACTS ABOUT THE NEW TESTAMENT MANUSCRIPTS:

- If you were to stack the manuscript copies of an average ancient author (e.g. Josephus), the stack would be about four feet high. If you were to stack just the Greek manuscript copies of the New Testament, the stack would be over one mile high!
- There are over 2.6 million pages of New Testament manuscripts that have been discovered, and more are being discovered regularly.
- While many manuscripts are fragments of a page, the average New Testament manuscript is over 475 pages long!
- We have found 43 percent of the verses in the New Testament in manuscripts that date before 225 AD.

2. Some messages may get distorted when passed orally from one person to another. Why does this problem not affect the New Testament documents?

3. Why might the loss of the original documents actually help preserve what the original documents said?

4. In reconstructing the New Testament documents, what is the nature of the variants and what do they affect? How many essential Christian beliefs are in question?

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

Skeptic Bart Ehrman, Misquoting Jesus, 252.

MISQUOTING JESUS OR MISQUOTING EHRMAN?

Scholars use the thousands of New Testament manuscripts to reconstruct the original New Testament. Despite some minor differences between manuscripts, it is easy in most places to see what the original said. None of the areas of the text that are in question affect any major doctrine of Christianity. This is well accepted by most New Testament scholars.

Despite this, UNC Chapel Hill Professor Bart Ehrman made quite a name for himself as a critic of the New Testament documents. In 2005, the conclusions he drew in his popular bestselling book, *Misquoting Jesus*, cast doubt on whether we can accurately reconstruct the original New Testament documents. This put Dr. Ehrman at odds with most New Testament scholars—liberal and conservative—who have long agreed we can reconstruct the original accurately.

But Dr. Ehrman only appears to be at odds with most everyone else. Once you read his academic work and the appendix of the paperback edition of *Misquoting Jesus*, you'll get a different story.

For that, we need a little background. Bruce Metzger of Princeton University, who was the greatest manuscript scholar of the last century, mentored Bart Ehrman. In fact, Ehrman dedicated *Misquoting Jesus* to Dr. Metzger. The problem is that Metzger disagrees with the conclusions Ehrman draws in that book. But it gets even more odd. In 2005, the same year Dr. Ehrman published *Misquoting Jesus*, he helped Dr. Metzger update and revise the classic work on the topic—Metzger's *The Text of the New Testament*. What do Metzger and Ehrman conclude together in that revised work? That the New Testament documents can be reconstructed accurately! In fact, Dr. Ehrman admits this in an interview found in the appendix of the paperback edition of *Misquoting Jesus* (pg. 252):

> *Bruce Metzger is one of the great scholars of modern times, and I dedicated the book to him because he was both my inspiration for going into textual criticism and the person who trained me in the field. I have nothing but respect and admiration for him. And even though we may disagree on important religious questions—he is a firmly committed Christian and I*

am not—we are in complete agreement on a number of very important historical and textual questions. If he and I were put in a room and asked to hammer out a consensus statement on what we think the original text of the New Testament probably looked like, there would be very few points of disagreement—maybe one or two dozen places out of many thousands. The position I argue for in "Misquoting Jesus" does not actually stand at odds with Prof. Metzger's position that the essential Christian beliefs are not affected by textual variants in the manuscript tradition of the New Testament.

This brings up several questions. Why does Dr. Ehrman come to opposite conclusions about the New Testament documents in two different books in the same year? (Maybe *Misquoting Jesus* should be called Misquoting Ehrman!) Why does he give one impression to the general public and the opposite to the academic world? Could it be because he can get away with casting doubt on the New Testament to an uninformed public, but not to his academic peers? Does selling books have anything to do with it? And why does he later say in the paperback edition of *Misquoting Jesus* that he really does agree that the New Testament documents can be reconstructed?

We don't know the answers to all of these questions, but we find this basic inconsistency quite telling—the man who gets all the attention for casting doubt on the text of the Bible, upon further review, doesn't really doubt it himself. Neither should you.

5. If someone were to say to you that Bart Ehrman thinks we cannot reconstruct the New Testament documents accurately, how would you respond?

6. When people say things contrary to Christianity, it is not your job to refute what they say but their job to support it. So if someone were to say, "the New Testament can't be reliable because it's been changed throughout the centuries," how would you answer that person? (Remember the three questions we talked about earlier: the first two ask for clarification and evidence from the person, and the third is your opportunity to offer the truth.)

SUMMING IT ALL UP

We do have an accurate copy of the original New Testament documents. To help you in your discussions, remember the following:

- We have about 5,700 copies of the New Testament manuscripts—much more than anything from the ancient world (Homer, Plato, Tacitus, etc.). As a result, we can reconstruct the original with great accuracy. Those 5,700 are just the Greek copies—there are thousands more in other languages.
- There are over 36,000 quotations of the scriptures from the early church fathers (1st and 2nd centuries) which can be used to aid in the reconstruction of the text.
- Most of the supposed "errors" in the biblical manuscripts turn out to be spelling and word order differences, none of which affect a single doctrine of the Christian faith. Even the skeptic Bart Ehrman, author of *Misquoting Jesus* agrees with this.

TOOLBOX

- Search You Tube for Greg Koukl and Dr. Dan Wallace: *Newly Discovered New Testament Documents*.

- *The Basics of New Testament Textual Criticism* by Dr. Daniel B. Wallace found at http://csntm.org/ or iTunes U.

- For a great visual overview of many biblical topics get *The Rose Book of Bible Charts, Maps, and Time Lines Volumes 1 and 2* by Rose Publishing (available at www.impactapologetics.com).