

Are the New Testament Documents Reliable?

From time to time, usually around Christmas or Easter, there is the announcement of a so called “lost gospel” that the media presents as a challenge to the historical, orthodox belief about the divinity of Jesus of Nazareth. Often there is a sudden splash of attention to the document in question with the presumption that it credibly challenges the foundation of Christianity.

One of the more popular attempts to discredit Christianity was by author Dan Brown in his novel (and subsequent movie) *The Da Vinci Code*. Brown’s basic plot was that the Christian Church has been engaged in a massive cover-up about Jesus, who really wasn’t the Divine Son of God. According to Brown’s theory, none of Jesus’ early followers believed him to be the Divine Son of God. The New Testament documents, especially the four Gospels, are largely fictional legends and put on the public by the political winners. According to Brown, the Emperor Constantine decreed Jesus divine and chose the four Gospels in the NT from among eighty gospels, because these four were the most supernatural. In choosing these four, he and the Catholic Church leaders there after hid every gospel that presented Jesus as simply an ordinary man.ⁱ Near the end of the book, the key figure (played by Tom Hanks in the movie) says – “Sophie, every faith in the world is based on fabrication. That is the definition of faith – acceptance of that which we imagine to be true, that which we cannot prove.”

This quote expresses the classic concept of faith in our time. One’s faith is not based on anything concrete, but rather one’s imagination. Brown’s novel and movie raise the question: is the Christian faith really based on a fabrication? Did Jesus of Nazareth remain dead rather than resurrected as the early church proclaimed? Peter contends that he and the early disciples “did not follow cleverly invented stories when we told you about the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eye witnesses of his majesty” (2 Peter 1:16). Luke claims to have carefully investigated the claim of Jesus’ resurrection and presents it as a fact of history (Luke 1:1-4). Were Peter, Luke and the other apostles wrong in their claims of Jesus’ resurrection?

The popularity of Brown’s novel and movie, as well as other books, raise the question of the historic reliability of the four Gospels as well as the rest of the New Testament documents.ⁱⁱ After all, Christianity is not merely a philosophy or ethical system, but the announcement of a historical fact: God raised Jesus of Nazareth bodily from the dead thereby declaring Jesus to be the Jewish Messiah and the Son of God (Rom. 1:1-5; 1 Cor. 15: 1-8). New Testament scholar F.F. Bruce expresses the importance of historical reliability to Christianity as follows:

For the Christian gospel is not primarily a code of ethics or a metaphysical system; it is first and foremost good news, and as such it was proclaimed by its earliest preachers. True, they called Christianity ‘The Way’ and ‘The Life’; but Christianity as a way of life depends upon the acceptance of Christianity as good news. And this good news is intimately bound up with the historical order, for it tells how for the world’s redemption God entered history, the eternal came into time, the kingdom of heaven invaded the

*realm of earth, in the great events of the incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection of Jesus the Christ. The first recorded words of our Lord's public preaching in Galilee are: 'The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has drawn near; repent and believe the good news.'*ⁱⁱⁱ

As Bruce rightly observes, the truth of Christianity depends on an alleged event in history: was Jesus of Nazareth really resurrected by God as the early Christians claimed? The original source documents for these claims are the 27 books of the New Testament. Therefore, a key question is whether the New Testament documents are credible and reliable?

I intend to address briefly three important questions about the New Testament. First, how did the Church come to recognize the 27 books that make up our New Testament as authoritative and distinctive from other literature? Second, are the four Gospels reliable eye witnesses to the historical Jesus? Third, given the reality that we do not have any of the original 27 documents of our New Testament, can we trust the copies to accurately represent what the original authors wrote?

I. The Formation of the New Testament Canon – Why These 27 Books?

The word “canon” (Gk: *kanon*) originally meant “reed,” but in the course of time came to have the formal sense of “list” or “table.” During the first 3 centuries in the church, it came to refer to the normative doctrinal and ethical content of the Christian faith. By the 4th century it came to refer to the list of books that constitute the Old and New Testaments as authoritative Scripture.^{iv}

A. The Precedent of the Hebrew Canon

Before looking at the data to answer this question, it's important to recognize that the idea of a canon (closed list of books) or authoritative Scripture was already established before the 1st century A.D. The establishment of the OT canon served as a model for the formation of the NT canon.

There is evidence from Josephus, a late first-century Jewish historian, that the tri-partite division of the Hebrew canon (the law, prophets & writings) was commonplace in the first century A.D., and there are many references by Jesus and the apostles to this identifiable group of authoritative books called Scripture. While opinions vary over the date of the closing of the OT canon, the evidence suggests that the OT canon may have been established as early as 500 B.C., but no later than the 1st century B.C.^v

When one reads the New Testament, there is a remarkable continuity with the plot line of the Hebrew Scriptures. The Hebrew Scriptures tell of the history of ancient Israel, its relationship with God, and the ways in which God wants his people to live.^{vi} However, the Hebrew Scriptures end with most of their prophecies unfulfilled. The Hebrew canon remained an open-ended narrative awaiting its long-promised Messiah. Therefore, it was natural for Christians to

compile and add their list of uniquely sacred Scriptures to the OT Scriptures as what they believed to be the divinely intended fulfillment of the story of God's dealings with humanity.^{vii}

B. The Rise of Heresy & Persecution

In addition to the precedent of the canon of the Hebrew Scriptures (what Christians call the Old Testament), the necessity of a New Testament canon was motivated by the rise of heresy in the early church. In particular, Marcion, who rejected the entire OT and accepted only the highly edited edition of Luke plus his edition of ten letters of Paul, was the source of the first list to be identified as a closed canon. The Montanist movement, which sought to elevate the voice of prophecy to a level of supreme authority in the church, also served to force the church to make public decisions as to the standard of orthodoxy. The infiltration of Gnosticism into the church required a close evaluation of ideas and their fidelity to the Gospel. Finally, the rise and intensity of persecution by the Roman Empire motivated the early church to identify which writings were authoritative and worth dying for.

C. The Process of Canonization

The NT contains hints of the beginnings of a process of collecting authorized documents. Jesus promised the Holy Spirit would cause the disciples to remember his teaching (John 14:26), testify further about him (John 15:26), and lead them into all truth (John 16:13). In 1 Timothy 5:18, Paul references Deuteronomy 25:4 and Luke 10:7 both as scripture indicating the existence of the gospel of Luke as a recognized authoritative document. In 2 Peter 3:15-16 Peter shows an awareness of a collection of Paul's letters and comparing them to "other scriptures." Like Paul, Peter was martyred in the mid-to-late sixties, so we have a fairly early indication that a collection of Paul's writings were informally canonized.

By the first half of the second century, the writings of the Apostolic Fathers such as Clement, Ignatius, and Polycarp all quote and allude to a broad cross-section of the writings that would become the New Testament. In the late second century, the Muratorian Canon reflected the view of the church and contained a list very close to our New Testament.^{viii} Irenaeus takes for granted that all Christians recognize the four Gospels and only those four.

Our most important source for determining a closed list of recognized books is Eusebius of Caesarea (260-340), whose views were largely indebted to the Alexandrian fathers Clement and Origen. Eusebius deploys a tripartite classification: the recognized books, the disputed books, and the books put forward by heretics in the name of the apostles but rejected as unorthodox. In the first category, Eusebius includes the four gospels, Acts, fourteen Pauline epistles (including Hebrews knowing the church in Rome did not view Hebrews to be Pauline), 1 Peter, 1 John, and the Apocalypse. The disputed books Eusebius divided into those generally accepted (James, Jude, 2 Peter, and 2-3 John) and those that are not genuine (Acts of Paul, Shepherd of Hermas, Apocalypse of Peter, Epistle of Barnabas, and the Didache). The third category of heretical writings includes gospels such as those of Peter and Thomas, acts of Andrew and John and similar writings.^{ix}

The first list that includes all and only the 27 books of our NT is that of the Easter letter by Athanasius in 367. The Councils of Hippo (393) and Carthage (397), both in North Africa, more formally ratified the recognition of these 27 books.^x While the dates of an actual *closed* canon may not be established until the 4th century, we should not miss the fact that the early church Fathers were widely recognizing and using the same New Testament books (as compared with other sources). When we read their correspondence, we see them mentioning all of our 27 NT books as having the authority of Scripture before they attempted to actually compile a canonical list (see Clement of Rome's first letter; martyred in 100 A.D.).

These facts undercut Dan Brown's fiction that Constantine convened the Council of Nicaea in 325 to decide which books belonged to the New Testament. The Council of Nicaea had nothing to do with deciding which books belonged in the NT canon. Instead, it formulated the doctrine of the Trinity. Moreover, the early second century references to undisputed books indicate the process of identification happened much earlier.

It is important to observe that when the canon was being recognized, there was no ecclesiastical machinery like the medieval pope to enforce decisions. Nevertheless, the worldwide church almost universally came to accept the same 27 books. It was not so much that the church selected the canon as that canon selected itself. It's been frequently said among scholars:

The fact that substantially the whole church came to recognize the same twenty-seven books as canonical is remarkable when it is remembered that the result was not contrived. All that the several churches throughout the Empire could do was to witness to their own experience with the documents and share whatever knowledge they might have about their origin and character. When consideration is given to the diversity in cultural backgrounds and in orientation to the essentials of the Christian faith within the churches, their common agreement about which books belonged to the New Testament serves to suggest that this final decision did not originate solely on a human level.^{xi}

The fact that the early Church largely recognized the same documents as genuine and authoritative raises the question of criteria. The early church leaders relied on three basic criteria in determining whether a gospel or letter made the canonical list:

1. *Apostolicity*

Did the document come from an apostle or someone in immediate contact with the apostles? This required that the document was written during the apostolic age, before the last of the Twelve (most likely John) had died. No book is more than one person removed from an apostle or an authoritative eyewitness of the life of Jesus. The church Fathers universally rejected pseudonymity as an acceptable literary category for documents bearing the authority of Scripture.

- Matthew & John are attributed to apostles, as are the epistles of Peter, John and the book of Revelation

- Mark was a traveling companion of both Peter and Paul and strong early church writings attribute Mark's Gospel to the memoirs of Peter
- Luke interviewed eyewitnesses of the life of Christ (Luke 1:1-4) and traveled with Paul
- James and Jude were both half brothers of Jesus
- The author of Hebrews was probably a follower of Paul

2. *Catholicity (universal)*

Did the documents enjoy widespread and continuous acceptance and usage by churches everywhere? Believers throughout the world to which Christianity had spread were in agreement on the abiding value of these books and used them widely. The books accepted into the NT canon were never found among only a sect within Christianity or used in a small corner of the Christian world.

3. *Orthodoxy*

Was the teaching of the books faithful to the teachings of Jesus and the apostles? Did the contents of the document conform to the "rule of faith," i.e. the Christian truth recognized as normative in the churches? Both Paul (Gal. 1:8-9; Col. 2:8f; 1 Tim. 6:3f) and John (1 & 2 John) were already combating the roots of heresy. In the writings of Ignatius (a disciple of the apostle John), there is considerable concern to distinguish the true from the false.

When we recognize these three criteria, we see why so many of the controversial documents do not merit any serious consideration to be included in the New Testament. They all fail each of these criteria. Craig Blomberg states:

Good arguments, adopted by a wide swath of liberal and conservative scholars alike, date all of the books accepted into the New Testament to the first century or, in the case of one or two books, perhaps to the very earliest years of the second century. The next oldest Christian writers, the so-called Apostolic Fathers, which date mostly from the first half of the second century, are largely orthodox in their doctrine. Only beginning in the second half of the second century does literature begin to emerge of a very different kind, and it presupposes the earlier existence and widespread usage of the New Testament documents. The most fanciful and unorthodox documents do not emerge until the third through the fifth centuries, and then only in a small percentage of the totality of the Christian literature written in those centuries.^{xii}

D. Excluded Gnostic Texts

We started out by acknowledging that there are, from time to time, attempts made by someone to present a document that somehow shows the early Church's process of canonization was corrupt. Usually this involves the presentation of a gnostic gospel. These are writings obviously produced by someone from within the sect of Gnosticism, a

philosophy that rejected the material realm as evil and believed in “secret knowledge” (Gk: *gnosis* = *knowledge*).

When one reads these texts, it’s obvious that one is reading something very different from our four Gospels in the New Testament. Most involve long, rambling discourses attributed to Jesus, supposedly given to one or more of his followers secretly after the resurrection, teaching about the nature of creation and the heavenly worlds, with all sorts of esoteric cosmological speculation.^{xiii}

The only post – New Testament gnostic text that is worth any serious consideration is the Coptic *Gospel of Thomas*. It’s the only gnostic text ever found on any ancient canonical list of recommended books, and then only once. Its composition dates back to the late second century. As with the other gnostic texts, it is not a narrative covering the public ministry of Jesus. In fact, it does not contain any narrative, but only 114 largely unconnected sayings attributed to Jesus.^{xiv}

One saying from the *Gospel of Thomas* will serve to highlight its radically different theology from our four canonical Gospels:

Simon Peter said to them, “Let Mary leave us, for women are not worthy of Life.” Jesus said, “I myself shall lead her in order to make her male, so that she too may become a living spirit resembling you males. For every woman who will make herself male will enter the Kingdom of Heaven.”^{xv}

E. New Scripture in a Much Later Era

How should we respond to claims by Muslims or Mormons when they have added large collections of further “revelation” centuries after the New Testament? Might not the Qur’an (7th century) or the Book of Mormon (19th century) function as a third testament of sorts? If the New Testament fulfills the Old Testament, could God not later want to change things again, with still fuller and more perfect revelation?^{xvi}

The question is better asked as what has God already disclosed about his purposes in our existing Scripture? The New Testament is not open-ended in the way the Old Testament is. In Jesus’ life, death, resurrection, and ascension, followed by the sending of the Spirit at Pentecost, Christians claimed that God had accomplished all that was necessary for the salvation of the world. All that remained was the church’s fulfillment of the Great Commission and the return of Jesus Christ to consummate God’s Kingdom on earth (Matthew 28:18-20).

The only way for Muslims and Mormons to justify their collection of “divinely inspired” literature is to claim one of two things. First, the existing texts of the New Testament are corrupt and originally taught something radically different (the typical Muslim claim).

Second, that entire books were left out of the canon that God originally gave to his people (the typical Mormon claim). However, there is no historical evidence to support either of these claims.

II. **Can We Trust the Gospels as Eye Witness Testimony?**^{xvii}

As we saw in the previous section, the four New Testament Gospels were chosen, because they were connected either directly or indirectly to the apostles. These written Gospels were believed to be based on the eye witness testimony of the apostles to the life, death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth.

At this point, it's probably wise to anticipate the objection of the skeptic that may be coming as I assume that material in the Gospels is accurate. The question to be answered is this: Is it more probable than not that the content of these four Gospels originate from the personal testimony of the apostles? Since we cannot cross examine the apostles, we are left to do our best to consider all the evidence. To the skeptic I suggest that you approach this as you would a scientific experiment in which the aim is to test a hypothesis. Let's start with the hypothesis that the Gospels actually do contain eye witness testimony and see where the weight of the evidence takes us.

A. The Reliability of Oral Testimony

What should we make of the fact that these four Gospels were not actually written until several years after the events they report. The majority of scholars date the Gospels as follows:

- Matthew (original Aramaic version in the early 60s; the Greek translation 75 – 85 AD)
- Mark (65 – 75 AD)
- Luke (65 – 85 AD)
- John (75 – 95 AD)

Assuming that our New Testament documents are reliable, here's what we know about the order of events leading to our written Gospels:

- Jesus traveled throughout Israel claiming to act and speak directly for God and proclaiming and demonstrating the good news of God's rule entering history in himself. As we would expect, this created quite a reaction among the people;
- After Jesus was crucified and resurrected from the dead, he delegated his authority to his apostles to preach and teach in his Name;
- From the time of his resurrection onward, a consistent oral tradition (account) of his crucifixion and resurrection emerged from the eye witnesses. This oral tradition also included various stories of Jesus' miracles and teaching. This oral tradition was passed on to new converts;
- As churches formed, new converts needed instruction and encouragement in the faith, which came through personal visits and letters of the apostles;

- As the apostles and other eye witnesses began to die and false teaching emerged, the church recognized the need for the Jesus stories to be written down. These writings became the four New Testament Gospels;
- The four New Testament Gospels were being read in their current form by A.D. 100. These four Gospels have always been universally accepted by the church as the most reliable eye witness accounts of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth.

In our time, we have a difficult time believing in the reliability of oral stories of Jesus being passed down accurately. However, we should be careful not to read our experiences back into the first century. In fact, written records were secondary to spoken narratives, and people were more likely to memorize what happened than write it down. One ancient orator said, "For my part, I think we should not write anything down which we do not intend to commit to memory."^{xviii}

This commitment to memorizing oral teaching was particularly strong in the Jewish community of Jesus' time. Rabbis would teach in rhythmic, repetitive patterns so that their students could memorize key truths. In this way, the rabbis' oral teachings were able to remain consistent from one generation to the next. Philo, a famous Jewish philosopher, described this process: "[The leaders] instruction proceeds in a leisurely manner; he lingers over it and spins it out with repetitions, thus permanently imprinting the thoughts in the souls of the hearers."^{xix}

For decades the stories of Jesus were passed along orally in this tradition. Nevertheless, there came a time when the eye witness testimony of the apostles needed to be preserved. For a time, both the oral stories were passed along with the written Gospels. One can see the strong reliance on the oral stories in a quote by Papias near the end of the first century:

If anyone who had served the elders came, I asked about their sayings in detail – what, according to the elders, Andrew or Peter said, or what was said by Philip or Thomas or James or John or Matthew or any other of the Lord's followers. ...For I perceived that what was to be obtained from books would not profit me as much as what came from the living and surviving voices.^{xx}

B. Connecting the Written Manuscripts to the Apostles

Since we do not have the original manuscripts of the Gospels, how can we know that our four Gospels were actually connected to an apostle? Can we reasonably know that the Gospels bearing the names of Matthew and John actually came from those men? Can we reasonably know that Mark's material comes from the eye witness accounts of Peter or that Luke's Gospel comes from Paul?

Here's what we do know:

- There was a common practice in the ancient world for titling books with the author's name first followed by a brief description of the book's contents. For example, the title of Flavius Josephus's history of the Jewish wars was "Flavius Josephus, Historical

Investigation of Jewish Conflict.^{xxi} Hence, it would not be uncommon for an apostle's name to be associated with a written Gospel they wrote.

- When titles were attached to ancient books, they often took the form of tags sewn to the edges of documents. Over the centuries, these tags could have been lost.
- Although the precise titles of various manuscripts vary from place to place, they are always connected to the same apostolic author. Despite the fact that there was no centrally recognized authority among Christians, the apostle's names were consistently connected to the same Gospel manuscripts regardless of geographical location.
- Papias, writing around A.D. 100 but referring to A.D. 80, affirms the apostle Matthew as the source of our Gospel and Peter as the source of Mark's Gospel;
- Irenaeus of Lyons linked each New Testament Gospel to an eye witness of the resurrected Jesus;
- Justin, writing in Rome around A.D. 150 attributed Mark's Gospel to the recollections of Peter;
- Around A.D. 200 Tertullian of Carthage affirmed the same saying:
 - We present as our first position, that the Gospel testimony has apostles for its authors, to whom the Lord himself assigned the position of propagating the Gospel. There are also some that, though not apostles, are apostolic – they do not stand alone; they appear with and after the apostles. ...So, John and Matthew, of the apostles, first instill faith into us while the apostolic writers Luke and Mark renew it afterwards. ...Never mind that there occurs some variation in the order of their narratives, as long as there is agreement in essential matters of faith.^{xxii}

Hence, there is a consistent strand of Christian testimony from the first century onward that ties the truth of the New Testament Gospels to eye witness testimony. If the Gospels were written sometime between A.D. 50 and 100 as most scholars believe, at least some of the people who walked and talked with Jesus must have been alive when the first Gospels were written. Writing to the Corinthians two decades after Jesus' death, the apostle Paul said, "[The Lord] was seen by more than five hundred brothers at once, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep [died]" (1 Corinthians 15:6).

Based on the facts, it is reasonable to conclude that it is more probable than not that our Gospels are actually based on the eye witness testimony of the apostles and other early disciples of Jesus. Certainly a skeptic must admit that there is no clear evidence to the contrary. When we also consider that virtually all of the original apostles, Paul and many of the early Christians were martyred for their testimony about Jesus, it raises the question of the probability that they were all delusional or willingly died for a lie.

III. Can We Really Have Confidence That We Know What the Original Author's wrote?

The fact is that we do not have a single original manuscript of any of our 27 New Testament documents. Moreover, it is true that scholars estimate there are 200,000 to 400,000 textual variants spread over more than 25,000 Greek manuscripts.^{xxiii} Given this reality, can we trust the copies to accurately represent what the original authors wrote? How does one know what the original authors such as Matthew, Mark or Paul actually wrote?

Before we seek to answer this question, let's consider why we have any variants in the 25,000 Greek manuscripts of our New Testament documents.^{xxiv} In the first century, the church kept its sacred writings in a book chest. Initially, the Jewish Scriptures, as well as the writings of the apostles, circulated as scrolls (strips of parchment or papyrus rolled around a stick). In the late first century, these writings began to take the form of stacks of papyri folded and bound to form a codex, the ancestor of the modern book. A particular church's codices would have been copies made by copyists or scribes. These were simply Christians who were capable of writing. At some point, probably in the 2d century, churches in major cities established official groups of copyists to duplicate the Christian Scriptures. We know that these copyists took their jobs very seriously yet there were mistakes made, and sometimes the changes were intentional.^{xxv} Occasionally, a copyists did change a word or add words on purpose to clarify something that seemed vague to them. However, these changes actually introduced variants between the various texts.

The field of study that attempts to determine the original author's words when there are variants in the existing manuscripts is called textual criticism. The task of the textual critic is to look closely at the copies of the ancient documents to determine which copy is closest to the original document. The basic premise of the textual critic is that it's impossible for all the copyists to have made the same mistake at the same time. It's possible to compare several manuscripts to discover when and where the error occurred. The textual critic can then, in most cases, figure out the original wording of a text.

New Testament scholars have over 25,000 Greek manuscripts with which they work to determine the original author's words. How does this compare to the comparable evidence for other works of antiquity? In the ancient Mediterranean world, Homer's *Illiad* and *Odyssey* were by far the most treasured documents outside of the Christian Bible, and they were put into writing 800 years before the New Testament. Nevertheless, we have only 2,500 manuscripts of those works put together.^{xxvi}

Every English translation of the Bible alerts the reader to particular textual variants. Usually the footnotes will include another possibility and explain why scholars believe the wording in your Bible is most likely the words of the original author. A typical English translation of the New Testament will include 200 – 300 variants in its footnotes, averaging about one per chapter of various books.^{xxvii}

If there are so many textual variants, why does the typical English New Testament only reference 200 – 300 of them? The answer is found in the fact that a super majority (97%) of the variants are simply not significant. Biblical scholars work from one of two recognized Greek New Testaments. These two Greek New Testaments include less than 3% of the variants, because the rest are insignificant.^{xxviii}

Of all the textual variants in the New Testament manuscripts, the only passages involving more than two verses are Mark 16:9-20 and John 7:53 – 8:11, and every English translation identifies these verses. There are about two dozen passages that involve as many as 1 – 2 verses. All of the rest of the variants affect less than a single verse, usually just a few words. The vast majority of the textual variants are wholly uninteresting except to specialists in the field of textual criticism. Craig Blomberg states:

Less than 3 percent of them [variants] are significant enough to be presented in one of our two standard critical editions of the Greek New Testament. Only about a tenth of 1 percent are interesting enough to make their way into footnotes in most English translations. It cannot be emphasized strongly enough that *no orthodox doctrine or ethical practice of Christianity depends solely on any disputed wording*. There are always undisputed passages one can consult that teach the same truths.^{xxix}

The vast majority of the variants in the New Testament are not even noticeable when the text is translated into another language. In fact, more than 99 % of the possible 400,000 variants fall into this category of virtually unnoticeable variants. Of the remaining 1% of the variants, only a few have any significance for interpreting a biblical text. As Blomberg says above, none of the differences affect any central belief of the Christian faith.^{xxx}

Sir Frederic Kenyon, former director of the British Museum, once commented concerning the Gospels:

The interval between the dates of the original composition and the earliest extant evidence is so small as to be 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.^{xxxi}

IV. Conclusion

I hope I have presented enough information for you to have confidence in the reliability of the New Testament documents. Certainly one does not need to be embarrassed by this conviction, and the fact is there is no significant basis for denying the reliability of these documents. In the endnotes I have referenced first rate Biblical scholars, who write in great detail defending the reliability of the New Testament documents. I encourage you to pursue further study if you still have doubts. It remains a critically important fact that Christianity stands on the alleged resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth.

Having put forth the factual basis above, it also remains true that Christianity offers a personal relationship with the Living God through His Son Jesus Christ. If in fact Jesus is alive then he

cannot be known personally at arms - length. At some point after the research has been done, one must actually come to Jesus personally to know if he's really alive. One must eventually step out of the research lab or library and ask Jesus to make himself real as Savior and Lord. I hope you will do just this. It is my prayer for you.

ⁱ Some will say that mentioning *The Da Vinci Code* is unfair since Brown intended it to be a work of fiction. But in an interview with bookreporter.com, Brown was asked how much of the book is based on fact to which he responded "all of it." However, when he's confronted with the many factual errors in the book, he retreats to the defense that he's just writing a novel. In an interview with *USA Today* (May 12-14, 2006), Brown responded that the book and movie are "a quiet invitation to think about faith, religion and history with a fresh, open-minded perspective." It should also be noted that Brown based his novel on the 1982 book by Pierre Plantard titled *Holy Blood, Holy Grail*. Plantard admitted under oath in a French Court that he had invented the whole scheme and the fraudulent documents upon which his book was based.

My aim is not to present a detailed response to *The Da Vinci Code*, but to present it as a popular example of how our culture has come to be highly suspicious of the Bible. For a detailed scholarly response to Brown's *The Da Vinci Code*, see *The Da Vinci Code Breaker* by Timothy Paul Jones, James Garlow, and April Williams.

ⁱⁱ Another popular attack on the credibility of the New Testament documents was written by Bart Ehrman titled *Misquoting Jesus*. Timothy Paul Jones has written a response to Ehrman titled *Misquoting Truth* (IVP 2007). For a detailed engagement with the recent challenges to the formation of the New Testament canon, see Craig L. Blomberg, *Can We Still Believe the Bible?* (2014 Brazos Press), ch.2. For a detailed study of the gospels as reliable eye witness accounts, see Craig Blomberg, *The Historical Reliability of the Gospels*, 2 ed (IVP Academic 2007) and Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses* (Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2006).

ⁱⁱⁱ F.F. Bruce, *The New Testament Documents: Are They Reliable?* p. 7 (Wilder Publications 2009).

^{iv} Carson, Moo, and Morris, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (Zondervan 1992).

^v There are numerous other writings from Second Temple Judaism, composed during the period spanning the 4th century B.C. through the 1st century A.D. that were excluded from the Hebrew canon. One collection of writings has come to be called the Old Testament Apocrypha. These works were eventually accepted into Roman Catholic and/or Eastern Orthodox canons. These works include four books describing the Maccabean period (1-4 Maccabees), historical novels (Judith & Tobit), books of proverbs or wisdom literature (Ecclesiasticus/Sirach & Wisdom of Solomon), and shorter works such as the Prayer of Manasseh and the Letter of Jeremiah. Another sixty or more books from this period have been recovered and are known as the Old Testament Pseudepigrapha because they are typically attributed to some ancient Old Testament patriarch or key figure in Jewish history who lived long before the time of the book's actual writing. With only one or two exceptions, these works never made a list of the Hebrew canon. No ecumenical (empire-wide) council ever officially declared them canonical until the Council of Trent in 1546 after Martin Luther insisted Christians return to the Bible of the Jewish Jesus and the Jewish apostles. See Craig Blomberg, *Can We Still Believe the Bible?* P.47-48.

^{vi} One of the reasons for the Jews to exclude the Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha is that their inclusion disrupts the chronological and theological unity of the Old Testament. Blomberg, p. 53.

^{vii} Blomberg, p.62.

^{viii} Carson, Moo & Morris, p. 492. The list is fragmentary, so that Matthew and Mark do not appear, but they are obviously assumed since Luke is referred to as the third gospel and John as the fourth. Luke is also recognized as the author of "the acts of the apostles." Thirteen letters are recognized as from Paul. Two epistles are attributed to John. The apocalypse is attributed to John. Jude and the epistles of Peter are included. Gnostic, Marcionite, and Montanist writings are all rejected, but the Wisdom of Solomon is accepted oddly.

^{ix} Carson, Moo & Morris, p.493.

^x Blomberg, p. 65-68.

^{xi} Carson, Moo & Morris, 494.

^{xii} Blomberg, p.44.

^{xiii} Blomberg quotes from a variety of these texts to demonstrate their literary composition and gnostic theology (p.68f).

^{xiv} Blomberg, p. 70-74. About one-third of the 114 sayings have at least a partial parallel in the canonical Gospels. About one-third of the sayings have no canonical parallel at all and are obviously gnostic. The remaining third may or may not be interpreted in an explicitly gnostic fashion.

^{xv} Blomberg, p. 73, quoting saying 114.

^{xvi} This discussion is based on Blomberg, p. 75-76.

^{xvii} The majority of this explanation is taken from *Misquoting Truth – A Guide to the Fallacies of Bart Ehrman’s Misquoting Jesus* by Timothy Paul Jones (IVP Books 2007). For a more in-depth treatment of the question, see *The Historical Reliability of the Gospels* by Craig L. Blomberg (IVP Academic 2007) and *Jesus and the Eye Witnesses* by Richard Bauckham (William B. Eerdmans Publishing 2006).

^{xviii} Jones, p. 84.

^{xix} Jones, p. 89-90.

^{xx} Jones, p. 84.

^{xxi} Jones, p. 98.

^{xxii} Jones, p. 110.

^{xxiii} Craig Blomberg, *Can We Still Believe the Bible?*, p. 16-17.

^{xxiv} This explanation is taken directly from Timothy Paul Jones, *Misquoting the Truth*, chapter 1.

^{xxv} Even a critic like Bart Ehrman concedes that the copyists were more concerned with preserving the words of Scripture than with promoting their own theological agendas. He acknowledges:

It is probably safe to say that the copying of early Christian texts was by and large a “conservative” process. The scribes...were intent on “conserving” the textual tradition they were passing on. Their ultimate concern was not to modify the tradition, but to preserve it for themselves and for those who would follow after them. Most scribes, no doubt, tried to do a faithful job in making sure the text they reproduced was the same text they inherited (quoted by Jones, p. 48).

^{xxvi} Blomberg, p. 35.

^{xxvii} Blomberg, p. 21.

^{xxviii} The United Bible Society’s 4th edition of the Greek New Testament contains 1, 438 of the most significant variants in its footnotes and presents the most important manuscript evidence for each existing reading of a disputed text. A companion volume, edited by Bruce Metzger, called *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament* explains the committee’s rationale for their choices and their levels of confidence for each choice. The 28th edition of the Nestle-Aland Greek New Testament includes about seven times as many variants as the UBS 4th edition, but the extra variants are seldom significant. Most of the extra variants involve the inclusion or omission of an article or conjunction, the inversion of a couple of words, variant spellings of words, or other minor differences. See Blomberg, p. 17.

^{xxix} Blomberg, p. 27-28. Blomberg points out that even Bart Ehrman in the appendix to the paperback edition of *Misquoting Jesus*, concedes that “essential Christian beliefs are not affected by textual variants in the manuscript tradition of the New Testament.”

^{xxx} Jones, p. 44.

^{xxxi} Quoted by Jones, p. 50.