

## ***Is the New Testament a reliable document?***

*(first draft)*

Travelling with a group of Iranian Christians yesterday, I found myself chatting to a very bright 15-year-old. He said that he liked being a Christian and he wanted to study the Bible more, “...although it has been changed over the years.”

I have just finished reading Nabeel Qureshi’s *Seeking Allah, Finding Jesus*, and he says that this is a standard assumption in Muslim cultures, that the Bible has been changed over the years, while the Quran has remained unchanged: the Quran today is exactly as it was dictated by Allah to Muhammad.<sup>1</sup> So, with Qureshi’s arguments fresh in my mind, I gave a stumbling explanation about the New Testament documents.

This morning, as I awoke, I started reviewing what I had said, and couldn’t get back to sleep (I’m getting used to this!), so I’m trying now to improve on what I said. Here’s my first written attempt to lay out what we can – and can’t – be sure of, as we approach the New Testament in 2019.

Note that I don’t have any theological or historical qualifications (unless you count a grade 9 at O level history!), so please would those of you who do have such knowledge check and correct what I’ve written? And if you help me on any of the factual details, that would be great too; then we could all benefit. Thank you.

(My missives have been going out to 34 people, 14 of whom have theological training, 8 being Rev or equivalent. Gosh, have I really been spouting to that many people who are so much more qualified than me?! Sorry. But what I’m saying is that there’s lots of you who can check this, if you would, please.)

### ***1) You’re reading a translation***

The words that we have in front of us today – to look at and learn from – are English (or Arabic) translations of the original Greek documents. [Is that right? Is all the NT written in Greek?] So if you read, say, the King James Bible and compare it with a modern translation, you’ll find that in places it seems to say different things, some of which might appear contradictory.

This is because the meaning of words changes with time. For example, some might say, “The passengers gave Paul fulsome praise for his driving of the minibus last night”, but what does that mean exactly? The OED gives two meanings for ‘fulsome’ (stress added): (1) Complimentary or *flattering* to an **excessive** degree. (2) Of large size or quantity; *generous* or **abundant**. I hope they meant the latter, and not the former! That is a word in the process of changing; other words have completely changed. OK, I’m probably well out of date by now, but in youth culture, ‘really wicked’ has a positive meaning!

On the plus side, we do still have the original Greek to go back to and check. We can ask: is such and such a good way to translate that verse, or will it be misunderstood by 21st century readers

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<sup>1</sup> Qureshi claims that even Muslim writings say that the Quran has changed: chapter 42, “Hadith and the history of the Quran”.

because the meanings of the English words have changed since the 17th century [AV is 16-something, right?]?

On the negative side, in order to translate a given verse or passage, translators first have to (obviously) decide what it means (i.e. interpret its meaning) before they can work out what English words to use to express that meaning. So to some extent at least, any translation contains a degree of interpretation. [My missives go out to two members of Wycliffe Bible Translators, so please correct me if I'm wrong.]

## ***2) It was an oral culture***

In New Testament times it was normal for people to pass things on orally. I guess that people didn't have their brains quite so clogged up with the huge amount of information that we do, but also, as the majority of people couldn't read and write anyway, how else could they pass it on?!

Qureshi explains how, as a devout Muslim, he learned to recite by heart vast amounts of the Quran. And that's in today's writing-based society, without the motivation that early non-literate Christians had to learn stuff by heart and pass it on.

But don't worry! It was also written down on pieces of parchment [is that what they used?] some of which have been preserved for almost 2000 years!

## ***3) The New Testament is a collection of books***

Remember that the New Testament wasn't written down as a single book in the way that I would sit down and write a book today. It is a series of books, written by different people at different times over about (so the scholars think) the first 60 years after the events they witnessed.

There were a number of different books around in the first centuries, so the church had to decide which books were more trustworthy, and which were less authentic, drawing together – some time in the fourth century [was it the fourth?], i.e. about 300 years after Jesus' death – a list (a canon) of “books we can solidly trust”.

## ***4) Have the Greek documents been changed?***

Here, I'll talk hypothetically, but this is simply to help us get our brains around the principles:

Paul sat down and wrote a letter to his mate, Timothy. Let's call this written document A. Tim thought that it was really helpful, so he read it out to his congregation(s). They memorized it. Someone thought it would be good to have a copy; we'll call it B. Maybe there was more than one copy, but let's call them all B documents, because they are direct copies of the original.

Maybe people who moved around had a memorized version of A, and then someone wrote that down from memory. Let's call that a C document, as it's a sort-of copy of A.

As time went by, and the Bs and Cs were carried around, and some other people copied those – so they were copies of copies, let's call them D documents, and these could have been taken hundreds of miles from [where did Timothy live?].

No-one's memory is perfect, and even copying isn't an infallible process, so some words will have been changed, despite the fact that, to the believers, this was a very, very important document linking them to the person whom they worshipped as God on earth.

Even more hypothetically, suppose that in the third century "the church" (an expression we use today to talk about an obvious hierarchy – but what did it look like then? a bit more amorphous, I guess) decided that they didn't like what Paul had written, and they wanted to correct it! How would they do that? Well, they presumably wrote down a 'corrected' version of Paul's book – we'll call it K. And then they sent people out with copies of K.

Now, suppose that a K copy is brought to Norwich, and we had a B, C or D copy. The church leader who had brought it would tell our church leader that the Bs, Cs and Ds were all wrong, and would we please correct our copy! We agree and we change it. But what about all the other Bs, Cs and Ds? If the church wanted K to be the 'correct' version, it would have to get **all** of the Bs, Cs and Ds changed, all over the known world.

And remember, we're talking about ships and walking [did they ride horses?] as the fastest means of conveying the message: "The text of Paul's first letter to Timothy has some errors in it. Please correct it."

Difficult, to say the least!

#### ***4) What about those errors of memory and of copying?***

Fast forward to 2019. How do the words of the Greek version of 1 Timothy that we have today compare with that single original document, A, that Paul wrote? The A parchment is long gone, of course, and probably so are most of the B, C and D documents. But some of those physical manuscripts **are** still available in museums and libraries today that we can examine (we'll look at the numbers in a minute), and there are a **lot** of later copies.

We can therefore look at and compare, verse by verse, word by word, all those different versions. Scholars have obviously done this over the years (it's a discipline known as textual criticism), and the agreed result is that the vast majority of the verses are either identical, or so close as to not cause any doubts about what Paul wrote in document A.

But don't let anyone tell you otherwise: there **are** some verses where the extant B and C manuscripts are definitely different from one another, even to the extent that some of the New Testament books have extra verses that occur in some manuscripts but not others.

If you look at your English Bibles, those differences in individual verses, and the extra verses that were added (or subtracted) are clearly marked as such, so we know not to base too many points of doctrine on those debatable verses.

#### ***5) How many B, C and D manuscripts are there?***

What I'm asking is how many **actual** manuscripts have we got, and how old are they? That is, how close, time-wise, are they to the date(s) when the original was written.

(Pinching from the Alpha Course workbook:) Scholars think that the various New Testament books were written at dates between AD 40 and AD 100. We have manuscript copies of some parts of those books carbon dated [is that how they date them? maybe not] to around AD 130 and full manuscripts (all 177,000 words!) from AD 350. So those manuscripts are from within a time lapse of at best 30 years and at very worst 310 years from when the books were actually written.

How many manuscripts do we have today? There are over five thousand (part or whole) Greek manuscripts!

How does that compare with other historical documents, on whose veracity historians rely?

	<b>Written</b>	<b>Earliest MS</b>	<b>Time span (years)</b>	<b>Copies</b>
Livy's <i>Roman history</i>	59 BC – AD 17	AD 900	900	20
Tacitus	59 BC – AD 100	AD 1100	1000	20
Herodotus	488–428 BC	AD 900	1300	8
Caesar's <i>Gallic Wars</i>	58–50 BC	AD 900	950	10
<b>New Testament</b>	<b>AD 40–100</b>	<b>AD 310</b> (AD 130 part)	<b>310</b> (30 part)	<b>&gt;5000</b>

Fortunately, the New Testament manuscripts are something that have been so highly prized through the centuries that people gone to some pains to preserve them intact!

Who was it said (something like), “Defend the New Testament?! I might just as well talk of defending a lion!”

Paul Bev. 5.1.18