The Historical Reliability of the New Testament

Evaluating Scriptural Integrity Using Three Standard Historical Criteria

> Both **Josh McDowell** (*Evidence That Demands a Verdict*) and **Lee Strobel** (*The Case for Christ*, featuring interviews with scholars like Dr. Bruce Metzger, Dr. Craig Blomberg, and Dr. Edwin Yamauchi) evaluate the reliability of the New Testament using three standard historical criteria: the **Bibliographic Test**, the **Internal Evidence Test**, and the **External Evidence Test**.

1. THE BIBLIOGRAPHIC TEST (MANUSCRIPTS & TIME GAP)

This test examines how many manuscript copies exist and how close the earliest existing copies are to the original autographs.

A. Sheer Quantity of Manuscripts

- **Greek Manuscripts:** Over **5,800** existing Greek manuscripts and fragments of the New Testament.
- **Total Translations & Ancient Versions:** When counting Syriac, Latin Vulgate, Coptic, Ethiopic, and Armenian translations, the total exceeds **24,000+** total ancient manuscripts.

B. Manuscript Comparison: Classical Works vs. New Testament

AUTHOR / WORK	WHEN WRITTEN	EARLIEST COPY	TIME GAP	NUMBER OF COPIES
Homer (Iliad)	c. 800 BC	c. 400 BC	~400 Years	~1,750
Julius Caesar (Gallic Wars)	c. 58–50 BC	c. AD 900	~950 Years	~10
Plato (Tetralogies)	c. 400 BC	c. AD 900	~1,300 Years	~210
Tacitus (Annals)	c. AD 110	c. AD 1100	~1,000 Years	~20
New Testament	**c. AD 50–100**	**c. AD 117–138 (P52)**	**30–100 Years**	**24,000+**

C. Key Early New Testament Manuscripts

- **John Rylands Papyrus (P52):** Dated to c. AD 117–138 (within 30–50 years of John's Gospel).
- **Bodmer Papyri (P66, P75):** Dated to c. AD 175–225 (containing large portions of Luke and John).
- **Chester Beatty Papyri (P45, P46, P47):** Dated to c. AD 200–250 (containing most of the Gospels, Acts, and Paul's Epistles).
- **Codex Sinaiticus & Codex Vaticanus:** Complete New Testaments from the 4th century (AD 325–350).

D. Early Church Father Quotations

McDowell and Strobel cite findings (originally cataloged by scholars like J. Harold Greenlee and Bruce Metzger) showing that early Christian writers prior to the Council of Nicaea (AD 325) quoted the New Testament **over 36,000 times**.

> *"Even if all physical New Testament manuscripts were destroyed, virtually the entire New Testament could be reconstructed solely from these early patristic quotes."*

E. Textual Purity & Variants

Scholars cited by Strobel and McDowell (such as Sir Frederic Kenyon and Dr. Norman Geisler) emphasize that the New Testament text is approximately **99.5% pure**. The vast majority of textual variations consist of minor spelling differences, word order, or non-translatable grammar quirks. No major Christian doctrine rests upon a disputed variant.

2. THE INTERNAL EVIDENCE TEST (EYE-WITNESS & INTENT)

This test evaluates whether the original documents claim to be eyewitness accounts and show signs of historical integrity.

A. Eyewitness Testimony Claims

Authors consistently claim to record events they directly witnessed or carefully researched from eyewitnesses:

- **2 Peter 1:16:** *"For we did not follow cleverly devised stories when we told you about the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ in power, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty."*
- **1 John 1:1–3:** *"That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which*