

Chapter Ten: Reliability of the New Testament

What is it that the New Testament claims to offer? It claims to offer a faithful, reliable witness to Jesus the Messiah (e.g. 1 John 1:1-2; 2 Peter 1:16, 18). In addition to the four Gospel accounts of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection, the New Testament is comprised mainly of letters written by apostles to groups of believers and individual believers spread across what is now Turkey, Greece, and Italy. On the basis of Jesus' death and resurrection and their understanding of the benefits that flow from these, the apostles wrote the letters to instruct these believers in how to live. All parts of the New Testament are united by the concept of bearing witness to Jesus.

This chapter presents the following reasons to trust the New Testament's witness to Jesus. After all, what is appropriate to good news is that it be truly reported.

1. Written down within a lifetime

- When trying to determine the reliability of a source, the first question a historian usually asks are: How far away in time and space is the source from the event about which it informs us?¹
 - The Gospel accounts were written within 30-70 years...the letters of Paul within 30 years.
- By comparison, there seems to be a much larger time gap for the sourcebooks of Islam.
 - Qur'an written within 60-70 years; earliest *Sira* = 120-200 years; earliest *hadith* = 220 years
- The early Muslim biographies of Islam's messenger "are not at all equal in their historical quality to the canonical Christian gospels." (p. 175)

2. Strong links in the chain of transmission

- Paul was the earliest writer to "receive" and "pass on" on crucial information about the life, death and resurrection of Jesus (e.g. 1 Corinthians 11:23-26; 15:3-7; 2 Thess. 2:15; Romans 1:4).
- These eyewitness traditions focus on two themes that happen to be very important in the conversation between the Gospel and Islam: (1) Jesus' death for our sins—1 Corinthians 15:3, (2) the divine Sonship of Jesus—Acts 9:20; cf. Galatians 1:15-16.

3. From fourfold Gospel to New Testament

- The New Testament writings were brought together into an authoritative collection ("canon") in two stages: an informal stage (2nd Century), and a formal stage (4th C).

4. Preservation of texts by believers

- Within 20-70 years of Jesus' death and resurrection, believers in Jesus possessed a growing number of written documents which circulated among the Christian communities. By the first half of the second century, there was already regular reading of the Gospel accounts in Sunday gatherings of Christians.

5. Many Gospel manuscripts from before Islam

- In addition to the 4th Century Codex Sinaiticus and Codex Vaticanus, scholars are now able to study 206 Greek and 44 Latin New Testament manuscripts that predate the seventh century. None of these manuscripts provides grounds for the Muslim accusation of textual corruption or falsification.

6. Sense perception and *tawātur*

- Muslim commentator Fakhr al-Din al-Razi (d. 1209) noted that "the principle of universally accepted transmission (*tawātur*)" applied equally to the Gospel reports of the crucifixion of Jesus and reports in Muslim doctrine. Both must be granted *tawātur* or both would be denied it.

7. Like witnesses in a court of law

- The legal concept of "witness" is familiar in Islam (e.g. Q 3.53; 2.282). Jesus appointed his followers to be "witnesses" (Luke 24:48; Acts 1:8), providing eyewitness testimony as participants in the events. What the New Testament claims, and delivers, is not perfect language, nor identical reports, but rather reliable witness that strengthens confidence (e.g. John 19:35; Acts 2:32).

¹ According to Martin Hegel, "The text of the Gospels is the best transmitted in the whole of antiquity." (p. 183)