Bible 101 - Back to Basics #3

Is the Bible reliable? Please remember that at this point we are establishing the historical reliability of Scripture, not its inspiration. We'll get to that later. For now we are looking at the Bible as a work of antiquity and good scholarship demands that we examine the reliability of the Bible as we would any other work of antiquity.  For our purposes today we will consider three tests for reliability of Scripture- the Bibliographical test, the internal evidence test and the external test.

I. The Bibliographical test for the New Testament

This test is an examination of textual transmission by which documents reach us. In other words, since we do not have the original documents, how reliable are the copies we have in regard to the number of MSS and the time interval between the original and existing copies?

A. Manuscript evidence of the NT
        0.      5,300 know Greek manuscripts
        0.      Over 10,000 Latin Vulgate
        0.      At least 9,300 other early versions
        0.      For a total of more that 24,000 manuscript copies of all or part of the New Testament.
        0.      No other document of antiquity even approaches such numbers. (The Iliad by Homer is second with only 643 manuscripts that still survive and the earliest complete text dates from the 13th century.
        0.      Besides number, in no other case interval of time between composition of the book and the earliest existing manuscript so short as that of the New Testament. The NT was written during the second half of the 1st century and the earliest manuscripts we have date approximately 250-300 years later.
        0.      Other works of antiquity
        0.      Caesar              100-44 BC.        AD. 900.         1,000 years.    10
        0.      Plato.                427-347 BC.      AD 900.          1,200.                 7
        0.      Tacitus.             A.D 100.              AD 1100.         1,000.                20
        0.      Demosthenes. 383-322 BC      AD 1100.         1,300.                200
        0.      Aristotle.           384-322 BC.     AD 1100.         1,400.                49
        0.      Manuscript reliability supported by various versions.
        0.      Ancient literature was rarely translated into another language.
        0.      Christianity from its inception has been a missionary faith. The earliest versions of the NT were prepared by missionaries to assist with their work among peoples whose native tongue was Syriac (Aramaic), Latin or Coptic.
        0.      Syriac and Latin versions of the NT were made around 150 AD, very near to the time of the originals.
        0.      Manuscript reliability supported by early Church fathers
        0.      The entire NT, with the exception of 11, verses could be recreated from the works of the fathers who wrote in the second and third centuries.

II. The Bibliographical test for the OT
A. Talmudists (AD 100-500)
        0.      Review care taken in copying
        0.      Fate of unfit copies
        0.      Reverence for the Word of God
B. Massoretic Period (500-900AD)
        0.      Complicated system of safeguards
        0.      Review
C. The witness of the Dead Sea Scrolls
        0.      Review history
        0.      Review Isaiah comments - main scroll 24 ft. long, 10 inches high.
        0.      40,000 fragments
        0.      500 books
D. The Septuagint  (LXX) - Translation of the Hebrew Scriptures into Greek.
        0.      Dated about 250 BC
        0.      King Ptolemy Philadelphia of Egypt (285-246 BC)
        0.      Established the library of Alexandria, a wonder of the ancient world
        0.      The king developed an interest in the Jewish Law.
        0.      Sent word to the High Priest in Jerusalem requesting translators.
        0.      High Priest Eleazar sent 6 elders from each of the 12 tribes, a total of 72.
        0.      In 72 days completed the translation of the Pentateuch from Hebrew into Greek.
        0.      The LXX gives evidence that the text we have today is substantially the same as the text of 300 BC.
        0.      Other versions
        0.      The Samaritan Text (5th century BC)
        0.      The Targums - interpretations and paraphrasing of the Law
        0.      The Mishna - commentary.
        0.      The Gemaras- together with the Mishna make up the Babylonian Talmud
        0.      The Midrash - doctrinal studies of the OT Hebrew text
        0.      All of the above, when quoting the Scriptures, agree with the Masoretic text we have today.

The bibliographical test has determined only that the text we now have is essentially what was originally recorded.

III. Internal evidence test for reliability - is the written record credible?
A. Telling the truth
        0.      The ability of the writer to tell the truth is paramount
        0.      The witness or writers nearness geographically and chronologically is important.
        0.      Luke 1:1-3, 2 Peter 1:16, 1 John 1:3, John 19:35, Luke 3:1
B. Timing of the written accounts of Jesus' life
        0.      There were many still alive when the accounts were written. Must have been accurate or hostile witnesses would have exposed them.
        0.      Common knowledge
        0.      Acts 2:22
        0.      Acts 26:24-28
        0.      The empty tomb - Mathew 28:11-15
C. "Inventors" of the story would have concealed:
        0.      The competition among the apostles for high places in the Kingdom
        0.      Their flight (cowardice) after Jesus arrest
        0.      Peters's denial
        0.      The failure of Christ to work miracles in Galilee
        0.      The references of some to His possible insanity
        0.      His despairing cry on the cross and many other things.

That a few simple men should in one generation have invented so powerful and appealing a personality, so lofty an ethic, and so inspiring a vision of human brotherhood, would be a miracle far more incredible than any recorded in the gospels.

IV. External evidence test - does other historical material confirm or deny the internal testimony of the document.
A. The historian Eusebius preserves the writings of Papias (AD 130)
B. Iraneus, Bishop of Lyons (AD 180), student of Polycarp, disciple of John
C. Archaeology - we will take more time on this subject at a later date.

After looking at these three tests, and others besides we must come to the conclusion that the Bible is trustworthy and historically reliable in its witness about Jesus. "Skepticism regarding the historical credentials of Christianity is based upon an irrational, anti-supernatural bias."

Two cases this week in the news. The offending bench atheists want removed with the following quote, "men who aren't governed by God will be governed by tyrants". And the kids opposing abortion who were denied their constitutional rights of free speech by an out of control gay teacher.

Romans 1:22-25