

## Study 8:

# New Testament Corroboration

Evidence for the New Testament  
from History and Archaeology

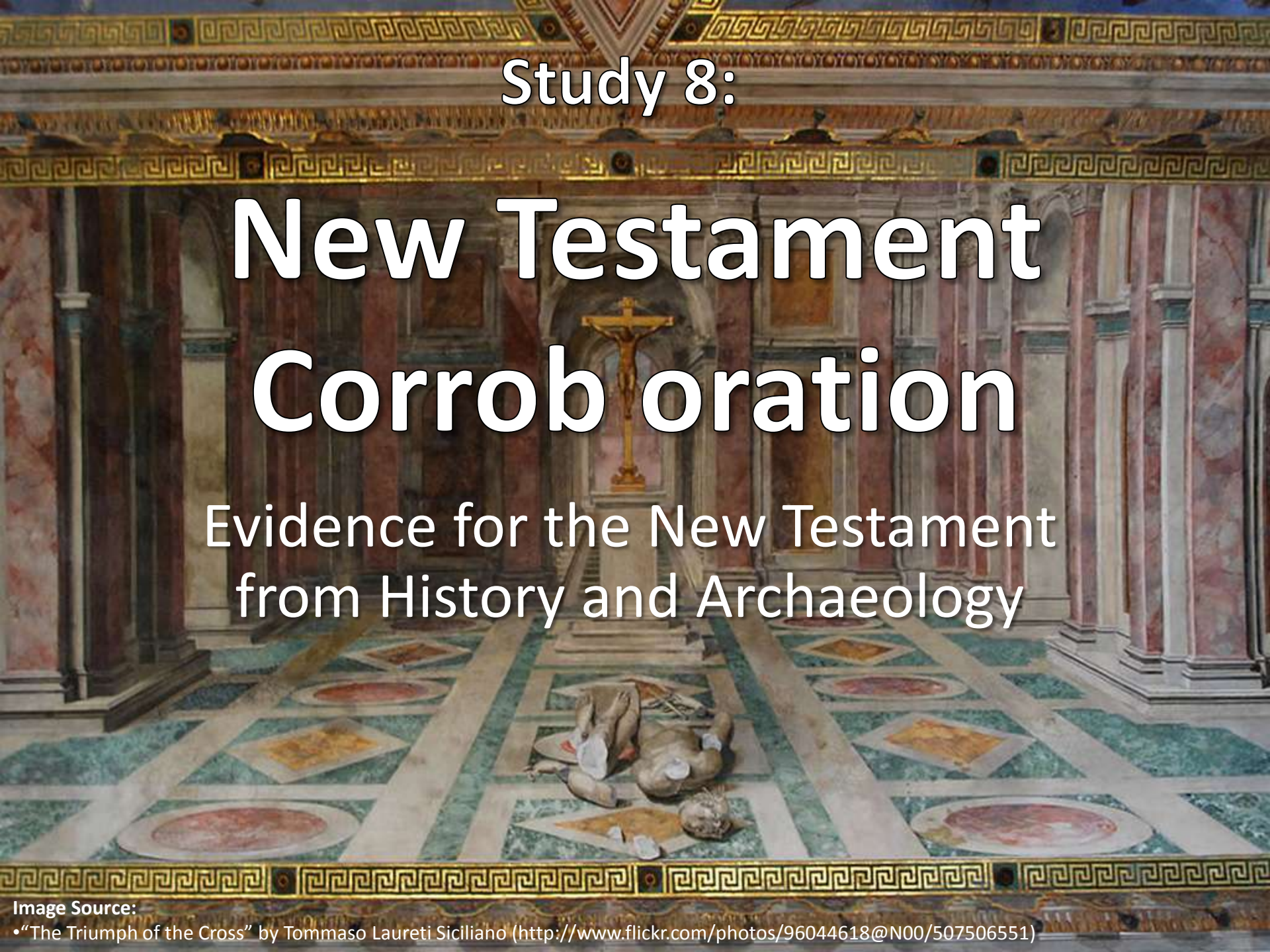


Image Source:

• "The Triumph of the Cross" by Tommaso Laureti Siciliano (<http://www.flickr.com/photos/96044618@N00/507506551>)

# The Census: Historical?

- “In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. (This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria.) And everyone went to his own town to register.” – Luke 2:1-3
- Scholars have questioned the supposed practice of such a census at the time, and others have pointed out that Josephus records a census by Quirinius that took place years after Christ was born.

# The Census: Evidence (1/2)

- According to Wheaton College Professor of New Testament and Archaeology John McRay, orders of a census similar to those recounted in the Bible have been discovered from a time not long after Christ.
- These documented orders tell of citizens being required to “return to their own homes” in order to be counted.
- While the date doesn’t coincide with the particular census mentioned in the Bible, it makes clear that such practices did exist in ancient Rome.

Source:  
• *The Case for Christ* by Lee Strobel

# The Census: Evidence (2/2)

- As for the governorship of Quirinius, a report published by the Interdisciplinary Biblical Research Institute makes a number of important points.
  - Apparently, Quirinius commanded the Roman army in Cilicia, not Syria, until about 6 BC. But archaeologist Sir William Ramsay found that the only Roman legion in all of Asia belonged to Syria. Since Quirinius conquered territory contiguous to Syria, it is reasonable to assume that he may have had authority over part of Syria as well.
  - Also, the “governors” at the time may not have been as specifically defined as we would think, and Josephus gives examples of multiple people being officers or governors of a particular region at once. Thus, records showing someone else in power at the time of Jesus doesn’t necessarily mean Quirinius wasn’t.
  - Finally, Luke mentions the census being the “first [...] while Quirinius was governor.” Thus, Josephus’ mention of a later census occurring under Quirinius may very well be referring to a later census.

# Nazareth: Did it Exist in Jesus' Time?

- Skeptics have claimed that Nazareth didn't exist in Jesus' time, since there are no references to it in prominent historical writings.
- According to John McRay, however, we do have extra-biblical reasons to believe it existed.
  - He cites an archaeological finding that mentions a priest's family being relocated to Nazareth in AD 70. While this is after Christ's death, it's still close enough that Nazareth likely had already been around for a while.
  - Other digs have uncovered objects from tombs in the outskirts of the town which have been dated to the first century.
- After interviewing McRay, Lee Strobel sums up:
  - “Even the usually skeptical Ian Wilson, citing pre-Christian remains found in 1955 under the Church of the Annunciation in present-day Nazareth, has managed to concede, “such findings suggest that Nazareth may have existed in Jesus' time, but there is no doubt that it must have been a very small and insignificant place.” So insignificant that Nathanael's musings in John 1:46 now make more sense: “Nazareth! [...] Can anything good come from there?”

Source:  
• *The Case for Christ* by Lee Strobel

# Evidence from Local History

- Professor of Ancient History at Western Michigan University, Dr. Paul Maier wrote the following about the importance of names in the Holy Land:
  - “Topography also provides interesting traces of the supernatural dimension in Jesus’ ministry. Bethany, where he raised Lazarus from the dead, according to John 11, is still called "Betanya" by Israelis. But to the majority Arab population of that Jerusalem suburb, the name of the town is El-Lazariyeh, "the place of Lazarus." That name change was known as far back as [the time of third and fourth century church historian] Eusebius, and exactly what one would expect if indeed Bethany had witnessed so great a miracle as the dead being raised.
  - “A similar instance is a southwestern suburb of Damascus. To this day, that location at the edge of the Syrian capital is named Deraya, "The Vision" in Arabic, because of what happened to Saul (the future St. Paul) on the Damascus Road.
  - “And this is despite the fact that the overwhelming majority Islamic Arabs of Damascus are hardly defenders of the Christian faith! Again, these topographical examples do not themselves prove the miraculous events at these places, but they surely are instances of "fallout" from something extraordinary that must have occurred.”

**Source:**

•October, 1999 issue of *The Lutheran Witness*.

# Extra-biblical References to Biblical Events

- First-century Roman historian Tacitus:<sup>1</sup>
  - “Christus [...] suffered the extreme penalty during the reign of Tiberius at the hands of one of our procurators, Pontius Pilatus, and a most mischievous superstition, thus checked for the moment, again broke out not only in Judea, the first source of the evil, but even in Rome.”
- Jewish historian Josephus:<sup>2</sup>
  - “[High Priest Ananias] assembled the sanhedrim of judges, and brought before them the brother of Jesus, who was called Christ, whose name was James, and some others, [or, some of his companions]; and when he had formed an accusation against them as breakers of the law, he delivered them to be stoned.”
  - “Now some of the Jews thought that the destruction of Herod's army came from God, and that very justly, as a punishment of what he did against John, that was called the Baptist: for Herod slew him, who was a good man, and commanded the Jews to exercise virtue, both as to righteousness towards one another, and piety towards God, and so to come to baptism”

**Source:**

•1: *Annals of Rome* by Tacitus; 2: *Antiquities of the Jews* by Josephus.

# Josephus Edited?

- Another writing by Josephus appears to explicitly testify to the resurrection of Christ in way that disagrees with his religious beliefs and writing style. Scholars have dissected the passage and generally conclude that the original passage was indeed written by Josephus, but had at one point been edited by biased copyists.
- A reference to a fourth-century Arabic version of this account lacks these apparent additions and appears to be the original untainted version. Even in this form it is a significant testimony to Christ's ministry:
  - “At this time there was a wise man who was called Jesus. And his conduct was good and [he] was known to be virtuous. Many people from among the Jews and other nations became his disciples. Pilate condemned him to be crucified and to die. And those who had become his disciples did not abandon his discipleship. They reported that he had appeared to them three days after his crucifixion and that he was alive; accordingly, he was perhaps the messiah concerning whom the prophets have recounted wonders.”\*

**Source:**

•\*Kitab Al-Unwan Al-Mukallal Bi-Fadail Al-Hikma Al-Mutawwaj Bi-Anwa Al-Falsafa Al-Manduh Bi-Haqaq Al-Marifa



# Historical Corroboration of Christ

- Norman Geisler and Frank Turek summarize the corroboration of Christ by ancient historians as follows:
  - “There are ten known non-Christian writers who mention Jesus within 150 years of his life. By contrast, over the same 150 years, there are nine non-Christian sources who mention Tiberius Caesar, the Roman emperor at the time of Jesus.”
  - “Piecing together all ten non-Christian references, we see that:
    - Jesus lived during the time of Tiberius Caesar
    - He lived a virtuous life
    - He was a wonder-worker
    - He had a brother named James
    - He was acclaimed to be the Messiah
    - He was crucified under Pontius Pilate
    - He was crucified on the eve of the Jewish Passover
    - Darkness and an earthquake occurred when he died.
    - His disciples believed he rose from the dead
    - His disciples were willing to die for their belief
    - Christianity spread rapidly as far as Rome
    - His disciples denied the Roman gods and worshiped Jesus as God”

**Source:**

• *I Don't Have Enough Faith to be an Atheist* by Norman Geisler and Frank Turek

# Early Authorship (1/2)

- The New Testament books were almost certainly written in the first century AD, within the lifetimes of those who had been eye-witnesses of Christ's life.
- This is important because if Matthew, Mark, Luke and John had stretched the truth, the many Jews who had also seen these events would have almost certainly discredited them.
- Paul Barnett explains that 25 of the 27 New Testament books were referenced by Clement, Ignatius and Polycarp between 95 and 110 AD. The other books (Jude and 2 John) were almost certainly written at least this early, as Jude was Jesus' half-brother and likely would have died by 100 AD, and 2 John was written before 3 John.\*

Source:

• *Is the New Testament Reliable* by Paul Barnett.

# Early Authorship (2/2)

- 100 AD is still about 70 years after Christ's death. Geisler and Turek point out several reasons why even earlier dates are likely:
  - In 70 AD, Jerusalem was conquered by the Romans and the temple destroyed. Jesus predicted this event in Mark 13:2, yet none of the New Testament writers mention the events. Thus, they were almost certainly written before this event (about 40 years after Christ died).
  - Acts was written before 62 AD and Luke even earlier, because Luke makes no mention of the deaths of either Paul, with whom he was travelling, or their close friend James. Clement says Paul died in 68 AD, and Josephus says James died in 62 AD (about 30 years after Christ died).
  - Geisler and Turek cite numerous other reasons and experts which point to even earlier dates for certain books, with the general consensus concluding the entire New Testament was written between around 40 and 75 AD.

Source:

• *I Don't Have Enough Faith to be an Atheist* by Norman Geisler and Frank Turek

# Top 10 Reasons to Trust the NT: 1-3

1. The New Testament writers include embarrassing details about themselves.
  - Disciples are portrayed as weak, sleepy, slow and doubtful.
  - Doubtful the authors would have described themselves this way if they were already embellishing the truth.
2. They include embarrassing and difficult details about Jesus.
  - Mark 3:20-21
  - John 8:31-44
  - Elsewhere, various people call Jesus a drunkard, demon-possessed and a madman. He associates with a prostitute and others the religious leaders of the day referred to as “sinners.”
  - If the New Testament writers were trying to exaggerate Christ’s greatness, they probably would have left out these events.
3. Similarly, the Gospels quote Jesus as saying borderline offensive things which many Christians still struggle with.
  - Matthew 5:21-48
  - John 6:54-60

**Source:**

• *I Don't Have Enough Faith to be an Atheist* by Norman Geisler and Frank Turek

# Top 10 Reasons to Trust the NT: 4-5

4. The writers carefully distinguish Jesus' words from their own.
  - This shows that they were not directly quoting him rather than paraphrasing his teachings.
  - For example, Paul doesn't put words in Jesus' mouth when dealing with various controversies. Instead, he makes a clear distinction between his own teachings and those of Jesus.
5. Resurrection details that had no reason to be invented.
  - Positive portrayal of Joseph of Arimathea, a member of the Jewish ruling Council that sentenced Jesus to die. And if this account was wrong, the council would have quickly disproven their claims.
  - The first witnesses of the resurrection were women, one of them formerly demon-possessed. Not the most trustworthy sources by the cultural standards of the day.
  - Mention of Jewish Priests converting to Christianity would have been a foolish inclusion had it not been true, for the Pharisees would have easily exposed the lie.
  - Matthew 28 claims that the Jewish cover-up of the resurrection was common knowledge among the Jews. He wouldn't have made this claim unless his readers (many of them Jews) would know if it was true.

**Source:**

• *I Don't Have Enough Faith to be an Atheist* by Norman Geisler and Frank Turek

# Top 10 Reasons to Trust the NT: 6-7

6. The writers describe over thirty historically-verified people, many of them well-known and powerful, such as Pilate, Caiaphas, Festus and Felix – as being directly related to Biblical events.
  - If these connections were false, they would have been easily disproven.
7. Divergent details.
  - Gospel accounts which contain different, complementary, details is a sign of truthfulness.
  - If the Gospel accounts contradicted each other by blatantly giving contrary details, this would be a sign of error.
  - Instead, when the Gospels differ, it is in the details they decide to include.
  - There's no reason to believe they're describing different events. They're simply focusing on different parts of the same event.
  - This shows that the authors didn't get together to fabricate a particular storyline. Had they don this, their accounts would have been very similar.
  - Modern-day reporting is the same: different journalists or witnesses often point out different details of the same event.
  - Example: Matthew 28, Mark 16, Luke 24 and John 20.

**Source:**

• *I Don't Have Enough Faith to be an Atheist* by Norman Geisler and Frank Turek

# Top 10 Reasons to Trust the NT: 8-9

8. The New Testament writers challenge their readers to verify the facts, even concerning miracles.
  - In 2 Corinthians 12:12, Paul refers to signs and miracles being performed among the Corinthians. Had these not actually occurred, Paul would be destroying his credibility with his audience by saying this.
9. Miracles are not described with grand supernatural language, but in a simple, matter-of-fact manner as with any other event.
  - Christ's resurrection isn't a flashy event, but rather was revealed through a couple angels in a tomb to some women who then ran into Jesus posing as a gardener.
  - The same tone is present in all other Gospel accounts of miracles, from the turning of water into wine to the raising of Lazarus.

Source:

• *I Don't Have Enough Faith to be an Atheist* by Norman Geisler and Frank Turek

# Top 10 Reasons to Trust the NT: 10

10. The authors of the New Testament abandoned their culture and heritage and willingly died for what they preached.
- This is probably the single most powerful testimony to the Bible's truthfulness.
  - It's one thing for religious people to die for something they've been taught to believe is true. But who dies for something they know to be false?
  - The disciples clearly had first-hand experience with Christ. We can't prove whether they really witnessed him come back to life, but if they hadn't, why on earth would they be willing to dedicate their entire life and to be martyred for something they knew to be a lie? What could they possibly hope to gain?
  - The disciples rapid transformation from hopeless after Christ's execution to tireless missionaries after his resurrection should be evidence enough that they were convinced he was the Son of God.
  - The disciples willingness to die for Christ's message is the ultimate testimony: He was the Messiah, and they knew it.

Source:

• *I Don't Have Enough Faith to be an Atheist* by Norman Geisler and Frank Turek



# That's All Folks!

I'd love to receive feedback (positive or negative) about this study, particularly in terms of content and organization.

If you'd prefer email, send it to: [bfrantz@tamu.edu](mailto:bfrantz@tamu.edu)

Thanks!