



Is the Bible *Reliable?*

by david vecchitto

DIFFICULT *Issues*

One thing that confuses me is how people could claim to be Christians and not believe the Bible. If they're not believing what the Bible says about Christianity, then what are they believing? What is the foundation of their beliefs? Is it themselves? Whatever they believe, it's probably not Christian. And if they don't believe in the reliability of everything the Bible says, then who decides what to believe and what not to believe? And, is that reliable? Is that *more* reliable than believing the Bible?

One of the first questions people ask when exploring the Christian faith is, "Is the Bible reliable?" What they mean by that is can the Bible be trusted as historically accurate? It's a great question, because if the Bible is not reliable then the whole Christian faith is a sham. I believe the Bible is historically accurate and it can be trusted as the basis for what we believe and how we live.

History of the Bible

The Bible is comprised of 66 different books written by more than 50 authors over a period of 1,500 years. It is divided between the Old Testament and the New Testament. The word "testament" simply means "a covenant between God and His people." The Old Testament is the covenant between God and His people before the coming of Jesus and the New Testament is the covenant between God and His people with the coming of Jesus. Although written by more than 50 human authors, the Bible's own testimony is that it is the very words of God. The apostle Paul writes that "all Scripture is breathed out by God."

The Old Testament covers the time period from creation until four centuries before the birth of Jesus. The 39 books in the

Old Testament were originally written in Hebrew with small portions written in Aramaic. This section of the Bible is the same scriptures used by Judaism today and historically. The New Testament covers the time period from the birth of Jesus until the return of Jesus. Its primary focus is on Jesus and the church. The 27 books in the New Testament were originally written in Greek.

Although the Bible is comprised of 66 different books it presents one story. It is the story of the eternal sovereign God of the universe creating a people for His very own. The Bible begins with God creating everything, including human beings, and it tells how sin first entered the world and corrupted everything God created, including his relationship with man and woman. The rest of the Bible tells of how God works to restore our relationship with Him and His created order. It climaxes with the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus who is God's very own Son sent to restore all things. It tells of how the church is established and how one day Jesus will return to take all of those who have trusted in Him to be with God forever in the new heavens and the new earth.

The Protestant Canon

The 66 books included in the Bible comprise the Christian canon. The word "canon" simply means "standard" or "rule." The 39 books of the Old Testament are rarely contested as part of the canon. When controversy arises around the canon, it always has to do with what books should be included in the New Testament.

The New Testament canon began to appear as early as 95 A.D. with Clement of Rome and the majority of the canon was identified by Irenaeus in 180 A.D. Athanasius of Alexandria was the first to identify the complete listing of the 27 books of the New Testament canon in 367 A.D. He regarded these books as the "only

source of salvation and of the authentic teaching of the Gospel." Jerome identified the 39 Old Testament books and the 27 New Testament books in a letter to Paulinus, the Bishop of Nola in 394 A.D. The Councils of Hippo, 393 A.D., and Carthage, 397 A.D., both confirmed the 27 books of the New Testament canon. Although the canon was confirmed in the 4th century, it continued to be debated through the 16th century.

Books were included in the New Testament canon if they were authored by an apostle or eye witness of Jesus, were

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doctrinally consistent with the other Biblical documents, and were broadly recognized in the early church. The ancient historical documents that have been excluded from the Christian canon were excluded because they failed to meet one of these criteria.

Roman Catholicism added additional books to their Old Testament canon in 1546 A.D. at the Council of Trent. These books are called the Apocrypha. The Protestant Bible retains the 66 books included in the original historic canon first identified in 367 A.D.

Reliability of the Bible

And even though we do not have any of the original Biblical manuscripts, we do believe from reason and historical data that the ancient manuscript copies we possess do accurately report the historical events of the Bible. From a purely objective, historical, and scientific point of view, the Biblical manuscripts are the most reliable ancient documents of all time. Three main tests are performed on ancient documents to determine the level of their historical accuracy: the bibliographic, internal, and external tests. Based on these tests, the New Testament manuscript copies are said to be 99.5% accu-

rate. This means that if we were to reconstruct the original documents from these copies, the errors would be less than one-half of one percent. If we deny the historic reliability of the Bible, then we have to deny the historic reliability of the writings of Caesar, Plato, and Aristotle as well as all other ancient historical documents.

The **bibliographic test** determines the reliability of the transmission of the original documents. An ancient document's reliability increases with the quantity of manuscript copies on hand, the shorter the time lapse between the dating of those copies and the original writings, and with the frequency and type of differences identified when comparing manuscript copies. Next to the New Testament, Homer's *Iliad* are the next most reliable ancient manuscripts. The New Testament has over 24,000 copies of ancient manuscripts compared with 643 copies of Homer. The earliest manuscript copy of the New Testament was written within 70 years of the original writings compared with Homer's earliest copy which is over 400 years after the events reported. When the 24,000 New Testament manuscript copies are compared, there are very few and minor differences. The differences that exist are primarily in word order, spelling, and in some cases a word added or omitted. This is because those who

copied the original manuscripts were meticulous in their work. These copyists, or scribes, were extremely dedicated to God and to preserving His word. Most importantly, there are no differences that exist that would affect the historic doctrines of Christianity.

Author and Work	Date of Original Writing	Date of Earliest Copy	Time Lapse in Years	Number of Copies
Various, <i>New Testament</i>	40-100 A.D.	130 A.D.	30	24,970
Homer's <i>Iliad</i>	800 B.C.	400 B.C.	400	643
Livy's <i>History of Rome</i>	59 B.C.-17 A.D.	900 A.D.	900	20
Caesar's <i>Gallic Wars</i>	100-44 B.C.	900 A.D.	1,000	10
Tacitus' <i>Annals</i>	100 A.D.	1100 A.D.	1,000	20
Thucydides' <i>History</i>	460-400 B.C.	900 A.D.	1,300	8
Herodotus' <i>History</i>	480-425 B.C.	900 A.D.	1,350	8
Plato	400 B.C.	900 A.D.	1,300	7
Aristotle	350 B.C.	1100 A.D.	1,400	5

The **internal test** determines the reliability of the original authors. In other words, when examining the documents themselves do the things reported appear to be reliable? The writers of the New Testament claimed to be eyewitnesses of the events they report and that their reporting is true. The apostle John writes, "Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written so that you may believe Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name." At the beginning of Luke's gospel he writes, "just as those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses...it seemed good to me also, having followed all things closely for some time past, to written an orderly account for you...that you may have certainty concerning the things you have been taught."

In addition to their claim to be true, the authors were martyred for the things they recorded. The authors were so convinced of the truthfulness of the things they wrote that they were willing to die instead of deny its truthfulness. This is because these men witnessed the things Jesus said and did, and, most importantly, witnessed the risen Jesus.

Thirdly, even though the four gospels are

recorded from different perspectives by different authors, the gospel accounts compliment each other. Many non-Christian scholars are skeptical at four gospels that agree. They would claim that three of the gospel ac-

counts would have been copied from one original gospel. But I would argue that four gospels that agree, even if copied from one original, tell us that the four authors agreed on the historical events they witnessed in those gospels.

Finally, many of the prophecies recorded in the Old Testament were fulfilled by Jesus in the New Testament. These include the place of his birth, the kind of death he would die, and his resurrection. Despite all the claims of the New Testament that Jesus fulfilled very specific prophecies about the Messiah, there is no external evidence to the Bible that contradicts or denies the claims of the New Testament.

The **external test** determines the reliability of the historical events reported in the manuscripts by comparing them to historical evidence outside those documents. Ancient historical writings outside of the Bible and archaeology support the historicity of the Bible. Ancient writings from both non-Christians and Christians have confirmed much of the New Testament. The Jewish historian Josephus, writing in the first century, cites events concerning Jesus of Nazareth and the growth of the early church. The early Church Fathers (100-450 A.D.) quote so much of the New Testament that if those manuscripts were to disappear we would be able to reconstruct almost the entire New Testament from their writings. More importantly, there are no historical documents that deny or contradict the historical reliability of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Archaeology has confirmed many ancient cities, civilizations, people, and historical events of the Bible. As more archaeological discoveries are made, the Bible's historical accuracy continues to increase in reliability.

Bible Translations

Reliability is sometimes questioned on the basis of the number of different Bible

translations that exist. One of the reasons that so many Bible translations exist is because publishers like to sell Bibles. That is why even with a single translation you can purchase the Bible in a variety of sizes, formats, and with an endless array of added features.

It's fair to say that all translations are not equal. The best Bible translations strive for accuracy and faithfulness when translating the meaning from the original Biblical languages to a modern day language. A word for word translation can often feel wooden, archaic and cumbersome. So it's also good to find a translation that is not only faithful to the original meaning of the text but readable today. At CrossWay Community Church we use the English Standard Version (ESV) Bible.

God's Revelation

How does reason support the reliability of the Bible? In other words, is it logical to believe that the Bible is reliable? I believe it is logical.

If you believe that there is a God, and if you believe that He is a loving God who has communicated to us, and if you believe the Bible is that communication, then you must believe that the Bible is trustworthy. The Bible is revelation from God. It is one of the primary ways that God reveals Himself, His character, and His plans. It is one of the primary ways that God communicates. He is a speaking God and He uses the Bible to continue to speak and reveal Himself to people. In order for God to effectively communicate to people, don't you think He would have ensured the reliable preservation of His words? Do you think God's plans and purposes could be thwarted by human error? Of course not! God preserves His word in order to accomplish His purposes.

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