



Questioning Christianity

Can We Trust the Bible?

The Scriptures: The Foundation of our Faith

- Evangelical Christians are often called “a people of the Book” because of our commitment to the authority and inerrancy of Scripture.
- **Baptist Faith and Message 2000, Article 1:**

“The Holy Bible was written by men divinely inspired and is God’s revelation of Himself to man. It is a perfect treasure of divine instruction. It has God for its author, salvation for its end, and truth, without any mixture of error, for its matter. Therefore, all Scripture is totally true and trustworthy. It reveals the principles by which God judges us, and therefore is, and will remain to the end of the world, the true center of Christian union, and the supreme standard by which all human conduct, creeds, and religious opinions should be tried. All Scripture is a testimony to Christ, who is Himself the focus of divine revelation.”
- **2 Timothy 3:16-17** *All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, ¹⁷that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.*
- Given the importance of the Scriptures to our faith, it makes sense that it would be the target of attacks regarding its trustworthiness.
- **Question:** What attacks or questions have you heard regarding the reliability and/or trustworthiness of the Scriptures?
 - Questions of historicity?
 - Questions of content?
 - Questions of development?
 - Questions of authorship?
 - ...others?
- **Our aim:** To give a hope-filled, reasonable answer to critical questions.
 - **1 Peter 3:15** *...but in your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect...*
 - **1 Corinthians 10:5** *We destroy arguments and every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God, and take every thought captive to obey Christ...*

- **Dual Benefit:**
 - Gives us confidence in our own faith.
 - Tear down barriers to belief, in love.
- This lesson's aim is to provide a broad survey of reasons why we can trust the Scriptures. It is by no means exhaustive; be encouraged to study more on your own!

The Bible's Unity in Diversity

- The Bible is remarkably unified in its message despite a great diversity in authorship, provenance, and settings.
- The Bible was written over a 1,500 year span.¹
- Unlike other literary works, the Bible did not emerge from a homogenous community or a single region; instead, it was written by people from diverse regions and cultures, including Rome, Egypt, and Mesopotamia.² Furthermore, the Bible was written in three languages: Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek.
- It was written by over 40 authors from different walks of life:
 - Moses & Daniel - Political leaders
 - Peter - Fisherman
 - Luke - Gentile doctor
 - Solomon - King
 - Paul - Rabbi
 - ...etc.
- The Bible is unique in its literary genres, with a multitude of literary forms within its pages. While other works also use diversity in literary form, the Bible is unique in that the "authors use them in order to focus their audience's attention on one supreme metanarrative."³
- **Why this should encourage us:**
 - One would be hard-pressed to assert a single, earthly authority manufactured the Scriptures given the breadth of diversity in every aspect of its composition.
 - It's even less likely that such diversity would produce the overarching, consistent metanarrative found in the Bible.
 - No single author understood the plan or the metanarrative completely; each author contributed to a picture he couldn't have singularly imagined.
 - Such unity in incredible diversity is evidence of divine inspiration.

¹ McDowell, Josh, and Sean McDowell. *Evidence That Demands a Verdict : Life-Changing Truth for a Skeptical World*. Fourth edition. Nashville, Tennessee: Thomas Nelson, 2017, 4.

² Ibid.

³ McDowell, *Evidence*, 5.

The Bible's Content

- Some may assert that the Bible's content is that of "any other religion", and thus shouldn't be trusted as a uniquely authoritative source.
- However, the content of the Scriptures speaks to their trustworthiness along several dimensions; below are just a few evidences from within the Scriptures themselves of both their divine origin and unique authority.
- **Predictive Prophecy**
 - **Isaiah 42:8-9** I am the Lord; that is my name; my glory I give to no other, nor my praise to carved idols. ⁹ Behold, the former things have come to pass, and new things I now declare; before they spring forth I tell you of them.
 - According to Deuteronomy 18:21-22, if a prophet claims to be speaking words from God, they are held accountable with their own lives.
 - **Regarding World Events:⁴**
 - Moses predicted that the Jewish people would be conquered twice, and carried off as slaves in both instances. Other prophets (including Hosea, Jeremiah, and Isaiah) predict other major historical events that would affect the Jewish people involving other nations and geopolitical forces far ahead of their time.
 - We'll address prophecies about Christ in a moment, but in the 10th century BC (several centuries before crucifixion was invented by the Assyrians and long before the Roman Empire), King David predicted this means of death for Israel's Messiah (Psalm 22, Psalm 34:20).
 - Isaiah and Jeremiah prophesied the destruction of Babylon, and it came to pass as predicted (Isaiah 13:17-22; Jeremiah 51:26, 43)
 - Isaiah prophesied that a conqueror named Cyrus would defeat the Babylonian empire and subdue Egypt (Isaiah 44:28, 45:1, 45:13). This prophesy was made 150 years before Cyrus was born, and 180 years before Cyrus accomplished these feats.
 - **Regarding Jesus's Life, Ministry, and Death:**
 - **His First Advent**
 - **The Fact of His Coming:** Genesis 3:15; Deuteronomy 18:15; Psalms 89:20; Isaiah 9:6; 28:16; 32:1; 35:4; 42:6; 49:1; 55:4; Ezekiel 34:24; Daniel 2:44; Micah 4:1; Zechariah 3:8.
 - **His Divinity.** Psalms 2:7,11; 43:6,7,11; 72:8; 102:24-27; 89:26,27; 110:1; Isaiah 9:6; 25:9; 40:10; Jeremiah 23:6; Micah 5:2; Malachi 3:1.
 - **Human Generation.** Genesis 12:3; 18:18; 21:12; 22:18; 26:4; 28:14; 49:10; II Samuel 7:14; Psalms 18:46,50; 22:22,23; 89:4;

⁴ <https://reasons.org/explore/blogs/todays-new-reason-to-believe/fulfilled-prophecy-evidence-for-the-reliability-of-the-bible>

29:36; 132:11; Isaiah 11:1; Jeremiah 23:5; 33:15.

- **His Forerunner.** Isaiah 40:3; Malachi 3:1; 4:5
- **His Nativity and Early Years**
 - **The Fact.** Genesis 3:15; Isaiah 7:14; Jeremiah 31:22
 - **The Place.** Numbers 24:17,19; Micah 5:2
 - **Adoration by Magi.** Psalms 72:10,15; Isaiah 60:3,6.
 - **Descent into Egypt.** Hosea 11:1
 - **Massacre of Innocents.** Jeremiah 31:15
- **His Mission and Office**
 - **Mission.** Genesis 12:3; 49:10; Numbers 24:19; Deuteronomy 18:18,19; Psalms 21:1; Isaiah 59:20; Jeremiah 33:16.
 - **Priest like Melchizedek.** Psalms 110:4.
 - **Prophet like Moses.** Deuteronomy 18:15
 - **Conversion of Gentiles.** Isaiah 11:10; Deuteronomy 32:43; Psalms 18:49; 19:4; 117:1; Isaiah 42:1; 45:23; 49:6; Hosea 1:10; 2:23; Joel 2:32.
 - **Ministry in Galilee.** Isaiah 9:1,2.
 - **Miracles.** Isaiah 35:5,6; 42:7; 53:4
 - **Spiritual graces.** Psalms 45:7; Isaiah 11:2; 42:1; 53:9; 61:1,2.
 - **Preaching.** Psalms 2:7; 78:2; Isaiah 2:3; 61:1; Micah 4:2.
 - **Purification of Temple.** Psalms 69:9
- **His Passion**
 - **Rejection by Jews and Gentiles.** Psalms 2:1; 22:12; 41:5; 56:5; 69:8; 118:22,23; Isaiah 6:9,10; 8:14; 29:13; 53:1; 65:2
 - **Persecution.** Psalms 22:6; 35:7,12; 56:5; 71:10; 109:2; Isaiah 49:7; 53:3
 - **Triumphal Entry into Jerusalem.** Psalms 8:2; 118:25,26; Zechariah 9:9
 - **Betrayal by Own Friend.** Psalms 41:9; 55:13; Zechariah 13:6
 - **Betrayal for Thirty Pieces of Silver.** Zechariah 11:12.
 - **Betrayer's Death.** Psalms 55:15,23; 109:17
 - **Purchase of Potter's Field.** Zechariah 11:13.
 - **Desertion by Disciples.** Zechariah 13:7.
 - **False Accusation.** Psalms 27:12; 35:11; 109:2; Psalms 2:1,2.

- **Silence Under Accusation.** Psalms 38;13; Isaiah 53:7.
- **Mocking.** Psalms 22:7,8,16; 109:25.
- **Insult, Buffeting, Spitting, Scourging.** Psalms 35:15,21; Isaiah 50:6.
- **Patience Under Suffering.** Isaiah 53:79.
- **Crucifixion.** Psalms 22:14,17
- **Offer of gall and vinegar.** Psalms 69:21.
- **Prayer for Enemies.** Psalms 109:4.
- **Cries Upon the Cross.** Psalms 22:1; 31:5.
- **Death in Prime of Life.** Psalms 89:45; 102:24.
- **Death With Malefactors.** Isaiah 53:9,12.
- **Death Attested by Convulsions of Nature.** Amos 5:20; Zechariah 14:4,6.
- **Casting Lots for Vesture.** Psalms 22:18.
- **Bones Not to Be Broken.** Psalms 34:20.
- **Piercing.** Psalms 22:16; Zechariah 12:10; 13:6.
- **Voluntary Death.** Psalms 40:68
- **Vicarious Suffering.** Isaiah 53:46,12; Daniel 9:26.
- **Burial With the Rich.** Isaiah 53:9.
- **His Resurrection**
 - Psalms 16:18,10; 30:3; 41:10; 118:17; Hosea 6:2.
- **His Ascension**
 - Psalms 16:11; 24:7; 68:18; 110:1; 118:19
- **His Second Advent**
 - Psalms 50:36; Isaiah 9:6,7; 66:18; Daniel 7:13,14; Zechariah 12:10; 14:48.
 - **Universal and Everlasting Dominion.** I Chronicles 17:11-14; Psalms 72:8; Isaiah 9:8; Daniel 7:14; Psalms 2:68; 8:6; 110:13; 45:6,7.
- The presence of predictive prophecy alone testifies to the Scriptures' divine origin; no other text of any kind (religious or otherwise) contains true, predictive prophecy.

- **Historicity & Accuracy**

- Many categorize the Bible as merely myth or legend, asserting that it is not unlike other religious texts that recount fantastic, heroic tales or stories of divine intervention.
- However, a closer look at the Bible reveals its aim is to communicate *actual history*, not merely mythological tales or legends. While this can be confusing given the variety of genres (including apocalyptic language and poetry), the overarching assertion of Scripture is that it is telling true events.
- Important note: **Christianity is a historical religion.** We do not believe that Christianity is merely internal to the believer, nor simply our version of the truth; we believe that Christianity is a *true accounting* of God's activity in the world. Thus, the content of Scripture should (and does) withstand historical scrutiny.
- **Some helpful quotes:**
 - "Biblical archaeology's greatest significance is that it has corroborated many historical records in the Bible." – Menahem Mansoor, professor emeritus, University of Wisconsin at Madison.
 - "It may be stated categorically that no archaeological discovery has ever controverted a biblical reference." Nelson Glueck, Archaeologist.
 - "There can be no doubt that archaeology has confirmed the substantial historicity of Old Testament tradition... The excessive skepticism shown toward the Bible by important historical schools of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, certain phases of which still appear periodically, has been progressively discredited. Discovery after discovery has established the accuracy of innumerable details, and has brought increased recognition to the value of the bible as a source of history." – B. William F Albright, Archaeologist
- The New Testament Documents are the best historical documents in the ancient world.
 - The narratives were written soon after the events they report.
 - Matthew: Early 60s-80s
 - Mark: Late 50s-60s
 - Luke: Early 60s-80s; Acts: AD 62-64
 - John: Mid 60s-90s
 - Even non-Christian scholars acknowledge the gospels and Acts were written within the first century. Even if you used liberal scholars' time estimates (which often date them later), the writings are still closer to the events that take place than others sometimes used to support unquestioned events in history.⁵

⁵ McDowell, *Evidence*, 46

- **Extrabiblical Corroborations**

- The New Testament accounts are cited by early church fathers in their writings, lending even more credence to their accuracy and historicity.
 - Clement of Rome (AD 95), a leader after Peter.
 - Ignatius (AD 70-110), third bishop of Antioch and disciple of John; he was martyred for his faith.
 - Polycarp (AD 70-156), disciple of John, and bishop of Smyrna.
 - There are many others - the point is that these men also quoted from and even died for the truths of the New Testament writings, and lived lives that overlapped with the Apostles shortly after the events that are reported.
- The gospel accounts are referenced by non-Christian sources, including the Jewish historian Josephus, who mentions Jesus as a wise man and teacher who was crucified by Pilate, and appeared alive again on the third day (Antiquities 18.3.3).

- **Details & Historical Features**

- The New Testament documents include details one would only associate with eyewitness testimony given for the purpose of testifying to true events.
 - Times of day, weather conditions, local customs, names of specific rulers and authorities, and other similar details.
 - Mark reports Jesus "asleep on the stern of the boat".
 - Peter is told to be about 100 yards out in the water when he saw Jesus on the beach.
 - The number of fish in the disciples catch is told to be 153 (John 21:11)
 - Mark 15:21 says that the man who carried Jesus's cross was "the father of Alexander and Rufus".
 - These details are not only characteristic of true testimony, but in some cases would be foolish to include if one was trying to fabricate a story for dissemination (independently verifiable facts).
- Ancient fiction wasn't like modern fiction; modern fiction is written to appear realistic, but this style of writing did not appear until about 300 years ago.
- The gospels include embarrassing details that authors themselves would have no reason to include.

- **No Motivation to Deceive**
 - Apart from the fact that the Scriptures accurately align with historical corroboration, there's no motivation for the disciples (or the early church fathers) to deceive. The question must be asked, "what did they stand to gain?"
- **Summary:** There's nothing in the content of the Scriptures themselves that gives cause for doubting their accuracy or reliability. Instead, the content of the Scriptures testifies to their divine origin through predictive prophecy and are consistently corroborated by historical research and archaeological discovery.

The Bible's Composition, Development, and Proliferation

- While some question the historicity of the *content* of Scripture, others question the historical development of the Bible itself in an attempt to discredit it as a reliable and/or authoritative source.
 - In other words, rather than attack the content directly, they attack the reliability of the actual documents, irrespective its content.
- Such questions typically fall in the following categories:
 - **Questions of Authority.** What authority "chose" the books of the Bible, and what agenda did they have?
 - **Questions of Alterations.** Haven't there been changes to the Bible that detract from its trustworthiness? Didn't scribes and other writers make edits to the Scriptures, and aren't there errors that render it unreliable?
 - **Questions of Contradictions.** Even if there weren't changes made to the documents, aren't there contradictions in the Bible that make it impossible to know what is true?
- **Questions of Authority: Canonization**
 - This question is best addressed by understanding how the Bible was canonized, the process by which the 66 books of the Bible came to be in the Bible.
 - Many think that various accounts circulated widely, and that some authorities chose which accounts backed their particular agenda. In other words, the Bible was a "product of man". However, a survey of the Bible's historical development counters this argument.
 - The Old Testament canon was largely settled by the time of Jesus.⁶ For the purpose of this lesson, we will focus on the development of the New Testament Canon.

⁶ Meade, John D., and Peter J. Gurry. 2022. *Scribes and Scripture : The Amazing Story of How We Got the Bible*. Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway, 147

- **The Four Gospels**
 - The first subcollection that was widely recognized were the four gospels.
 - By the time of Athanasius's famous list of canonical books in 367, these four gospels were already widely viewed as authoritative in many churches and were circulating.⁷
 - Furthermore, early church fathers like Irenaeus and Tertullian affirmed that the church only had these four gospels, and early manuscript evidence confirms this view (i.e. Manuscript P45 from the third century should the four gospels and Acts in one codex). No Greek manuscript groups include any additional so-called gospels.⁸
- **Other New Testament Books & Closing the Canon**
 - The Pauline epistles collection canonized by the end of the second century, as seen in the writings of Origen, Tertullian, and Clement of Alexandria.⁹
 - Up to around 400, early Christians drafted eighteen canon lists and presented them as complete and exclusive lists of New Testament books.¹⁰
 - The Bible was not created by a human vote at the Council of Nicea in 325, and such simplicity does not account for the development of the canon we have today.¹¹
 - Instead, the church recognized which books were Scripture, with careful attention given to content, authorship, consistency, and other metrics in adjudicating veracity and authenticity.
- **Summary:** In every case, books were not "chosen", but rather recognized for their authority. No one individual put together the Bible as such; instead, they were widely recognized by multiple authorities over many years.
- **Questions of Alterations: Transcriptions & Copying**
 - Since we don't have the original manuscripts of the Scriptures, another vein of questioning surrounds the assertion that changes were made (whether intentionally or unintentionally) that renders the Bible unreliable as an authoritative source.
 - Much ink has been spilled on this topic – it's recommended that the reader consults with the works cited at the end of this lesson for further study.
 - However, in short, the New Testament manuscripts have been remarkably preserved by copying and recopying in a decentralized way that actually

⁷ Meade & Gurry, *Scribes & Scriptures*, 150.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Meade & Gurry, *Scribes & Scriptures*, 152.

¹⁰ Meade & Gurry, *Scribes & Scriptures*, 156.

¹¹ Meade & Gurry, *Scribes & Scriptures*, 163.

strengthens the case of their reliability rather than detracting from it.

- It's in these copies that differences exist, but a vast majority are scribal mistakes that are easily reconcilable through comparison.
 - If you count such obvious Scribal mistakes, there are 100s of thousands of textual variations. However, fewer than 1% are meaningful, and 0% affect doctrine.
- In the cases where accounts or texts appear to differ (see longer ending of Mark and John 7:53-8:11, for example), the science of text criticism gives us confidence to make determinations.
- Furthermore, there is no significant matter of doctrine or faith practice that is affected by the aforementioned sections in question.
- The textual witness of the New Testament is staggering – beyond any other piece of ancient literature by far.
 - New Testament manuscripts: 5,800+
 - Latin New Testament manuscripts: 10,000+
 - Manuscripts in other languages, including Syriac, Coptic, and Armenian: 5,000+
 - That's over 20,000 (conservatively) *before* the invention of the printing press.
 - We have over 1,000 times the number of copies compared to the average ancient text.
- The Bible has withstood all historical, scientific, and textual criticism lobbed its way over thousands of years.

- **Questions of Contradictions: Interpretation**

- The last category of doubt concerns what some purport to be apparent contradictions in the Bible.
- These break into two categories:
 - **“Purposeful” Contradictions:** Sometimes the gospel writers, for example, embrace what appear to be contradictory statements as a rhetorical or literary tool for theological clarification.
 - i.e. Jesus says “he judges no one” (John 8:15) and he also has “much to judge” (John 8:26).
 - **Apparent Contradictions:** Sometimes the gospel accounts relate their testimony in a way that appears different from other accounts, is presented in a different order, or seems to include different details.
- In both cases, all such questions are solvable through proper interpretation and harmonization.

“Who Would Make All This Up?”

- In his book, *Can We Trust the Gospels*, Peter J. Williams uses this title for his last chapter to capture another significant truth about the Scriptures: The fact that it seems incredibly unlikely that the content of the Scriptures would be invented.
- Just a few fascinating inclusions that seem unlikely to be helpful if one were making it up: The shameful death of Christ, the testimony of women at the resurrection, the foolishness of the disciples and other heroes of the Bible, the contradictory nature of Jesus’s ministry against the religious leaders, etc.
- Additionally, there is a whole category of content considerations called “undesigned coincidences” this lesson doesn’t address; these are the connections between texts across time and space that would have been impossible to fabricate through collusion.
- Apart from these, it’s also unlikely that the apostles and other New Testament writers would have stood by accounts they knew to be fabrications in the face of persecution and death.
- In short, the simplest explanation is that the accounts contained in Scripture actually happened, Jesus is actually the God-man, and salvation is available to all who repent from their sin and trust in Him.

For Further Reading:

- McDowell, Josh, and Sean McDowell. *Evidence That Demands a Verdict : Life-Changing Truth for a Skeptical World*. Fourth edition. Nashville, Tennessee: Thomas Nelson, 2017.
- Meade, John D., and Peter J. Gurry. *Scribes and Scripture : The Amazing Story of How We Got the Bible*. Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway, 2022.
- Williams, Peter John. *Can We Trust the Gospels?* Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway, 2018.