

The Bible—A Reliable Guide for Truth?

Introduction

Does God exist? If so, has He revealed the answers to ultimate issues such as “Why are we here?” “What is the purpose of life?” and “Is there an afterlife?” If there are answers, where can they be found? Many people consider the Bible as a reliable source for answers to the ultimate issues of humanity. But is the Bible trustworthy? Can the question of the Bible’s reliability be investigated, and evidence adduced to determine whether the Bible is a reliable guide, or is the Bible’s trustworthiness solely a matter of faith? The following essay presents facts, evidence and reasons in support of the reliability of the Bible as a source of truth. The reader is urged to be like a juror in a courtroom trial who considers testimony first, then renders a verdict. The issue for the jury to decide is whether the evidence is sufficient to conclude, indeed, that the Bible is a reliable guide for truth.

The Bible

The Bible is one book made up of more than 60 separate writings. These writings include stories about the history of the world, the history of the Jewish people, poetic books and prophetic books. The Bible begins with the assumption that God exists, that God created the universe, and that He is a sentient being, capable of communicating with His creation, and has done so in various ways.

The Fall of Humanity

The early chapters of Genesis, (the first book of Bible), chronicles God forming the first humans (Adam and Eve), and His interactions with them. According to Genesis, Adam and Eve disobeyed God’s commands. The effect of this disobedience—what the Bible calls *sin*—is that Adam and Eve and their posterity are fallen, separated from a holy God. Virtually everything following the first few chapters of Genesis deals with God’s plan to restore humanity to the intended relationship with the Creator. This restoration is often called *redemption* or *salvation*.

The Old Testament—Redemption through a Promised Messiah

The Old Testament--The Written Story of Redemption

Recorded in the Hebrew language, the first 39 books of the Bible are commonly called the *Old Testament*.¹ The Old Testament is the written story of redemption in which God made sacred agreements with people, called *covenants*. These covenants contain God’s promises that are sometimes conditioned on human obedience in order to obtain what God has offered. For example, God instituted animal sacrifice as a way for people to atone for their sins in order to obtain temporal redemption. Ultimately, the Old Testament predicts, through the prophet Jeremiah and others, that there will be a *new covenant* (Jeremiah 31:31, ff) that involves an eternal sacrifice for the forgiveness of sin and restoration of a fallen people into a personal relationship with God.

¹ The word *Testament* is a translation of the Hebrew word *berith* which means *covenant*.

Redemption Promised Through a Messiah

God's promised redemption of humanity began to take shape with a man named Abram who is introduced in Genesis chapter 11, and whose name God changed to *Abraham* ("father of a multitude"). God promised Abraham a myriad of descendants chosen to bring a blessing to all people through a coming *Messiah*, the Hebrew word meaning *anointed one* (the Greek equivalent is *Christ*).² The Messiah would provide the ultimate remedy for the sin that separates people from God. But how does the Old Testament reveal who will be this Messiah? How can the Messiah be identified when He comes? And what is the New Covenant that He will bring?

The Identity of the Messiah through His Lineage

There are numerous Old Testament passages which appear to be predictive of the coming Messiah. It is through these prophecies that the identity of the Messiah is revealed. Each prophetic passage narrows the possible candidates for the Messiah. For example, in Genesis chapter 12, God's covenant with Abraham is understood to mean that the Messiah will be a descendant of Abraham.² Abraham's grandson, Jacob, had 12 sons, which make up the 12 tribes of the nation Israel. According to Genesis 49:11, the Messiah would be a descendant of Jacob's son *Judah*.³ The prophet Samuel foretold that God designated a man from the tribe of Judah, Jesse (1 Samuel 16:3), whose son would be in the lineage of the Messiah. The prophet Nathan prophesied that Jesse's son, David, was the one whose descendant would be the Messiah. It would be this Son of David who would establish an eternal kingdom (2 Samuel 7:12, ff., "I will establish the throne of His kingdom forever"). Thus, through prophecy we can glean that the Messiah would be a descendant of Abraham, Jacob, Judah, Jesse and David. Based upon these prophecies, the Jews were looking for the Messiah to be a descendant of David.

The Identity of the Messiah through Identifying Features

In addition to Bible prophecy establishing the lineage of the Messiah, the Old Testament predicts more identifying features about the Messiah. These include that He would be born in Bethlehem (Micah 5:2), born of a Virgin (Isaiah 7:14), suffer for the sins of the world (Isaiah 53:1-9), be crucified (Psalm 22:16) but would come back to life, i.e., resurrected (Isaiah 53:10-12) and would appear with wounds from His crucifixion (Zechariah 12:10). Additionally, the Messiah was predicted to bring sight to the blind, hearing to the deaf, and healing to the lame so that they would "leap like a deer" (Isaiah 35:5, 6).

Seven hundred years after Isaiah foretold what the Messiah would do when He came, John the Baptist, imprisoned and facing execution under King Herod Antipas, had a question for Jesus. He asked his followers to approach Jesus and ask Him to confirm that He was the Messiah (*Coming One*). Jesus told John's followers to report what they had heard and seen, namely that the blind receive sight, the deaf hear and the lame walk (Matthew 11:2-5), a direct reference to what Isaiah prophesied about the Messiah in Isaiah chapter 35.

The Messiah—More than a Mere Man

In further describing the coming Messiah through Old Testament prophecy, several passages reveal that He would not be a mere man but would actually be the Eternal God in human form. The Messiah's actions are said to be from eternity (Micah 5:2); the promised Son who will be

² Genesis 12:2-3, "In you all the families of the earth will be blessed."

³ "The scepter shall not depart from Judah until that which is his shall come." This is the wording found in the *Septuagint* (abbreviated *LXX*), the Greek translation of the Hebrew Old Testament.

born of a virgin shall be called *Immanuel*, meaning *God with us* (Isaiah 7:14); and the Son's name will be called *Mighty God* and *Everlasting Father* (Isaiah 9:6). These references serve as important indicators that the Messiah would be God Himself.

Messianic Prophecy and the Reliability of the Old Testament

Christianity affirms that Jesus is the Messiah predicted in the Old Testament. Jesus' fulfillment of Messianic prophecies is evidence that the Old Testament is a reliable guide to truth and suggests divine inspiration by foretelling the future. The Jews at the time of Jesus had a literal view of the prophecies of the Messiah. After Jesus was born and the Magi came looking for the *King of the Jews*, Herod the King gathered his scribes and chief priests together and asked where the Messiah was to be born. They answered him, "Bethlehem of Judea" (Matthew 2:4-6).

After the time of Jesus, 2nd and 3rd century Christians⁴ used Bible prophecy to make the case that Jesus was the predicted Messiah and that the Old Testament writings accurately foretold the future, evidence of their supernatural character. The sampling of Bible prophecies provided here is but a small part of what many writers claim are at least 60 major prophecies of the Messiah in the Old Testament, all fulfilled by Jesus.

Is the Old Testament a Reliable Guide for Truth?

Reasons to Trust the Old Testament

The Old Testament describes God creating the heavens and the earth (Genesis 1:1) but does not say *when* God created the universe nor *how* He created it. The Old Testament is not meant to be a science textbook or even as a survey of world history. Instead, it is a selected history of God's interactions with certain people and nations as His plan of redemption unfolds. The Old Testament provides lessons and examples for those who came afterward, answering the questions, "Why are we here?" "What does God require of us?" and Job's famous question, "If someone dies, will they live again?" (Job 14:14). The very first chapter of Genesis teaches that humanity was created in the image of God (Genesis 1:26, 27). This is typically understood to mean God's moral and spiritual likeness, in that God is a holy, moral being, and humanity has been given these same attributes. Many Old Testament stories are well known even by those who have not studied the Scriptures because the stories have become part of common culture. But whether someone knows the teachings of the Old Testament or is a skeptic, is there a way to objectively determine if the Old Testament teachings are true? Fortunately, yes, evidence and reasons exist which make a case that the Old Testament is trustworthy.

The threshold question regarding whether the Old Testament is a reliable guide to truth turns on whether the claims found in the Old Testament, such as God's call to Abram, the promise of the Messiah, and the promise of life after death are true. At this point some will ask, "Isn't it merely a matter of faith?" In short, no. Just as Jesus did not tell those who questioned His ability to forgive sin to "Just believe," Scripture gives evidence and reasons to believe the truth claims in the Bible. The question of whether the Bible is a reliable guide to truth is not resolved by blind faith or wish projection, but by facts. What facts can be adduced to show that the accounts found in the Old Testament are true?

⁴ E.g., Justin Martyr (c. 100-165), *First Apology*

Jesus' Perspective on Trusting the Old Testament

As set forth previously, there are numerous Old Testament prophecies concerning the coming Messiah fulfilled by Jesus, confirming His identity as the Messiah. When Jesus encountered a Samaritan woman at a well near Sychar she shared her beliefs with Jesus: "I know that Messiah is coming (He who is called Christ); when that One comes, He will declare all things to us." In response Jesus said, "I who speak to you am He." (John 4:25-26) Therefore, evidence from Bible prophecy and Jesus' own claims confirm He was the Messiah. The identity of Jesus as the promised Messiah is, by itself, a reason to accept His words as true.

The Resurrection as a Confirming Sign that Jesus Spoke the Truth

An additional reason to adopt Jesus's view that the Old Testament is a reliable guide to truth is His resurrection from the dead. If a person predicts His own resurrection, and the evidence supports that the person actually did rise from the dead, those facts make a compelling reason to accept as true whatever other claims He made. The historical event that sets Jesus apart from everyone else is His resurrection. Jesus predicted on several occasions that He would be crucified and rise again on the third day.⁵ Even Jesus' enemies were fully aware of His prediction, so they made preparations to prevent anyone from claiming Jesus had risen, including posting Roman guards at His tomb and placing a Roman seal on the tomb (Matthew 27:62-66). The Gospel accounts provide four different perspectives which agree on the central fact that Jesus, after being crucified, appeared alive. The New Testament further describe at least 10 daylight appearances of Jesus after His crucifixion where He showed Himself alive. Moreover, one of the New Testament epistles adds that one of His appearances was to more than 500 men.⁶

Why Jesus' Opinion Counts

Since there is compelling evidence that Jesus rose from the dead,⁸ it is reasonable to accept as true what Jesus accepted as true. How can this be applied to the question of the reliability of Old Testament? One way is to consider how Jesus described the Old Testament. In Matthew 15:1-2 some Pharisees⁷ and scribes asked Jesus about why His disciples violated traditions. Jesus responded by admonishing them that they were violating the very commandment of God. He then quoted from the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20:1-17) about honoring father and mother, says they are violating the commandment, and refers to the commandment as the *word of God* (Matthew 15:6). In several other places in the Gospels Jesus refers to the Old Testament as the "word of God," which not only implies His belief the Scriptures were accurate, but also inspired by God.

In addition to calling the Old Testament the word of God, Jesus' view of the reliability of Scripture can also be seen by His references to passages in the Old Testament. Some of these passages are the ones most often questioned by critics, including the stories of Adam and Eve, Noah and the flood, and Jonah and the whale.⁸ Often these accounts are singled out and dismissed by skeptics as being mere myths and legends. Although the truth of Christianity does not stand or fall with whether there was a literal Adam and Eve, a literal flood which killed all of humanity except those aboard Noah's ark, and a literal fish that swallowed Jonah,⁹ is there a

⁵ E.g., Matthew 16:21

⁶ I Corinthians 15:6

⁷ The *Pharisees* (Hebrew *parash*, "to separate") were legalistic Jews who saw themselves as religiously superior.

⁸ The text of the Book of Jonah says *great fish* (Hebrew *dawg gadol*), not *whale* (Jonah 1:17).

⁹ Christianity stands or falls with the historic death and resurrection of Jesus.

good reason to accept those accounts as being literally true, reliable stories? Yes. The reason is that Jesus endorsed each of these accounts as true.

Adam and Eve

Jesus was questioned about marriage and divorce on more than one occasion. In the account found in Matthew 19:3-5, He was asked about God's ideal for marriage, Jesus replied, "Have you not read that He who made them in the beginning made them male and female. And for this cause a man shall leave his father and mother and shall separate unto his wife..." Jesus based his answer to the marriage question on the Genesis account of God creating "in the beginning" "male and female," a clear reference to Adam and Eve. Thus, Jesus impliedly endorses as true the story of Adam and Eve.

Noah and the Flood

There are other traditions outside of the Old Testament that also involve a great flood and survivors who managed to be on board a boat. At least one of these ancient traditions, the Epic of Gilgamesh, appears to pre-date the account in Genesis. So, why take as true the Biblical account of the flood? Again, the answer comes from the words of Jesus. In Matthew chapter 24 Jesus warns His disciples that the Temple in Jerusalem was going to be destroyed. His disciples then asked Him when that would happen, what would be the sign of His second coming and the sign of the end of the age. In responding Jesus compared his return to "the days of Noah" (Matthew 24:37) and refers to "the day that Noah entered the ark" (Matthew 24:38). A simple reading of this passage leads to the conclusion that Jesus believed the Genesis account of Noah and the flood.

Jonah and the Whale

The Old Testament account of Jonah being swallowed by a great fish is viewed by some as the ultimate "exaggerated fish story." It is reasonable to wonder how a fish could swallow a man whole, and how that person could survive for three days. The story of Jonah is entertaining, but can it be taken as literally true without straining *credulity* (i.e., believing something in spite of the evidence)?

Jesus was pestered by some of the Jewish religious leaders to provide a sign that His message was truly from God. In response Jesus let them know the only sign they would be given was "the sign of Jonah the prophet; for just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the sea monster, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth" (Matthew 12:38-40). Jesus uses Jonah as a symbol of His death and resurrection. He could have used any number of Old Testament accounts as signs, yet He used the experience of Jonah as the only sign the religious leaders would receive. The significance of Jesus' words to the Jewish religious leaders is that Jesus accepted as true the Old Testament story of Jonah and linked the story to not only His death, but also as a preview of His resurrection.

Concepts, Words and Letters.

One could argue that Jesus went out of His way to confirm the reliability of certain Old Testament accounts (e.g., Adam and Eve, Jonah) that centuries later would be questioned by skeptics. Jesus' endorsement of those accounts is a valid reason to accept them as true. If Jesus did accept those stories as true, to what extent did Jesus trust the rest of the Old Testament Scriptures? Roughly 10% of the words of Jesus recorded in the Gospels are quotations from the Old Testament. This demonstrates that He was both intimately familiar with the Old Testament Scripture and trusted it as authoritative. In fact, it was his practice to use the Old Testament to

answer questions and underscore His points about God's intent for humanity. In doing so Jesus reveals the extent in which He trusted the Old Testament—not just the concepts taught, but the very words and even letters used.

Jesus Trusted the Concepts found in the Old Testament

By quoting from the Old Testament to answer questions and make points, Jesus demonstrated His implicit trust in the truth of the Old Testament. Often when teaching the truth about His mission, Jesus made certain claims that caused His enemies to accuse Him of blasphemy.¹⁰ In one of these accounts (John 10:22-39) the Jews wanted Jesus to plainly state that He was the Christ. Jesus responded that He had already informed them He was the Messiah, yet they did not believe because they were not His followers. He went on to say to them that He gives His followers eternal life, and no one can snatch them out of His hand or the Father's hand. When the Jews picked up stones to stone Him, Jesus asked, "For which of my good works are you stoning Me?" The Jews responded, "For a good work we do not stone You, but for blasphemy; and because You, being a man, make Yourself out to be God" (John 10:32-33). Jesus answers them by referring to an Old Testament passage (Psalm 82:1, ff.) then says, "The Scriptures cannot be broken" (John 10:35). Jesus trusted the concepts of the Old Testament and used them to disarm his enemies from their misguided attacks upon His teachings.

Jesus Trusted the Words of the Old Testament

There are many exchanges between Jesus and the Jewish leaders where they tried to trap Him into saying something that would either be contrary to the Law or cause Him to lose favor with ordinary Jews. For example, in the account of the woman caught in adultery the religious leaders found a situation they hoped would force Jesus to either break the Law of Moses or lose the support of the common people. The Law prescribed stoning a woman caught in adultery, but compassion dictated finding a more loving solution. The religious leaders thought they had Jesus on the horns of a dilemma. If He said, "Let her go" He would be seen as disobeying the Law. If He said, "Stone Her," He would be seen as lacking compassion. Jesus escapes through the horns by saying, "Let him without sin cast the first stone." At the point the crowd began dropping their stones and left (John 7:53-8:11).

Jesus' encounter with the Sadducees is recorded in Matthew chapter 22. The Sadducees were a group of wealthy and powerful Jews who did not believe in angels or an afterlife. They approached Jesus with a hypothetical about a married man who died childless, and the Law prescribed in that situation that if the man had a surviving brother, he should marry the widow. In the hypothetical the deceased husband had six brothers, and each in succession married the widow and died childless, then the woman died. The Sadducees' question for Jesus was, "Whose wife will she be in the resurrection, since all seven were married to the woman?" (Matthew 22:23-28). Jesus first let them they made two mistakes--they did not understand the Scriptures and they did not understand the power of God (Matthew 22:29).

After pointing out their mistakes Jesus proceeds to illustrate from the Old Testament that there is an afterlife. He does so by referencing the account on Mount Sinai when Moses was confronted by God speaking to him through a burning bush. At the time of Moses, the Patriarchs Abraham, Isaac and Jacob had been dead for centuries, but Jesus points out to the Sadducees from the Exodus account that God told Moses, "I *am* the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob"¹¹ not "I *was*

¹⁰ *Blasphemy* refers to "speaking injuriously (about God)."

¹¹ Exodus 3:6

the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.” Jesus continues, “He is not the God of the dead but of the living” (Matthew 22:32). In short, Jesus uses the words of Old Testament to show that Abraham, Isaac and Jacob were alive when God spoke to Moses, proving from Old Testament teachings that there is life after death. Jesus’ entire argument hinged on the word *am* (*I am the God of Abraham....*) showing that He trusted the very tense of the verb (present tense, *am* versus past tense, *was*) from the passage in Exodus 3:6. Jesus could not make the argument if He did not accept the accuracy of the Old Testament accounts.

Jesus Trusted the Very Letters of the Old Testament

Jesus gave a famous sermon on top of a high hill near the Sea of Galilee, commonly known as the “Sermon on the Mount.” His sermon, as recorded in the Gospel of Matthew chapters 5-7, addresses the role of the Law of Moses. Jesus stated plainly that He did not come to abolish the Law, but to fulfil it (Matthew 5:17). He then says, “For truly I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not the smallest letter or stroke shall pass from the Law until all is accomplished” (Matthew 5:18). Jesus’ point was that nothing significant, and even nothing insignificant in the Law will be lost or pass away. When the Gospel of Matthew records these words of Jesus, Matthew, writing his Gospel in Greek, uses the word *iota* (translated *jot* in the familiar King James translation of 1611) to signify that even the smallest part (the *iota*, the smallest Greek letter) remains intact. The application is that Jesus trusted even the minute details of what God had revealed in the Old Testament Law.

Summary of Reliability of the Old Testament from the Perspective of Jesus

There is a host of evidence that the Old Testament predicts a coming Messiah, and that Jesus fulfilled those predictions. Jesus not only stated that He was the promised Messiah (John 4:25-26), but made many unique claims, including having the authority to forgive sin (Matthew 9:2), existing before Abraham (John 8:58) and being one with the Father (John 10:30). Further, Jesus accepted worship (Matthew 14:33) and allowed His followers to call Him “Lord” and “God” (John 20:28). These claims and actions by Jesus set Him apart as the Messiah who was also God incarnate. Therefore, if Jesus’ claims to deity were true, then His acceptance of the Old Testament as a reliable guide to truth is compelling evidence that the Old Testament is trustworthy, even to the very words and letters.

Is the Old Testament of Today the Same as When Originally Written?

Before moving to the reliability of the New Testament, even though Jesus, as God, endorsed the Old Testament as the reliable Word of God, the question remains whether the Old Testament we have today is the same as when it was first written. In other words, has the Old Testament been changed over the centuries to the point where no one can be sure what the original text said?

In order to answer the question, it is important to note that before the 15th century invention of the printing press by Gutenberg, all literature was written by hand, usually on *parchment* (animal skins which had been shaved and scraped to accommodate writing), or on *papyrus* (an ancient form of paper made from reeds that grow in the Nile delta). In the case of the Old Testament, the Jews were the custodians of the text of Scripture and considered it a sacred duty to be able to make accurate handwritten copies of the text. The Jewish scribes had to memorize and follow minute regulations or order to be approved to copy the Old Testament. The task of the Jewish copyist was to assure the text remained pure and accurate, faithful to the original text (*exemplar*) from which they were copying. If accuracy was paramount, how can the accuracy of the Jewish scribes be gauged today?

The Old Testament was completed around the year 450 B.C. Until nearly the middle of the 20th century the standard text of the Hebrew Old Testament was compiled from a few Hebrew manuscripts that dated to around the year A.D. 900. The text was maintained by Jewish Masoretes.¹² The *Masoretic Text* from A.D. 900 was used to translate the Old Testament into other languages for more than a millennium. Despite the devotion of the Masoretes to the fidelity of the Old Testament text, the fact remained that the Masoretic Text was compiled centuries after the Old Testament was completed. How could one verify that the text of the Old Testament was not changed during the 1,300-plus years that the Scriptures were being copied by hand?

Discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls

In the year 1947 an event occurred that provided an answer to the question of whether the Old Testament from the time of the Masoretes was essentially the same as when the Old Testament was completed in 450 B.C. A young shepherd boy discovered scrolls in a cave in an area called Qumran which is near the Dead Sea. This area is also just a few miles from Jerusalem. Scholars confirmed the young boy's find included copies of the Old Testament that pre-dated the time of Jesus. The discovery led to further searches of the area, and an additional 10 caves were found that contained old copies of the Old Testament. These writings became commonly known as the *Dead Sea Scrolls*.

Significance of the Dead Sea Scrolls

One of the Qumran findings was a complete scroll of the Old Testament Book of Isaiah, dating around 150 B.C., more than 1,000 years before the Masoretic text. When comparing the text of the Isaiah scroll of 150 B.C. to the Masoretic text of Isaiah from A.D. 900, scholars were amazed—they were nearly 100% identical. For example, the accounts of the “suffering servant” located in Isaiah chapter 53 were compared. There are 166 words in the Hebrew text of the Isaiah chapter 53. Of those 166 words, only 17 *letters* were different between the Dead Sea Scroll copy and the Masoretic text. Of those 17 letters 10 were spelling changes (for example, in English the term for hard work can be spelled either *labor* or *labour*) and four were stylistic changes (the use of conjunctions). The only substantive difference between the two texts was *one word*—a three-letter word for *light* that appears in verse 11 of the Qumran text of Isaiah which is not in the Masoretic text.

One word difference out of 166 words is better than 99% accuracy in copying the text by hand over more than 1,000 years. In short, the Dead Sea Scrolls confirm that the Old Testament text has been accurately copied from before the time of Jesus. The significance of Qumran is that there is now no room for the allegation that the Old Testament has been changed over the years through copying and re-copying.

Between the Old and New Testaments

After being exiled from their homeland in Israel by the conquering powers of Assyria (722 B.C.) and Babylon (586 B.C.) the Jewish people began returning to Palestine around the 5th century B.C., about the time the Old Testament writings were completed. From that point to the birth of Jesus (the *Inter-testament Period*, also called the *400 silent years*) the Jews were subject to Greek conquerors who reigned from Syria, and finally were subjugated by Rome around the year 64 B.C. At the time of Jesus many Jews expected the Messiah would come as a military leader, cast

¹² The *Masoretes* were Jewish scholars who flourished between the 6th and 9th centuries A.D.

off the yoke of the Romans and establish Israel as a military and economic powerhouse. However, when Jesus came, He came not as the Lion of Judah, but as the Lamb of God, offering Himself as the sacrifice which brought redemption to all who believe. Christianity views the advent of Jesus, an era St. Paul called “the fulness of time,”¹³ as the “hinge of history.” Most people continue to date history as “before Christ” (“B.C.”) and “in the year of our Lord” (*anno domini*, or A.D.),¹⁴ further evidence of the impact of Jesus on the world.

The New Testament

Can the New Testament be Trusted?

The New Testament contains 27 books: four biographies (*Matthew, Mark, Luke* and *John*) called the *Gospels*; a history of the birth of the Church (the *Acts of the Apostles*); 21 letters, or *epistles* (letters written to churches, individuals, and people in a particular region); and one book of prophecy (*Revelation*) which deals with the future and end time events.

The Gospels include accounts of Jesus conducting a three-year ministry traveling the countryside, healing the sick, casting out demons and teaching about God’s plan of redemption. During His ministry, Jesus claimed to be able to forgive sin (Matthew 9:2, 6), promised that by believing in Him a person will have eternal life (John 11:25), and said He was the only way to God (John 14:6). Anyone can make truth claims, even extraordinary ones. Some claims cannot be verified by observation because they involve *spiritual claims*. For example, Jesus promised the paralyzed laying at His feet in the midst of a crowded home, “Son, your sins are forgiven” (Mark 2:5). How could anyone present know whether the man’s sins truly were forgiven by watching the event? There was no way to see an event that is happening in the unseen, spiritual (i.e., *metaphysical*) realm (i.e., sins being forgiven).

Jesus’ Use of Observable Evidence to Support His Spiritual Claims

In the account of the paralyzed man, Jesus knew what some present there were thinking. In response, He said, “But so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins, I say to you, get up, pick up your pallet and go home.” The man got up, picked up his pallet and went home. Those watching could not see the man’s sins being forgiven, but they could see a paralyzed man healed in front of their eyes. Jesus used observable, testable, verifiable evidence of a miraculous healing to support His claim to be able to forgive sin. The logic of this account of Jesus is plain—if He can heal a paralytic, His claim that He can forgive sin becomes far more believable. Jesus even told His own disciples, “Believe Me that I am in the Father and the Father is in Me; otherwise believe because of the works themselves” (John 14:11). Jesus gave His disciples and the entire world reasons to believe based upon his works of performing miracles, casting out demons and rising from the dead. Trusting the spiritual claims of Jesus is validated by His miraculous works.

Evidence for the Reliability of the New Testament

There are two important considerations when investigating whether the New Testament is a reliable guide to truth: (1) Has the wording of New Testament been changed from what was originally written; and (2) Does archaeology confirm the accuracy of the people, places, titles and customs contained in the New Testament? If the evidence supports that our New Testament

¹³ Galatians 4:4

¹⁴ It is common today to see *BCE* (“Before Common Era”) and *CE* (“Common Era”) in place of B.C. and A.D.

is essentially the same as when it was written, and if archaeology confirms its historical accuracy, then it is reasonable to accept as true the truth claims, i.e., “spiritual claims” of the New Testament. For example, historians conclude that Jesus died on a Roman cross, but history cannot determine that Jesus died for the sins of the world—history can only determine that Jesus *claimed* to have died for the sins of the world. Jesus’ spiritual claims are outside the scope of historical and archaeological investigation, but the accuracy of the writings that contain His claims can be historically investigated. And if the accuracy of the writings can be demonstrated by competent evidence, then a case is made for accepting Jesus’ spiritual claims.

Is the New Testament the same Today as when Originally Written?

A common question is whether the New Testament been changed over the years. There is no doubt that “variations” have crept into our existing copies. However, most of these “variations” are unintentional, caused by slips of the pen, poor eyesight or a number of other reasons due to copying and re-copying by hand. Other variations may be intentional. For example, adding and deleting words, phrases or even chapters to promote a particular doctrine or agenda. Scribes also would attempt to harmonize a passage with a parallel account or remove something that appeared to the scribe as erroneous or impious.

Without the autographs to consult, how is the original wording of the New Testament determined when there are places of variation? The answer is by comparing the manuscript copies we do have (*extant copies*), filtering out obvious scribal errors, and applying standard principles of reconstructing an original text from existing manuscripts. This summarizes the discipline called *textual criticism*. The purpose of textual criticism is to arrive at what the autographs said by scrutinizing extant copies. When it comes to textual criticism of the New Testament, there are so many extant copies to examine, and many of the copies are so close in time to the autographs, that comparing the New Testament to contemporary secular writings is embarrassing.

We possess more than 20,000 Greek manuscripts and Versions of the New Testament compared to fewer than 35 for Roman historian Tacitus, (c. A.D. 115) around 250 for Caesar’s *Gallic Wars* (c. 50 B.C) and just over 200 for Plato (c. 350 B.C.). In terms of how close the oldest copies are to the original writing, a New Testament fragment from John’s Gospel dates to A.D. 125 (John’s Gospel is typically dated to A.D.90, a 30-year gap between the writing and oldest copy) and we have complete copies of books of the New Testament around 100 years after their writing. The oldest copy of Tacitus dates to c. A.D. 850 (a 700-year gap between the writing and oldest copy) Caesar c. 800 (850-year gap) and Plato c. 900 (1,250- year gap).¹⁵ Virtually no one claims these secular writings have been changed over the years. However, with 100 times more manuscripts of the New Testament, several hundred years closer to the original writings than their secular counterpart, the text of the New Testament stands alone in terms of the wealth of evidence available to reconstruct the original wording.

A more visual way of comparing the New Testament to ancient Graeco-Roman literature is to make piles of all the extant manuscripts from each writer. The tallest pile of these ancient writers would be approximately four feet high. If all the manuscripts of the New Testament were piled up, it would reach *one mile* high. As textual critic Daniel Wallace illustrates, there are a thousand times more New Testament manuscripts than those of the average Graeco-Roman writer.¹⁶

¹⁵ See Clay Jones, *The Bibliographical Test Updated*, Christian Research Journal, vol. 35, no. 3 (2012).

¹⁶ Daniel B. Wallace, ed., *Revisiting the Corruption of the New Testament*, (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2011), 29.

What About the Variations?

The wealth of manuscript (called *bibliographical*) evidence for the New Testament assures that nothing has been lost over the centuries of copying and re-copying. Significant “variations” between the copies (*variant readings*) can be resolved using the principles of textual criticism. Most scholars conclude that other than obvious slips of the pen in copying, and innocuous differences such as spelling changes, the amount of *substantial variation* (i.e., that which requires a textual analysis) is minuscule, approximately 1/1000th of the text.¹⁷ By way of comparison, the manuscript evidence for the New Testament is even superior to that of the works of Shakespeare, which are barely 400 years old, in that the autographs are missing and every one of his 37 plays have gaps in the existing copies. When it comes to the New Testament, there are no gaps. The study of New Testament textual criticism put to rest the oft-heard allegation that the New Testament has been changed over the years. Instead, the evidence leads to the conclusion that the claims of the New Testament can be relied upon as authentic claims from eyewitnesses to the events.

Evidence from Archaeology

Another tool for determining the reliability of the New Testament is archaeology. Are the places, names, titles, customs and people listed in the New Testament consistent with what history and archaeology have uncovered? In brief, the answer is, “Yes.” The accuracy of the New Testament’s references to historical people and places is another reason to accept the New Testament as a reliable guide to truth.

A century ago, critics of the New Testament listed several references in the New Testament to customs, people and places that had not been corroborated by archaeology. The lack of archaeological corroboration led them to question the New Testament’s reliability. This type of reasoning is an informal logical fallacy, essentially an argument from silence. When investigating history, it is important to remember that *the absence of evidence is not evidence of absence*.

To the critic’s dismay, the number of uncorroborated New Testament references has shrunk dramatically in the past century. For example, critics used to contend that the New Testament reference to the use of nails to crucify Jesus was fabricated. The reason? Because metal nails were scarce and costly during the time of Jesus, and no evidence had been found that showed the Romans used metal nails in the 1st century to crucify people. Then, in 1968, an excavation in Jerusalem uncovered a cement box of bones (*ossuary*) which dated to the time of Jesus. A man’s name--Yohannon ben Ha’galgol—was written on the outside of the box. Inside the box archaeologists discovered a 4 ½ inch, bent metal spike protruding from the man’s heel bone. The man had clearly been crucified. Likely, the Romans gave up trying to remove the bent nail for reuse and left it in Ha’galgol’s heel bone. There are numerous other examples of recent archaeological discoveries confirming biblical references.¹⁸

¹⁷ Brooke Foss Westcott and Fenton John Anthony Hort, *The New Testament in the Original Greek* (Cambridge and London, 1881), 565.

¹⁸ See David E. Graves, *The Archaeology of the New Testament* (New Brunswick, Canada: Electronic Christian Media, 2019).

Archaeological Confirmation from the Book of Acts.

Classical scholar, Colin Hemer, investigated the historical references in the Acts of the Apostles to villages, towns, cities, boats, ships, bodies of water, titles and customs. Hemer documents more than 60 references in the Acts of the Apostles which have been confirmed as accurate by archaeology.¹⁹ Another archaeologist, William Ramsay, more than a century ago was researching the region of Asia Minor (modern Turkey) as it existed in the 1st century. He found few sources to help his investigation. As a last resort, and without expecting to find much, Ramsay consulted the book of Acts. To his amazement, he found that Luke used the precise names, places, locations and titles in Acts which were confirmed by archaeological discoveries. Ramsay's conclusion was that Luke was an historian of the first rank, among the best of antiquity.²⁰

Are the Gospels True Accounts of What Jesus Said and Did?

When it comes to the four Gospels, the identity of the writers does not appear within the texts. There is an open question as to whether the titles affixed to the Gospels (e.g., *the Gospel According to Matthew*), were part of the original writings or were added later. Though we don't have the autographs to examine (they have been lost, destroyed, or otherwise are unknown to exist today) that every extant copy of a Gospel manuscript that has the first chapter intact has a title listing either Matthew, Mark, Luke or John.

Internal Clues to Gospel Authorship

Details within the text of the Gospels provide clues as to their authorship. The Gospel According to Luke is dedicated to the same person as the Acts of the Apostles. The Acts of the Apostles is generally presumed to have been written by Luke, a gentile physician who was a traveling companion of the Apostle Paul. Thus, even within the texts of Luke and Acts is evidence to support the traditional authorship of Luke. Further, within the text of the Gospel of John are self-references to the writer as "the disciple whom Jesus loved" (cf., John 21:20). Taken together with other claims within the Gospel of John, including the writer calling himself a *disciple* (John 21:24) and presenting accounts as an eyewitness (John 21:25), it is reasonable to conclude, from the internal evidence alone, that John, son of Zebedee, Apostle and disciple of Jesus is the author.

External Statements Regarding Gospel Authorship

The identity of the Gospel writers was not a mystery to the generations that came after the Apostles. The question of "Who wrote the Gospels?" is conclusively answered by 2nd century Christians. Papias, a bishop in the early church and a disciple of John the Apostle, wrote in the year c. 110 that both Matthew and Mark wrote a Gospel account. Polycarp, a disciple of Papias, wrote c. 180 that Luke and John both wrote Gospel accounts. There are other lines of evidence that further support the traditional authors of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John being the actual writers.²¹ If true, then we have eyewitness accounts from two disciples (Matthew and John), another eyewitness account, according to Papias, in that Mark's Gospel is actually account of Peter as told to Mark. Finally, we have an investigative journalist, Luke, who interviewed the eyewitness in order to compile his account.

¹⁹ Colin Hemer, ed., *The Book of Acts in the Setting of Hellenistic History* (Tubingen: Mohr, 1989).

²⁰ Sir William Ramsay, *St. Paul the Traveller and the Roman Citizen* (London: Hodder & Stroughton, 1925), 5.

²¹ See John Stewart, *In Defense of the Gospels*, pp.49-67 (Panora, Iowa: Intelligent Faith Press, 2018).

When were the Gospels Written?

If the Gospels were written by the traditional authors as claimed by Papias and Irenaeus, the next issue is “when were the Gospels written?” The consensus of scholars today is that Mark wrote his Gospel first, followed by Matthew, Luke, then John. However, among early Christian scholars such as Augustine (354-430), it was believed that Matthew wrote his Gospel first. As for the date Matthew wrote, New Testament scholars think Mark wrote his Gospel between A.D. 50 and 70, though some conclude it could have been as early as the late 30s.²² Matthew and Luke could well have written their Gospels before the year A.D. 70 based on the fact that there is no mention of the fall of Jerusalem which occurred in A.D. 70. The fall of Jerusalem and destruction of the Temple, led by Titus, son of the Emperor Vespasian, was such a seminal event in Jewish history that it is nearly unthinkable for a writer to not mention the event if writing after A.D. 70. The same is true of John’s Gospel, though most scholars think it was written c. A.D. 90 or later. Within the text of John is a reference that supports the idea that even John’s Gospel was written prior to A.D. 70. In John 5:2 it says, “Now there is in Jerusalem by the sheep gate a pool, which is called in Hebrew Bethesda, having five porticoes.” After A.D. 70 there was no sheep gate—it had been destroyed by the Romans in their siege of Jerusalem. Thus, the use of the present tense (“there *is* in Jerusalem”) supports the view that John’s Gospel pre-dates A.D. 70.

The range of dates scholars affix to the writing of the Gospels is generally from A.D. 40 to 100. Regardless of how early or late one dates the Gospels, virtually every scholar agrees that the Gospels were written when eyewitnesses to Jesus’ life were still alive, and at a time when the Matthew, Mark, Luke and John were likely still alive. This is important evidence in support of the traditional view that the Gospels are, essentially, eyewitness and firsthand accounts of Jesus’ life and teachings.

The Question of Biased or Embellished Accounts

Even if one concedes that the Gospels are essentially eyewitness accounts written by Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, how can we know whether their accounts are embellished and biased in favor of making Jesus out to be someone He was not? One compelling reason is *the criterion of embarrassment*. This criterion asks whether there are unflattering, embarrassing statements involving the main characters included in the writing. If someone is writing a fictionalized, embellished account, the main characters are usually put in a positive light. Including embarrassing details about the important characters is evidence of an unbiased writing.

The Gospels contain numerous accounts that are embarrassing toward Jesus and the disciples, with no reason to include them unless they were true. These include false and defamatory statements, such as Jesus being called a *drunkard* (Matthew 11:19), a *deceiver* (John 7:12), *demon-possessed* (Mark 3:22), and, by implication, *cursed* (Galatians 3:19, “cursed is anyone who is hung on a tree”). In another account Jesus’ own family thinks He has *lost His mind* (Mark 3:21, 31) and was *not believed by His own* brothers (John 7:5). The disciples are also put in a negative light in many instances. For example, Jesus told them three times to *watch and pray*, but instead they fell asleep (Matthew 26:36, ff). Jesus told them they had *little faith* (Matthew 7:26), and they showed a *lack of courage*. At His crucifixion, three women were present, but only one disciple. This is not the type of account that someone includes unless it is true. A final example is the account of Peter denying Jesus three times. Since it is well-accepted that Mark’s Gospel is the recollections of Peter, and since the Gospel of Mark contains the account of Peter

²² James Crossley, *The Date of Mark’s Gospel: Insight from the Law in Early Christianity* (London: T&T Clark Continuum, 2004).

denying Jesus, the only reasonable conclusion is that the event actually happened. The criterion of embarrassment implies that the Gospel of Mark tells the unvarnished truth. If the Gospels writers were writing fiction, they would have made themselves out to be courageous

Lost Gospels?

Occasionally a book or television special is promoted that purports to present newly discovered writings that tell a different story about Jesus than what is found in the Gospels. The Gospel of Judas, Gospel of Thomas, Gospel of Philip and Gospel of Mary Magdalene are often mentioned. Typically, these writings are said to have been suppressed by the Church in a conspiracy to maintain the Church's power or for some other sinister reason. The truth is that these so-called *lost gospels* are like the breakfast cereal *Grape Nuts*. Grape Nuts is neither grapes nor nuts. The lost gospels are neither lost, nor are they gospels. Instead, they are fictional accounts of Jesus, written from 150 to 300 years after the time of Jesus, eliminating them from being eyewitness accounts. The majority of these lost gospels appear to be written by *Gnostics* (a 2nd century cult that mixed Christianity with mysticism and pagan beliefs). Scholars have found not a single, verifiable new fact about Jesus' ministry from these lost gospels.²³ The truth about Jesus' life and ministry comes from the New Testament, not lost gospels.

Accuracy of the New Testament Confirmed by Early Secular Sources

Evidence for the reliability of the New Testament is supported not only by archaeology but by secular historians and writers. Several of these writings date to within 100 years of the time of Jesus and confirm many of the key events recorded in the New Testament. Here is a sampling:

Flavius Josephus

Flavius Josephus was born just after the time of Jesus' crucifixion. He wrote two lengthy works on the 1st century history of the Jews. He mentions Jesus in two places within his treatises, including one reference to Jesus as "the so-called Christ." In addition, Josephus confirms that Jesus was crucified under Pontius Pilate, and that the "tribe of Christians" still existed at the time of his writing (ca 93).²⁴ An Arabic version of one of the Josephus' references to Christ mentions the disciples reporting that Jesus had risen from the dead and was "perhaps the Messiah." While there is controversy over whether Christians may have later embellished Josephus' reference to Jesus, most scholars accept Josephus' writings as confirming His existence and His followers' belief that He was the Christ.

Cornelius Tacitus

Tacitus' writings are usually dated about 20 years after Josephus, about the year A.D. 115. He was a premier Roman historian and Senator, and his writings include a 16-volume treatise called *Annals*. About half of his treatise survives. In *Annals*, Tacitus describes events which began around 30 years after the time of Jesus, during the reign of Emperor Nero:

[Nero] ...to suppress the rumor (that he had instigated the burning of Rome) falsely charged with the guilt, and punished with the most exquisite tortures, the persons commonly called Christians, who were hated for their enormities. Christus, the founder of the name, was put to death by Pontius Pilate procurator of Judea in the time of Tiberius.²⁵

²³ Raymond E. Brown, *The Gnostic Gospels*, New York Times Book Review, January 20, 1980.

²⁴ Flavius Josephus, *Antiquities*, 18.3.3

²⁵ Tacitus, *Annals*, 15.44

Tacitus' confirmation of the historical crucifixion of Jesus under Pontius Pilate is solid external evidence (i.e., outside the New Testament) for the accuracy of New Testament references to the major events in the life of Jesus.

Pliny the Younger

Pliny was the governor of Bithynia, a region of Asia Minor in what is modern Turkey. About the year A.D. 112, Pliny wrote a letter to the Roman Emperor Trajan about a problem he was having with Christians under his rule who refused to recognize the Emperor as divine. Pliny severely punished many of the Christians, including men, women and children, and even executed some who failed to bow in worship to the Emperor. Despite Pliny's severe actions, the Christians still would refuse to bow to the Emperor. In Pliny's letter to the Emperor, he asked whether he should continue killing them or take some other course of action. In referencing the Christians Pliny wrote:

They affirmed, however, that the whole of their guilt, or their error, was, that they were in the habit of meeting on a certain day before it was light, when they sang in alternate verse a hymn to Christ as to a god, and bound themselves to a solemn oath, not to any wicked deeds, but never to commit any fraud, theft, adultery, never to falsify their word....²⁶

Pliny's letter confirms that in the early 2nd century the followers of Jesus revered Him as God, sang hymns to Him and worshipped him. Additionally, these early Christians were also known for their honesty and integrity, practices commanded in the New Testament. Pliny's letter describes Christians in a way that is consistent with the New Testament, corroborating the New Testament accounts' historical accuracy.

Other Secular Sources Confirming Events from the New Testament

In addition to Josephus, Tacitus and Pliny, there are several other secular writers worth noting who, within 100 years of the time of Jesus, in one way or another confirmed the historicity of Jesus and biblical accounts. These include the Roman historians Thallus and Suetonius, the satirist Lucian of Samosata, and Syrian philosopher Mara bar Serapion.²⁷

Summation--The Bible is a Reliable Guide for Truth

In several instances when Jesus quoted Scripture, He referred to the Old Testament as *the Word of God*. Jesus quoted the Old Testament in sermons, used it to answer questions, and trusted that its claims and predictions were true. Jesus' endorsement of the Old Testament makes a hearty case for trusting the Old Testament as a reliable guide for truth. In addition to the testimony of Jesus, prophecy provides further evidence that the Old Testament is more than mere stories and pronouncements of the Jews. Fulfilled Old Testament prophecy suggests divine inspiration behind the writings. Together, Jesus' view of the Old Testament and fulfilled prophecy provide convincing reasons to accept the Old Testament Scriptures as trustworthy.

Regarding the New Testament, there is overwhelming manuscript evidence in support of the view that New Testament we have today is the same as when it was written in the 1st century.

²⁶ Pliny, *Epistles*, 10.96

²⁷ Stewart, *ibid*, pp. 122-124.

Evidence from within the Gospels and from external sources confirms that the Gospels are firsthand accounts. Scholars nearly unanimous agree that the New Testament was written while eyewitnesses to the life of Jesus were still alive, and there are strong arguments that the entire New Testament was written before the year A.D. 70, within 40 years of the time of Jesus.²⁸

The criterion of embarrassment supports the conclusion that the Gospels present the unvarnished truth about Jesus' life and teachings. In addition, dozens of the historical details referenced in the Gospels and the Acts of the Apostles have been corroborated by archaeology. The majority of Paul's epistles are accepted as authentic even by the most critical scholars. External sources such as Josephus, Tacitus and Pliny corroborate the historicity of key events in the Bible, including Jesus' crucifixion under Pontius Pilate, His disciples' belief that He rose from the dead, and that His followers worshiped Him as God.

Together, the Old and New Testaments make up the Bible, which Christians accept as the very Word of God. Based upon multiple lines of evidence, the Bible has strong credentials for its acceptance as reliable source of truth about God, humanity, and the future. Some two billion people on earth trust Jesus for their redemption and use the Bible as their guide. Based upon the totality of the evidence, it is reasonable and logical to trust the words of Jesus when He said, "I am the Way, the Truth and the Life; no one comes to the Father except by me" (John 14:6).

The Bible, as God's eternal Word, promises redemption to all who trust in Jesus (Romans 3:24). God further promised, "so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it" (Isaiah 55:11). The Bible is essentially God, the Creator, revealing His plan of redemption to a fallen race. Jesus, the Redeemer, claimed and proved He was the promised Messiah, and gave humanity many reasons to trust the Bible as a reliable guide for truth. Jesus' view of Scripture, along with confirming discoveries of its accuracy from history and archaeology, together make the case that the Bible can be trusted to tell the truth. The evidence is sufficient for an objective juror, after weighing the evidence, to render a verdict that the Bible is a reliable guide for truth.

The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God stands forever (Isaiah 40:8).

²⁸ See John A.T. Robinson, *Redating the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1976) where he argues the entire New Testament was written prior to A.D. 70.

Author Information

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