

Can We Trust the Bible?

Are the Scriptures Reliable?

I. Intro.:

- A. The modern challenge to the reliability of the scriptures. Modern critics challenge its reliability and authenticity.
- B. The Islamic challenge to the Bible. They do not believe it accurately records history and, in fact, distorts truth. They believe the only reliable source of God's truth is the Koran. They agree with many modern critics who question the Bible's accuracy and reliability.
 - 1. "Likewise today we find that Christian Bible scholars have given such extensive criticism on the Hebrew scriptures (commonly called the O. T.) as to bring into question their validity and value." (Dr. El Dareer; Hutto - El Dareer Debate; p.10; Hiram O. Hutto, pub.; Jan. 1978.)
 - 2. "As for eyewitnesses, I am sure you are all familiar with the fact that none of the four canonized Gospels in the N. T. was authored by any disciples of Jesus. In fact the authors of the Gospels are unknown or their identities uncertain since all we have are Greek translations of what was supposedly written in Hebrew or Syriac." (Dr. El Dareer; p. 23; *ibid.*)
- C. This becomes a critical matter in defense of the Bible. Can it be defended?
 - 1. We want to step back from the biblical record itself to see if its accuracy and authenticity can be defended. It is a topic far beyond the scope of one lesson. However I want us to look at some basic principles that help us to see we can trust the Bible as the Word of God.

II. How do we know the Bible accurately recounts history?

- A. Isn't this what we base all we believe about Jesus upon?
 - 1. How do you know the Bible is telling the truth? Inspiration? Maybe originally.
 - 2. But this is an old book. How can we be sure it is accurate? This is what we want to examine. Let's illustrate the problem this way:
 - a. Suppose you are in school and need to borrow a friend's class notes to copy - Suppose, after you copied them, somebody took a similar class the next year and copied your notes. And someone copied their notes and so on for 50 years. How accurate a copy of the original do you think the last copy would be? This is what we have to consider with the Bible. Even if the original writings of the apostles and prophets were inspired, what about all the copies made since then? This is a crucial question and one we need to answer.

III. The Evidence regarding the Old Testament Scriptures.

A. The Hebrew Old Testament

- 1. Divided into three categories - Law, Prophets, & the Writings or the Psalms.
 - a. Our OT contains same books though arranged differently.
 - b. Had been assembled into one body of writings by time of Ezra and Jewish Council ca. 410 BC.
- 2. The Jews have considered the canon of the OT closed since the Council of Jamnia ca. 90-100 AD. They made official at that time what they had believed for a long time - that the OT contained only those books that we recognize now.
 - a. From that time forward the Jews took extraordinary care to preserve the text.

3. However, the oldest Old Testament manuscripts we had for centuries dated from the ninth century AD, leaving a significant gap from the original documents. How was the text preserved during that time?

A. The Jewish Preservation of the Text.

1. The care paid by the scribes in making copies of the text is almost beyond comprehension. We have examples of the regulations followed for copying the text.
 - a. The Masoretic scribes give us an example of this. This school of scribes that began about the 5th century AD copied the text with such precision that there can be little doubt of the accuracy of their work. Their work is so significant that today's Hebrew text of the OT is often referred to as the Masoretic Text.

B. The Testimony of the Dead Sea Scrolls

1. The Dead Sea Scrolls were discovered in 1948 in the caves of Qumran near the Dead Sea. They predate the time of Jesus by at least 100 years and our oldest Masoretic texts by 1000 years.
2. Their discovery confirms the reliability of the Old Testament text we now have but it also included many apocryphal books.
 - a. Their discovery confirms that by the 4th century the Law and the Prophets was pretty clearly settled along with most of the Hagiographa (The writings), but some of the Writings along with Daniel were still questioned by some.
 - b. It should be noted, however, that Jesus never quoted from any Apocryphal writing, and with the possible exception of Jude 14, 15 there is no quotation from Apocryphal writings in the NT. This possible Apocryphal quotation in Jude from the Book of Enoch is also similar to a passage in Deuteronomy.
 - c. Later writers also clearly make a distinction in what they considered part of the canon and what parts of the Septuagint (Greek translation of the O. T.) were not.

IV. Three Basic tests for validity of the New Testament record.

1. They are the same kind of tests you would apply to any book to determine its accuracy.

A. **Bibliographical test** - Since we don't have the original do we know we have good copies of the original documents? This important fact can be determined most accurately if there are a number of different copies to compare. The more you have to compare the easier it is to eliminate scribal errors and other possible transmission problems. Suppose you wanted the class notes from a class taught at the university many years ago. If you could get access to several different students notes who were in the class you could determine pretty clearly what had been taught in the class. The more copies the better. Now think about the number of manuscripts we have of the New Testament text.

1. F. E. Peters points out that on the basis of manuscript tradition alone the works that make up the Christian's new testament made up the most frequently copied and widely circulated books of antiquity. (The Harvest of Hellenism, F. W. Peters, pg. 50).
2. There are now more than 5,300 known Greek manuscripts of the New Testament. Add over 10,000 Latin Vulgates and at least 9,300 other early versions (MSS) and we have more than 24,000 manuscript copies of portions of the NT in existence today. No other document of antiquity even begins to approach such numbers of attestation. In comparison The Iliad by Homer is second with only 643 manuscripts that still survive. The first complete preserved

text of Homer dates from the 13th century. (Our Bible. How We Got It, Charles Leach, pg. 145).

3. John Warwick Montgomery says that "to be skeptical of the resultant text of the NT books is to allow all of classical antiquity to slip into obscurity. For no documents of the ancient period are as well attested bibliographically as the NT." (History and Christianity, by J. W. Montgomery, pg. 29).
4. Our earliest manuscripts of the NT come 250-300 years after the original documents. "This may sound a considerable interval but it is nothing to that which parts most of the great classical authors from their earliest manuscripts. We believe in all essentials and accurate text of the 7 extant plays of Sophocles: yet the earliest substantial manuscript upon which it is based was written more than 1400 years after the poets death. (Handbook to the Textual Criticism of the New Testament, Frederick G. Kenyon, pg. 4)
5. Review chart on pg. 42 of Evidence that Demands a Verdict, Vol. 1, revised edition, 1979.
6. Further comparison to the Iliad. They continue by saying that, "the Iliad has about 15,600 lines. Only 40 lines (or 400 words) of the NT are in doubt whereas 764 lines of the Iliad are questioned. This 5% textual corruption compares with 1/2 of 1% of similar emendations in the NT." (A General Introduction to the Bible, Norman L. Geisler, pg. 367.)
7. Not one of the variations Schaff says altered, "an article of faith or precept of duty which is not abundantly sustained by other undoubted passages, or by the whole tenor of scripture teaching." (Companion to the Greek Testament and the English Version, Philip Schaff, pg. 177.)
8. That textual variations do not endanger doctrine is emphatically stated by Sir Frederick Kenyon (one of the great authorities in the field of NT textual criticism): "One word of warning already referred to must be emphasized in conclusion. No fundamental doctrine of the Christian faith rests on a disputed reading..." "It cannot be too strongly asserted that in substance the text of the Bible is certain: especially is this the case with the NT. (Our Bible and the Ancient Manuscripts, by Frederick G. Kenyon, pg. 23).

B. **The internal test for the reliability of the scriptures.**

1. **Back to the class notes** - Suppose someone many years later questions whether the original copy accurately represents what was said today. Maybe he thinks there are inconsistencies in what is in the notes, things that don't fit the time period when the notes were written - expressions used that he doesn't think were used then (such as "Peter was a 'totally awesome' teacher!"). How do we decide if the writer is accurate or not?
 - a. Was he there?
 - b. Does he appear competent to record what was said and done?
 - c. Is there any evidence to contradict what he wrote about this class?
2. Let the book testify about itself. On this test J. W. Montgomery writes that Literary critics still follow Aristotle's dictum that "the benefit of the doubt is to be given to the document itself, not arrogated by the critic to himself." Therefore, "one must listen to the claims of the document under analysis, and not assume fraud or error unless the author disqualified himself by contradictions or known factual inaccuracies." (History and Christianity, pg. 29).
3. What may appear to be internal contradictions in a document must not be immediately be assumed to be so. Robert Horn says, "*Certainly much more is required than the mere*

appearance of a contradiction. First, we must be certain that we have correctly understood the passage, the sense in which it uses words or numbers. Second, that we possess all available knowledge in this matter. Third, that no further light can possibly be thrown on it by advancing knowledge, textual research, archaeology, etc." He further says, "Difficulties do not constitute objections. Unsolved problems are not of necessity errors. This is not to minimize the difficulty; it is to see it in perspective. Difficulties are to be grappled with and problems are to drive us to seek clearer light; but until such time as we have total and final light on any issue we are in no position to affirm, 'Here is a proven error, an unquestionable objection to an infallible Bible.' It is common knowledge that countless 'objections' have been fully resolved since this century began." (The Book That Speaks For Itself, Robt. Horn, 1970, pg. 86, 87.)

4. The NT claims to be the accounts of the eyewitnesses. It is being recounted by primary sources - the people who saw with their own eyes.
 - a. "We are witnesses of these things" was their constant and confident assertion (of the earliest preachers of the gospel). And it can have been by no means so easy as some writers seem to think to invent words and deeds of Jesus in those early years, when so many of His disciples were about, who could remember what had and had not happened. "And it was not only friendly eyewitnesses that the early preachers had to reckon with; there were others less well disposed who were also conversant with the main facts of the ministry and death of Jesus. The disciples could not afford to risk inaccuracies (not to speak of willful manipulation of the facts), which would at once be exposed by those who would be only too glad do to do so. On the contrary, one of the strong points in the original apostolic preaching is the confident appeal to the knowledge of the hearers; they not only said, 'We are witnesses of these things,' but also, 'As you yourselves also know' (Acts 2:22). (The NT Documents: Are They Reliable?, F. F. Bruce, 1964, pg. 33, 44-46).
5. Let the NT state its own case of eyewitness testimony:
 - a. **Luke 1:1-3** ¹Inasmuch as many have taken in hand to set in order a narrative of those things which have been fulfilled among us, ²just as those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word delivered them to us, ³it seemed good to me also, having had perfect understanding of all things from the very first, to write to you an orderly account, most excellent Theophilus, (NKJV)
 - b. **2 Peter 1:16** ¹⁶For we did not follow cunningly devised fables when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but were eyewitnesses of His majesty. (NKJV)
 - c. **1 John 1:3** ³that which we have seen and heard we declare to you, that you also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship *is* with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ. (NKJV)
 - d. **John 19:35** ³⁵And he who has seen has testified, and his testimony is true; and he knows that he is telling the truth, so that you may believe. (NKJV)
 - e. **Acts 2:22** ²²Men of Israel, hear these words: Jesus of Nazareth, a Man attested by God to you by miracles, wonders, and signs which God did through Him in your midst, as you yourselves also know -- (NKJV)
 - f. **Acts 26:24-26** ²⁴Now as he thus made his defense, Festus said with a loud voice, "Paul, you are beside yourself! Much learning is driving you mad!" ²⁵But he said, "I am not mad, most noble Festus, but speak the words of truth and reason. ²⁶"For the king, before whom I also speak freely, knows these things; for I am convinced that none of these things escapes his attention, since this thing was not done in a corner. (NKJV)
6. There is no rational basis upon which to question the statements of these eyewitness who not only believed what they wrote but were willing to be martyred in horrible deaths rather than deny its truth.

C. External evidence for the reliability of the scriptures.

1. **Back to the class notes** - Suppose there were other people who lived about the same time who referred to these class notes. Would what they say be important? How would it help?
 - a. They might say, "Those notes are so inaccurate. I've talked to other people who were in that class and they say those notes are not accurate."
 - b. They might also say, "I talked to people who were in that class and they say those notes are extremely accurate. I use them all the time because the eyewitnesses told me they were accurate."
2. "Do other historical materials confirm or deny the internal testimony provided by the documents themselves?" (J. W. Montgomery, History and Christianity, pg. 31.) In other words, what sources are there apart from the literature under consideration (the NT) that substantiate its accuracy, reliability and authenticity?
3. Extra-Biblical Authors - those who lived and wrote near to the time of the eyewitnesses of the NT. Some were even personally acquainted with them.
 - a. **Irenaeus of Lyons** (AD 180), who was a student of Polycarp of Smyrna; martyred in AD 156, had been a Christian for 86 years, and was a disciple of John the apostle. He wrote: "So firm is the ground upon which these Gospels rest, that the very heretics themselves bear witness to them, and, starting from these [documents], each one of them (the heretics - SP) endeavours to establish his own particular doctrine." (Against Heresies III). The four gospels had become so axiomatic in the Christian world that Irenaeus can refer to it (fourfold Gospel) as an established and recognized fact as obvious as the four cardinal points of the compass.
 - b. **Clement of Rome** (ca. AD 95) uses scripture as being reliable and authentic.
 - c. **Ignatius (AD 70-110)** of Antioch and martyred, knew all the apostles and was a disciple of Polycarp, who was a disciple of John. He died for the faith rather than deny the truth taught about Christ in the gospels.
 - d. **Polycarp (AD 70-156)** a disciple of John succumbed to martyrdom at 86 years of age. When asked to recant his faith and live, he is reputed to have said, 'Eighty-six years have I served Him, and he hath done me no wrong. How can I speak evil of my King who saved me?' He was burned at the stake. (Who Was Who in Church History, Elgin S. Moyer, pg. 337.) He certainly had ample contact to know the truth.
 - e. **Flavius Josephus**, Jewish historian. His accounts of the events of the gospels confirm that of the gospels to a great extent. (F. F. Bruce, NTD, pg. 107). Josephus certainly wrote from a differing non-Christian viewpoint yet what he says closely follows the outline of the gospel accounts.
4. These men quoted and alluded to New Testament books extensively. Other external sources add to the abundant evidence that shows the N.T. to be an accurate account of the life and work of Jesus of Nazareth.

V. Archaeological evidence.

- A. Archaeology is the study of ancient peoples and civilizations as learned by what they left behind. Archeologists dig up old towns, etc. to study the people who used to live there. Biblical archaeology is such studies taking place in Bible lands.
- B. Archaeology has done a great deal to correct the impression that Biblical history was of doubtful trustworthiness. In fact some of the most famous bible lands archaeologists have spoken plainly about the accuracy of the Bible as confirmed by archaeology.

1. **Wm. F. Albright**, who during his life was called the dean of Biblical archaeologists, said of the Bible: "Thanks to modern research we now recognize its substantial historicity." (Return to Biblical Theology, "The Christian Century", Nov. 19, 1958, p. 1329)
 2. The late Jewish Arch. **Nelson Glueck** affirmed: "As a matter of fact, however, it may be stated categorically that no archaeological discovery has ever controverted a Biblical reference." (Rivers in the Desert, p. 31.)
 3. **Gleason L. Archer** speaking on this point concluded: "Nowhere has archaeological discovery refuted the Bible as history" (Bibliotheca Sacra, Jan.-Mar., 1970, p. 5.)
- A. Arch. discovery has shown Luke to be an historian of the first rank. His historical references, place names, political titles, geographic locations have been shown to be incredibly accurate.
1. Merrill Unger tells us that arch. has authenticated the Gospel accounts, especially Luke. In Unger's words, "The Acts of the Apostles is now generally agreed in scholarly circles to be the work of Luke, to belong to the first century and to involve the labors of a careful historian who was substantially accurate in his use of sources." (M. F. Unger, Archeology and the New Testament, 1962, pg. 24.)
 2. Sir William Ramsay is regarded as one of the greatest archaeologists ever to have lived. His life's work began as one who did not accept the reliability of the NT record but who was convinced by years of study. Concerning Luke's ability as a historian, Ramsay concluded after 30 years of study that "Luke is a historian of the first rank; not merely are his statements of fact trustworthy... this author should be placed along with the very greatest of historians." (The Bearing of Recent Discoveries on the Trustworthiness of the New Testament, 1915; pg. 222).
- A. Recent discoveries have not changed the validity of these men's conclusions. Modern liberal archaeologists often try to put a different interpretation on the evidence but their interpretations do not disprove interpretations that agree with the biblical record.

VI. Such evidence for the reliability of the scriptures cannot be discarded.

- A. If one discards the scriptures as inaccurate, he must discard almost all the literature of antiquity. A fair and unbiased mind could do no less.
1. Again remember what John Warwick Montgomery said - that "to be skeptical of the resultant text of the NT books is to allow all of classical antiquity to slip into obscurity. For no documents of the ancient period are as well attested bibliographically as the NT." (History and Christianity, by J. W. Montgomery, pg. 29).
- A. We can say without fear of successful contradiction that we have the words of the eyewitnesses of the life of Christ.

VII. The role of inspiration

- A. For those who are convinced by the above evidence and believe the NT record to be true, there is another important element that helps to explain this unfailing accuracy - accuracy that far surpasses other ancient documents in accuracy. That element is the doctrine of divine inspiration.
1. God's hand was in the recording and preservation of the scriptures. The Bible plainly teaches this to be true. 2 Tim. 3:16-17; 2 Pet. 1:19-21, etc.)

2. By His hand, we have an accurate preservation of the story of Christ and of His church so we may have a firmly established faith and have complete confidence in what we believe about the life and teachings of Jesus.

Conclusion

VIII. We have to regard what these gospels say Jesus said about himself and what He taught.

- A. Having established the gospel accounts of Jesus to be trustworthy we now have to consider what they say about Jesus and decide it is believable. After all it isn't just a story about somebody going to town one day and getting killed.
 - B. What sets the story of the gospels apart from other historical writings of men during that time? The claims of the miraculous and the claims Jesus made for Himself - as the son of God.
 - C. This is what we are called upon to believe - what He said about Himself. All of Christianity is based upon what Jesus said and taught. So what are the claims that are made about Jesus in these documents?
 1. He claimed equality with God.
 2. He accepted worship as deity.
 3. He claimed sinlessness.
 4. He claimed the shedding of his blood would save men from their sins.
- A. Who is Jesus? Jesus is Lord!
 - B. The Koran actively denies all of these claims!
 - C. Any challenge to this truth must answer the evidence presented in this lesson and the mountains of evidence like this available to establish this truth.

Note: I must credit the following for much of this material: Josh McDowell's Evidence That Demands a Verdict, Vol. 1; many of Ferrell Jenkins writings that address this issue. And F. F. Bruce's The New Testament Documents - Are They Reliable? (S.P.)

Steve Patton
University church of Christ
14314 Bruce B. Downs Blvd.
Tampa, FL 33613
(813) 971-3179
steveapaton@gmail.com