

# How reliable is the Bible?

## The Basic approach to the issue

The most important thing in discussing issues to do with the Bible is to get the order right. The end point is coming to regard the Bible as the authoritative, reliable Word of God; a Christian does this because they have already come to put their trust in Jesus as their Lord, and part of their living under the Lordship of Jesus is trusting him with respect to the Scriptures. In other words, Christians believe the Bible as the Word of God, the supreme authority in all matters of faith and conduct, because we believe in Jesus, not the other way around.

But then the question comes: 'how do you know what Jesus said about the Bible? Isn't it only from the Bible that we have that sort of information, and therefore isn't the argument circular?' It is a good question, and there is a good answer to it. The answer is based on the crucial distinction between regarding the Bible as historically reliable, and regarding the Bible as spiritually/theologically reliable. Regarding the Bible as historically reliable is a question of history, not of faith. The normal rules of history apply, as they do to any ancient document, and it is according to those rules that the claim of the New Testament Gospels to accurately preserve the words and deeds of Jesus must be tested. Once that question of history is decided, a person will then make their response to Jesus, and if that response is to believe his words and trust his deeds, then the package will include trusting the Bible.<sup>1</sup>

Accordingly, when launching into a discussion about the Bible, it is important to decide whether what is at stake is the religious or the historical reliability of the Bible. Any question about the **religious** status of the Bible will be answered from the Christian point of view in terms of Jesus ('Why do you believe the Bible is the Word of God?' 'Because Jesus endorsed it as such, and I trust that Jesus knows more about what God thinks and wants than I do - don't you?'). This keeps these sorts of questions about the Bible focused on the main issue, Jesus. On the other hand, with regard to the **historical** status of the Bible, it is crucial to recognise that any question on this issue needs to be addressed in historical terms. And the fact is that quite apart from commitments of faith, there are good reasons to believe the Bible, and especially the gospels as historically accurate, reliably bringing us the actual words and deeds of Jesus.

One of the problems in talking about the Bible is that so often people have little real first hand experience of the Bible as an adult. An important task, then, is to deal with the issue in concrete, rather than abstract and theoretical, terms. The first two sub-questions we are going to deal with do this.

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<sup>1</sup> It is important to recognise that this gives us an approach to the Old Testament, as well as the New. That is, once we know what Jesus said (Gospels historically reliable) and we trust in Jesus (faith commitment), then we will accept his view of the Old Testament, which is that it was Holy Scripture, the Word of God. See Matthew 22.31-32, where Jesus quotes Exodus 3.6, and many more such examples. See "Jesus' view of the Old Testament", in John Wenham's book, *Christ and the Bible: What was Jesus' View of Scripture*, Eagle: Surrey, 1993.

## Why were the New Testament documents produced anyway?

For some religions, their scriptures appeared literally from heaven, or were dictated directly by God. This is not the claim of the New Testament. The 27 documents that make up the New Testament are quite self consciously human works responding to human needs. They came about as follows.

Originally, the early Christian movement had no Scriptures specific to it; of course they regarded what Christians call the Old Testament as Scripture, as Jesus had done, but essentially their faith found its basis in the testimony of those who were eye witnesses of Jesus' life, death and resurrection, the original disciples or Apostles. They had been commissioned by Jesus, authorised to speak on his behalf, and were charged with the responsibility to take his message to all people. And this they did, slowly at first, but with increasing geographical spread. As they wandered across the Roman empire, they left behind groups of Christians and an oral tradition; stories, told and retold, of Jesus life and works.

As those first Christian communities grew, they would from time to time run into problems – persecution from outside, defection or betrayal from inside. And so the apostles would write to them, seeking to encourage or correct as appropriate. The first New Testament documents written, then, were the letters or epistles, quite a number by Paul, some by John, a couple by Peter and even an anonymous one. Early Christians made copies of these letters, and gave them to one another, and so they circulated around.

As the first generation of Christians grew old, and the apostles approached death, the need arose for an authoritative preservation of their testimony to Christ. Hence the Gospels were written, some by Apostles themselves (Matthew, John), other by their associates (Mark, Luke – see Luke 1.1–4 for his reasons for writing). Hence the gospels were written second.<sup>2</sup>

## Which were included as binding for Christians, and why?

However, the 27 documents we have in our Bibles were not the only letters Christians wrote to each other, nor the only letters claiming spiritual authority. From the earliest years, the church had to decide which of those claims to accept, and which documents could be relied upon as truly representing Christ and his Apostolic testimony.

The process of finally deciding took many years, but three criteria were applied. First, was a document associated with Apostolic authorship? If there was no connection to an Apostle, a document may have been seen as helpful instruction, but of a totally different order of authority from Scripture. Second, how widely had a document been accepted by the earliest Christian

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<sup>2</sup> See the chapter, “The Four Gospels” in Paul Barnett’s book, *Jesus and the Rise of Early Christianity: A History of New Testament Times*, InterVarsity Press: Downers Grove, 1999, pp. 376–399 for the interesting suggestion that the four gospels derive from the four mission centers of the early church: Jerusalem, led by James (Matthew’s gospel; see Acts 12.17, 15.13–21); Peter (Mark’s gospel); Paul (Luke’s gospel); and John (John’s gospel).

communities? Where there were disputes about the status of a document, such as one church regarding it is inauthentic, then it was less likely to be accepted. And third, did it conform in teaching to the earliest statement of Christian faith, known as the Rule of Faith, and the teaching of other documents already counted as Scripture? Since God would not contradict himself, it was clear that any document that held contrary teachings or instructions to clearly received Scripture could not be the Word of God.

The key point here is that the early Christians were by no means naïve. They had to fight bravely against many who would do them harm, and so were exceedingly careful and conservative in what they accepted as the authoritative word of God.

### How confident can we be that they were historically reliable?

So Jesus' authorised Apostles, most of whom who were eye-witnesses to his life, death and resurrection, recorded their testimony and wrote letters of instruction and encouragement to the first Christian communities, and these documents were carefully collected together in what we now call the New Testament. So far so good. The next question is an important one: 'Well sure, the documents in the New Testament might have come from Apostles and so on, but what makes you think they are historically reliable? How do you know they didn't just make up this stuff about Jesus?'

We can assess the historical veracity of the New Testament documents by using generally accepted "Criteria of Authenticity" that apply to any ancient text. There are four:

1. **External evidence:** although this is not detailed, it is supportive of the accuracy of the NT.<sup>3</sup>

Source	Author and work	Date	External evidence
Jewish	Josephus <i>Jewish Antiquities</i>	AD 92	Jesus was called "the Christ" He was the founder of the Christians He was crucified under Pontius Pilate There was a belief that he rose from the dead James was Jesus' brother
	Rabbi Eliezer	AD 95	Christianity was a world wide movement by AD 70
Roman	Pliny <i>Letter to the Emperor Trajan</i>	AD 112	Jesus' followers were called "Christians" These followers worship Jesus as "God"
	Tacitus <i>Annals of Imperial Rome</i>	AD 112	Jesus was executed in Judea during the period when: • Tiberius was emperor (AD 14–37) and • Pontius Pilate was governor (AD 26–36) The movement spread from Judea to Rome
	Suetonius <i>Life of Claudius</i> <i>Life of Nero</i>	AD 120	Claudius expelled Jews from Rome after constant disturbances on account of "Chrestus" (AD 49) Christians existed in Rome at the time of Nero and were persecuted by him (AD 66)

<sup>3</sup> Summarised from Paul Barnett, *Is the New Testament History?*, pp. 16–32.

2. **Multiple independent sources:** the number of authors contributing to the NT compares favourably to literature about other great figures (eg. Alexander the Great). There are no less than nine or ten early authors, most writing independently of each other.
  - There are at least two independent eyewitnesses who wrote gospels: Mark and John.
  - Paul's letters and Acts are two independent sources for cross checking the accounts of the leadership of the Jerusalem church and the historic spread of Christianity out of Judaism to the nations.
  - Paul appeals to his readers in 1 Corinthians 15 to check what he is saying with other surviving eyewitnesses.
  
3. **Appropriately synchronous contexts** (ie. the NT documents should have background detail that fits with the times and the locations that it is dealing with). In addition, the time lapse from Jesus life in Palestine until the literature about it was written (less than 60 years) was short when compared to other great figures: for the Roman emperor Tiberius 100–200 years, or for Alexander the Great 400 years.<sup>4</sup>
  - **Clear social contexts** that fit Jesus' era that are not replicated later in the history of Christianity eg. agrarian and village backgrounds to events rather than urban backgrounds (later Christianity was primarily an urban phenomenon).
  - **Dissimilarity** of Jesus' teaching from what later Christians believed eg. Jesus' habit of associating with 'sinners'.
  - Events that reflect genuine discussion going on in **Judaism** in the first century AD.
  - **Aramaic background** (Aramaic was the first language spoken by most Jews in Palestine).
  
4. **Embarrassment:** when Jesus makes a prophecy that is apparently unfulfilled, or where social norms are not followed eg. a woman, Mary Magdalene, was the first witness of the resurrection, and yet the testimony of woman was not legally admissible at the time – in other words, this is not something that you would make up.

In other words, though there are no knockdown arguments for the historical reliability of the New Testament documents, we are a long way from simply taking them 'on faith'. When doing the ordinary work of an ancient historian evaluating the accuracy of different documents, the New Testament stacks up very well.

At the same time, there is an important rider. It is actually quite difficult to approach these sorts of questions entirely objectively. People are often deeply affected by their own presuppositions, and this is especially the case with respect to Jesus' miracles. If a person comes to the issue with the presupposition that miracles don't and can't happen, and that we live in a closed universe with no God, then they will believe almost anything else rather than the records of the miracles in the Bible, no matter how good are the historical arguments. But the point is that that is an assumption, a faith commitment, as much as any other faith commitment. Having uncovered this faith commitment, the question becomes why hold this view, and on what basis.

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<sup>4</sup> Paul Barnett, *Is the New Testament History?*, pp. 40–41.

## What about the process of transmission – we don't have the original monographs?

The final question runs along these lines: "It's all well and good to tell me how the original New testament documents came about, and to argue that they are historically reliable; but we don't have the originals, and what we do have are hopelessly corrupted and changed!"

Again, this is an important issue, and certainly not one that has been ignored by ancient historians. Almost any ancient historical documents exists in our day in multiple copies, and since there were no photocopiers back then, it was all done by hand, with the resulting possibility of scribal error. The discipline which works at recovering as closely as possible the original text is known as textual criticism. It is a whole academic field of study in its own right, with time tested rules and approaches.

There were a number of features of the early history of Christianity that have helped in accurate transmission:

- The rapid spread of Christianity in the Hellenic (Greek speaking) world meant that there was a short time period in which corruption could occur.
- The need for manuscripts for reading in church meant that many copies of documents were made.

The survival of many of these manuscripts means we have many copies, relatively close in time to the originals. This table compares the New Testament with other typical ancient texts that are regarded as historically reliable.<sup>5</sup>

Author or text	When written	Earliest extant copy	Time span (approx. years)	Number of ancient copies
Caesar	100–44 BC	AD 900	1000	10
Aristotle	384–322 BC	AD 100	400	49
Homer's <i>Iliad</i>	900 BC	400 BC	500	643
NT portions	AD 50–100	AD 125	50	>5,000

One particularly impressive document, known as Codex Sinaiticus, is a *complete* fourth century (ie. AD 301–400) copy of the New Testament.

There are a number of other factors also assist us in assessing the NT's reliability:

- The early spread into the Latin, Syriac and Coptic (Egyptian) speaking areas means that there are early translations from c. 150 AD giving us insight into early originals.
- From the end of the New Testament period (c. 95 AD) there is an unbroken and growing stream of Christian literature that quotes from the New Testament documents, thus establishing its prior existence.

<sup>5</sup> Summarized from Josh McDowell, *Evidence that demands a verdict*, Here's Life Publishers Inc., 1979, p. 42.

All these factors mean, “today we are able scientifically to reconstruct, almost to perfection, the text of the scrolls of the New Testament as they were originally written.”<sup>6</sup>

## Conclusion – where this all gets you

In conclusion, it is worth asking the question, where does all this information get you?

In part, it means that you can feel confident. There really are good reasons for accepting the historical reliability of the gospels, and that means we have reliable access to the person of Jesus, who urges us to put our faith in him, and therefore receive the Bible not just as historically, but also as spiritually reliable.

There is a fairly widespread prejudice against the reliability of the Bible, with comments like, “The Bible is just full of contradictions!” As it turns out, often this kind of objection has no, or very little, basis, and can be fairly easily dealt with. Sometimes, it’s even worth gently challenging this prejudice, even in oneself. If you think the Bible is full of contradictions, it’s worth challenging yourself to find 3, to read (say) a gospel and see what appears contradictory. A first hand knowledge with the Bible, ‘reading it for yourself’, is vital.

The great 19<sup>th</sup> century Baptist pastor and leader, Charles Spurgeon was once challenged to defend the Bible. “Defend the Bible”, he replied. “I’d rather defend a lion!” Spurgeon’s instinct here is exactly right. The Word of God brings it’s own conviction. When actually engaged with, and when illuminated by their ultimate Author, the Living and True God, the Scriptures are quite able to defend themselves, and serve unflinchingly, as they claim, to make people “wise for salvation”.

## Further reading

There is a wealth of outstanding books and articles by renowned scholars on this subject now. If you would like to read further, the books referred to in the footnotes would be the best place to start.

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<sup>6</sup> Paul Barnett, *Is the New Testament History?*, Hodder and Stoughton, 1986, p. 165.