

Can We Trust the Bible?

It has been called "The Greatest Book Ever Written." Kings and rulers have sought to destroy it with intense fervor. Men, women and children have been put to death for affirming its teachings. Scholars have devoted their lives to proving or disproving its contents. It claims to be the Word of God and the source of absolute truth. If this book has made such astonishing claims about itself, one must ask, "Is it reliable? Where did it come from? Did the events described in the Bible really take place? Can I trust that it is God's Word?"

In order to answer these questions, the Bible needs to be examined in terms of its uniqueness, preparation, and confirmation through history, archeology and prophecy. These avenues of exploration will demonstrate the reliability of the Bible and why it has earned the respect and allegiance of millions throughout history.

I. Uniqueness of the Bible

The study of the reliability of the Bible begins with its uniqueness. Webster defines "unique" as "different from all others; having no like or equal." The Bible is different from all other human writings in its continuity, circulation and survival.

A. Its Continuity

The first area of uniqueness of the Bible is its continuity. It is an amazingly unified document, despite factors which would lead to great disharmony in ordinary writings. Josh McDowell, noted author and lecturer on the historical evidences of the Christian faith, outlines some of these factors. He explains that the Bible was:

1. Written over a 1,600-year span.
2. Written by more than 40 writers from every walk of life--from king to peasant; philosopher to fisherman.
3. Written in different places--from the wilderness, to a comfortable room, to a dungeon.
4. Written at different times--from war to peace.
5. Written during authors' different moods--from the height of joy to the depths of despair.
6. Written on three continents--Asia, Africa and Europe.
7. Written in three languages--Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek.
8. Written concerning hundreds of controversial issues. ¹

Although the Bible contains this much diversity, its authors speak with harmony and focus on one theme: "God's redemption of man."² F.F. Bruce, Professor of Biblical Criticism at the University of Manchester, summarizes the Bible's continuity:

*The writings themselves belong to a great variety of literary types. They include history, law, religious poetry, didactic treatises, lyric poetry, parable and allegory, biography, personal correspondence, personal memoirs and diaries. ... For all that, the Bible is not simply an anthology; there is a unity which binds the whole together. An anthology is compiled by an anthologist, but no anthologist compiled the Bible.*³

B. Its Circulation

The second area of uniqueness for the Bible is its circulation. It has been read by more people and published in more languages than any other work.⁴ At the end of 1993, United Bible Societies reported that 2,062 languages had access to at least one book of the Bible. The Cambridge History of the Bible reports, "No other book has known anything approaching this constant circulation."⁵ Although the widespread circulation of the Bible does not prove it is the Word of God, it does substantiate further the uniqueness of the Bible.

C. Its Survival

The survival of the Bible is the third way it is unique from all other books. Composed before the invention of the printing press, it was written on perishable material such as papyrus and parchment. For hundreds of years, it was copied and recopied by hand. Yet, this did not diminish its soundness. It has more manuscript evidence than any other piece of classical literature. John Warwick Montgomery, former Chairman of Church History at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, makes this statement:

*To be skeptical of the resultant text of the New Testament 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 New Testament.*⁶

The accuracy of the Old Testament manuscripts is the result of the Jewish system of preservation. Bernard Ramm explains this system:

*Jews preserved it as no other manuscript has ever been preserved. With their massora [methods of counting] they kept tabs on every letter, syllable, word and paragraph. They had special classes of men within their culture whose sole duty was to preserve and transmit these documents with practically perfect fidelity. ... Whoever counted the letters and syllables and words of Plato or Aristotle? Cicero or Seneca?*⁷

Not only has the Bible weathered the elements, but it also has withstood constant scrutiny and persecution. John W. Lea, author of *The Greatest Book in the World*, cited H.L. Hastings' explanation:

*Infidels for eighteen hundred years have been refuting and overthrowing this book, and yet it stands today as solid as a rock. Its circulation increases, and it is more loved and cherished and read today than ever before ... So the hammers of the infidels have been pecking away at this book for ages, but the hammers are worn out, and the anvil still endures. If the book had not been the book of God, men would have destroyed it long ago. Emperors and popes, kings and priests, princes and rulers have all tried their hand at it; they die, and the book still lives.*⁸

II. Translations of the Bible

Not only does the uniqueness of the Bible support its reliability, but the methods of translation of this book also support its dependability. As previously outlined, the Bible was written over centuries by a variety of people. The original writings were composed in Hebrew (most of the Old Testament), Aramaic (parts of Ezra, Daniel and Jeremiah), and Greek (the whole New Testament).⁹

These writings have since been translated into most of the world's known languages. This causes some to question the accuracy of the Bible. They ask, "If the Bible has been translated so many times, version upon version, how can one possibly trust its reliability?" The answer to this question is found in the translation process. While the Bible has been translated into numerous languages, these translations are only one, or at most two, steps removed from the original text.

The Bible was translated into other languages soon after it was written. The Old Testament was translated into Greek during the third century B.C. From 383-400 A.D., Jerome, the secretary to the bishop of Rome, translated the Bible into Latin.¹⁰ In 1382, John Wycliffe translated the Bible from Latin into English so that the people could study the Bible in their own tongue. The Renaissance brought a renewed interest in the classics and the desire to study them in their original languages.¹¹ William Tyndale, who studied Hebrew and Greek, translated the Bible into English directly from ancient Greek texts.¹² Other English translations followed in quick order, but probably the greatest of all English translations was commissioned by King James of England in 1604 and was first published in 1611.¹³

Each of these works was taken carefully from the oldest writings of the Old and New Testament. Since the study of Greek and Hebrew was revived in the fifteenth century, scholars have been able to work directly from ancient manuscripts. Therefore, the belief is unfounded that today's Bible is based on a

series of previous translations. We can be confident that the Bible translations we have today are accurate and based directly on ancient manuscripts.

A further question arises, "Why are there so many current translations and why do they seem to vary at times?" Wycliffe produced his work because of his desire to present a translation in the common tongue. Current translations are made with a similar motivation to produce a fresh version in the language of today. A careful comparison of a translation from 1960 with a more current translation would show subtle differences in word choice. Comparing both to the much older King James Version would show even greater differences.

Today's translations also will vary somewhat based on whether the translators made a "word for word" translation or one based on a "thought for thought" concept. The meaning remains the same, but word choices will vary.

III. Confirmation of the Bible through History

A. Bibliographical Test

The third means for verifying the reliability of the Bible is its confirmation by historical test. Josh McDowell argues that the Bible should be subjected to the same tests as any other historical document to determine its reliability. These tests are the bibliographical test, the internal evidence test and the external evidence test.

1. New Testament bibliographical test. McDowell describes the bibliographical test as "... an examination of the textual transmission by which documents reach us." ¹⁴ This is accomplished by examining the number of manuscripts and the time interval between the original and the existing copy. The manuscript evidence of the New Testament is astounding. Today there are over 5,000 manuscript copies of portions of the New Testament in Greek and at least 15,000 more in other languages. No other ancient writing has *anywhere near* this abundance of existing manuscript evidence. Additionally, the interval of time between the composition of the New Testament books and the date of the earliest existing manuscripts is the shortest of any work of antiquity. Sir Frederic G. Kenyon, who was the Director of the British Museum, summarizes the manuscript evidence as follows:

The interval then between the dates of original composition and the earliest extant [existing] evidence becomes so small as to be in fact negligible, and the last foundation for any doubt that the Scriptures have come down to us substantially as they were written has now been removed. Both the authenticity and the general integrity of the books of the New Testament may be regarded as finally established. ¹⁵

2. Old Testament bibliographical test. This test for the Old Testament is more complicated. Given the age difference between the New and Old Testaments, the number of surviving manuscripts for the Old Testament is much smaller.

Despite the small number of manuscripts (as compared to the New Testament), the accuracy of the Old Testament documents has been verified through the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls in 1947. The Scrolls consist of approximately 40,000 inscribed fragments. Over 500 books have been reconstructed from these pieces. The Dead Sea Scrolls provide confirming evidence that Old Testament manuscripts date before the time of Christ.

Gleason Archer, Chairman of Old Testament at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, reports that the Isaiah copies "... proved to be word for word identical with our standard Hebrew Bible in more than 95 percent of the text. The 5 percent of variation consisted chiefly of obvious slips of the pen and variations in spelling."¹⁶ Dr. Henry Morris, President of the Institute for Creation Research, concludes, "There is thus no reasonable doubt that our present Old Testament ... is practically identical with the text in use several centuries before Christ, practically extending back to the time when the last books of the Old Testament were originally written."¹⁷

B. Internal Evidence Test

The second test for the historical accuracy of the Bible is the internal evidence test. This test determines whether the written record is credible by analyzing the ability of the writer or the witness to tell the truth. The New Testament relies upon men who were eyewitnesses of the actual events and teachings of Jesus, or men who related eyewitness accounts of these details. Throughout the New Testament, the writers refer to what they had seen and heard. Many of their contemporaries also had witnessed Jesus' life. If they reported the facts incorrectly, these people would have challenged their writings. F.F. Bruce explains, "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 to do so."¹⁸

An additional indication of the sincerity of the New Testament writers is their willingness to record incidents that portray themselves in a negative light, such as their flight after Jesus' arrest, their competition for a high place in the Kingdom of God, and Peter's denial of Christ.¹⁹ Given these facts, we can trust the New Testament writers' portrayal of Christ.

C. External Evidence Test

The external evidence test is the final one that historians use to verify the reliability of a document. This test seeks other historical material to substantiate the information contained in the document under review. One

example of such confirmation is the testimony of a friend of the Apostle John (who wrote five books in the New Testament). Irenaeus, who was the Bishop of Lyons in A.D. 180, was a disciple of John and wrote the following:

*Matthew published his gospel among the Hebrews ... in their own tongue, when Peter and Paul were preaching the gospel in Rome and founding the church there. After their departure, ... Mark, the disciple and interpreter of Peter, himself handed down to us in writing the substance of Peter's preaching. Luke, the follower of Paul, set down in a book the gospel preached by his teacher. Then John ... himself produced his gospel, while he was living at Ephesus in Asia.*²⁰

Along with the testimony of contemporaries, archeology also provides powerful external evidence for the reliability of the Bible. (This confirmation will be discussed at length in the following section.) Archeologist Joseph Free reports, "Archeology has confirmed countless passages which have been rejected by critics as unhistorical or contradictory to known facts."²¹ Finally, the weight of historical evidence clearly upholds the reliability of the Bible as Dr. Clark Pinnock states:

*There exists no document from the ancient world witnessed, by so excelling a set of textual and historical testimonies and offering so superb an array of historical data on which an intelligent decision may be made. An honest [person] cannot dismiss a source of this kind. Skepticism regarding the historical credentials of Christianity is based upon an irrational (i.e., antiscientific) bias.*²²

IV. The Witness of Archeology to the Bible

Archeology provides the fourth avenue of exploration of the reliability of the Bible. Archeology not only verifies certain biblical references, but it also provides a background for the message of the Bible.

A. The Old Testament Record

William F. Albright, one of the world's greatest Near East archeologists, states, "There can be no doubt that archeology has confirmed the substantial historicity of Old Testament tradition."²³

With more than 25,000 sites already discovered that show connections to the Old Testament period, the amount of archeological support is *overwhelming*. To demonstrate how archeology has confirmed the Bible, the controversy surrounding Abraham can be cited. Critics of the nineteenth century felt that Abraham could not have existed as he is described in the Bible. For example, they felt he would be unable to read and would lack knowledge of law and history.

Sir Leonard Woolley's excavations at Ur of the Chaldees show that it was a highly developed city. They discovered clay tablets that served as books and receipts for business transactions. Therefore, "it became clear that Abraham was a product of a highly developed culture. ..." ²⁴ Sir Frederic Kenyon concurs:

It is therefore legitimate to say that, in respect of that part of the Old Testament against which the disintegrating criticism of the last half of the nineteenth century was chiefly directed, the evidence of archeology has been to re-establish its authority ... ²⁵

Another example of the contribution of archeology is the discovery of the Ebla tablets in 1974. For years, the Genesis 14 account of the victory of Abraham over Chedorlaomer and the Mesopotamian kings has been held to be fictitious and the cities of Sodom, Gomorrah, Admah, Zeboiim, and Zoar as mere legend. ²⁶ However, the Ebla tablets refer to all five of these cities and in one document even lists them in the same sequence as Genesis 14. ²⁷

Lastly, in August 1993, it was reported that an Israeli archeologist had discovered the first known reference outside the Bible to King David. The inscriptions were found on a broken monument in northern Israel. Hershel Shanks, editor of *Biblical Archaeology Review*, said, "The stele [monument] brings to life the biblical text in a very dramatic way. It also gives us more confidence in the historical reality of the biblical text." ²⁸

B. The New Testament Record

The New Testament has also been substantiated by the archeologist's spade. The book of Acts most readily lends itself to archeological investigation because it contains so many references to customs, places and events of that time. Therefore, Luke, the author of Acts, has been subjected to intense scrutiny. For example, in his gospel, it was believed that Luke was wrong about the events surrounding Jesus' birth. Critics maintained that there was no census at that time; people did not have to return to their ancestral home; and Quirinius was not governor of Syria. ²⁹

Archeological discoveries have upheld Luke's account on all three fronts. First, the evidence shows that the Romans held a census every 14 years and that the practice was initiated under Augustus. Second, an inscription in Antioch names Quirinius as governor of Syria in 7 B.C. and 6 A.D. Finally, a papyrus found in Egypt reads this way:

Because of the approaching census it is necessary that all those residents for any cause away from their homes should at once prepare to return to their governments in order that they may complete the family registration of the enrollment. ... ³⁰

Sir William Ramsay, who has completed the most extensive study, thus far, of the data recorded in Acts, concedes, "Luke is a historian of the first rank ... In short, this author should be placed along with the very greatest of historians." ³¹

Other references in the New Testament to certain cities and regions, customs and political situations have also been confirmed through archeology. In fact, Morris says, "... no statement in the New Testament has to this date been refuted by an unquestioned find of science or history. This in itself is a unique testimony to the amazing accuracy and authenticity of the New Testament records." ³²

V. Confirmation of the Bible through Prophecy

The final area of confirmation of the reliability of the Bible is prophecy. The inclusion of many specific prophecies sets the Bible apart from all other works. The fulfillment of these prophecies points to the reliability of the other information presented in the Old and New Testaments. The number of prophecies is astounding. Therefore, the following analysis is limited to a few messianic prophecies and prophecies related to a specific city. The fulfillment of these prophecies will amply demonstrate the reliability of the Word of God.

A. Prophecies Concerning the Messiah

The Old Testament contains over 300 prophecies of the coming Messiah that were fulfilled in Jesus. For purposes of this discussion, a few of these prophecies have been selected. Their fulfillment is explained in the New Testament excerpts that are included.

It should be remembered that the prophecies were written by a variety of men over several centuries. At least 400 years passed between the last of these prophecies and the appearance of Jesus. ³³

PROPHECY	FULFILLMENT
<p>#1 Born of a Virgin "Therefore the Lord Himself will give you a sign: Behold, a virgin will be with child and bear a son, and she will call His name Immanuel." --Isaiah 7:14</p>	<p>"...she was found to be with child by the Holy Spirit.And Josephkept her a virgin until she gave birth to a Son; and he called His name Jesus." --Matthew 1:18, 24, 25</p>

<p>#2 Born at Bethlehem “But as for you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, too little to be among the clans of Judah, from you One will go forth for me to be ruler in Israel. His goings forth are from long ago, from the days of eternity.”</p> <p style="text-align: right;">--Micah 5:2</p>	<p>“...Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea....”</p> <p style="text-align: center;">--Matthew 2:1</p>
<p>#3 Hands and Feet Pierced “...they pierced my hands and my feet.”</p> <p style="text-align: right;">--Psalm 22:16</p>	<p>“And when they came to the place called The Skull, there they crucified Him.....”</p> <p style="text-align: center;">--Luke 23:33</p>
<p>#4 Garments Parted and Lots Cast “They divide my garments among them, and for my clothing they cast lots.”</p> <p style="text-align: right;">--Psalm 22:18</p>	<p>“The soldiers therefore, when they had crucified Jesus, took His outer garments and made four parts, a part to every soldier and also the tunic; now the tunic was seamless, woven in one piece. They said... ‘Let us not tear it, but cast lots for it, to decide whose it shall be....”</p> <p style="text-align: center;">--John 19:23, 24</p>
<p>#5 Bone Not Broken “He keeps all his bones; not one of them is broken.”</p> <p style="text-align: right;">--Psalm 34:20</p>	<p>“But coming to Jesus, when they saw that He was already dead, they did not break His legs.”</p> <p style="text-align: center;">--John 19:33</p> <p><i>(Historical Note: The executioners normally broke criminals' legs to hasten their death.)</i></p>

(All Scripture quotations in this chart are from the *New American Standard Bible*.)

Given the fulfillment in Jesus' life of these and many other prophecies, it becomes evident that God directed what has been written by the prophets. Josh McDowell makes this conclusion:

*Certainly God was writing an address in history that only the Messiah could fulfill. Approximately forty major claims to be the Jewish Messiah have been made by men. Only one--Jesus Christ--appealed to fulfilled prophecy to substantiate His claims, and only His credentials back up those claims.*³⁴

B. Prophecies Concerning the City of Tyre

In addition to the messianic prophecies, the Bible also contains many prophecies regarding the fate of certain cities and nations. As an example of

the astounding accuracy of these biblical prophecies, the following is an analysis of the predictions related to the city of Tyre. This city of ancient Phoenicia is now in southern Lebanon. It was once an enemy of Israel.

In Ezekiel 26, written between 592 and 570 B.C., the Lord declares His anger towards Tyre for her extreme arrogance. He predicts her invasion by Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylon, and her ultimate destruction. Verses 7, 8 and 14, declare her fate:

For thus says the Lord God, 'Behold, I will bring upon Tyre from the north Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon... and he will make siege walls against you...'

'And I will make you a bare rock; you will be a place for the spreading of nets. You will be built no more, for I, the Lord, have spoken,' declares the Lord God.

The fulfillment of Ezekiel's prophecy is explained by the *Encyclopedia Britannica*. It states, "After a 13-year siege (585-573 B.C.) by Nebuchadnezzar II, Tyre made terms and acknowledged Babylonian suzerainty [sovereignty]." It goes on to say:

*In his war on the Persians, Alexander III ... marched southward toward Egypt, calling upon the Phoenician cities to open their gates ... The citizens of Tyre refused to do so, and Alexander laid siege to the city. Possessing no fleet, he demolished old Tyre, on the mainland ...*³⁵

Philip Myers, a secular historian, summarizes the fate of Tyre:

*Alexander the Great ... reduced [Tyre] to ruins. She recovered in a measure from this blow, but never regained the place she had previously held in the world. The larger part of the site of the once great city is now bare as the top of a rock--a place where the fishermen that still frequent the spot spread their nets to dry.*³⁶

The record of history regarding Tyre makes it obvious that each prophetic detail recorded in Ezekiel was fulfilled just as the Bible predicted.

Conclusion

The Bible's uniqueness, its preparation, and the testimony of history, archeology and prophecy, all work together to confirm beyond reasonable doubt that it is totally reliable. Sir Frederic G. Kenyon makes this conclusion:

*"... it is reassuring at the end to find that the general result of all these discoveries and all this study is to strengthen the proof of the authenticity of the Scripture, and our conviction that we have in our hands, in substantial integrity, the veritable Word of God."*³⁷

Summary Outline

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The preceding article, *Can We Trust The Bible?*,
is taken from the *Practical Christian Living* curriculum.
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