

I Can Believe My Bible Because It Is Reliable

Introduction. Integrity has the idea of trustworthiness or wholeness. The integrity of a book has been preserved when it has been transmitted without a change that would affect its meaning. If we stated that our New Testament text had integrity, it would mean that the present Greek text, from which we get our English translations, would yield the same meaning as the autographs, written by the apostles or the various authors.

Sometimes when you talk to someone about the Bible, a common question which surfaces is, "How do we know the Bible is reliable?" That is an excellent question which far too many Christians cannot answer. To the world, one of the greatest "leaps of faith" a Christian can take is believing the Bible. To some, it is ludicrous to trust in a book that was written so long ago. However, there is great evidence to demonstrate that faith in the Bible is not a blind "leap" into the unknown. There is a strong correlation between the original written word of God and what we read in our homes.

I. The Need For Textual Criticism

- A. If we had the autographs, written by the apostles or the other authors, there would be no need for textual criticism. The problem is, however, we do not possess, as nearly as we know, any of the autographs. Perhaps they are not in existence or, if they are, they have not been brought to our attention.
- B. Textual criticism is the science that deals with this particular area of Bible study.
 - 1. The textual critic attempts to restore the original text from the materials which he has at hand, such as manuscripts, versions, or quotations.
 - 2. They bridge the gap between the autographs and translated texts, so that we may know that our English translations are representative of what God wanted us to know.

II. The Work Of Scribes

- A. Schools of scribes helped to preserve God's word (Ezra 7:6, 10). Since scribal mistakes were inevitable, various circles of Jewish scholars sprang up at a very early date who were dedicated to the preservation of the Old Testament text.
- B. Approximate dates of their activities:
 - 1. Sopherim (fifth century to third century B.C.).
 - 2. Zugoth (second to first century B.C.).
 - 3. Tanaim (first century B.C. to A.D. 200).
 - 4. Amoraim (A.D. 200-500).
 - 5. Masoretes (A.D. 500-950).
 - a) These were the most well known of the scribal groups. The Masoretes got their name because of their acknowledged dependence on the authoritative traditions (Masorah) concerning the text.
 - b) The Masoretes are perhaps best known for their system of vowels and accents which they devised for the Hebrew text.
 - (1) All letters in the Hebrew alphabet are consonants. Therefore, the Old Testament was first written without vowels. Although this may seem unusual to us, it was sufficient for the many centuries in which Hebrew continued as a spoken language.

- (2) When Hebrew was no longer a spoken language, there was an eminent danger that the proper pronunciation of the words in the text would disappear. To meet this danger the Masoretes inserted vowel points above and below the lines of the text.
- c) The Masoretes were not only concerned with details of proper pronunciation. They also sought ways and methods by which they could eliminate scribal slips of addition or omission.
 - (1) They achieved this through intricate procedures of counting. They numbered the verses, words, and letters of each book. They counted the number of times each letter was used in each book. They calculated the middle verse, the middle word, and the middle letter of each book.
 - (2) With these complicated safeguards, when a scribe finished making a copy of a book he could then check the accuracy of his work before using it.
 - (a) The absence of very old copies of the Hebrew Bible need not us surprise or disturb us. When a manuscript was properly copied, it was given equal weight with older manuscripts.
 - (b) The disappearance of the ancient Hebrew manuscripts is adequately accounted for, and those which remain may be accepted as exactly preserving the ancient text.
- d) The Masoretes were first class textual critics. Their labors were so productive and their contributions so large that our Hebrew text today is often referred to as “the Masoretic text.”

III. The Old Testament Text

- A. The Bible is a very old book, but it is by no means the oldest book in the world. The earliest known examples of writing carry us into the ancient land of Egypt where inscriptions have been found dating as far back as 4000-5000 B.C. This is very important because it was formerly held by skeptical Bible critics that writing was unknown in the days of Moses (approximately 1500 B.C.) and therefore Moses could not have been the author of the first five books of the Bible. We now know that writing was generally practiced many centuries before Moses.
- B. The textual witnesses for the Old Testament are not as vast as compared with the multitude of witnesses on the Greek text, and the earliest evidence available for the Old Testament is also the most recently discovered.
- C. The Dead Sea Scrolls.
 - 1. Since 1947, about 40,000 fragments of manuscripts from 500 books, both biblical and nonbiblical, have been discovered in the Dead Sea region. The biblical manuscripts found range in date from the 3rd century B.C. to the 1st century A.D. The manuscripts have had an enormous impact on Old Testament textual studies.
 - 2. Before the discoveries, the earliest Hebrew manuscripts were known as the Cairo Codex and the Leningrad Codex of the Prophets. The Cairo Codex includes the Former and Latter Prophets and is dated at A.D. 895. The Leningrad Codex of the Prophets is slightly later, dating from A.D. 916.

- Another early Hebrew manuscript is the British Museum Codex of the Pentateuch. It has proved to be a very important witness on the Old Testament text, even though it originates in the tenth or eleventh century.
3. The oldest known manuscript of the entire Old Testament is the Leningrad Codex which was completed in A.D. 1008. Many other manuscripts, of course, are in existence, but these are the basic witnesses to the text of the Old Testament. The latest edition of the current Hebrew Bible (Kittel's Biblia Hebraica) is based on these four Hebrew manuscripts, in particular the Leningrad Codex of the complete Old Testament. The importance of the Dead Sea Scrolls is seen when one considers that the textual evidence in possession now goes back over 1,000 years before any of the earliest manuscripts.
 - a) The Jewish scribes looked upon their copies of the scriptures with an almost superstitious respect, which led them to give a ceremonial burial to any copy which was old or worn. Their motive was to prevent the improper use of the material on which the sacred name of God had been inscribed.
 - b) This was a very noble endeavor; however, this ancient custom has deprived us of many early manuscripts, and thus lengthened the gap between the available copies of the text and the Old Testament autographs. Without the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls, the time between the autographs and our earliest manuscripts would have been at least 1,400 years.
 4. Eleven caves have yielded manuscript material, some of it intact in the form of large scrolls, but most of it consisting of small fragments. Every book of the Old Testament was represented at Qumran except Esther.
 - a) The greatest number of the manuscripts come from the Pentateuch (15 of Genesis, 15 of Exodus, 9 of Leviticus, 6 of Numbers and 25 of Deuteronomy), the Latter Prophets (18 of Isaiah, 4 of Jeremiah, 6 of Ezekiel and 8 of the Minor Prophets), and the Psalms (27 manuscripts).
 - b) Some of the best known manuscripts are the two Isaiah scrolls from Cave 1 (Isaiah A [a complete text of Isaiah from 125 B.C.] and B), extensive fragments of a Samuel scroll from Cave 4, a scroll of the Psalms from Cave 11 and a commentary on Habakkuk also from Cave 1.
 - c) The earliest manuscript is probably that of Samuel, originating in the late 3rd century B.C. To date, approximately 200 biblical manuscripts have been identified among this material, over 100 from Cave 4 alone.
 5. The most amazing fact of all is realized when the Qumran manuscripts are compared to the 9th and 10th century copies. Within a time frame so large, many discrepancies could have crept in which would cast doubt on the Old Testament text. But the overwhelming majority of variances were nothing more than trivial spelling differences.
 - a) It is fascinating to note that the Isaiah scroll led the RSV translators to make only 13 changes from the Masoretic Text.
 - b) Furthermore, in 1,000 years of copying the Old Testament text of Isaiah 53, only 17 letters are in question out of 166 words.

- (1) Ten of them are simply a matter of spelling, which do not affect the sense. Four more letters are minor stylistic changes, such as conjunctions.
 - (2) The remaining three letters comprise the word “light,” which is added in vs. 11, and does not significantly affect the meaning.
- D. Although Old Testament manuscripts are the primary source of evidence, additional materials can offer strong support for textual evidence and accuracy.
1. Ancient literature was rarely translated into another language. This shows the great esteem in which the Bible was held.
 2. These additional translations, such as the Septuagint (the Bible of Jesus and the apostles; 2/3 of the roughly 300 Old Testament quotations are taken from it), Samaritan Pentateuch, Aramaic Targums, etc., with their parallel readings, substantiate the Masoretic text and give it an increased credibility.
- E. Since the Old Testament text is related in important ways to the New Testament, its reliability supports the Christian faith. This is true not only in establishing the dates when supernatural predictions were made of the Messiah, but also in supporting the historicity of the Old Testament that Jesus (Matthew 22:45; 24:15; Mark 7:6; John 5:45-47) and the New Testament writers (Matthew 27:9; Acts 2:16; 28:23; Romans 4:6; 9:25) affirmed.

IV. *The New Testament Text*

- A. There can be no reliable English version unless there is an accurate Greek text. No serious objection can be laid against the Greek text, which means that our faith, based on the New Testament, is secure.
- B. “The plethora of New Testament manuscripts is a great benefit when trying to determine the original reading of the New Testament, for it is easier to sift through and evaluate the various extant [existing and known] readings than to emend [correct] texts with no evidence” (Paul D. Wegner, *A Student’s Guide to Textual Criticism of the Bible*, p. 41)
- C. The number of our New Testament manuscripts is vast, almost 5,700 in all. By far, the New Testament is the best-attested book from the ancient world. It is really quite striking to compare the quantities of manuscripts of just the New Testament with the principle Greek and Roman writings which we possess.
1. Homer’s Iliad is preserved for us on the basis of 643 manuscripts.
 2. The writings of Demosthenes survive on the basis of 200 manuscripts.
 3. Livy’s History of Rome is based upon 20 manuscripts.
 4. Tacitus’ Annals is available today on the basis of 20 manuscripts..
 5. Caesar’s Gallic Wars is preserved for us on the basis of 10 manuscripts.
 6. The History of Herodotus survive on the basis of 8 manuscripts.
 7. The History of Thucydides is available today on the basis of 8 manuscripts.
 8. The writings of Plato survive on the basis of 7 manuscripts.
 9. Pliny’s Natural History is based upon 7 manuscripts.
- D. There are three widely accepted tests to determine the genuineness and authenticity of ancient documents.

1. The first test is bibliographical. This test examines the textual tradition by which the document reaches us. How reliable are the copies? What is the time interval between the original and the earliest extant (existing) copy?
 2. The second test is internal. The benefit of doubt to be given to the document itself. Frauds is not assumed unless the author disqualifies himself by contradictions or known factual inaccuracies (Luke 1:1-4; John 19:35; Acts 2:22).
 3. The third test is external. Does other historical material confirm or deny the internal testimony? In the case of the New Testament, Tacitus, Josephus, Polycarp, and Papias all give historical accounts which verify the recorded accounts.
- E. Only a few manuscripts contain anything close to a complete New Testament. In fact, the oldest fragment of the New Testament is the John Rylands fragment. The fragment contains John 18:31-33, 37-38 and is dated in the first half of the second century. This fragment was penned less than 100 years after the gospel was written.
1. Most of the manuscripts do not contain the entire New Testament for the simple reason that a hand-produced copy of the whole was too bulky for practical use.
 2. The New Testament was often broken down into separate volumes and this is why most of the existing manuscripts do not contain all of the 27 books. The present manuscripts indicate that four categories were generally followed when making copies of the New Testament.
 - a) The four gospels.
 - b) Acts and the general epistles.
 - c) The epistles of Paul.
 - d) The book of Revelation.
 3. For dating purposes, several factors help determine the age of a manuscript.
 - a) Materials used.
 - b) Letter size and form.
 - c) Punctuation.
 - d) Text divisions.
 - e) Ornamentation.
 - f) Color of the ink.
 - g) Texture and color of the parchment.
- F. There are six major sources of manuscript evidence for the New Testament.
1. Papyri were written on material made from an Egyptian reed-like plant known as "papyrus." They are the oldest of our documentary evidence, and are mostly fragments of the original letters or books. There are 109 of them in existence.
 2. There are 307 known uncials. They are written in capital letters without punctuation and date from the beginning of the 4th century A.D. The most famous of these are the Sinaiticus Codex and Vaticanus Codex.
 3. Cursives or minuscules are written in a running hand-style. There are about 2,860 of these in existence and they date from the 9th century A.D.

4. Lectionaries are compilations of selected passages designed to be read in the public worship services. Lectionaries cannot be classified as uncials or cursives because they are copies of both types. About 2,410 lectionaries are in existence.
 - a) Although many lectionaries have been catalogued, the majority of them still await critical analysis.
 - b) They contain all of the New Testament many times over, with the exception of Revelation and parts of Acts.
 5. There are also about 19,000 manuscripts of the New Testament which are written in different languages such as Latin, Arabic, and Armenian.
 6. There are at least 36,000 quotations from Christians and non-Christians who lived near the end of the first century. These men include Origen, Clement of Alexandria, Irenaeus, Ignatius, Justin Martyr, Tertullian, Hippolytus, Cyprian, Papias, Polycarp, and Clement of Rome.
 - a) The writings of these men are so extensive that the New Testament could be virtually reconstructed from them without the use of New Testament manuscripts.
 - b) A word of caution needs to be offered, though. Quotes from these sources are sometimes used without verbal accuracy and some copyists were prone to mistakes or to intentional alteration.
- G. C. F. Sitterly wrote, "It is considered by many as providential that the Bible was early translated into different tongues, so that its corruption to any large extent became almost if not altogether an impossibility, since the versions of necessity belonged to parts of the church widely removed from one another and with very diverse doctrinal and institutional tendencies.... Such extreme literalness frequently prevails that the vernacular idiom is entirely set aside and the order and construction of words in the original sources are slavishly followed and even transliterated, so that their bearing on many questions at issue is direct and convincing." F. F. Bruce added, "There is no body of ancient literature in the world which enjoys such a wealth of good textual attestation as the New Testament."

V. *Preserving The Biblical Text*

- A. People seeking to disprove the Bible claim that there are as many 150,000 to 200,000 variations.
 1. As we have seen before, there are many more copies of the New Testament than any other ancient book, therefore there will be many more variations.
 2. Also, one misspelled word which occurs in 2,000 manuscripts equals 2,000 variations in the mind of the skeptic.
- B. When manuscripts differ, textual critics must make a decision as to the content of the original words. There is more to this than simply choosing the readings of the oldest available manuscripts. Several criteria of textual criticism are used.
 1. The quality of the manuscript is preferable to quantity of manuscripts.
 2. The more difficult reading is often preferable to the easier one.
 3. The shorter reading is usually preferable to the longer one.
 4. The genealogy of the manuscript is considered.
 5. The context must ultimately be given the greatest weight.

- C. There are two types of manuscript variations.
1. Unintentional slips or errors of the hand, eye and/or ear.
 - a) All ancient books had to be produced by hand, and no human hand is so exact or eye so sharp as to preclude the possibility of error. Often a scribe with a copy before him mistakes one word for another, and by chance copies down the wrong word. Sometimes a scribe confuses words of similar sound. Also, a scribe can misunderstand a passage due to improper division of the words.
 - b) Errors of omission and addition are common. Most variations are made up of minute details, either obvious scribal blunders or slight changes in spelling, grammar, and word order. These are of no consequence to our text.
 2. Purposeful variant readings inserted by the scribe.
 - a) These insertions were not made by dishonest scribes who wanted to tamper with the text. The intention of the scribe is almost always good. They usually only wanted to “correct” what appears to be an error in the text.
 - b) This was often the case when a scribe was copying the gospels. If he found a statement of Jesus in one gospel similar to a statement in another, he would modify one in order that it be in perfect agreement with the other. Changes could have also been made for linguistic, historical, or doctrinal reasons.
 - c) Although the vast majority of variations do not have any textual bearing on our text, substantial variations do have a bearing. But there are not many substantial variations (Mark 16:9-20; John 7:53-8:11; Acts 8:37; 9:5-6; 1 John 5:7-8).
 - (1) So while the amount of variation is large, the cumulative effects of the variations is very small. The variant manuscripts readings, by their nature, do not threaten to overthrow our faith.
 - (2) F. J. A. Hort, one of the leading textual critics, said, “The amount of what can in any sense be called substantial variation is but a small fraction of the whole residuary variations, and can hardly form more than a thousandth part of the entire text.”
 - (3) Our present day Greek text is without doubt almost 100 percent like the original autograph(s). We actually have a New Testament text which is over 99% trustworthy and whole. Furthermore, we actually know the various words and/or verses that make up the one percent of doubtful text.
- D. Students of the Bible are often troubled to find contradictory statements.
1. These allegations of error are usually based on a failure to recognize basic principles of interpreting ancient literature. The following principles can help one determine if there is a true contradiction in the Bible.
 - a) The unexplained is not necessarily unexplainable.
 - b) Fallible interpretations do not mean fallible revelation.
 - c) Understand the context of the passage.
 - d) Interpret difficult passages in the light of clear ones.

- e) Do not base teaching on obscure passages.
 - f) The Bible is a human book with human characteristics.
 - g) Just because a report is incomplete does not mean it is false.
 - h) New Testament citations of the Old Testament need not always be exact.
 - i) The Bible does not necessarily approve of all it records.
 - j) The Bible uses non-technical, everyday language.
 - k) The Bible may use round numbers as well as exact numbers.
 - l) Take notice of when the Bible uses different literary devices.
 - m) An error in a copy does not equate to an error in the original.
 - n) General statements do not necessary mean universal promises.
 - o) Later revelation displaces previous revelation.
2. Gleason L. Archer stated, "As I have dealt with one apparent discrepancy after another and have studied the alleged contradictions between the biblical record and the evidence of linguistics, archaeology, or science, my confidence in the trustworthiness of Scripture has been repeatedly verified and strengthened by the discovery that almost every problem in Scripture that has ever been discovered by man, from ancient times until now, has been dealt with in a completely satisfactory manner by the biblical text itself -- or by the objective archeological information."

Conclusion. John F. Herschel said, "All human discoveries seem to be made only for the purpose of confirming more and more strongly the truths that come on high and are contained in the sacred writings." In today's society, children are being heavily exposed to the religion of humanism. So, it is logical that the next generation would be thinking in terms of humanism and apply that to the Bible. Humanism teaches children that man is the authority, not God. When this principle is applied to the Bible, people claim that it was written merely by men. They view themselves as the authority and not God.

There is overwhelming evidence to accept the Bible as completely accurate. This is invaluable in a world of infidels and skeptics who want to discredit God's word as unreliable and inaccurate. We can study our Bibles with the utmost confidence that these are the authentic words which the Holy Spirit communicated to man (1 Peter 1:24-25).