

Is the Bible Reliable?

The Integrity of the Text

February 15, 2009



All of the original writings of the Bible have been lost to time and deterioration. And yet, God chose *written communication* as the primary means of delivering His message to mankind. So, the question is: Can our modern Bible be trusted?



We can't just *hope* it's been correctly duplicated and uncorrupted through the ages; we must *know* that our current copy is as trustworthy as the original. To trust its authority, we must be able to trust its authenticity.



So, let's talk about how the Bible went from God to us. There are three separate links in this chain:

1. Inspiration ... The *writing* of the Word
2. Canonization ... The *grouping* of the Word
3. Transmission ... The *copying* of the Word

First, let's briefly examine "inspiration".



This does *not* mean that God puts someone into a trance and possesses their pen (without their awareness). Human agency and divine intervention are intertwined. The word "inspire" literal means "to breathe or blow into". For instance, Second Timothy 3:16 is usually translated like this:

All Scripture is **inspired** by God ... - 2 Timothy 3:16a NAS

However, the NIV translates it more literally (and poetically):

All Scripture is **God-breathed** ... - 2 Timothy 3:16a NIV

We see a unique association here with the creation of man:

God formed the man from the dust of the ground and **breathed** into his nostrils the **breath of life**, and the man became a **living being**. - Genesis 2:7 NIV

When God breathed into dust He gave it life; and when He breathed into the chisels and pens of His 40 authors (over 1500 years) He gave life to His Word and *it* became a

living thing. We call it the “Living Word” because, though it’s thousands of years old, it remains as relevant as when it was first inspired.

Now, let’s move onto canonization. “Canon” is a Greek word that means “ruler” and it refers to the standard used to evaluate which books “measured up”.

There are *two* canons: The Old Testament and the New. The O.T. was set in place by conservative Jews a couple hundred years before Christ; and Jesus *Himself* validates the collection as being divinely inspired. He refers to it both as:

The word of God ... - *Matthew 15:6 NIV*

The command of God ... - *Matthew 15:3 NIV*

Jesus debated with Jewish religious leaders over many issues, but the content of the O.T. canon was not one of them.

Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the **Law of Moses**, the **Prophets** and the **Psalms**. - *Luke 24:44 NIV*

With *this* confirmation we need go no further with the O.T. I’ll just mention in passing the fulfilled prophecy, archeologically substantiated historical accuracy, and a unified theme among un-related authors that defies naturalistic explanations.

Although the N.T. was written by eyewitnesses who lived during the life of Jesus, it wasn’t “canonized” until 397 AD, over 300 years after the last of the Apostles had died. So, why did it take so long to assemble it? And how can we trust decision-makers who were so far removed?

There’s a lot of misunderstanding about how the 27 books of the New Testament were officially brought together. And thanks to the Da Vinci Code, there’s a misconception that the books were *selected* by a bureaucratic committee with an agenda. Truth is, the N.T. had been *unofficial* “canonized” since the very beginning. Within the life of the authors, many of the books were already being recognized as Holy Scripture.

Bear in mind that our Lord’s patience means salvation, just as our dear brother Paul also wrote you with the wisdom that God gave him. He writes the same way in all his letters, speaking in them of these matters. His letters contain some things that are hard to understand, which ignorant and unstable people distort, as they do the other Scriptures, to their own destruction. - *2 Peter 3:15-16 NIV*

And check this out: the Apostle Paul not only regards Luke’s Gospel as Scripture, he puts it on the same plane as the O.T.!

For the Scripture says, “Do not muzzle the ox while it is treading out the grain,” **[That’s from Deuteronomy 25:4]** and “The worker deserves his wages.” **[That’s from Luke 10:7]** - *1 Timothy 5:18 NIV*

In c. 95 AD, just a few years after the N.T. was completed, the first post-Biblical author was quoting from it as scripture. And this was standard practice from here on out.

In AD 397, the Third Council of Carthage didn't *determine* the books to be included; they formally recognized and acknowledged those books that had already obtained distinction.



It would be like a university assembling Shakespeare's most frequently utilized and universally regarded plays into one volume. His works wouldn't suddenly obtain prominence *from* being selected; they'd be selected *based* on their pre-existing prominence.

Because of the authority of miracles and fulfilled prophecy, the N.T. was received as inspired by people of faith from the start. Our faith isn't based on ill-founded fairytales; it's based on historical records of actual events as recorded by eyewitnesses.

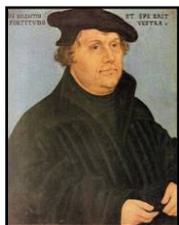
When you hear about *lost Gospels* or *Epistles* being "left out" it's more accurate to say they were never accepted to begin with.

Do you know why the N.T. was even officially canonized? A heretic and Jew-hater, named Marcion, created his own canon in the 2nd century and started a branch of Christianity that excluded the O.T. and cut-and-pasted portions of the N.T. By 397 his movement was catching on. So, the Council of Carthage provided believers with an official list of what was and what wasn't universally regarded as N.T. scripture. It wasn't that the N.T. had to be established, so much as this false teaching had to be confronted.

The criteria for canonization were so demanding that even a handful of established books were debated before being included. For instance 2nd Peter was disputed because its style is so different from 1st Peter. This is easily explained by the way:

With **the help of Silas**, whom I regard as a faithful brother, I have written to you
... - 1 Peter 5:12 NIV

But the point is, although I'm thankful it's in the Bible, if 2nd Peter (or the few other debated books) was excluded, nothing of consequence, nothing central to salvation, would be altered.



And, I should mention that the Catholic Bible has a few more books than our Protestant Bible, though it has *nothing* to do with the canonization of the New Testament. These *deuterocanonical texts* were not given scriptural authority until 1546, as a response to Martin Luther breaking from the church and denouncing their authority. That debate sits well outside the N.T. canonization.

It's clear that the 66 books of the Bible accurately represent the teachings and beliefs of Jesus and His earliest followers.

Finally, let's touch on transmission (the 3rd link in the chain).



Until the Dead Sea Scrolls were discovered in 1947, the oldest existing copy of O.T. writings was from c. 916 AD. The D.S. scrolls contained a copy of Isaiah from c. 125 BC. That's 1000 years older than the existing copy, and only 500 years after the *original* was written.

This provided the perfect opportunity to judge copying accuracy over a *millennium*. They were 95% textually identical! The 5% that was different was mostly misspellings and didn't constitute any threat to the content or reliability of the text.

There are three standards that historians apply to ancient documents in order to test for authenticity and accuracy:

1. The number of copies that have survived
2. The age of the earliest of these copies
3. The consistency between existing copies

For instance, look at these secular manuscripts that modern scholars have no reluctance treating as authentic and accurate:

- A. Plato: 7 copies; the earliest is 1,200 years from the original writing.
- B. Aristotle: 49 copies; the earliest is 1,100 years.
- C. Homer's Iliad: 643 copies; the earliest is 900 years.

That's the most copies outside of the Bible. The quantity of N.T. material is almost embarrassing in comparison with other works of antiquity.

- D. New Testament: 24,000 copies; about 30 years!

And as far as consistency between them goes, there is only one half of one percent variation. They're 99.5% textually pure! The .5% variants are easily corrected by comparing them to the multitude of samples that don't contain the typo, the single word omission, or the repetition.

The Bible enjoys an *unequaled* reputation for fidelity. These minor issues *never* affect the central content or message. The thrust of the entire Bible is to bring you into an intimate relationship with your Heavenly Father through His only Son.

- The Bible is one book, one history, one revelation.