

# Is the Bible Reliable?

## *The Integrity of the Text*

April 3, 2011

This morning, we'll begin preparing ourselves for this unique opportunity to talk about the Bible with those around us. And because God chose written communication as an essential means of delivering His message to mankind, we need to be able to share a realistic, unshakable confidence in the integrity of His Word.



All of the original writings have been lost to time and deterioration. We *only* have copies, like the Dead Sea scrolls (pictured here). So, the question is, and it's a valid question: Can our modern copy of the Bible be trusted? We can't just *hope* it's been correctly duplicated and uncorrupted through the ages; we need to be fully convinced that our current copy is every bit as trustworthy as the original was.



Copper Scroll

We can't trust its authority unless we trust its authenticity. So, how did our Bible get from God's mind to our hands? Well, there are three big steps involved:

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

As far as "inspiration" goes, God hasn't revealed exactly how He worked through 40 different authors over a 1500 year stretch. But He didn't "possess" their pen without their awareness. The Bible is clear that He purposefully chose to use their human experiences, struggles, and skill-sets, but infused, enabled, and endowed by His Holy Spirit.



It'd be kind of like having a pen with power-steering ... *and* a navigation system! It was "Empowered Writing". It's human agency and divine influence intertwined.

The word "inspire" means "to breathe into". 2nd Timothy tells us that "scripture is inspired", but the NIV translates it literally:

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

It reminds me of Genesis, when God formed man from the dust ...

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

And when He breathed into the hearts and hands of His writers, their *words* became a living thing. We even refer to it as the “Living Word” because although it’s an *ancient* document, it remains as fresh and relevant as when it was first inspired.



Now, “canon” is Greek for “ruler”; it refers to the standard used to evaluate which books “measured up” First is the OT cannon. The OT books were confirmed by Jewish leaders a couple hundred years before Christ, and the process they used is lost to history. But it must’ve been a good one, because Jesus Himself validates the OT collection as both. He calls it:

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

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

And He gave it a *sweeping* “stamp of approval” when he said:

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

So, if one can trust the NT, they can trust Christ. And if one can trust Christ, they can trust the OT. Of course there’s also all that fulfilled prophecy, archeologically substantiated historical accuracy, and a unified theme among the un-related authors that defies naturalistic explanations.



Now, the NT was written by men who lived during the life of Jesus, but it wasn’t canonized until 300 years later, in 397<sup>AD</sup>. So, *why* did it take so long ... *who* finally did it ... and can we trust *them*? The “Da Vinci Code” made lots of money asserting that the NT books were officially canonized by a bureaucratic committee with an unholy agenda.

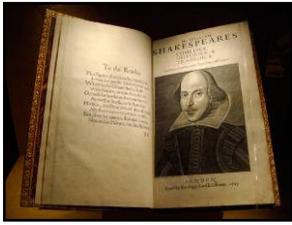
The non-theatrical truth is that the NT had been *unofficially* canonized from day one. Look what Peter says about Paul’s epistles:

[Paul’s] letters contain some things that are hard to understand, which ignorant and unstable people distort, as they do the **other Scriptures** ... - *2 Peter 3:16b NIV*

And Paul puts Luke’s Gospel on the same plane as the OT!

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

A few years after the NT was completed (c. 95<sup>AD</sup>) the first post-Biblical author was quoting it as scripture. Early quotes are *so* extensive you can reconstruct a NT just from the quotes. In 397<sup>AD</sup>, the Third Council of Carthage didn’t *determine* which books to include; they officially *recognized* the books that were *already* regarded as scripture and had withstood the test of time.



It would be like a university assembling Shakespeare's most frequently utilized and universally accepted plays into one volume. His works wouldn't suddenly obtain prominence because they were *selected*; they'd be *selected* because of their pre-existing prominence. Because of the miracles and the fulfilled prophecy, the NT was received as inspired from the start by the eyewitnesses.

And when you hear about "lost" or "left out" books of the Bible, it's very misleading. They were *never* accepted to begin with! They were known counterfeits, bent on perverting the Gospel.

Know why the Council of Carthage had to *officially* canonize the NT in 397<sup>AD</sup>? A heretic and Jew-hater named Marcion created his own canon (in the 2nd century) that rejected the OT and heavily edited the NT. By 397 his movement was catching on and confusing believers. So the Council officially identified what was and wasn't universally regarded as inspired NT scripture.

The criteria for canonization were *so* demanding that even a handful of *established* books were debated before being included. For instance, the inclusion of 2nd Peter was debated because the writing style is different from 1st Peter. It was ultimately included, because the text itself provided an explanation.

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

1st Peter was *coauthored*. I'm thankful it's in the Bible but if 2nd Peter or the few other debated books were excluded, nothing of consequence or central to salvation would be altered. There was profound unanimity on the majority of the books. And those books are what establish the totality of our theology.



The Catholics have seven books (the Apocrypha) that are *not* in the Protestant Bible; and you know what *that* means? Their Bible ... is a little ... heavier! They're referred to as *deuterocanonical* which means, "added later". And in 1546<sup>AD</sup>, Martin Luther broke from the Catholic Church and denounced the authority of the Apocrypha. And that's how that works.

The sixty-six universally regarded books accurately represent the teachings and beliefs of Jesus and His earliest followers ... *if* nothing's been compromised in transmission. If you've ever played "telephone" you know how the copy-of-a-copy debate goes.



Until the Dead Sea Scrolls were discovered in 1947, the oldest existing copy of OT writings was from c. 916<sup>AD</sup> (900 years *after* Christ!). But, the DS scrolls contained a copy of Isaiah from about 125<sup>BC</sup>. That's over *1000 years* earlier, and only 500 years after, the *original* was written. This provided the *perfect* opportunity to judge copying accuracy over a *millennium*.

And when they were compared, they turned out to be 95% textually identical! And 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 secular standards historians apply to ancient documents in order to test for authenticity and accuracy:

1. The number of surviving copies (for sake of comparison)
2. The age of the earliest copies (how close to the original?)
3. Consistency between the existing copies

When you have several copies (whether complete or partial) from different locations and generations, you can discover a lot. Let's look at three secular manuscripts that modern scholars have no reluctance treating as both authentic and accurate:

- A. **Plato's Works** (400<sup>BC</sup>): 7 copies and 1,200 years from earliest fragment to original
- B. **Aristotle's works** (350<sup>BC</sup>): 49 copies and 1,100 years of "gap"
- C. **Homer's Iliad**, 1200<sup>BC</sup>: 643 Greek copies and 900 years of gap (*the most copies of any ancient writing outside of the Bible*)
- D. The quantity of **New Testament** material is almost embarrassing in comparison with other works of antiquity: 24,000 copies and the earliest fragment has a 30 year gap!

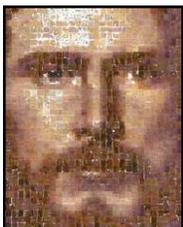
There's simply nothing else like it ... or even *close*. The Iliad has 643 Greek copies; the NT has 6000 Greek copies *and* 8000 Latin copies *and* 10,000 in other languages; from various locations and generations to be compared and cross-referenced.

The consistency between the 24,000 copies is staggering: only 1/2 of 1% variation. They're virtually, unbelievably identical! The .5% variants are easily accounted for by comparing them to the multitude of samples that don't contain the typo, the single word omission, or the double word repetition. And these minor issues *never* affect the central content or the message of the Gospel.



- Our Bible has an *unequaled* reputation of fidelity.

Seeing how fervently God worked to communicate, authenticate, and preserve His Word, tells us *volumes* about how passionately he wants to get the message of His love, grace, and life to us.



Look how someone arranged some of the Dead Sea scroll fragments.

The Lord is neither distant nor detached, but is infinitely personal and inherently present and imminently involved in our world. So let's be ready to share (in our own words and way) that just as we can trust the reliability of the Word of God, we can trust the God of the Word.