

Is the Bible Reliable?

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The Bible's uniqueness

Among the many books that have been written, the Bible is unique for several reasons:

- **Continuity** – it contains 66 books written over a period of 1500 years by over 40 different writers (including kings, peasants, philosophers, fishermen, statesmen and scholars) in different locations and cultures using three different languages (Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek) and in different emotional moods (from misery and depression to joy and thanksgiving), yet the whole book has a tremendous continuity and tells one story of God's plans for mankind.
- **Circulation** – the Bible is listed by Guinness World Records as the most widely printed and distributed book in history. It has been translated into more languages than any other book and was the first major book to be printed in Europe.
- **Continuance** – through many different periods of history the Bible has faced opposition and criticism, but it has survived and is still read today by millions of people across the world.
- **Content** – the Bible is one of the best available sources for studying ancient history and contemporary human thinking. The lives of the people we read about in the Bible can easily be related to our own experiences and there is great honesty about the weaknesses of the authors. Some of the teachings recorded in the Bible are among the most radical the world has ever heard. It also contains historical references that can be tested against archaeological evidence and claims about the future some of which have already been fulfilled since they were first written.
- **Consequence** – no other book has been more quoted in the literature of the Western world and the Old Testament laws have shaped our modern legal system. More importantly, millions of people worldwide say that the Bible has transformed their lives.

How we got our Bible

People often ask the question: who decided which books should be included in the Bible? How did we end up with the 66 books that are recognised as forming the Bible?

A] Old Testament (OT)

The 39 books of the Old Testament were written down by people from the nation of Israel (later the Jews) who trusted God. They were preserved within the nation by faithful people who loved God. Copies of the individual books were made and distributed, with scrolls kept in each Jewish meeting place (synagogue). After AD 70, when Jerusalem was destroyed by a Roman army, a

group of leading Jewish scholars met to confirm which books were already recognised as coming from God. They produced a list identical to our Old Testament except in a different order.

Christians accept these Israelite texts as true and trustworthy because Jesus recognised them as being God's word. He referred to all three major divisions of the Old Testament: Law, Psalms and Prophets (see Luke 24:44, Luke 11:51). The New Testament writers also repeatedly claim that the Old Testament is historically accurate and the word of God (see for example Matthew 21:42, 22:29, 26:54, 56; Luke 24; John 5:39, 7:38, 10:35; Acts 17:2, 11, 18:28; Romans 1:2, 4:3, 9:17, 10:11, 11:2, 15:4, 16:26; 1 Corinthians 15:3-4; Galatians 3:8, 22, 4:30; 1 Timothy 5:18; 2 Timothy 3:16; 2 Peter 1:20, 21, 3:16).

B] New Testament (NT)

The 27 books of the New Testament are also accepted by Christians as God's word. Their names were first listed together by a group of Church leaders at a meeting called the Synod of Hippo in AD 393, but this group was only confirming which books already met two criteria:

a) They were written by apostles or their associates

The most important principle for including these books was that they were written by people who knew Jesus, who followed Him closely, and who had been given authority by Him. The Bible calls these people apostles.

One of the main New Testament writers, Paul, does not fit this description perfectly since he did not know Jesus during His life on earth. He was, however, appointed specially by Jesus in a special encounter described in the book of Acts and is described as an apostle in the NT. Peter confirmed the status of Paul's writings as being Scripture equal to the OT in authority (2 Peter 3:16).

Some New Testament books, for example Luke, Acts and Mark, were not written by apostles, but their authors were close to apostles and wrote under their approval.

b) They had already been widely accepted by the Church

The books that formed the New Testament were already widely known across the Church and the leaders who compiled the list were not deciding which books to include but simply acknowledging the books that were already recognised as being from God.

Do we have the Bible as originally written?

The earliest copies of parts of the Bible were written by hand. They are known as manuscripts. The quantity of manuscripts of the Bible is much greater and their dates closer to the time of writing than for any other ancient text. When manuscripts from earlier dates have been discovered, the differences between them and the later manuscripts that were previously known have been found to be minimal. The majority of the New Testament is also quoted in the writings

of Christians living in the second and third centuries, suggesting that it was already well known and established as Scripture by this time.

Why trust the Bible as historically accurate?

Much has been written about the historical reliability of the Bible, but a number of points can be made:

- Old Testament prophecies are fulfilled at later points in history, both before and during the lifetime of Jesus.
- The writers of the New Testament either: a) claimed to be eyewitnesses to events they described (see 1 John 1:1-4; 2 Peter 1:16-18); b) have been identified since early times as eye-witnesses of the events (the Gospels named after Matthew and Mark are attributed to these men, the latter of whom is said to have based his account on the memories of Simon Peter, by early Christian writers); c) to have interviewed eye-witnesses (e.g., Luke 1:1-4).
- The honesty with which the lives of Old Testament kings and New Testament apostles are recorded ('warts and all') indicates that these are not works of 'propaganda' or mythical stories. The people in the Bible read like real people and their responses to events resonate across the centuries with our experience.
- The texts are full of cultural and geographical references that have consistently over time been substantiated by archaeological finds, even in some cases when the historical consensus was once that the Bible could not be reliable (e.g., dates of domestication of camels or the development of writing).
- The New Testament contains no reference to the destruction of the Temple in AD 70, supporting the suggestion that almost all of its books were written before that date.
- The existence of the Jewish people, despite all the opposition they have faced, and their massive contribution to the world as well as the seemingly intractable problems of the Middle East testify to the significance of these peoples in history, which is explained by the history recorded in Scripture.
- There are references to Christians and their beliefs in the writings of Jewish rabbis and Roman officials which are often not detailed but which fit well with the New Testament accounts. Historians from both cultures also refer to Christians and their beliefs.

None of these points can prove that the Bible is, as it claims to be, the word of God, but they certainly support those claims and suggest that they are worthy of serious consideration.

Isn't the Bible full of contradictions?

People sometimes make this claim, especially when confronted with some of the Bible's more challenging claims, but when asked to point out one of these contradictions they cannot.

Some passages in the Bible do seem at first reading contradict others, but further investigation reveals that there is an alternative explanation. This is particularly true of the four Gospels,

which often record the same event from different perspectives or record similar but distinct events in the life of Jesus. The differences between these records do not imply inaccuracy or fabrication, rather they complement each other to build a more accurate and clearer record of the life of Christ as seen through four different pairs of eyes, just as four different biographies about one celebrity could be quite different but all true.

Other apparent contradictions can be dismissed if we understand the original Greek or Hebrew version of the text. The apparent differences appear because of inaccurate or difficult translations into English. Still others are due to a poor understanding of the culture or literary style in which the Bible was written.

Another important point to realise is that the Bible contains diverse types of writing, including poetry, which is not intended to be understood literally, and wisdom literature, which contains sayings that are not intended to be universally applicable but to be used with wisdom depending on the situation.

A final point to note is that the Old Testament describes the same God as the New Testament, but the requirements God gave to His people and their system of worship changes from the nation of Israel under the Law of Moses to the Church after Jesus Christ. This is not a matter of contradiction, but of developments in God's plan of salvation.

Conclusion

No one could prove by argument beyond all reasonable doubt that the Bible is God's word to mankind. The Bible is, however, a special book which is not a collection of myths and is reliable as a historical text. It claims to be God's word to human beings, and it has all the qualities we might expect in a book that really is from God.

Understanding this is only the beginning to taking the Bible seriously. It makes sense to read the Bible for yourself or with other people, considering its claims and making your own response. One thing you should not do is to ignore it. The claims of the Bible are too important to be ignored, and its credentials are too impressive to be dismissed.