

How do I know the Bible is true?

Addressing eight common objections

Objection	Response
1. No one really knows what the Bible says because the original manuscripts are lost.	True, the “autographs” no longer exist, but a remarkable number of copies do. No other book from the ancient world has more, earlier, or better copied manuscripts than the Bible. More than 6,000 Greek, 10,000 Latin, and 10,000-15,000 other early versions of the New Testament are in existence, some dating to within a generation of the originals. Compare with only 643 copies of Homer’s <i>Iliad</i> , with the earliest copies dating 1,000 years <i>after</i> the original.
2. The Bible has been copied so many times, with so many variations, there’s no way to know what was originally scripted.	While it’s true there are variations among the manuscripts – as many as 400,000 by some counts – the vast majority have to do with changes in spelling, grammar, and style, or accidental omissions or duplications of words or phrases. Only about 400 variants in the New Testament manuscripts have any significant bearing on the meaning of the passage, and most of these are noted in the footnotes or margins of modern translations and editions of Scripture. The only textual variants that affect more than a sentence or two are John 7:53-8:11 and Mark 16:9-20.
3. The books of the Bible were chosen arbitrarily by councils of men in highly political processes. As a result, they left out some very good books – perhaps some equally inspired writings.	These oft-repeated charges are unfounded. They deny the supernatural inspiration and preservation of Scripture and instead emphasize the efforts of men who, it is argued, wanted only to maintain control over the early church. In truth, the Holy Spirit authored Scripture through the pens of human agents, managed its preservation and decided which books belong in the canon (2 Tim. 3:16-17; 2 Peter 1:20-21). Councils of Christian leaders met in the fourth century and made important decisions about the New Testament based on evidence supporting the books’ inspiration and authority, but in no way did they undermine God’s revelation of Himself in Scripture. The God who hangs the stars in space and calls them by name (Isa. 40:26) has no problem guiding the means by which His very words are given to His most precious creation: mankind.
4. It’s silly to assume that one book – the Bible – contains all of God’s truth and that other great writings, from the Vedas to the Book of Mormon, do not come from God.	We must begin with the claims of the documents themselves. The Bible specifically and repeatedly declares itself to be the written Word of God, while the Vedas do not. Even the Book of Mormon is called “another testament of Jesus Christ,” dangerously ignoring a Biblical mandate not to add to or take away from the Scriptures (Rev. 22:18-19). While many religious writings contain moral and ethical truths, some of which are consistent with Scripture, only the Bible claims to be God’s written and complete revelation to mankind. The Bible’s claim to be the Word of God is backed up by unparalleled textual, archaeological, and historical evidence. Most compelling, however, is the testimony of the Holy Spirit, who authored the Scriptures and who confirms in our human spirits the truth of God’s Word.

(Over)

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5. The Bible is full of contradictions.	Not so. Consider these guidelines for dealing with Bible difficulties: 1) logic and reason – examine the Bible like other documents; 2) translation – consider the nuances between various English versions; 3) time – take note that some seemingly contradictory statements are separated by years and must be seen in their proper time frames; 4) context – study the chapters and books in which apparent contradictions occur; 5) sense – remember that words and phrases can be used literally or figuratively; 6) quotations – note that many Old Testament passages are paraphrased or summarized in the New Testament, not quoted word for word; 7) perspective – keep in mind that when two or more writers provide separate accounts of the same events, differences in names, numbers, and conversations may be accounted for by each writer’s perspective.
6. The Bible can’t be true because it depicts a different God in the Old and New Testaments.	The Bible is God’s progressive revelation of Himself and must be understood in its complete context. When one reads both the Old and the New Testaments it becomes evident that God is the same yesterday, today and forever (Mal. 3:6; Heb. 13:8). For example, both testaments tell us that God judges the unrepentant in time and eternity; that He is compassionate and gracious; that He desires a personal relationship with people; and that He is actively engaged in human history. Concerning the Trinity, while the Bible emphatically declares that there is one true and living God (Deut. 6:4; James 2:19), the Old Testament hints at the triune Godhead and the New Testament more fully reveals one God in three persons (see Gen. 1:1-2, 26; 3:22; 11:7; Isa. 6:8; Matt. 3:16-17; John 1:1, 14; 10:30; Acts 5:3-4; Col. 1:16; 2:9; Heb. 1:8; 1 Peter 1:2).
7. There are so many translations of the Bible today, it’s impossible to know which translation is the right one.	There is an alphabet soup of Bible translations available today, from the KJV to the NJB and the TNIV to the HCSB. This has led some to ask, “Which version is right?” and others to conclude that because there is so much variation between translations, none of them is correct. Keep in mind, however, that the <i>autographs</i> , or original documents, of Scripture are inerrant – not the subsequent copies and translations. Even though there are dozens of English translations that differ in varying degrees from one another, we have a high degree of confidence that the source documents from which these versions came are accurate representations of the autographs.
8. There are so many Christian denominations today, it’s clear that Christians can’t agree on what the Bible teaches.	Christian denominations generally developed out of a desire for fellowship and joint ministry between individual churches – a biblical concept (Acts. 11:27-30). There is a rich diversity among Christian denominations today, and the differences between them are not as wide as they appear. Many of the disagreements among Christians are over matters of conscience, such as which day of the week to worship, dietary restrictions, or which translation of the Bible to use (see Rom.14:1-23; 1 Cor.10:23-33), or they focus on lesser points of doctrine, such as church polity or the manner in which missions activities are organized and funded. It should be acknowledged that Christians often have engaged in petty squabbling, internal power struggles and political wrangling. The New Testament implores believers to be gracious toward and forgiving of one another (Eph. 4:32).

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Objection 1: No one really knows what the Bible says because the original manuscripts are lost.

The second part of this statement is true: The “autographs,” or original manuscripts, written on a variety of degradable surfaces from parchment to papyrus, no longer exist. But the remarkable number of copies, dating back in some cases to within a generation of their authorship, makes the first half of this objection false. In fact, we have tremendous confidence in the reliability of the Bible because of its manuscript trail. No other book from the ancient world has more, earlier, or better copied manuscripts than the Bible. (The word “manuscript” is used to denote anything written by hand, rather than copies produced from printing presses.)

Do copies count?

New Testament scholar Craig L. Blomberg writes, “In the original Greek alone, over 5,000 manuscripts and manuscript fragments or portions of the NT have been preserved from the early centuries of Christianity. The oldest of these is a scrap of papyrus containing John 18:31-33, 37-38, dating from A.D. 125-130, no more than forty years after John’s Gospel was most probably written” (“The Historical Reliability of the New Testament,” *Reasonable Faith: Christian Truth and Apologetics*, pp. 193-94). Andreas J. Kostenberger adds, “The total tally of more than 6,000 Greek mss., more than 10,000 Latin Vulgate mss., and more than 9,300 early versions results in over 25,000 witnesses to the text of the NT” (“Is the Bible Today What Was Originally Written?” found in www.4truth.net).

So how does the Bible stack up against other ancient manuscripts? According to scholar F.F. Bruce, we have nine or 10 good copies of Caesar’s *Gallic Wars*; 20 copies of Livy’s *Roman History*; two copies of Tacitus’ *Annals*; and eight manuscripts of Thucydides’ *History*. The most documented secular work from antiquity is Homer’s *Iliad* with 643 copies. But the New Testament, with its thousands of Greek manuscripts alone, is the most highly documented book from the ancient world (*The New Testament Documents, Are They Reliable?*, p. 16).

Is older better?

Generally speaking, the older the manuscripts, the better. That’s because the narrower the gap between originals and copies, the more accurate the copies are likely to be. The oldest manuscript for *Gallic Wars* is roughly 900 years after Caesar’s day. The two manuscripts of Tacitus are 800 and 1,000 years later, respectively, than the original. The earliest copies of Homer’s *Iliad* date from about 1,000 years after the original was authored around 800 B.C. But with the New Testament, we have complete manuscripts from only 300 hundred years later. Most of the New Testament is preserved in manuscripts fewer than 200 years after the original, with some books dating from a little more than 100 years after their composition and one

fragment surviving within a generation of its authorship. No other book from the ancient world has as small a time gap between composition and earliest manuscript copies as the New Testament.

How careful were the copy makers?

Scholars of almost every theological stripe attest to the profound care with which the Old and New Testament documents were copied. For the New Testament, the books were copied in Greek and later translated and preserved in Syriac, Coptic, Latin and a variety of other ancient European and Middle Eastern languages.

The New Testament is the most accurately copied book from the ancient world. Textual scholars Westcott and Hort estimate that only one-sixtieth of its variants rise above “trivialities,” which leaves the text 98.33 percent pure. Noted historian Philip Schaff calculates that of the 150,000 variants known in his day, only 400 affect the meaning of a passage; only 50 are of any significance; and not even one affects an article of faith (*Companion to the Greek Testament and English Version*, p. 177).

Sir Frederick Kenyon, a New Testament authority, writes, “The number of manuscripts of the New Testament, or early translations from it, and of quotations from it in the oldest writers of the Church, is so large that it is practically certain that the true reading of every doubtful passage is preserved in some one or other of these ancient authorities.... This can be said of no other ancient book in the world” (*Our Bible and the Ancient Manuscripts*, p. 55).

How about hostile witnesses?

Eyewitnesses and contemporaries of Jesus wrote the New Testament. For example, Luke probably wrote his gospel around 60 A.D., before he penned Acts. Since Jesus died around 30 A.D., this would place Luke only three decades after the events, while most eyewitnesses – and potentially hostile witnesses – were still alive and could have refuted Luke’s record. The apostle Paul speaks of more than 500 eyewitnesses of the resurrected Christ when he wrote 1 Corinthians, which critics date around 55-56 A.D. John and Peter add similar testimonies (1 John 1:1-4; 2 Peter 1:16).

In short, while it’s true we are lacking the “autographs” of Scripture, we have sound reasons to be confident that what we read today has been faithfully preserved through thousands of copies, many of them written in close chronological proximity to the time they were originally penned. “If we compare the present state of the New Testament text with that of any other ancient writing, we must ... declare it to be marvelously correct. Such has been the care with which the New Testament has been copied – a care which has doubtless grown out of true reverence for its holy words.... The New Testament [is] unrivaled among ancient writings in the purity of its text as actually transmitted and kept in use” (Benjamin B. Warfield, *Introduction to Textual Criticism of the New Testament*, pp. 12-13, quoted in *The Case for Christ* by Lee Strobel, p. 70).

How Do I Know the Bible is True?

Objection 2: The Bible has been copied so many times, with so many variations, there's no way to know what was originally scripted.

Mormons and Muslims allege that the Bible's documents were substantially corrupted in their transmission, but there is overwhelming evidence that proves these claims false. Scholars of almost every theological persuasion attest to the profound care with which the Old and New Testament documents were copied and preserved.

To begin, it's important to know that the texts of the Old and New Testaments were written – under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit – by some 40 authors over a period of roughly 1,500 years. With thousands of ancient copies in existence, it is a monumental task to establish the accuracy and truthfulness of these manuscripts. Textual criticism is the science of examining the books of the Bible and their origins. “It has to do with the reliability of the text, that is, how our current text compares with the originals and how accurately the ancient manuscripts were copied,” according to Paul E. Little in *Know Why You Believe*.

The Old Testament

Let's begin with the Old Testament, copies of which were written on clay and wooden tablets, papyrus and parchment, even pottery pieces and beaten metal fragments. Scribes, or copyists, were devout Jews with the highest professional standards and the utmost dedication to dealing with the Word of God. Their habits included wiping a pen clean before writing the name of God, copying one letter at a time, and counting the letters of both the original and the copy. If there were discrepancies, the copy was destroyed.

The earliest and most complete copy of the entire Hebrew Old Testament dates from around 900 A.D. and is known as the Masoretic text. All of the present copies of the Hebrew text we have today are in remarkable agreement with this text. But even earlier texts have now been found. The discovery of the Dead Sea scrolls in 1947 resulted in the earliest manuscript copy yet of the complete book of Isaiah. Later discoveries at the Dead Sea unearthed fragments of every book in the Old Testament except Esther. Since these scrolls date from a group of dedicated Jews living at Qumran from about 150 B.C. to 70 A.D., the discoveries closed the gap in the age of manuscripts by about 1,000 years. A careful comparison of the Qumran manuscripts with the Masoretic texts shows remarkable similarity.

Other texts fortify our confidence in the reliability of the Old Testament manuscripts. The Septuagint is a Greek translation of the Old Testament dating from the third century B.C. For a Hellenized Hebrew culture whose people often knew only Greek, the Septuagint became a bridge for understanding the Hebrew history and theology of the Old Testament. In addition, the Syriac version of the Old Testament, written in the Aramaic language of Syria, followed, as did a Samaritan version. With all of these texts existing in 200 B.C., what does it mean for the accuracy of the Scriptures?

R. Laird Harris writes: “We can now be sure that copyists worked with great care and accuracy on the Old Testament, even back to 225 B.C. Although some differed among themselves, it was so little, we can infer that still earlier copyists had also faithfully and carefully transmitted the Old Testament text. Indeed, it would be rash skepticism that would now deny that we have our Old Testament in a form very close to that used by Ezra when he taught the Law to those who had returned from the Babylonian captivity” (“How Reliable is the Old Testament Text?” in *Can I Trust My Bible*, p. 124).

The New Testament

For the New Testament, the original documents were written and copied in Greek, and later translated and preserved in Syriac, Coptic, Latin and a variety of other ancient European and Middle Eastern languages. In the Greek alone, more than 5,000 manuscripts and manuscript fragments of the New Testament have been preserved from the early centuries of Christianity.

As William Lane Craig explains, “The oldest of these is a scrap of papyrus containing John 18:31-33, 37-38, dating from A.D. 125-130, no more than forty years after John’s Gospel was most probably written. More than thirty papyri date from the late second through early third centuries, including some which contain good chunks of entire books and two which cover most of the gospels and Acts or the letters of Paul. Four very reliable and nearly complete NTs date from the fourth and fifth centuries” (“The Historical Reliability of the New Testament,” *Reasonable Faith: Christian Truth and Apologetics*, p. 194).

While it’s true there are variations among the manuscripts, the vast majority have to do with changes in spelling, grammar, and style, or accidental omissions or duplications of words or phrases. Only about 400 variants have any significant bearing on the meaning of a passage, and most of these are noted in the footnotes or margins of modern translations and editions of Scripture. The only textual variants that affect more than a sentence or two are John 7:53-8:11 and Mark 16:9-20.

William Lane Craig further writes in *Reasonable Faith*, “Neither of these passages is very likely to be what John or Mark originally wrote, though the story in John (the woman caught in adultery) still stands a fairly good chance of being true. But overall, 97-99% of the NT can be reconstructed beyond any reasonable doubt, and no Christian doctrine is founded solely or even primarily on textually disputed passages” (p. 194).

Consider these statements from renowned Bible scholars:

- The New Testament is the most accurately copied book from the ancient world. Textual scholars Westcott and Hort estimate that only one-sixtieth of its variants rise above “trivialities,” which leaves the text 98.33 percent pure. Noted historian Philip Schaff calculates that of the 150,000 variants known in his day, only 400 affected the meaning of a passage; only 50 were of any significance; and not even one affected an article of faith (*Companion to the Greek Testament and English Version*, p. 177).
- Sir Frederick Kenyon, a New Testament authority, writes, “The number of manuscripts of the New Testament, or early translations from it, and of quotations from it in the oldest writers of the Church, is so large that it is practically certain that the true reading of every doubtful passage is preserved in some one or other of these ancient authorities.... This can be said of no other ancient book in the world” (*Our Bible and the Ancient Manuscripts*, p. 55).
- Many of the apparent discrepancies in the gospels, Acts and the writings of Paul – minor as they are – disappear once we judge ancient historians by the standards of their day rather than ours. As Craig L. Blomberg writes, “In a world which did not even have a symbol for a quotation mark, no one expected a historian to reproduce a speaker’s words verbatim” (“The Historical Reliability of the New Testament,” *Reasonable Faith: Christian Truth and Apologetics*, p. 207).
- “The point is simply that the textual evidence for what the NT authors wrote far outstrips the documentation we have for any other ancient writing, including dozens which we believe have been preserved relatively intact. There is absolutely no support for claims that the standard modern editions of the Greek NT do not very closely approximate what the NT writers actually wrote” (Blomberg, p. 194).
- “If we compare the present state of the New Testament text with that of any other ancient writing, we must ... declare it to be marvelously correct. Such has been the care with which the New Testament has been copied – a care which has doubtless grown out of true reverence for its holy words.... The New Testament [is] unrivaled among ancient writings in the purity of its text as actually transmitted and kept in use” (Benjamin B. Warfield, *Introduction to Textual Criticism of the New Testament*, pp. 12-13, quoted in *The Case for Christ* by Lee Strobel, p. 70).

To summarize, even though there are some discrepancies in copies of ancient Bible manuscripts, the overwhelming number of variations is trivial, such as transposed letters. No discrepancy threatens any Biblical doctrine. Modern equivalents of these minor variants would be the difference between the English words “honor” and “honour,” or receiving a notice in the mail saying “You may have already w-n a million dollars.” The meaning of these sentences is profoundly clear.

For these and other reasons we have not discussed here – archaeological and other scientific evidence, for example – we can be confident that the English translations we hold in our hands come from reliably consistent Hebrew, Greek and Aramaic documents that have been copied meticulously since the originals were penned. We also may take comfort in the knowledge that the same Holy Spirit who inspired the “autographs” of Scripture has taken care to preserve these texts.