

How Accurate Is The Bible?

How accurate is the Bible? That is a question many have asked after talking with a Mormon or after hearing a college professor declare the Bible to be filled with inaccuracies and therefore not trustworthy. It is understandable that the cults are motivated to discredit the Bible, and it is understandable that an unbelieving professor stepped outside of his expertise. But how should we respond to 200,000 variants in the Bible? Can we really trust the Bible? To answer our question, we need to start by understanding the One who wrote the Bible. We need to understand the character of God.

WHAT IS GOD LIKE? The character of God is the only real reason we can trust the Bible to speak the truth. Most critics are not aware they have a faulty assumption that colors their view of the Bible. Here is how most people view God.

You thought that I was just like you . . . (NASB) Psalm 50:21

God speaks boldly in this verse. He is not like us. He does not make mistakes. He does not need the Encyclopedia Britannica, the Library of Congress, or a news reporter to help Him understand something or to collect information. He already knows everything and the book of Numbers tells us why we can trust Him when He speaks or writes,

God is not a man, that He should lie, Nor a son of man, that He should repent; Has He said, and will He not do it? Or has He spoken, and will He not make it good? (NASB) Numbers 23:19

and,

. . . in order that by two unchangeable things, in which it is impossible for God to lie . . . (NASB) Hebrews 6:18

GOD WROTE THE BIBLE. 2 Timothy 3:16 tells us that God wrote the Bible,

All Scripture is inspired by God . . . (NASB) 2 Timothy 3:16

The word “inspired” comes from a Greek word which means “God-breathed.” That is, God “breathed” the words to be written.

He wrote all 66 books, all 1189 chapters and all 31,173 verses of the Bible. This is an easy task for an omnipotent, omniscient God. He is not like us - He does not grow tired, and He does not sleep. He does not lie! That is why we can trust what He wrote it.

The sum of Thy word is truth,

And every one of Thy righteous ordinances is everlasting. (NASB) Ps. 119:160

The Mystery of God

For My thoughts are not your thoughts,
neither are your ways My ways,” declares the
LORD. For as the heavens are higher than the
earth, So are My ways higher than your ways,
And My thoughts than your
thoughts.

(NASB) Isaiah 55:8-9

THE VOICE OF GOD. How do we know the Bible was written by God? Several years ago, I asked a Christian friend why he believed the Bible was true. He told me that he knew God was real by the experiences he had and by how God had helped him. I told him the Hare Krishnas, Mormons, Jehovah’s Witness, members of the occult, Muslims, Hindus all believe their god is the true god because they have had an

experience. He had not thought about that. If experience is the test of truth, then are we all correct? If so, we have a problem. How do we then know that God is speaking to us in the Bible?

The answer is already given to us in the Bible. Listen to Deuteronomy 18:20-22,

*But the prophet who shall speak a word presumptuously in My name which I have not commanded him to speak, or which he shall speak in the name of other gods, that prophet shall die.’
“And you may say in your heart, ‘How shall we know the word which the LORD has not spoken?’ “When a prophet speaks in the name of the LORD, if the thing does not come about or come true, that is the thing which the LORD has not spoken. The prophet has spoken it presumptuously; you shall not be afraid of him. (NASB) Deut. 18:20-22*

Fulfilled prophecy is the signature that God has spoken in the Bible. The Bible is the only sacred book that contains future predictions that have come true. It is a very unique book with 737 prophecies recorded in about 8,500 verses. That is about 25% of the Bible.

The prophecies occur in both the Old Testament and New Testament. The Old Testament prophets, the New Testament apostles, and Jesus Christ all made predictions about the future. They have all come true except for those which are yet future. The Bible is also a book of history whose facts are being proven to be true with almost every archeological finding. The Bible is accurate when it speaks to history; and when it makes predictions, they come true. It is Truth.

MYSTERY OF AUTHORSHIP. God did not write the Bible as we do a letter. He used two authors.

... for no prophecy was ever made by an act of human will, but

men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God. (NASB) 2 Peter 1:21

This verse tells us that God the Holy Spirit “moved” human authors to write the Bible. The Greek word for “moved” comes from the root word PHERO which means “to carry,” “to bring” or “to bring along.” This means the Holy Spirit “brought” men along. He caused men to write what He wanted them to write. The different books of the Bible had different authors who used their own style, language and grammar, but the Holy Spirit “carried” them in their writing. What they wrote was what the Holy Spirit wanted to be written. Here is an example,

You spoke by the Holy Spirit through the mouth of your servant, our father David: “Why do the nations rage and the peoples plot in vain? (NIV) Acts 4:25

The Signature of God

The Bible contains a number of fascinating proofs that absolutely authenticate the Scriptures as the . . . authoritative Word of God. The evidence from hundreds of fulfilled prophecies form one of the strongest and most obvious proofs of divine inspiration.”

Grant R. Jeffrey
The Signature of God

Who spoke through David? The answer is the Holy Spirit! At the end of one book the apostle Paul wrote, we are given a hint that the influence of the Holy Spirit on the writer was, at times, hard to detect,

... and I think that I also

have the Spirit of God. (NASB) 1 Cor. 7:40

Paul appears to not be sure. In his other books he does not make this comment. This is remarkable because it implies on the other occasions he knew the Holy Spirit was guiding him, but this time he was not completely sure. The Holy Spirit did not dictate the message, but yet He was guiding the apostle. Who were the authors? The answer is men and the Holy Spirit.

BOOKS OF THE BIBLE. Some have wondered if any books in the Bible do not belong and if any are missing. The answer to our question comes to us directly from Jesus

Christ Himself.

OLD TESTAMENT. At the time of Jesus' life the only scriptures that existed were the Jewish scriptures - the Tanakh. Jesus quoted from them. He taught them. He believed them. Here is an example. Jesus is speaking,

You search the Scriptures, because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is these that bear witness of Me; (NASB) John 5:39

He also considered them to be authoritative and lasting,

Do not think that I came to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I did not come to abolish, but to fulfill. For truly I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not the smallest letter or stroke shall pass away from the Law, until all is accomplished. (NASB) Matt. 5:17-18

Notice that Jesus refers to the Law and the Prophets. These are two sections of the Jewish scriptures, the Tanakh. The Tanakh was divided into three sections: The Law, The Prophets and the Writings. Jesus clearly recognized them as authoritative. Near the end of the gospel of Luke, Jesus

makes another significant statement about the scriptures. He endorsed the last section, The Writings, when He refers to the Psalms, the largest book in the Writings.

Now He said to them, "These are My words which I spoke to you while I was still with you, that all things which are written about Me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled." (NASB) Luke 24:44

During His ministry, He also endorsed The Twelve or the minor prophets when He referred to Jonah being in the belly of a great sea monster and alluding to him being there three days and nights (Matt. 12:40-41), In short, Jesus recognized the Jewish scriptures from Genesis to Chronicles as real and authoritative.

The Dead Sea Scrolls have proven to modern critics that the Tanakh, as we know it today, has not changed since the time of Christ. In fact, the Dead Sea scrolls pre-date Christ by about by 100-150 years. So when He referred to The Law and The Prophets and The Writings, He referred to the Tanakh we have in A.D. 2001.

NEW TESTAMENT. Many are under the impression there was a great debate about which books should be added to the

<i>The Jewish Scriptures (Tanakh)</i>		
The Law	The Prophets	The Writings
Torah (Pentateuch) Genesis Exodus Leviticus Numbers Deuteronomy	Former Prophets Joshua Judges Samuel (1 & 2) Kings (1 & 2) Latter Prophets Isaiah Jeremiah Ezekiel The Twelve (Minor Prophets)	Poetry Psalms Proverbs Job Five Rolls Song of Songs Ruth Lamentations Esther Ecclesiastes Historical Daniel Ezra-Nehemiah Chronicles (1 & 2)

New Testament. The truth is the apostles affirmed and confirmed the contents of the New Testament. The great church debates were largely attempts to remove certain books which some considered to not be authoritative.

Maybe the most significant statement about the New Testament actually comes from Jesus,

But when He, the Spirit of truth, comes, He will guide you into all the truth; for He will not speak on His own initiative, but whatever He hears, He will speak; and He will disclose to you what is to come. (NASB) John 16:13

Jesus tells His apostles the Holy Spirit will guide them into truth: that is, He will reveal truth to them, just as we have already observed with Paul! This was required since Jesus wanted His church to be built on the apostles,

... having been built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus Himself being the corner stone, (NASB) Ephesians 2:20

So Jesus endorses His apostles through the ministry of the Holy Spirit. As the years elapsed, the apostles wrote the majority (81%) of the New Testament books and their com-

panions and Jesus' brothers wrote the balance. It must have been a surprise to them to discover that Paul the apostle would write just about half of the books. His letters and the letters of the other apostles were passed around for all to read (Col. 4:16; 1 Thess. 5:27). The letters could be reviewed by the other apostles. Peter reviewed Paul's writing. Listen to this,

... just as also our beloved brother Paul, according to the wisdom given him, wrote to you, as also in all his letters, speaking in them of these things, in which are some things hard to understand, which the untaught and unstable distort, as they do also the rest of the Scriptures, to their own destruction. (NASB) 2 Peter 3:15-16

Peter considered Paul's letters to be scripture ("the rest of the scriptures"). So Peter endorses Paul and then Paul in turn endorses Luke when he writes,

For the Scripture says, "YOU SHALL NOT MUZZLE THE OX WHILE HE IS THRESHING," and "The laborer is worthy of his wages." (NASB) 1 Tim. 5:18

The first part of that quote is from Deuteronomy 25:4 - from

<i>Human Authors of the New Testament</i>			
Books	The Apostles	Companions	Jesus' Brothers
Matthew	Matthew		
Mark		John Mark	
Luke		Luke	
John	John		
Acts		Luke	
Romans-to-Philemon	Paul		
Hebrews	-	-	-
James			James
1 & 2 Peter	Peter		
1, 2 & 3 John	John		
Jude			Jude
Revelation	John		

the sacred scriptures. The second part is from a passage which is found ONLY in Luke 10:7. Now notice that Paul refers to both as scripture. Paul considered the writings of Luke to be equal to that found in Deuteronomy.

EARLIEST NEW TESTAMENT. The earliest list of all of the New Testament books is found in a manuscript called the Muratorian fragment (A.D. 170). It is damaged. That is why it is called a fragment. The beginning has been torn off and references to some books are missing. The author of the document gave a running account of the development of the New Testament. In the document he lists the New Testament books except for Matthew, Mark, Hebrews, James, 1 & 2 Peter and 3 John. Matthew and Mark are probably missing due to the tear since the author of the Muratorian refers to the “third book of the gospel.” So only Hebrews, 1 & 2 Peter and 3 John are missing from the list. Were they part of the torn piece too? We do not know. But as early as A.D. 70-130, Hebrews, James, and 1 & 2 Peter were already quoted as being part of the New Testament (Pseudo-Barnabas, Clement of Rome). The Muratorian Fragment includes other books but clearly states they were not received.

The books of the New Testament were recognized very early. The New Testament books were not being discovered but were being defended.

CONCLUSION. The New Testament was written by the apostles who were equal to the Old Testament prophets (Eph. 3:5; 2 Peter 3:2). Both were moved by the Holy Spirit to write what God wanted written. The New Testament is endorsed by fulfilled prophecy and by the apostles. The apostle John was the last apostle when he wrote his smaller epistles and Revelation. By this time the New Testament books had been identified and endorsed.

ALL THOSE ERRORS. The original manuscripts written

by the prophets and the apostles under the guidance of the Holy Spirit were without error. We call these original books autographs. But copies have been made over the centuries. Errors have been made in the process of copying them. Most of the errors are simple spelling errors, missing words or grammatical errors. Some intentional changes were made by the human copiers in an attempt to clarify the meaning of a passage. In a few rare cases, it is clear someone tried to change the meaning to reflect a doctrinal opinion.

Now we come to our primary question. How accurate is the Bible? And how should we understand 200,000 variants in the Bible? How many variants are there in the Bible? What is a variant?

OLD TESTAMENT VARIANTS. The Old Testament copies have very few variants since the Jewish rabbis had very strict rules about copying accuracy. In fact, the rabbis would destroy copies if there were too many errors. The discovery of the Dead Sea

Scrolls was a major event. It provided Biblical scholars with proof that the Old Testament contained 39 books and provided thousands of manuscript fragments. Prior to that the Christian community had only three partial copies and one complete copy.

With recent discoveries of Aramaic cursive copies, we now have copies dating from 250 B.C. By comparing all of these Old Testament copies, differences between the documents have been identified. These differences are called variants. There are very few variants in the Old Testament compared to the New Testament which has 200,000. Of the Old Testament variants, only sixteen are of any significance.

NEW TESTAMENT VARIANTS. The New Testament has approximately 200,000 variants between 5,309 Greek manuscripts, 10,000 Latin Vulgates and 2,000 lectionaries. In addition to the manuscripts, we have enough quotes from all of the early fathers to completely write the New Testament

Variants in the New Testament Autographs

- 24,633 manuscripts	- 24,000 fragments
5,309 Greek manuscripts	
10,000 Latin Vulgate	- 36,289 Patristic Quotes
9,324 Other	
Total = 200,000 variants	

Criteria For Selecting Ancient Bible Manuscripts

Rule	Reason
1. Older manuscripts are preferred.	Less subject to copying errors
2. The more difficult reading is preferred.	Additions tend to add complexity
3. The shorter reading is preferred.	Additions and errors add words
4. The reading which best explains all variants is preferred. . . .	
5. The reading with the widest geographical separation is preferred.geographically	Additions and errors tend to reoccur
6. The reading conforming to the author's style is preferred.	Additions do not agree.
7. The reading which reflects no doctrinal bias is preferred.	Additions tend to be biased.

except for about 11 verses. Now that is amazing.

WHAT IS A VARIANT? A variant is any difference between manuscripts. Let's illustrate! Say you have three manuscripts and discover that one word is misspelled in all three manuscripts. That will be counted as three variants. But if you only found two misspellings, you will only have two variants and so on. So a single misspelling, such as a missing accent mark, across 500 manuscripts would be counted as 500 variants. Spelling errors and missing words account for the vast majority of the 200,000 variants.

Before we go further, we need to know how the various manuscripts are used to determine how the Bible should read. Linguistic scholars start by selecting a group of the high quality manuscripts to use in their Bible translation. They do not use all of them because the manuscripts have already been catalogued and evaluated. They use rules to determine which manuscripts are more trustworthy. For example, older manuscripts are considered to be more reliable since they should be less subject to additions. Later manuscripts tend to have multiple additions and copying errors.

Example Variants from John 3:16

Thus for loved God the world so as the Son the only one gave
 Θψχθς ιγυ κιγσκφηρ ς τηςς χςρ ξςφμςς θφχη χςρ ψλςρ χςρ πςρςιηκ ηςθξηρ
 Θψχθς ιγυ κιγσκφηρ ς τηςς χςρ ξςφμςς θφχη χςρ ψλςρ χςρ πςρςιηκ ηςθξηρ
 Θψχθς ιγυ κιγσκφηρ ς τηςς χςρ ξςφμςς θφχη χςρ ψλςρ χςρ πςρςιηκ ηςθξηρ
Θψχθ ιγυ κιγσκφηρ ς τηςς χςρ ξςφμςς θφχη χςρ ψλςρ γψχςψ χςρ πςρςιηκ ηςθξηρ

spelling error

added word

that all the believing into Him not perish but have ages.
 λργ σγς ς σλφχηψθρ ηλφ γψχςρ πκ γςςοκχγλ γοογ ηεκρ γλθρλςρ² mss B
 λργ σγς ς σλφχηψθρ ηλφ γψχςρ πκ γςςοκχγλ γοογ ηεκρ γλθρλςρ² mss W^{sup}
 λργ σγς ς σλφχηψθρ ηλφ γψχςρ πκ γςςοκχγλ γοογ ηεκρ γλθρλςρ² mss w
 λργ σγς ς σλφχηψθρ ηλφ γψχςρ πκ γςςοκχγλ γοογ ηεκρ γλθρλςρ² mss χ

The linguistic scholars apply these rules to all of the manuscripts and identify every spelling error, every letter and word that is omitted, every vowel that is wrong and even grammatical errors. So just one Greek word can account for multiple variants as the different manuscripts are compared.

ARE VARIANTS SIGNIFICANT? The New Testament has 200,000 spelling, grammatical, and omission variants. These variants occur in only 10,000 places in the New Testament. This may seem high, but this is small when we compare this to the New Testament with its 184,590 words or 838,380 letters. Of those 10,000 places, only 400 words are in question. Of those 400 words, only 50 are significant and none of them affect anything we believe. This translates to a Bible that is 99.9% accurate. There is no other ancient book in existence with so many copies and with so little error. The Bible is really unique. The Bible is very accurate! The Bible very accurately reflects what the Prophets and the apostles wrote.

TODAY'S ENGLISH BIBLES. We have been describing the original Hebrew and Greek translations of the Bible. The question we need to ask now is, "How accurate are the English translations to the original languages? The answer depends on which translation we are talking about.

The New King James Version (NKJV) is the best Bible for Bible study, with the New American Standard Bible (NASB) being next. For Bible study you want a Bible that is as close to the Greek language as possible. The NKJV and NASB do that. I do not recommend the New International Version. Here are the reasons why:

ENGLISH BIBLES VS GREEK EXAMPLE. In order to explain, we will start with a passage from the New Testament and then compare the English translations to the Greek text. The scripture below is Acts 14:23. The English words have already been substituted for the Greek words.

Having appointed and for them in every church elders, praying with fastings they committed them to the Lord in whom they believed. (NASB) Acts 14:23

Now we will compare the different Bibles,

NASB

And when they had appointed elders for them in every church, having prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord in whom they had believed.

NIV

Paul and Barnabas appointed elders for them in each church and with prayer and fasting committed them to the Lord in whom they had put their trust.

LIVING BIBLE

Paul and Barnabas also appointed elders in every church and prayed for them with fasting, turning them over to the care of the Lord to whom they trusted.

AMPLIFIED BIBLE

And when they had appointed and ordained elders for them in each church with prayer and fasting, they committed them to the Lord in Whom they had come to believe [being full of the joyful trust that He is the Christ, the Messiah].

THE SECRET NEW KINGDOM BIBLE

They chose elders for each church, by praying and giving up eating for a certain time. These elders had trusted the Lord, so Paul and Barnabas put them in the Lord's care.

KING JAMES

And when they had ordained elders in every church, and prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord, on whom they had believed.

NEW KING JAMES

So when they had appointed elders in every church, and prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord in whom they had believed.

GOD'S WORD

They had the disciples in each church choose spiritual leaders, and with prayer and fasting they entrusted the leaders to the Lord in whom they believed.

The red highlights show substantial deviation from the original Greek.

COMPARISONS. The NASB, KJV and NKJV are very close to the actual wording of the original Greek version of the book of Acts. This is typical for these Bibles. The other Bibles differ substantially.

The last one, God's Word, is the worst because it says the disciples of each church selected the elders and that is not true. The Greek does not say that. The actual Greek word for "appoint" means "to select." The translators of this Bible used an older, out of date meaning (400 B.C.) of the word which meant "to elect by show of hands." The translators either did not know the word had changed meaning by the time of Christ or they wanted to convey the thought that a congregational form of selecting leaders was biblical. This is an old, erroneous meaning historically given to this verse.

The NIV, The Secret Kingdom New Testament Bible, and Living Bible added to the Word of God when they

add the words, "Paul and Barnabas." These words are not in the Greek. They did this to make the Bible more readable. Unfortunately, they are adding their own opinions. For some who want to study the Word of Truth, this is unacceptable. This example is typical of these Bibles.

A knowledge of the original languages is needed by someone who seriously desires to know what the Bible really says. It will take study, but the benefits are rewarding.

The best Bibles for study are the New King James Version and the New American Standard.

CONCLUSION. Jesus said, "For truly I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not the smallest letter or stroke shall pass away from the Law, until all is accomplished" (NASB) Matthew 5:18.

We should thank God for keeping His Word pure and we should ask the Holy Spirit to help us understand what He has so carefully preserved.

To Him be the glory forever and ever.