

HOW DO WE KNOW WE CAN TRUST THE BIBLE? (OT: Ps 119:9-16; NT: 2 Tim 3:14-17)

INTRODUCTION

*It ain't necessarily so, it ain't necessarily so
The things that you're liable, to read in the Bible
It ain't necessarily so*

These lyrics were written by the Gershwins in 1935 for their opera *Porgy and Bess*. In that decade, they were controversial for how they cast doubt on the trustworthiness of the Bible. The song seems to resonate with people, and it has been recorded in nearly every decade since. The Bible may be an important book, it may contain some inspirational stories. But is it reliable? Can we trust it? No.

But what if we could? What if there is a God who reveals himself to us? And what if this God is the God of the gospel – the God who loves you and wants you to know him; the God who offers grace for eternal life and hope for life today. I wouldn't want to miss that memo.

Our approach today might be a little unusual if you've grown up in the church. Because we're going to look at this question – Can we trust the Bible? – by taking a step back from the Bible itself. Instead, we're going to examine the *evidence*.

Military historian Chauncey Sanders sets forth three tests to determine the trustworthiness of any ancient document.¹ Several writers have subjected the Bible to these tests.² And we're going to do so today. After that, we'll briefly consider three practical takeaways. So: 3 Tests and 3 Takeaways. If you believe in the Bible, I hope you'll be encouraged and equipped to discuss these issues with others. If you're new to all this, I hope you'll find this helpful and that it might move you to consider what the Bible has to say to your own life.

THE TESTS

1. THE MANUSCRIPT TEST

The first test used to determine the trustworthiness of any ancient document can be called the *manuscript test*. This test is important because it focuses on whether we can trust that the words we have in our hands today are the same words that were written by the original authors. Some say, "The Bible we have today was written thousands of years ago! We don't have the original documents. All we have is a translation... of a translation. Surely, we can't trust it!" The manuscript test is made up of two parts:

- First, it focuses on the **time between the original author and the earliest copy** we have: How much time has passed between when the document was first written and when we have our earliest copy? This enables you to gauge how likely it is that the document in question truly came from the author who wrote it.

- The second part focuses on the **number of copies** that we have: How many partial or complete copies of the original have been collected since it was written? This enables you to make comparisons to see if the text has changed over time.

Let's look at some examples to make this clearer and to see how the NT in particular compares:³

Author	Book	Date Written	Earliest Copies	Part #1: Time Gap	Part 2: # of Copies
Homer	<i>Iliad</i>	800 BC	400 BC	400 years	643
Aristotle	<i>Poetics</i>	350 BC	1,100 AD	1,450 years	5
Caesar	<i>Gallic Wars</i>	50 BC	900 AD	950 years	10
Disciples	<i>NT</i>	1C	2C	150 years	5,686

Based on this test, you can see that the evidence for the trustworthiness of the gospels is almost embarrassing by comparison. One theologian concludes: "To be skeptical of the... New Testament books is to allow all of classical antiquity to slip into obscurity, for **no documents of the ancient period** are as well attested bibliographically as the New Testament."⁴

2. THE INTERNAL TEST

The second test used to determine the trustworthiness of any ancient document is called the **internal test** – *internal* because it looks at the book itself. This test is important because the manuscript test only tells you that the words you have are the same as the original, but you still need to figure out whether that original is trustworthy. "Okay," someone might say, "I can believe that the words we have are the words the biblical authors wrote, but there's no way you can believe what they wrote. These tales can't really have happened!" But when we look at the Bible itself, there are reasons to trust it. Let me give you two examples from the gospels.

First: The Gospels are Eyewitness Accounts

- **[Authors]:** They were written by people who witnessed the events themselves. Peter writes: **We did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty (2 Pet 1:16).** The gospels are historical accounts written by people who were there.
- **[Others]:** More than that, the gospels name other eyewitnesses. "Mark, for example, says that the man who helped Jesus carry his cross... 'was the father of Alexander and Rufus... Paul refers to a body of five hundred eyewitnesses who saw the risen Christ."⁵ Why is this important? Because you can't name eyewitnesses if they're not prepared to back you up! Mark and Paul are saying: *Alexander, Rufus and these 500 witnesses will all tell you that what we're saying is true. If you don't believe it, go and ask them.*

Second: The Gospels Read Like History, Not Fiction

- **[Details]:** For example, consider some of the random details that are included: "In Mk 4, we are told that Jesus was asleep on a cushion in the stern of a boat. In Jn 21 we are told... they caught 153 fish. In Jn 8... we are told [Jesus] doodled with his finger in the dust... None of these details are relevant to the plot or character development at all... The only explanation for why an ancient writer would mention [them]... is because the details had been retained in the eyewitnesses' memory."⁶

- **[Embarrassing information]:** Or consider all the embarrassing things authors include. Another popular view “is that the gospels were written by the leaders of the early church to promote their policies, consolidate their power, and build their movement.”⁷ But if the Bible was meant to be propaganda, then, honestly, the authors did a terrible job!
 - The Apostles – the group of men who led the early church, are depicted “as petty and jealous, almost impossibly slow-witted, and in the end as cowards who... failed their master.”⁸
 - Jesus – the hero of the story is crucified. He didn’t come with power. He didn’t come with prestige. Instead, he is put to death like a criminal.

Why would the leaders of the early church report their ugly failures? Why would they preach a Savior who seems so weak? Because they were recording what truly took place.

3. THE EXTERNAL TEST

The third test used to determine the historical reliability of an ancient document is called the *external test*. Are there other historical sources that confirm or deny the testimony of the book in question? This test is important because “conformity or agreement with other known historical or scientific facts is often the decisive test of evidence.”⁹ Once again, the external evidence encourages us when it comes to the Bible. Consider two examples:

First: We have **historians**, with no Christian bias, who corroborate the truth of the Bible.

- **Josephus** – A first century Jewish historian, records many of the things we read about in the NT.¹⁰ He even writes about Jesus himself: “And there arose about this time Jesus, a wise man, if indeed we should call him a man... When Pilate had condemned him to the cross... those who had loved him at first did not cease; for he appeared to them on the third day alive again... and even now the tribe of Christians, so named after him, has not yet died out.”¹¹
- **[Others]:** And there are others – Tacitus, Thallus, Eusebius – who record their own histories in a way that’s consistent with the Bible. In fact, theologians have noted that from the extrabiblical sources we can derive at least 12 basic facts about the life of Jesus. If we didn’t even have the New Testament, we would still know the following: 1) Jesus lived during the time of Tiberius Caesar. 2) He lived a virtuous life. 3) He was a wonder-worker. 4) He had a brother named James. 5) Some said he was the Messiah. 6) He was crucified under Pontius Pilate. 7) He was crucified on the eve of the Jewish Passover. 8) Darkness and an earthquake occurred when he died. 9) His disciples believed he rose from the dead. 10) His disciples were willing to die for their belief. 11) Christianity spread rapidly as far as Rome. 12) His disciples denied the Roman gods and worshipped Jesus as God.¹²

Second: Along with the historians we also have **archaeological** evidence.

We don’t have time to get into this today, but the Bible is full of details – referencing nations, kings, places, dates, and so on. Over time, archaeologists have discovered well over 25,000 biblical sites that establish the accuracy of these details as recorded in the Bible.¹³

Transition: What are you supposed to do with all of this?!?! Let’s move from the Tests to the Takeaways.

THE TAKEAWAYS

1. [Unbeliever]: Don't Settle for a Cheap Critique

- It's somewhat fashionable to be dismissive of the Bible → As if it's enlightened or intellectual to doubt what the Bible has to say.
 - Cynical spirit is common in our culture → Given birth to numerous best-selling books.
 - One example comes from David Plotz.
 - He wrote: *Good Book: The Bizarre, Hilarious, Disturbing, Marvelous, and Inspiring Things I Learned When I Read Every Single Word of the Bible*.
 - It's promoted as a humorous deconstruction of the Bible, and it concludes that you can't take God seriously.
 - I recently read it in my book club and expected it to present some challenges to my faith.
 - But in the end, I was kinda disappointed.
 - I expected it to be more robust, but the objections turn out to be kinda weak.
 - His "gothca" critiques just reveal that he hasn't taken the time to understand what the Bible really has to say.
 - In the end, it feels kind of cheap.
 - One of the members of my book club described it this way:¹⁴
 - *If I'm reading Shakespeare, there are some things that I don't understand.*
 - *But I don't conclude that Shakespeare was an idiot!*
 - *I assume the problem is with me, not the text.*
 - I wonder what it would look like for you to read the Bible that way?
 - Honor the fact:
 - That the Bible is a profoundly important book.
 - That you're not the first person to have questions/doubts.
 - That these same questions/doubts have been discussed for thousands of years and millions have concluded that it can still be trusted.
 - How much evidence to you have for your doubts?
 - If you're putting the trustworthiness of the Bible on trial, do you have enough to convict?
 - Or maybe it's like Shakespeare and the problem is with us, not the text.
- Either way – Don't settle for a cheap critique.***

2. [Believer]: Don't Settle for a Cheap Defense

- As your pastor, I want you to know that I believe this book.
 - I believe it is God's Word.
 - I believe it has absolute authority over my life and our church.
- But let's not pretend that there aren't some confusing/challenging things in here!
 - The biblical authors struggle with this themselves.
 - Have you ever read the Psalms and how the authors wrestle with God?!?!
- Philip Yancey once said: "There is no challenge from the atheists – classic or contemporary – that is not raised by the Bible itself. Indeed, it is quite astounding that our God is compassionate enough to let us shake our fists at him and even gives us the language to do so."¹⁵
 - Psalms raise harder objections than anything that ever made *NYT Bestseller* list.
 - And we need to be honest about that.

- It's possible to be too blasé about the truth of the Bible → As if everything in it is easy to believe and immediately accept.
 - That's not what the biblical authors do...
 - They raise their questions, find true solutions, and thus move deeper into faith.
- That's a good model for us...
 - Bible isn't encyclopedia of easy answers.
 - It's a book that invites us to bring our questions/wrestle with our doubts.
 - Xns should ask the hardest questions → Then find the best solutions.
 - And we need to do that.
 - If you just skim along surface, you won't be prepared when trouble comes.
 - When something happens in your life that causes you to doubt, you won't be ready if you haven't lived deeply in this text.
 - Moment of crisis isn't always the best time to learn theology...
 - You need to build a foundation beforehand – inoculate yourself on the frontend – so you're prepared when trouble comes.
 - Ask your questions, find true solutions, move deeper into our faith.

Don't settle for a cheap defense.

3. [All]: Read it

- Never before in history have we had more access to God's Word.
- And never since the invention of the printing press has it been left so unread.
- But what if we did?
 - What if there is a God who reveals himself to us? And what if this God is the God of the gospel – God who loves you and wants you to know him; God who offers grace for eternal life/hope for life today.
 - Don't you want to read about that?!?!?

CLOSE: So, here's my ask...

- If you haven't read the Bible much, let's do so together through this series.
- There are 35 days until this series is done, and in that time let's read the gospel of John.
- Starting tomorrow morning, we'll post a short reading to social media every day at 4am.
 - If you get up earlier than that, you have problems I can't help you with.
 - If you follow along, you'll read through the whole gospel during this series.
 - If you miss a day, don't worry, pick up the next day and carry on.
- Let's read the Bible together:
 - Doing so won't remove all your questions/doubts.
 - YA: *How to Read the Bible* (B214, 11am)
 - All: By time finished John, be time for men's/women's *Summer Study*.
 - But it will usher you into something beautiful.
 - You might find you can trust it.
 - You might find that what you thought of the Bible...

Well maybe THAT *ain't necessarily so.*

RESOURCES AND ENDNOTES

Resources

This list contains some of the resources that were used to prepare this sermon series. Check them out if you want to dig a little deeper.

- F. F. Bruce, *The New Testament Documents: Are They Reliable?*
- T. Keller, *The Reason for God*.
- Logos Bible Software.
- J. McDowell, *More Than a Carpenter* and *A Ready Defense*.
- D. Plotz, *Good Book: The Bizarre, Hilarious, Disturbing, Marvelous, and Inspiring Things I Learned When I Read Every Single Word of the Bible*.
- C. Sanders, *Introduction to Research in English Literary History*.
- L. Strobel, *The Case for Christ*.

Endnotes

¹ See C. Sanders, *Introduction to Research in English Literary History*, 143 ff.

² See, for example, J. McDowell, *More Than a Carpenter*, 41 ff.

³ Table taken from information provided in J. McDowell, *A Ready Defense*, 45.

⁴ J. W. Montgomery, *History and Christianity*, 29.

⁵ T. Keller, *The Reason for God*, 101-102; the rest of this paragraph paraphrases from these same pages.

⁶ Keller, 107.

⁷ Keller, 104.

⁸ Keller, 105.

⁹ L. R. Gottschalk, *Understanding History*, 150.

¹⁰ Josephus mentions the Herods; the Roman emperors Augustus, Tiberius and Claudius; Quirinius, the governor of Syria; Pilate, Felix and Festus; the high priestly families – Annas and Caiaphas; and others.

¹¹ Josephus, *Antiquities* xviii.3.3, quoted in F. F. Bruce, *The New Testament Documents: Are They Reliable?*, 111.

¹² This list comes from Norman Geisler and Frank Turek, quoted in R. Rhodes, *Answering the Objections of Atheists, Agnostics, & Skeptics*, 138.

¹³ Rhodes, p. 130.

¹⁴ Yuval Levin made this comment in my book club on 4/12/23.

¹⁵ Philip Yancey made this comment in my book club on 4/12/23.