

Week 4

The Reliability of the Bible

Key Verses

2 Timothy 3:14-17 - But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it and how from childhood you have been acquainted with the sacred writings, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work. (ESV)

2 Peter 1:21 - For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit. (ESV)

Teachers: Remember this is a resource for you. There is a lot of information here, so please customize as needed for your teaching style and class.

+ Introduction

Can we trust the Bible? Not only for the moral truths it provides but perhaps more importantly, for the historical and textual elements with which it is composed? How do we know that the Bible was not manufactured primarily out of a political or religious agenda but was recorded historically and accurately? How do we know that its composition is, in fact, honest and not engineered? How do we know that it has remained accurate and not manipulated over time? As a modern-yet-ancient text, does it pass the litmus test of historical evidence, textual criticism, and archeology?

The Bible we are holding in our hands today holds many of these questions by virtue of its very existence. It is one book, with many authors, with content spanning over 2500 years. Its first page opens with the creation of the world, and its last page ends with the beginning of the next. If, in fact, the Bible is the Word of God, then it should show signs of reliability in many different ways

when held up to the light of modern scholarship, investigation, and analysis. The question is, how do we answer these questions? And where do we even begin? These are important questions that all Christians must consider, discover, and answer.

If we are ever going to understand the Bible at all, we must first approach it on its own terms, not our own. We must approach it as it claims to be – the Word of God – which is not only morally and existentially helpful, but historically true and textually reliable. The question, “Is the Bible reliable?” is an important question because it forces us to not treat it according to our preference – picking and choosing how we will read it – but according to its own criteria.

The aim of today’s lesson is to discuss certain criteria that point to its historical and textual veracity. To be sure, “The Reliability of the Bible” is a topic that can only be comprehensively and sufficiently covered in a seminary-level, semester-long course. However, today, we will strive to address this big question at a 30,000-foot view, and to discuss its reliability broadly. Our goal is not to be comprehensive or exhaustive; in fact, you will likely have additional questions after this. Our only goal today is to be both adequate and helpful.

First, we will discuss why there is reasonable evidence to believe in the historical and textual reliability of the New Testament. Then we will discuss why there is sufficient reason to trust the textual purity and reliability of the Old Testament. Hopefully, by the end of this lesson, you will have a renewed confidence and a greater understanding of the historical and textual reliability of God’s Word.

+ New Testament Reliability

Have you ever wondered how the Bible came to be? How was it decided that the New Testament is comprised of 27 particular books? Why did those books of the Bible ‘make the cut,’ but others did not? Were the apostles or early church leaders simply picking and choosing the books they did like and did not like or was it more a matter of preference, doctrine, history, authorship, or genre? These are all valid and legitimate questions.

Before we dive into this, let me approach these questions by presenting a hypothetical situation first. For instance, what would happen if tomorrow, an archaeologist or an activist or even an actor—broke the news, claiming they just uncovered the real, original Constitution of the United States of America? (I know, this may sound like the movie, *National Treasure*, but track with me.) Let’s just say this individual claims that the newly discovered, allegedly original Constitution also happens to contradict the Constitution we have in our government today. What would be the response?

For one, the response would be overwhelming. Twitter would erupt. There would be skeptics. There would be conspirators. But regardless of who ‘liked’ or ‘disliked’ the new, allegedly-original-Constitution, the document would nonetheless have to pass several important criteria as a way of determining its authenticity.

Scholars would need to know many details, including, but not limited to, the following: Where was it found? Who is its author? And, how old is this document? They would also want to know if its authorship seems congruent with other documents by the same author.

These questions are litmus tests to ensure the purity and credibility of the text in question. And the same approach is necessary for the New Testament documents as well. In fact, the books that we have today in the Bible are collectively called the 'canon,' which means 'measuring stick,' or 'standard.' These are the books that have 'met the standard' of criteria.¹

So, what are some of the specific criteria that can be applied to determine and ensure the historical and textual reliability of the New Testament? Let's take a look at the Criteria Test and Truth Test.

+ Criteria Test

There were four main criteria of canonicity for the New Testament. Or said another way, four leading indicators proved some books were authoritative while others were not. Let's go through each one briefly, starting with the first: Apostolic Authorship.

1. Apostolic Authorship

One of the most important tests we can conduct to discern a document's reliability is by first asking the question, "Who wrote this document?"

When the church leaders were putting the New Testament together into the 27 books we have today, one of their first qualifications to determine its authenticity and trustworthiness was that it had to be written by an apostle or someone who was very close to an apostle.

Who was an apostle, and why was this an important criterion? An 'apostle' was not just any Christian in Jesus' era. An apostle was someone who was one of Jesus' 12 disciples, or who knew Him closely, and was an eyewitness of what He said and did.

Lifeway Resources provides a helpful commentary on this criterion:

The early Christians essentially asked, "Is this particular work under question the work of one of the apostles?" Or, "If it is not the work of the apostle himself, was it produced under the supervision of and with the stamp of approval of one of the apostles?" Jesus' apostles wrote most of the books in the New Testament. For example, John and Matthew were apostles. Additionally, Paul accounts for roughly half of the books. Luke, who wrote two New Testament books, was not an apostle. The early church, though, generally recognized him as Paul's protégé, advisor, traveling companion, and physician. Or consider the writer of the Gospel of Mark; although Mark was not an apostle, early Christians generally recognized Peter as Mark's historical source. These works thus meet the criterion of apostolicity.²

In other words, if the 'document' or 'letter' or 'book' in question did not have an immediate, personal, and direct tie to an apostle, the document would not be considered trustworthy nor authoritative in the church. As a general rule, the closer the text to an apostle, the more trustworthy the text.

This principle should not be surprising. In a court of law, we give great credence to an eyewitness and their testimony – one of the surest and strongest forms of evidence to authenticate the veracity of something in question. The next criterion, however, reinforces the first.

2. Age

The criterion of apostolic authorship and the criterion of age go hand-in-hand. If a document originated within an apostolic environment, that would mean the age of the document should reflect the same era.

In our modern concept of text, authorship and age go together like a username and a timestamp on a tweet. If a tweet outdates or predates the user, it is probably a counterfeit. Likewise, if a document claims to be written by an apostle, but its timestamp places it well outside of the person's lifetime, it would be a cause for concern regarding its reliability.

Similarly, if a document's authorship is not apostolic in origin or does not originate from their era, it is deemed illegitimate and untrustworthy. If a document originated outside of the generation of Jesus and the apostles – yet, used their autograph – then it simply cannot pass the test of 'age' for historically or textually reliable.

The criterion of **age** ensured that the documents had to be apostolic and therefore, within the generation of Jesus and the apostles. Nearly every book in the New Testament was written before 70 AD, with the exception of some books written around 90 AD, which the Apostle John wrote since he outlived the rest of the apostles.

Perhaps someone may object and say, "Well, that's 50 years after Jesus! No way you could still remember that!" The objection is reasonable but not necessarily substantive. We read history books and biographies without questioning the veracity of their accounts. If we were to pick up the biography of Phil Knight, the Founder, and CEO of Nike, or Steve Jobs – which were written in their own lifetimes – we would not doubt their own testimony, would we? At least by virtue of its own age and timeframe, we should not have doubts as to its inherent historical and textual reliability. The same is true for any book in history, whether about George Washington or Richard Nixon or Napoléon Bonaparte.

However, if someone 200 years after George Washington died, came out and claimed, "I have a story of something George Washington did that no one else knows!" We would have reason to doubt his claim because this person could not have been an eyewitness; he did not live in the same timeframe as George Washington, and therefore, he could not have known something unique about George Washington that George Washington's contemporaries knew of him. This is why the age and timeframe of a document matter as a helpful criterion for determining its reliability.

In many of the Apostle Paul's letters, he references real names of real people who could also attest to his historical claims. One example is in 1 Corinthians 15:

1 CORINTHIANS 15:3-6 *"...Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, 4 that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, 5 and that he appeared to Cephas, and then to the Twelve. 6 After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers and sisters at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep."*

As Paul writes to his contemporaries, he appeals to his message's genuineness because it is specific to a historical event with many present eyewitnesses. The age of a text matters. The further the age of a document from what it claims, the least trustworthy it can be. The closer the age of a document is to the details it claims to be true, the more reliable it can be. For a New Testament book to pass the test of reliability, the age of the document had to place it in the same lifetime of Jesus and the apostles.

3. Orthodoxy

A third important test for determining the veracity of a New Testament document was its sense of orthodoxy. In other words, it is asking the question, "Does the general message of this specific document 'fit' or complement everything else that we have that is proven to be written by an apostle and within a trustworthy timeframe?"

In the earliest ages of the church, we have instances that strongly suggest the notion that the New Testament we have today was considered 'sacred' or 'orthodox' by the church at large from a very early date.

One example is when the Apostle Paul intermixes both Old Testament and New Testament content, quoting Deuteronomy 25:4 alongside a statement of Jesus in Luke 10:7, and calls them *both* 'Scripture' in 1 Timothy 5:18. Paul makes several references of God speaking through him, and people listening to him 'as if he were Christ Jesus himself' (Galatians 4:14; 2 Corinthians 2:17, 13:3). Paul claims divine inspiration in 1 Thessalonians 2:13, which says, "*When you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as a human word, but as it actually is, the word of God, which is indeed at work in you who believe.*"

Furthermore, the Apostle Peter refers to the Apostle Paul's letters as 'Scripture' in 2 Peter 3:16.³ What is interesting is that the apostles were not exactly the best of friends (check Galatians 1), but they nevertheless affirm each other's message. It would be similar to teammates on a football or baseball team. They may not be best of friends, but there is a shared goal and purpose that unites them in ways they can affirm.

Ultimately, in the earliest stages of the church, the same New Testament we have today was the same one the early church already considered authoritative, in the timeframe of the life of Jesus and the apostles and their protégés. If they considered the same documents authoritative that we consider authoritative today, that breaks any objection that certain documents 'became authoritative' and others 'became invalidated' later on.

By applying the orthodoxy criterion, we can determine if a document is considered reliable from the very start or not.

4. Usage

A final criterion that helps determine the veracity and reliability of a document is to see if the early church considered the text authoritative and if it was being **used** by the church in an authoritative way in its earliest settings. And throughout Paul's letters, we do find evidence of such usage (Colossians 4:16; 1 Thessalonians 5:27). Even James wrote his epistles to the twelve tribes

dispersed abroad (James 1:1). These are significant details reminding us that what was being written was recognized as authoritative in the 1st century church.

In the earliest stages of the church, the same New Testament we have today was the same one the early church leaders and members were using as well. They were recognized as authoritative precisely because they were used alongside texts that were already seen as authoritative for hundreds of years (the Old Testament) and used in the same context as these sacred texts.

✦ Formal Authentication of the New Testament

Around 360 AD, approximately 150 years after these texts were in circulation and affirmed, church history shows that false teachers started popping up all over the local churches like weeds. These individuals gave their own stories and convictions and feelings of inspiration, and it presented a crossroads for the early church. Scripture was not 'open' for further contribution because it would not be apostolic, timeframe sensitive, fit early orthodoxy, or align with early usage. The early church wanted to ensure that the message remained reliable, free from being diluted from outside, unreliable perspectives. So in 367 AD, they gathered and formed the Council of Carthage, where they formally ratified and therefore, closed the canon of the New Testament (and the Old Testament, too, but it was already canonized).

To be sure, this motion in 367 AD did not give a new authority to books that did not have authority already. Rather, it accomplished two important things: 1) It formally recognized the authority of the books that did have authority, and 2) It formally denied the veracity and reliability of other books and letters that did not meet the criteria above. This is an important distinction: the canon was not created in 367 AD; it was closed then in order to keep it pure.

A modern example would be an official border around a formally established nation. If a nation builds a physical border around its perimeter, the border does not create the nation; it simply defines its edges more clearly. Similarly, the canon did not create Christian orthodoxy; it simply existed to protect it and define it.

✦ The Truth Test

It takes a good deal for a document to pass the criteria test to be considered trustworthy and reliable. If you apply the criteria of apostolic authorship, age, early orthodoxy, and early usage—you will end up with a handful of documents that 'pass' the test. The New Testament documents that we have today do pass these criteria.

However, that does not mean the documents are true. They can be textually authentic, but how do we know that what was said in history was actually true of history? In other words, how do we know the apostles were telling the truth after all? What if they made it up? What if they had motive for such a report, whether political power or personal fame or influence or money? What if the timestamps are legitimate, but the reporting is not? These are great questions as well, and

this leads to several points of discussion that can further cement the historical reliability of the New Testament.

1. Eyewitness Detail

The New Testament genre is not a myth or legend. Its composition is historical, and it reads as such. In fact, there are over 140 unique details between the gospel accounts and Acts that include details only an eyewitness could know.

For the sake of brevity, the gospel of Mark recounts a story where a naked man runs into the scene and then is gone (Mark 14:51-52). Why is this important? Well, if the Bible was primarily a myth or a moral lesson—such an inclusion would not only be bizarre but completely irrelevant. But the Bible, however, is an eyewitness; details are important to the historical account.

For instance, if you are telling a story to your spouse about your excursion to the mall—and there just so happened to be a streaker during your time there—it does not matter what the point of your story is. The fact of the matter is, you are going to include the fact that you saw a streaker with your own eyes, simply because that is a detail you remember, even if there was no real connection to your story.

Another eyewitness detail in the gospel of John further reveals eyewitness detail. After a long day of fishing and catching no fish, Jesus tells His disciples to cast their nets over the other side of the boat—and once they do so, the text says they haul in “153 large fish” (John 21:11) What is significant about the number 153? Absolutely nothing. It is simply a detail from eyewitness testimony.

If the New Testament were myth or legend, the writers would not have included such detailed reporting, because such detailed reporting does not strengthen its ‘point’ or ‘purpose’ it seeks to convey accuracy and truth.

2. Embarrassing Testimony

Another facet in the New Testament that points to its own historical reliability is that it includes many details that fundamentally deface the credibility of the very people who would have been accused of ‘making the whole thing up.’

For example, if Peter had made up these stories to gain power or influence, then why include the story where Jesus literally calls Peter, “Satan” and where Peter denies knowing Christ three times when a teenage girl asks him? The text also conveys that all the disciples ran away during the arrest of Jesus (Mark 14:50).

And it also communicates that the brave ones at Jesus' death and the first people to see Jesus resurrected were **women**. In a highly patriarchal society, no one would include these details if they were trying to make their story sound convincing. If anything, it would make their story less believable as women were not allowed to “testify” to truth. These stories do not help the apostles' case if they are manufacturing a story that would give them power and influence.

3. Expected Testimony

In addition to indications of reliability inside the New Testament documents themselves, we also have indications in the Old Testament that spoke of things 400 years prior to what the New Testament bears witness. The Old Testament contains over 400 prophecies about the coming Messiah. Jesus Christ perfectly fulfilled every one of them.

Do you know what the odds of that happening are? Think about it: one single man fulfilling every prediction about the coming Messiah, Savior of the world. A professor named Peter Stoner worked with 600 students to figure out what the probability would be of just eight (of the over 400) prophecies being fulfilled in any one person who had lived up to the present time. The result: 1 in 100,000,000,000,000,000.⁴

Lee Strobel, an atheist-turned-Christian, performed some calculations to try to figure out what this would look like in real life. Lee notes:

"I imagined the entire world being covered with white tile that was one-and-a-half inches square – every bit of dry land on the planet – with the bottom of just one tile painted red. Then I pictured a person being allowed to wander for a lifetime around all seven continents. He would be permitted to bend down only one time and pick up a piece of tile. What are the odds it would be the one tile whose reverse side was painted red? The odds would be the same as just eight of the Old Testament prophecies coming true in any one person throughout history!"⁵

4. Extrabiblical Testimony

The historical scholarship includes over ten ancient non-religious, non-Christian sources within a 150-years timespan of Jesus' life. And when you take their messages about Christianity, you get a storyline that is congruent with the eyewitness reporting of the New Testament.⁶

For any other ancient text or document, the surrounding support of 10-plus extra sources for verifiability would be considered substantial, reinforcing a level of veracity beyond reasonable doubt in the scholarly community.

✦ Old Testament Reliability

How can we trust that what we have in the Old Testament today is legitimate and trustworthy as well? The Old Testament composition differs from the composition of the New Testament in many ways, but perhaps the most significant difference is the *timespan* of its composition. While the New Testament was put together in a timespan of about 50 years, the Old Testament was put together from a timespan of approximately 2400 BCE to 400 BCE – from Moses to Malachi.

As a result, it was compiled progressively, not all at once. It was also compiled by people who outlived and outdated others. So, how was it compiled? And how can we be sure that the written tradition was not manipulated over time or changed in various redactions?

✦ How The Old Testament Was Kept Accurate

Fortunately for us, the Old Testament was not compiled over time like the telephone game. It was not primarily oral tradition, but written tradition. It was not done in the context of a whisper between two people; it was transmitted in the context of many who could fact-check it at the same time. And it was not written once and looked over once; a number wrote it of scribes together to ensure little to no mistake.

Back in the Old Testament era, to be a scribe as a Jew meant serious work and scholarship. In the Jewish culture, a scribe was one of the loftiest positions one could hold. The scribal position was lofty, and the scribal process was strict and tedious.

Whenever a Scripture text was being reproduced or copied, it would be looked at by 5-6 different scribes **at the exact same time**. Why? If someone made a mistake, then the rest could hold that person accountable and tell them where they messed up and where they need to correct it. Furthermore, the more copies they produced together, the greater the likelihood that the message would be preserved. If there were only one scroll at a time, then the risk of losing it would be great. Their 'copying' process is similar to how we 'backup' our own files today. The more copies of our hard drive, the better – it gives us great insurance that the files will not be lost. Where there are no backups, however, there is trouble – especially of ever reproducing the same work.

Think of the Old Testament scribes back then like your Time Capsule feature on your Apple Computer today. The scribes functioned like a 'Time Capsule' – their life work was to copy correctly the important documents that quite literally defined the Jews, their culture, and their convictions and beliefs.

✦ Dead Sea Scrolls

If there is any substantial proof of this scribal process over hundreds of years – and the reliability of their ancient process – the Dead Sea Scrolls exist as evidence. The Dead Sea Scrolls might be the most ground-breaking archaeological discovery in the last century. In 1946, a young shepherd boy was throwing rocks into the small caves of Qumran – until he heard a great 'shattering' noise of pots. Intrigued, he hoisted himself into these caves and discovered many clay pots and other vessels that contained and preserved ancient scrolls – many of them dating all the way back to 300-100 BCE.

The discovery hauled in hundreds of Old Testament manuscripts that were still intact and thousands of pieces of manuscripts that have been salvable. Scholars believe that Jews hid their scrolls in Qumran's caves during either the Babylonian or Assyrian exile of the Jews so that they would not be burned in exile and preserved for the future.

However, the big question is how different are the Old Testament manuscripts from 300 BCE to the Old Testament we have today? One of the world's leading textual criticist, Dr. Dan Wallace at

Dallas Theological Seminary, reports a 97.5 – 99.5% accuracy rate, with the difference to sentence structural or misspellings along the way, nothing related to the content or historical reporting.

The Dead Sea Scrolls remain the oldest Old Testament manuscripts recovered to date, and if there is no difference between what we have today and what was present 2300 years ago, we have strong reason to believe that the construction of the Old Testament earlier than that is also just as historically reliable and textually accurate.

+ Who Wrote The Bible, God or Man?

Lastly, perhaps you have heard the claim before, “I cannot believe in the Bible, it was a book written by imperfect men.” It is an objection to the reliability of the Bible rooted not in the fallible nature of God, but in the fallible nature of man. When someone levels this charge, how are we to respond? Was the Bible written by God or man?

The answer is... yes.

The Biblical answer is that it was composed by both, at the same time. This might sound a bit tricky or confusing, so let’s pull from one clarifying passage of Scripture, 2 Peter 1:21.

“For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.”

What does Peter mean by this? It means a couple things that can help us understand how it was composed.

Firstly, it means that Scripture was not dictated by some kind of spiritual possession. What this passage tells us is that God did not possess someone – like a puppet or like a robot and their hand started inscribing text. “Carried along by the Holy Spirit” communicates human autonomy, not possession. But secondly, the phrase “[not] by the will of man...” is equally important as well. It means that man was not primarily responsible. It was not in their capacity. The picture is one of a tandem, dynamic relationship. There are only a couple of examples in the Old Testament when God told a prophet to write something down verbatim; also, the original 10 Commandments were said to be written by the very finger of God on the tablets.

But other than those two situations, the vast majority of Scripture was composed by God working through different people to write down what He wanted them to write down.

This means you can see the person’s personality, talent, level of education, writing style, and communication all intact. And that is why there are different voices, styles, structures, and even perspectives in the Bible – because there are different authors, all carried along by the Holy Spirit.

+ Extra Sources

John Piper, <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/how-can-you-know-the-bible-is-true>

Michael J Kruger, <https://www.michaeljkruger.com/why-i-dont-prefer-the-phrase-criteria-of-canoncity/>.

Lifeway, <https://www.lifeway.com/en/articles/bible-study-establishing-new-testament-canon>.

¹ Lifeway, *Establishing the New Testament Canon*, <https://www.lifeway.com/en/articles/bible-study-establishing-new-testament-canon>.

² Ibid.

³ All of these examples come from *Advent Thru The Eras: Joy, Hope, Faith and Love: "God-Breathed and Useful: Why We Can Trust the Scriptures."* December 29-30, 2018.

⁴ Peter Stoner, *Science Speaks*, (Chicago, Moody Press, 1963), p. 109.

⁵ Lee Strobel, *Inside the Mind of Unchurched Harry and Mary*, (Grand Rapids, Zondervan, 1993), pp. 36-37. ⁶ Dr. Frank Turek, <https://www.facebook.com/drfrankturek/videos/1569651076429703/>.