

IS THE BIBLE RELIABLE?

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Introduction

This brief paper considers the issue of the reliability of the Bible. It begins by chronicling the trajectory that led to the compilation of the 66 books of the current canon of the Bible. While the original books are not extant (in existence), the discipline of textual criticism employs criteria such as the number of copies in existence, closeness to the original and internal/external evidence in determining the reliability of ancient documents. Furthermore, the paper offers a tentative definition of the phrase “historically reliable” and considers this in light of the history of the canon of the Bible.

The canon of the Bible

By canon, we mean the list of books considered authoritative and inspired by God. According to Geisler and Nix (1968), the selection was guided by five criteria: is it authoritative? Is it prophetic? Is it authentic? Is it dynamic (evidence of transformative power)? Finally, the degree to which it was received, accepted and circulated was vital – for instance, Peter acknowledges the writings of Paul in II Peter 3:16).

Internal evidence suggests that writers such as Moses, various prophets, kings (e.g. Solomon) and scribes, such as Ezra, wrote the Old Testament (Ex 40:20; I Kings 8:9; Neh 8:8). With time, various attempts were made to chronicle a canon of the Old Testament – some containing the Law alone, while others featured the entire canon. The Septuagint was a translation of the Old Testament into Greek between 250-150 B.C. The Pharaoh of Egypt, Ptolemy Philadelphus, wanted to add a copy to his famous Library of Alexandria and commissioned Jewish scholars from Israel to undertake the work in Egypt. It was this translation that the Lord and his Apostles used (Orr, 1986). Other canons, such as the Samaritan Pentateuch contained the Law alone and has been dated to about 122 B.C. The Masoretic text is considered the standard Hebrew text today. Masorete comes from the word “tradition” and encompasses a period of 400 years (A, D. 500 -900) during which time these scribes meticulously edited and standardized the Hebrew Bible. The eminent Bible scholar, Sir Fredric Kenyon, attests to their discipline and rigor in stating:

They numbered the verses, words and the middle letter of each. They enumerated verses which contained all the letters of the alphabet, or a certain number of them; and so on ... The Massoretes were indeed anxious that not one jot or tittle, not one

smallest letter nor one tiny part of a letter, of the Law should pass away or be lost (Kenyon, 1941).

In 1947, the Dead Sea Scrolls were discovered in Israel and contained 40,000 inscribed fragments. These manuscripts predated the Masoretic Text by one thousand years and would serve to answer the question, how reliable is the biblical translation we have today compared to texts a thousand years ago? Taking Isaiah chapter 53 as a case in point, Geisler and Norman (1968) write that only one word (three letters) of 166 is different, but this difference has no impact on the meaning, which is highly significant after a gap of one thousand years. This no doubt is a testimony to the high standards of transmission.

The earliest record we have for the canon of the New Testament is what is referred to as Athanasius' Easter Letter of 367 A.D. when the Eastern church listed the twenty-seven books we have today. A few years later, the Western church did the same at the Council or Synod of Hippo (A.D. 393). This was later confirmed in another Council in Carthage (A.D. 397). Both cities were in North Africa and the former may have been attended by the famed church father Augustine. This by no means implies that the canon of the New Testament was unknown before this date. The four Gospels were well established by this time, and the churches circulated the letters of the Apostle Paul. A break-up of the translations of the earliest manuscripts of the New Testament is as follows: 5,300 in Greek, 10,000 in Latin and about 9,300 in other languages (e.g. Syrian, Ethiopian, Slavic, Armenian etc.).

In comparison, the *Iliad* by Homer is second with only 643 manuscripts that still survive. The table below is from Josh McDowell's *Evidence that Demands a Verdict* (1979), and demonstrates how "no other document of antiquity even begins to approach such numbers and attestation" (McDowell, 1979, p. 39).

Work	When written	Earliest copy	Time span	No. Of copies
Homer (Iliad)	900 B.C.	400 B.C.	500 years	643
New Testament	40-100 A.D.	125 A.D.	25 years	Over 24,000

In the late fourth century, a Latin translation of the Bible, the Latin Vulgate was introduced. Later, in the 16th century, the Dutch scholar used the Latin Vulgate and other Greek manuscripts to write the *Textus Receptus* – a new, complete translation of the New Testament into Greek. The translators of the King James Version (1611), the most cherished translation in the English-speaking world until World War I, relied on the *Textus Receptus*

(Daniell, 2003, p. 509). The next segment will consider the issues related to reliability, inerrancy and inspiration.

Reliability and inspiration

As we have seen, there is no doubt that the Bible was painstakingly copied and transmitted by individuals who believed it to be the definitive word of God. Does this mean, however, that there were no errors in this process? That would be inaccurate. Humans are fallible and there are errors such as spellings, divergent words in some areas in translations and other typos (Schäfer & Omanson (2011)). Keep in mind that copyists made over 24,000 copies of the New Testament books by hand before the Guttenberg's printing press in the 15th century. If we understand the term "historical reliability" as a text that "provides an accurate gist or an essentially faithful representation of what occurred" (Licona, 2019, p. 148), then there is no doubt that the Bible is reliable. Licona (2019) uses four criteria to compare the historical reliability of the Gospel of Mark and the ancient historian Suetonius's celebrated *Life of Augustus*. He concludes that the Gospel of Mark is more reliable than Suetonius's great biography. In addition, the eminent biblical scholar, F. F. Bruce concludes that, "The variant readings about which any doubt remains among textual critics of the New Testament affect no material question of historic fact or Christian faith and practice" (In Dowley, p. 133). In summary, the sheer scale of translations obviously throws up some variant readings and typos, but none of these in any way impact upon the doctrinal or historical underpinnings of Christianity. Hence, we can safely assume to be in possession of the Word of God as reliable witnesses handed it down to us. The proclamations of Jesus below should further reinforce our confidence in the reliability of the Bible:

Matthew 5:18: For verily I say unto you, Till heaven and earth pass, one jot or one tittle shall in no wise pass from the law, till all be fulfilled.

Matthew 24:14 And this gospel of the kingdom shall be preached in all the world for a witness unto all nations; and then shall the end come.

John 5:46 For had ye believed Moses, ye would have believed me: for he wrote of me.

It stands to reason that Christians must believe the Bible they hold in their hands today has been divinely preserved by the Lord Jesus, as he intimates in Matthew 24:14. In mentioning Moses as the author of the Law, Jesus further lends credence to the Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch. Hence, while we have seen that the process of handing down the Bible has in no way diluted or corrupted God's Word, it would be more salient to approach the Scriptures as

the inspired Word of God. That which is “breathed” upon by God would no doubt demonstrate unique and extraordinary qualities. The miraculous preservation of the Bible throughout the centuries in the face of immense hostility, the widespread reception of the Bible in every continent and among the most heterogeneous of tribes and nations, and the claims of changed lives for the better, are some arguments that weigh heavily in favor of the divine inspiration of the Bible.

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