



How Accurate Is the Bible?

by Kenneth Boa, Ph.D., D.Phil.
President, Reflections Ministries

This article originally appeared in the Winter 2009 issue of *Knowing & Doing*.

“You’re always quoting the Bible to me as if it were the last word on issues about life. How can you base your life on a book that’s so full of contradictions and errors? Historians and scientists have long since proven that the Bible is inaccurate and unreliable.”

Many people are of the opinion that the teachings of the Bible are outdated, contradictory, and full of scientific and historical errors. With few exceptions, they have reached these conclusions through second- and third-hand sources rather than their own study of the Bible. Consider the following statements:

- The Bible says that God helps those who help themselves.
- The books of the New Testament were written centuries after the events they describe.
- “Cleanliness is next to godliness” is in the Bible.
- According to the Bible, the earth is flat.
- The earliest New Testament manuscripts go back only to the fourth or fifth centuries A.D.
- The Bible teaches that the earth is the center of the universe.
- The English Bible is a translation of a translation of a translation (etc.) of the original, and fresh errors were introduced in each stage of the process.

How many of these statements do you think are true? The answer is that all of them are false. Yet these false impressions persist in the minds of many, and misinformation like this produces a skeptical attitude toward the Bible.

In this article, we will consider a number of objections to the accuracy and reliability of the Bible to help you make a more informed decision as to whether or not it is authoritative.

“How can you be sure that the Bible is the same now as when it was written? The Bible has been copied and translated so many times! Haven’t you ever played the game where people sit in a circle and pass a sentence from one person to the next until it comes back around in a completely distorted version? If that could happen in a room in just a few minutes, think of all the errors and changes that must have filled the Bible in the centuries since it was first written!”



Ken Boa

There are three lines of evidence that support the claim that the biblical documents are reliable: the bibliographic test, the internal test, and the external test. The first test examines the biblical manuscripts, the second deals with the claims made by the biblical authors, and the third looks to outside confirmation of the biblical content.

The Bibliographic Test

1. *The Quantity of Manuscripts*

In the case of the Old Testament, there is a small number of Hebrew manuscripts, because Jewish scribes ceremonially buried imperfect and worn manuscripts. Many ancient manuscripts were lost or destroyed during Israel’s turbulent history. Also, the Old Testament text was standardized by the Masoretic Jews by the sixth century A.D., and all manuscripts that deviated from the Masoretic Text were eliminated. But the existing Hebrew manuscripts are supplemented by the Dead Sea Scrolls, the Septuagint (a third-century B.C.

Greek translation of the Old Testament), the Samaritan Pentateuch, and the Targums (ancient paraphrases of the Old Testament), as well as the Talmud (teachings and commentaries related to the Hebrew Scriptures).

The quantity of New Testament manuscripts is unparalleled in ancient literature. There are over 5,000 Greek manuscripts, 8,000 Latin manuscripts, and another 1,000 manuscripts in other languages (Syriac, Coptic, etc.). In addition to this extraordinary number, there are tens of thousands of citations of New Testament passages by the early church fathers. In contrast, the typical number of existing manuscript copies for any of the works of the Greek and Latin authors, such as Plato, Aristotle, Caesar, or Tacitus, ranges from one to 20.

2. *The Quality of Manuscripts*

Because of the great reverence the Jewish scribes held toward the Scriptures, they exercised extreme care in making new copies of the Hebrew Bible. The entire scribal process was specified in meticulous detail to minimize the possibility of even the slightest error. The letters, words, and lines were counted, and the middle letters of the Pentateuch and the Old Testament were determined. If a single mistake was discovered, the entire manuscript was destroyed.

As a result of this extreme care, the quality of the manuscripts of the Hebrew Bible surpasses all other ancient manuscripts. The 1947 discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls provided a significant check, because these Hebrew scrolls antedate the earliest Masoretic Old Testament manuscripts by about 1,000 years. But in spite of this time span, the number of variant readings between the Dead Sea Scrolls and the Masoretic Text is quite small, and most of these are variations in spelling and style.

While the quality of the Old Testament manuscripts is excellent, that of the New Testament is very good—considerably better than the manuscript quality of other ancient documents. Because of the thousands of New Testament manuscripts, there are many variant readings, but these variants are actually used by scholars to reconstruct the original readings by determining which variant best explains the others in any given passage. Some of these variant readings crept into the manuscripts because of visual errors in copying or because of auditory errors when a group of scribes copied manuscripts that were read aloud. Other errors resulted from faulty writing, memory, and judgment, and still others from well-meaning scribes who thought they were correcting the text. Nevertheless, only a small number of

these differences affect the sense of the passages, and only a fraction of these have any real consequences. Furthermore, no variant readings are significant enough to call into question any of the doctrines of the New Testament. The New Testament can be regarded as 99.5 percent pure, and the correct readings for the remaining 0.5 percent can often be ascertained with a fair degree of probability by the practice of textual criticism.

3. *The Time Span of Manuscripts*

Apart from some fragments, the earliest Masoretic manuscript of the Old Testament is dated at A.D. 895, due to the systematic destruction of worn manuscripts by the Masoretic scribes. However, the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls dating from 200 B.C. to A.D. 68 drastically reduced the time span from the writing of the Old Testament books to our earliest copies of them.

The time span of the New Testament manuscripts is exceptional. The manuscripts on papyrus came from the second and third centuries A.D. The John Rylands Fragment (P52) of the Gospel of John is dated at A.D. 117-38, only a few decades after the Gospel was written. The Bodmer Papyri are dated from A.D. 175-225, and the Chester Beatty Papyri date from about A.D. 250. The time span for most of the New Testament is less than 200 years (and some are within 100 years) from the date of authorship to the date of our earliest manuscripts. This sharply contrasts with the average gap of over 1,000 years between the composition and the earliest copy of the writings of other ancient authors.

To summarize the bibliographic test, the Old and New Testaments enjoy far greater manuscript attestation in terms of quantity, quality, and time span than any other ancient documents. It is especially interesting to make specific comparisons between the New Testament and other writings.

The Internal Test

The second test of the reliability of the biblical documents asks, "What claims does the Bible make about itself?" This may appear to be circular reasoning. It sounds like we are using the testimony of the Bible to prove that the Bible is true. But we are really examining the truth claims of the various authors of the Bible and allowing them to speak for themselves. (Remember that the Bible is not one book but many books woven together.) This provides significant evidence that must not be ignored.

A number of biblical authors claim that their accounts are primary, not secondary. That is, the bulk

of the Bible was written by people who were eyewitnesses of the events they recorded. John wrote in his Gospel, "And he who has seen has borne witness, and his witness is true; and he knows that he is telling the truth, so that you also may believe" (John 19:35; see 21:24). In his first epistle, John wrote, "What was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we beheld and our hands handled concerning the Word of life . . . what we have seen and heard we proclaim to you also" (1 John 1:1, 3). Peter makes the same point abundantly clear: "For we did not follow cleverly devised tales when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of His majesty" (2 Peter 1:16; also see Acts 2:22; 1 Peter 5:1).

The independent eyewitness accounts in the New Testament of the life, death, and resurrection of Christ were written by people who were intimately acquainted with Jesus Christ. Their gospels and epistles reveal their integrity and complete commitment to the truth, and they maintained their testimony even through persecution and martyrdom. All the evidence inside and outside the New Testament runs contrary to the claim made by form criticism that the early church distorted the life and teachings of Christ. Most of the New Testament was written between A.D. 47 and 70, and all of it was complete before the end of the first century. There simply was not enough time for myths about Christ to be created and propagated. And the multitudes of eyewitnesses who were alive when the New Testament books began to be circulated would have challenged blatant historical fabrications about the life of Christ. The Bible places great stress on accurate historical details, and this is especially obvious in the Gospel of Luke and the Book of Acts, Luke's two-part masterpiece (see his prologue in Luke 1:1-4).

The External Test

Because the Scriptures continually refer to historical events, they are verifiable; their accuracy can be checked by external evidence. The chronological details in the prologue to Jeremiah (1:1-3) and in Luke 3:1-2 illustrate this. Ezekiel 1:2 allows us to date Ezekiel's first vision of God to the day (July 31, 592 B.C.).

The historicity of Jesus Christ is well-established by early Roman, Greek, and Jewish sources, and these extrabiblical writings affirm the major details of the New Testament portrait of the Lord. The first-century Jewish historian Flavius Josephus made specific references to John the Baptist, Jesus Christ, and James in his

Antiquities of the Jews. In this work, Josephus gives us many background details about the Herods, the Sadducees and Pharisees, the high priests like Annas and Caiaphas, and the Roman emperors mentioned in the gospels and Acts.

We find another early secular reference to Jesus in a letter written a little after A.D. 73 by an imprisoned Syrian named Mara Bar-Serapion. This letter to his son compares the deaths of Socrates, Pythagoras, and Christ. Other first- and second-century writers who mention Christ include the Roman historians Cornelius Tacitus (*Annals*) and Suetonius (*Life of Claudius, Lives of the Caesars*), the Roman governor Pliny the Younger (*Epistles*), and the Greek satirist Lucian (*On the Death of Peregrine*). Jesus is also mentioned a number of times in the Jewish Talmud.

The Old and New Testaments make abundant references to nations, kings, battles, cities, mountains, rivers, buildings, treaties, customs, economics, politics, dates, etc. Because the historical narratives of the Bible are so specific, many of its details are open to archaeological investigation. While we cannot say that archaeology proves the authority of the Bible, it is fair to say that archaeological evidence has provided external confirmation of hundreds of biblical statements. Higher criticism in the 19th century made many damaging claims that would completely overthrow the integrity of the Bible, but the explosion of archaeological knowledge in the 20th century reversed almost all of these claims. Noted archaeologists such as William F. Albright, Nelson Glueck, and G. Ernest Wright developed a great respect for the historical accuracy of the Scriptures as a result of their work.

Out of the multitude of archaeological discoveries related to the Bible, consider a few examples to illustrate the remarkable external substantiation of biblical claims. Excavations at Nuzi (1925-41), Mari (discovered in 1933), and Alalakh (1937-39; 1946-49) provide helpful background information that fits well with the Genesis stories of the patriarchal period. The Nuzi tablets and Mari letters illustrate the patriarchal customs in great detail, and the Ras Shamra tablets discovered in ancient Ugarit in Syria shed much light on Hebrew prose and poetry and Canaanite culture. The Ebla tablets discovered recently in northern Syria also affirm the antiquity and accuracy of the Book of Genesis.

Some scholars once claimed that the Mosaic Law could not have been written by Moses, because writing was largely unknown at that time and because the law code of the Pentateuch was too sophisticated for that period. But the codified Laws of Hammurabi

(ca. 1700 B.C.), the Lipit-Ishtar code (ca. 1860 B.C.), the Laws of Eshnunna (ca. 1950 B.C.), and the even earlier Ur-Nammu code have refuted these claims.

Much more could be said about the reliability of the Bible. Hopefully, this article gives you a sense of some of the responses which can be made the questions of skeptics. For more, consult some of the many excellent books on this topic.

Ken Boa is president of Reflections Ministries, an organization that seeks to encourage, teach, and equip people to know Christ, follow Him, become progressively conformed to His image, and reproduce His life in others. He is also President of Trinity House Publishers.

© 2009 C.S. LEWIS INSTITUTE
8001 Braddock Road, Suite 300 • Springfield, VA 22151
703/914-5602
www.cslewisinstitute.org

C·S· LEWIS INSTITUTE
Discipleship of Heart and Mind

◆ ◆ ◆
*In the legacy of C.S. Lewis,
the Institute endeavors to develop disciples who can
articulate, defend, and live faith in Christ
through personal and public life.*

◆ ◆ ◆