

## Special Section: Reasons We Believe

### Is The Bible Reliable?

By Bob and Gretchen Passantino



Illustration © Jimmy Abegg 1997

Doubts about the Bible include how it is translated, what the writers meant, how the text was preserved, how books were included or excluded, and its truthfulness. Each of these topics is complex, but there is ample evidence to affirm the Bible's complete reliability.

#### **Bible Translations**

Reputable Bible translations are produced by careful scholarship in textual criticism, linguistics, translation, grammar, vocabulary, style, and history. Various texts of the original language Testaments (Hebrew and Aramaic of the Old Testament and Greek of the New Testament) are published and generally available, along with documented accounts of how the texts were derived from existing copies over time.

The published texts of the biblical books are derived from comparing the contents of the thousands of hand-copied ancient manuscripts, manuscript portions, and fragments to each other, and from analyzing the copies grammatically and linguistically. Through textual comparison and analysis, we can determine with almost complete certainty the reliability of close to 98 percent of the original New Testament text, and only slightly less certainty the accuracy of Old Testament text. The few questions of wording, spelling, and numbers do not compromise any essential teaching or doctrine of the Bible.

Linguistic scholars work together, ensuring that the original languages are understood and translated accurately into the receptor language. Grammarians and specialists in vocabulary, style, and history are consulted as well.

Whether you prefer the literary beauty of the *New King James Version*, the complexities of

the *New American Standard Bible*, the concise clarity of the *New International Version*, or some other reputable translation, the text of the Bible we have today is essentially what was written.

## How We Got Our Bible

The Bible is a collection of 66 books composed under inspiration of the Holy Spirit by many authors over almost 1,500 years. Authors include adopted Egyptian nobility (Moses), a shepherd (David), a Babylonian official (Daniel), a tax collector (Matthew), a doctor (Luke), a philosopher/rabbi (Paul), and a fisherman (Peter). The Bible includes poetry, history, government records, prophecy, dialogue, parables, sermons, letters, and religious instructions.

Despite this diversity and complexity of the sources, the Bible contains no contradictions, and is widely supported by history, archaeology, science, and philosophy.

When someone claims that the Bible contains contradictions, he is claiming that the Bible both affirms and denies the same thing under the same conditions. While more than 2,000 “discrepancies” have been attributed to the Scriptures over the centuries, none has proven to be a contradiction. For example, some assert that the gospel accounts of the resurrection are contradictory because one gospel mentions two angels at the empty tomb (John 20:12–13), and another gospel mentions only one angel (Matthew 28:1–8). However, while the accounts vary, they do not contradict. Matthew’s account does not say that there was one angel and only one angel, nor does he say that the angel’s appearance to Mary Magdalene and “the other Mary” was the same occasion described by John. In fact, if the two accounts record the same event, then the one account that cites two angels, is, at the same time, citing at least one angel. Neither account contradicts the other.

When someone claims that the Bible contradicts science, history, or archaeology, he is actually misstating the case. The Bible contradicts many presuppositions, interpretations, and assumptions that skeptics draw from the facts of science and history, or from the artifacts of archaeology, but it has never been proved to contradict the facts themselves.

For example, no one disputes that all animals share certain characteristics and are similar to each other in many ways. However, proponents of evolution interpret these facts to mean that animal life evolved from common ancestors. Christians, however, interpret the same facts as evidence that one intelligent Creator (God) created all animals. The Bible contradicts the evolutionary *interpretation* of the facts, but not the facts themselves.

As the books of the Bible were composed, they were recognized by God’s people (first the Jews regarding the Old Testament, then the Christians, who also recognized the New Testament books) as God’s Word. The books were tested according to the following principles:

1. The book must be written by a person of God (e.g., a prophet, an apostle, a trusted associate of an apostle, etc.).
2. The writer and writings must be confirmed by facts and the acts of God.
3. The book must come with the power of God. Application produces godly transformation in believers’ lives (2 Tim. 3:16–17; Hebrews 4:12, etc.).
4. The book must be accepted by the people of God initially (see Peter call Paul’s words “Scriptures” in 2 Peter 3:15–16) and over time (before the second half of the 2nd century all of the main churches in the Roman empire accepted at least the four gospels, the Acts of the Apostles, and Paul’s writings as Scripture).

At the beginning of the 4th century the Christian churches generally agreed on which books composed the Bible and which books were excluded. This was the earliest time such a question had general significance. Emperor Diocletian Galerius decreed that Christians were to be persecuted and their Scriptures burned. It was a matter of life and death to determine which

books one would risk martyrdom for. By the end of the 4th century the Bible as we know it was formally recognized by all Christian churches. It is important to note that the church recognized the Scriptures, it did not determine or make up Scriptures.

For many centuries the texts of the Old and New Testament books were copied by hand. Professional copyists, or scribes, were meticulous, skilled workers. Convinced they were copying God's Word, they could not alter it in any way. The remarkable preservation of the original texts is traced by comparing our earliest copies of books or portions of books with those of later centuries. Our oldest copies of Old Testament writings are from before the time of Christ, and our oldest copies of New Testament writings date to before A.D. 70. In addition, we have citations by other authors, collections of scriptures used in church services, and versions in other languages. Critics point to the absence of the originals to discount the Bible, but biblical scholars like F. F. Bruce note, "There is no body of ancient literature in the world which enjoys such a wealth of good textual attestation as the New Testament." Slight variations among copies do not obscure the original, Bruce continues. "The wealth of attestation is such that the true reading is almost bound to be preserved by at least one of the thousands of witnesses." And although the copies of the Old Testament are fewer, their unique copying standards "give us ground for greater confidence than might be supposed," confirming "that no serious changes were introduced into the text of the Old Testament" through the centuries.



Illustration © Jimmy Abegg 1997

## Does the Bible tell the truth?

Most disputes about the truthfulness of the Bible can be grouped into three categories: (1) misunderstandings; (2) ignorance of the facts concerning the trustworthiness of the Bible; (3) dislike of its teachings.

Most misunderstandings fall in the area of interpretation. Interpretive problems range from misunderstanding the type of literature in a passage (confusing poetry with historical narrative, for example), through vocabulary, to confusing time and circumstance differences between two events. A good book for further information is Walter C. Kaiser and Moises Silva's *An Introduction to Biblical Hermeneutics: A Search for Meaning*.

Some say they distrust the Bible when they really mean they don't like or agree with it. However, the Bible has more supporting its truthfulness than does any critic.

### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR:**

BOB AND GRETCHEN PASSANTINO have spent 23 years ministering in the areas of apologetics, evangelism, and discipleship through their organization *Answers in Action*.

# Is the Bible reliable?

by Bob and Gretch



**DOUBTS** ABOUT THE BIBLE INCLUDE HOW IT IS TRANSLATED, WHAT THE WRITERS MEANT, HOW THE TEXT WAS PRESERVED, HOW BOOKS WERE INCLUDED OR EXCLUDED, AND ITS TRUTHFULNESS. EACH OF THESE TOPICS IS COMPLEX, BUT THERE IS AMPLE EVIDENCE TO AFFIRM THE BIBLE'S COMPLETE RELIABILITY.

## Bible Translations

REPUTABLE BIBLE TRANSLATIONS ARE PRODUCED BY CAREFUL SCHOLARSHIP IN TEXTUAL CRITICISM, LINGUISTICS, TRANSLATION, GRAMMAR, VOCABULARY, STYLE, AND HISTORY. VARIOUS TEXTS OF THE ORIGINAL LANGUAGE TESTAMENTS (HEBREW AND ARAMAIC OF THE OLD TESTAMENT AND GREEK OF THE NEW TESTAMENT) ARE PUBLISHED AND GENERALLY AVAILABLE, ALONG WITH DOCUMENTED ACCOUNTS OF HOW THE TEXTS WERE DERIVED FROM EXISTING COPIES OVER TIME.

The published texts of the biblical books are derived from comparing the contents of the thousands of hand-copied ancient manuscripts, manuscript portions, and fragments to each other, and from analyzing the copies grammatically and linguistically. Through textual comparison and analysis, we can determine with almost complete certainty the reliability of close to 98 percent of the original New Testament text, and only slightly less certainty the accuracy of Old Testament text. The few questions of wording, spelling, and numbers do not compromise any essential teaching or doctrine of the Bible.

Linguistic scholars work together, ensuring that the original languages are understood and translated accurately into the receptor language. Gram-marians and specialists in vocabulary, style, and history are consulted as well.

Whether you prefer the literary beauty of the *New King James Version*, the complexities of the *New American Standard Bible*, the concise clarity of the *New International Version*, or some other reputable translation, the text of the Bible we have today is essentially what was written.

## How We Got Our Bible

The Bible is a collection of 66 books composed under inspiration of the Holy Spirit by many authors over almost 1,500 years. Authors include adopted Egyptian nobility (Moses), a shepherd

(David), a Babylonian official (Daniel), a tax collector (Matthew), a doctor (Luke), a philosopher/rabbi (Paul), and a fisherman (Peter). The Bible includes poetry, history, government records, prophecy, dialogue, parables, sermons, letters, and religious instructions.

Despite this diversity and complexity of the sources, the Bible contains no contradictions, and is widely supported by history, archaeology, science, and philosophy.

When someone claims that the Bible contains contradictions, he is claiming that the Bible both affirms and denies the same thing under the same conditions. While more than 2,000 "discrepancies" have been attributed to the Scriptures over the centuries, none has proven to be a contradiction. For example, some assert that the gospel accounts of the resurrection are contradictory because one gospel mentions two angels at the empty tomb (Jn. 20:12-13), and another gospel mentions only one angel (Mt. 28:1-8). However, while the accounts vary, they do not contradict. Matthew's account does not say that there was one angel and only one angel, nor does he say that the angel's appearance to Mary Magdalene and "the other Mary" was the same occasion described by John. In fact, if the two accounts record the same event, then the one account that cites two angels, is, at the same time, citing at least one angel. Neither account contradicts the other.

When someone claims that the Bible contradicts science, history, or archaeology, he is actually misstating the case. The Bible contradicts many presuppositions, interpretations, and assumptions that skeptics *draw from* the facts of science and history, or from the artifacts of archaeology, but it has never been proved to contradict the facts themselves.

For example, no one disputes that all animals share certain characteristics and are similar to each other in many ways. However, proponents of evolution interpret these facts to mean that animal life evolved from common ancestors. Christians, however, interpret the same facts as evidence that one intelligent Creator (God) created all animals. The Bible contradicts the evolutionary *interpretation* of the facts, but not the facts themselves.

As the books of the Bible were composed, they were recognized by God's people (first the Jews regarding the Old Testament, then the Christians, who also recognized the New Testament books) as God's Word. The books were tested according to the following principles:

1. The book must be written by a person of God (e.g., a prophet, an apostle, a trusted associate of an apostle, etc.).
2. The writer and writings must be confirmed by facts and the acts of God.
3. The book must come with the power of God. Application produces godly transformation in believers' lives (2 Tim. 3:16-17, Heb. 4:12, etc.).
4. The book must be accepted by the people of God initially (see Peter call Paul's words "Scriptures" in 2 Pet. 3:15-16) and over time (before the second half of the 2nd century all of the main churches in the Roman empire accepted at least the four gospels, the Acts of the Apostles, and Paul's writings as Scripture).

At the beginning of the 4th century the Christian churches generally agreed on



which books composed the Bible and which books were excluded. This was the earliest time such a question had general significance. Emperor Diocletian Galerius decreed that Christians were to be persecuted and their Scriptures burned. It was a matter of life and death to determine which books one would risk martyrdom for. By the end of the 4th century the Bible as we know it was formally recognized by all Christian churches. It is important to note that the church recognized the Scriptures, it did not determine or make up Scriptures.

For many centuries the texts of the Old and New Testament books were copied by hand. Professional copyists, or scribes, were meticulous, skilled workers. Convinced they were copying God's Word, they could not alter it in any way. The remarkable preservation of the original texts is traced by comparing our earliest copies of books or portions of books with those of later centuries. Our oldest copies of Old Testament writings are from before the time of Christ, and our oldest copies of New Testament writings date to before A.D. 70. In addition, we have citations by other authors, collections of scriptures used in church services, and versions in other languages. Critics point to the absence of the originals to discount the Bible, but biblical scholars like F. F. Bruce note, "There is no body of ancient literature in the world which enjoys such a wealth of good textual attestation

as the New Testament." Slight variations among copies do not obscure the original, Bruce continues. "The wealth of attestation is such that the true reading is almost bound to be preserved by at least one of the thousands of witnesses." And although the copies of the Old Testament are fewer, their unique copying standards "give us ground for greater confidence than might be supposed," confirming "that no serious changes were introduced into the text of the Old Testament" through the centuries.

### Does the Bible tell the truth?

Most disputes about the truthfulness of the Bible can be grouped into three categories: (1) misunderstandings; (2) ignorance of the facts concerning the trustworthiness of the Bible; (3) dislike of its teachings.

Most misunderstandings fall in the area of interpretation. Interpretive problems range from misunderstanding the type of literature in a passage (confusing poetry with historical narrative, for example), through vocabulary, to confusing time and circumstance differences between two events. A good book for further information is Walter C. Kaiser and Moises Silva's *An Introduction to Biblical Hermeneutics: A Search for Meaning*.

Some say they distrust the Bible when they really mean they don't like or agree with it. However, the Bible has more supporting its truthfulness than does any critic. ♦