

Is there a book with more opinions about it than the Bible? For instance, the Bible is the best selling book of all-time, having sold around 4 billion copies over the years.ⁱ However, it is also the most stolen book of all time!ⁱⁱ I think we all know that “Thou shall not steal” doesn’t mean anything to thieves, but including stealing the Bible? That’s just nuts. Christians hold the Bible up as God’s word, while others have sought to burn Bibles. Christians see the Bible as authoritative for living – even if they aren’t perfect at living it all out – while others see the Bible as completely irrelevant, and not worth paying attention to. So, the Bible is one book that pretty much everyone has an opinion on, and the opinions vary wildly.

If we were to sum up what Christians believe about the Bible, it would be something along these lines, **“I believe the Bible is the Word of God and has the right to command my belief and action.”** As a result, the Bible shapes our understanding of who God is what His character is, and what he does in our lives – all of which are topics we’ve looked at the last three Sundays. And so what a person believes about the Bible – whether they take it seriously and believe it, or dismiss it – has a HUGE impact on what they believe about God.

And so the question I really want to try and help us answer today is this: **Is the Bible trustworthy? Is it believable?** For anyone who wants to take the Christian faith seriously – whether that’s a skeptic who questions if God even exists and wants to give Jesus a fair shake, or whether that’s a life-long Christian who is deeply committed to Jesus – this question of the reliability of Scripture is a necessary one to answer with confidence and continually maintain confidence in it.

This morning’s passage gives us a great example of why the question of its reliability is so important. We read in verse 14, “But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of, because you know those from whom you learned it, and how from infancy you have known the holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus.” Right here we have a very high view of Scripture that tells us that through knowing it, we are made “wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus.” Hebrews 4:12 says that Scripture is “sharper than a two edged sword...and judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart.” These are the roles that Scripture plays in our faith. And so it’s important to know if it really is reliable.

The place to begin this quest on the reliability of Scripture is in the New Testament, and in particular the life of Jesus as recorded in the Gospels. **Let’s begin by looking at the Gospels as biographies...**As records of history that focus in on Jesus. Because when

the gospels were written, none of the authors expected that what they were writing would one day be included with Genesis and Psalms and all the rest of the Scriptures they knew. They were simply writing to record the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ (Luke specifically addresses is biographical account to his friend Theophilus). Yes, the writers were inspired by God's Spirit as were the rest of the authors of Scripture, but that doesn't mean the authors were in some unconscious trance and that their minds weren't engaged as they wrote. They had a goal of recording the life of Jesus to share with others.

So some people will argue that the Gospels aren't reliable records of history because the authors were biased. They had an agenda. They were telling history to make a point. And it is true, that they recorded history not just because of posterity, but because they wanted to communicate something about Jesus. That does not, however, automatically mean that what they wrote is unreliable or untrue. In fact, that was the way history was written then, and oftentimes still is today, to help us learn and grow from those who have gone before us. And so certain things are then highlighted from history to help make the point.

Additionally, the gospel writers had to accurately record Jesus' life, because many people who had seen Jesus and interacted with him, and heard him teach, and saw his miracles, were still alive at the time of their writing. This is especially true for Matthew, Mark, and Luke, which were all likely to have been written prior to A.D. 70. (This is also true for Acts and nearly all of the NT letters; All but maybe 5 or 6 "books" of the New Testament were written prior to A.D. 70.) **This is significant, because it means they had accountability for what they wrote about Jesus' life.** They couldn't make stuff up, because it would discredit their historical documentation. John's gospel was likely later, perhaps in the 80's or early 90's – still within the lifetimes of some people who'd seen Jesus – but especially the first three gospels, that was definitely true.

So the Gospel writers had to be true to what actually happened, and they wanted to be true to history or else they'd be discredited. Truth mattered to them. I'm not sure it always matters to a lot of people today, unfortunately, though it certainly should; but for them, truth definitely mattered.

This is significant to recognize the credibility of the Gospels as historical documents, because: **The first reason to believe that the *whole* Bible is trustworthy comes from Jesus himself as recorded in the Gospels.** Because, a lot of Christians will say, "The Bible is trustworthy because the Bible says it's trustworthy." And that just doesn't hold water for many people. And I don't blame them. It's like a car salesman saying that their car is the best simply because they say it's the best. Well, of course you're going to say it's the best. That doesn't mean it actually is.

So if we can see the Gospels as reliable biographies, as accurate historical documentations of the life of Jesus, then we can sort of pull them apart from the rest of Scripture and say, “What can we learn about the trustworthiness of the Bible from them?” And the answer to that is that we can learn a lot, and it all centers on Jesus. Because one thing Jesus did was he affirmed the Old Testament as God’s Word to us...
Jesus affirmed the trustworthiness of the Scriptures (Old Testament).

We see Him affirm the OT in so many places. For instance, Jesus says:
 “If you believed Moses, you would believe me, for he wrote about me” (John 5:46).

Matthew 5:18 – “For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished.”

In Matthew 15 he challenges some Pharisees on their breaking of some of the commandments of God as outlined in Exodus and Deuteronomy. And I could go on. He affirms the importance and the necessity of Scripture in our lives over and over again.

And then additionally, He quotes Scripture all the time, and from a wide range of the Old Testament. **Jesus quoted from at least 24 different Old Testament books.** So it’s not like we can say, “well some of the OT he affirmed, but a lot if it he didn’t.” No. Actually, Jesus quoted from over half the OT books, and He preached on the Old Testament as well. He interpreted the Old Testament for people. He taught it. He did all this to hold people accountable, to straighten out their misunderstandings, and to teach about Himself and how he fulfilled the Old Testament, and more. Here are just three of the times he quoted the Old Testament:

**“Haven’t you read this passage of Scripture:
 ‘The stone the builders rejected
 has become the cornerstone;
 the Lord has done this,
 and it is marvelous in our eyes’?” (Mark 12:10-11).** That’s Jesus taking a couple verses out of the Psalms and applying it to himself.

Mark 12:26-27 – “Now about the dead rising—have you not read in the Book of Moses, in the account of the burning bush, how God said to him, ‘I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob’? He is not the God of the dead, but of the living. You are badly mistaken!”

Matthew 22:37-40– Jesus replied: “‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ All the Law and the Prophets

hang on these two commandments.” In those three quotes alone, Jesus quoted from the Psalms, Leviticus, Deuteronomy, and Exodus, and with this affirmation of “the Law” (first five books of the Bible) and “the Prophets” Jesus gives his blessing on nearly half of the Old Testament. So Jesus, as recorded in the biographical accounts of his life (the Gospels), clearly affirms Scripture for us.

And lastly, if you want support that is completely outside the Bible: archaeological research (inscriptions on tombstones, buildings) and other non-Biblical documents (from other historians, from governmental documents, etc.), verify a lot of the Old Testament locations, people, events, and so forth. Not all of it has been verified, but enough has that it starts to paint a picture of reliability. For instance, the pool of Siloam, which is mentioned in Scripture a few times including in the Gospels (and previously was thought not to actually ever exist because it hadn’t been found), was unearthed in 2005. A New York Times Article – and others – from 1990 reports about archaeological digs showing that the Wall of Jericho likely came down in the time frame that lines up with the Biblical account of it. Prior to this dig, many scholars thought the wall had fallen 150 years or so earlier, and used that to discredit the account of the Israelites coming into the Promised Land. But once the remains were found and analyzed, it actually supported the Biblical record. So, in a nutshell: **If Jesus believed that the Scriptures were trustworthy, then that’s a pretty good reason for us to follow suit – plus the other sources outside of Scripture that support it, too.**

Now, a second thing to consider, and it pertains to an objection that often gets raised in regards to their trustworthiness, has to do with the handing down of the Scriptures over the centuries. People contend that as copies were made, that there are all kinds of errors that came about, and so they make the Scriptures unreliable. **So, people will argue: How can we believe that the Bible we’re reading today is the same as what they read in 350 A.D., or in Jesus’ day or even before? Aren’t there all kinds of copying errors and variations that make it unreliable?”**

Now, it is true that there are many, many variances in the Scriptures. A variance means any change or variation in the text, as you compare any two hand-written manuscripts with each other. And if you take all the ancient manuscripts of the NT (start with that) that we have – some manuscripts are of entire books, some are partial because of deterioration to the papyrus and some are even just a few words long – if you take all of them together there are about 400,000 variances. That’s a lot of variances – about 3 variances for every one word in the Bible. And that’s just the NT. But, there are a lot of manuscripts, too. **There are well over 20,000 manuscripts of the Bible.** (Over 24,000, even; including nearly 6,000 of the NT.) No other ancient book has anywhere near as much manuscript evidence. For instance, Homer’s Iliad – written a couple hundred years after King David lived, and has the second most copies of manuscripts from antiquity – the Iliad has only about 650 manuscript copies.

So, with all those thousands and thousands of Biblical manuscripts, there are bound to be some variances. So here's the deal. Before printing presses and copy machines, if they wanted to make more copies of a text, a typical way it would happen is someone would read Scripture, while others copied it down. Because they believed, as we do, that Scripture is God's Word, this was a job that was taken very seriously. But until the printing press was invented in the mid-1400's they only did it by hand. And they didn't have auto correct and spell check and all that. That's why there are variants. There are four categories of variants. First, **Some of the errors are simply mis-spelled words or nonsense words – words that don't make any cents.** ☺ (See what I did there?) A real common one of these is the movable "nu" in Greek. I won't go into detail about it but, we have a similar thing in English with "a" and "an." As in: "An apple" or "a boat." It's a common mistake to get it mixed up – especially when writing without erasers, delete buttons, etc.

The second most common variants are: **Ones that are minor changes but don't affect the translation or meaning.** This could be things such as the use of the definite article "the" with names – such as "Jesus" or "the Jesus." I know, we would never do that in English, but Greek can. Greek manuscripts vary on this, depending in large part on when they were written; languages change over time. English today is not the same as it was 50 or 350 years ago. Same with Greek. Sometimes "the" was used in front of names, and in other periods of time it wasn't. That would influence how a copyist would write. Another minor change that doesn't affect translation or meaning is word order. In Hebrew and in Greek, word order can change (English has some flexibility, but not as much) and still have the same meaning in a sentence. And so some variances are this kind of word order.

Third is: **Meaningful variants that aren't really viable.** So if all the manuscripts for John 3:16 read, "For God so loved the world" and then a manuscript that dates later reads, "For God so loved the Huskies" we know that probably the earlier manuscripts are the correct ones, even if we might prefer "Huskies." ☺ Luke 6:22 reads, "Blessed are you when people hate you and when they exclude you and revile you and spurn your name as evil, on account of the Son of Man." There's a single text from the 11th Century that omits "on account of the Son of Man." It's a significant change – is it a blessing Jesus is giving on people who are hated because of their devotion to him, or is it a blessing on people who are hated for any reason? That's significant. But this one text from over 1,000 A.D. is clearly in error, and it's all the others that are right. Errors are likely to come over time, and so earlier manuscripts are weighted more heavily. So that kind of variant is significant, but just isn't viable.

Lastly are: **Meaningful or significant changes that are viable.** This is far and away the smallest category of changes in the Biblical text, and accounts for less than 1% of those

400,000 NT variances. And the vast majority of these do not impact doctrine or our understanding of Scripture. For instance, there's a variance in Romans 5:1 where some manuscripts read, "Let us have peace with God" while most read, "We have peace with God." The first one urges us to have peace, the other declares it to be so. That's significant, and it's viable. It comes about because of a variance of one letter in one word. But it doesn't change a significant teaching of the Bible and our faith. And that's what we find with these variances. In the end, they don't impact the message of the Bible.

When you put it all togetherⁱⁱⁱ: **The end result of all this is that the Bible is trustworthy, and that's why Christians turn to it to know God, how to be in relationship with Him, and how He calls us to live.** Jesus affirms Scripture; He quotes the OT frequently and broadly. And the Bible has not been altered over the years. We have enough ancient manuscripts – far more than any other book of antiquity – to determine exactly what each Biblical author was inspired to write. The main purpose of Scripture – to understand who God is and what it means to be in relationship with Him – is conveyed. So you can read your Bible with confidence and trust that God is speaking to you through it just as He intended. It is "able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Jesus Christ" as Paul puts it in today's passage. May we each be filled with that same wisdom today and always, and may we be able to affirm together this statement: **"I believe the Bible is the Word of God and has the right to command my belief and action."** Let's pray...Amen.^{iv}

ⁱ <https://www.statista.com/statistics/248141/most-read-books-in-the-world/>

ⁱⁱ <https://money.cnn.com/gallery/pf/2013/06/07/bizarre-stolen-items/index.html>

ⁱⁱⁱ One topic I didn't cover here is the length of time from when the original texts would have been written to the earliest copies we have. We have nearly entire copies of the NT that date to the 3rd century A.D., for instance. This may seem like a long time to us. But all other works of antiquity (Iliad, Odyssey, the writings of Josephus or Flavius, etc.) have time gaps of at least 400 years – and many are 800-1500 years! And those works are considered accurate and reliable.

^{iv} There is a lot of scholarly work on this whole topic that we discussed today, and much of it is available on-line. If you'd like to read things for yourself, or dive into this topic more broadly or deeply, here are some suggested websites:

- This article is excellent: https://www.str.org/sites/str.org/files/Media/Default/Publications/DigitalSG_0910_New-1.pdf
- <https://bible.org/article/how-accurate-bible>
- <https://bible.org/article/number-textual-variants-evangelical-miscalculation>
- <https://www.gci.org/articles/inspiration-authority-and-reliability-of-scripture/>
- <https://carm.org/manuscript-evidence>
- <https://carm.org/when-were-gospels-written-and-by-whom>
- Here's a website devoted to the Dead Sea Scrolls. You can see what they look like, and even read them (if you can read Greek and Hebrew!). <https://www.deadseascrolls.org.il/home>
- More: http://www.nbcnews.com/id/6750670/ns/technology_and_science-science/t/archaeologists-identify-traces-miracle-pool/#.W66T-y_MyHo