

# Why you can believe the bible

*What is the history of the bible, and how do we know that the bible we have today can be trusted?*

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## Who wrote the Bible? How does it compare to other "sacred" books?

This article briefly answers some of the big questions about the Bible and where we got it from. If these are questions that you have or you would like more information, please email us and we would be happy to assist you in finding the answers you need.



The Quran came from Mohammed. The Book of Mormon came from Joseph Smith. But the Bible is unique among the many sacred books in the world. The Old and New Testaments were written by 40 different authors, located in Asia, Africa and Europe, over a 1600-year time span. Despite this diverse origin, the Bible conveys the same basic message: the God who created the heavens and the earth has provided a way for people to know Him.

Beyond its unique authorship, the Bible contains a massive amount of prophecies which later were fulfilled in detail. For example, various Old Testament prophets gave over 300 specific prophecies about the coming Messiah (God's one and only Son who would die for the sins of the world), ie. where He would be born, where He would grow up, etc. These prophecies were perfectly fulfilled by Jesus Christ hundreds of years later. These and the many other fulfilled prophecies show why the authors could write, "Thus says the Lord..."--they were speaking for the One who knows "the end from the beginning."<sup>1</sup>

Also archaeology repeatedly confirms peoples' names, historical events, and geographical details exactly as they are recorded in the Old and New Testaments. Though archaeology cannot prove the spiritual truth of the Bible, the discoveries do show the Bible's reliability as an historical report. [More on Bible archaeology.](#) (see end of article)

Also, compared to other ancient writings, the Bible has been remarkably protected, preserved over time. Compared to only seven existing manuscripts of Plato's writings, there exists over 5,000 manuscripts of the New Testament. And when the text of all these volumes are compared one to another, you find they are 99.5% consistent with each other.

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## **Is the Bible historically true? Are the Gospels accurate about Jesus?**

How can we know if the Gospel biographies on Jesus' life are accurate? When historians try to determine if a biography is reliable, they ask, "Do other numerous sources report the same details about this person?"

Here is how this works. Imagine collecting biographies on the Ian Thorpe. You find many describing his swimming career, his family, his Olympic Games victories, and each of these biographies report many similar facts. But what if you came across one biography reporting that Ian Thorpe lived ten years as a priest in South Africa? None of your other sources mentioned anything about a former career as a priest, or living ten years in South Africa. Obviously, the credibility of this biography is out the window.

Regarding Jesus of Nazareth, do we find multiple biographies reporting similar facts about his life? Yes. There are four New Testament books (called Gospels) that give lengthy details of Jesus' life. Who wrote the gospels? Two of the books were written by men who knew Jesus personally and traveled with him for over three years (Matthew and John); the other two books were written by close associates of Jesus' apostles.

Each of the four authors recorded very in-depth narratives of Jesus' life. As you would expect from various writers covering the life of a real person, there is agreement in the facts, but also uniqueness and variations in the presentations. And each biography is presented without sensationalism or flowery creativity, but in a newspaper style of "this is how it was." The Gospels give specific geographical names and cultural details that have been confirmed by historians and archaeologists. The messages in the gospels also indicates authenticity.

Jesus' statements fit the culture and audience He was addressing, yet His statements are unlike what was currently taught in Judaism. In looking at the gospels, His teachings do not include many topics that the early church probably would have wished that Jesus had addressed. This lends support that the biographers were accurate, not adding to Jesus' words from a later perspective.

For a sample of what is presented in one of the Gospels, [click here](#).

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## **History of the Bible. Did ancient historians also write about Jesus?**

It is significant that people opposed to Jesus confirm many of the details surrounding his life, death and resurrection. These people serve as valuable witnesses to confirm some of the stories of the Bible and showing that concepts such as the belief in the resurrection were key in the earliest days of Christianity and not added many years later. Cornelius Tacitus (A.D. 55-120), an historian of first-century Rome, "is considered one of the most accurate historians of the ancient world."<sup>2</sup> An excerpt from Tacitus tells us that Nero "inflicted the most exquisite tortures on a

class...called Christians. ...Christus [Christ], from whom the name had its origin, suffered the extreme penalty during the reign of Tiberius at the hands of one of our procurators, Pontius Pilatus..."<sup>3</sup> (In contrast, the Muslim Quran, written six centuries after Jesus lived, reports that Jesus was never crucified, though it is a fact confirmed by numerous secular historians.<sup>4</sup>)

Flavius Josephus, a Jewish historian (A.D. 38-100+), wrote about Jesus in his Jewish Antiquities. From Josephus, "we learn that Jesus was a wise man who did surprising feats, taught many, won over followers from among Jews and Greeks, was believed to be the Messiah, was accused by the Jewish leaders, was condemned to be crucified by Pilate, and was considered to be resurrected."<sup>5</sup>

Suetonius, Pliny the Younger, and Thallus also wrote about Christian worship and persecution that is concurrent with New Testament accounts.

Even the Jewish Talmud, again not a favourable source regarding Jesus, concurs about the major events of his life. From the Talmud, "we learn that Jesus was conceived out of wedlock, gathered disciples, made blasphemous claims about himself, and worked miracles, but these miracles are attributed to sorcery and not to God."<sup>6</sup>

This is remarkable information considering that most ancient historians focused on political and military leaders. Yet ancient Jews, Greeks and Romans (who themselves were not ardent followers of Jesus) substantiate the major events that are presented in the four Gospels.

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### **Has the New Testament changed and become corrupted over time?**

Some people have the idea that the New Testament has been translated "so many times" that it has become corrupted through stages of translating. Well, if the translations were being made from other translations, they would have a case. But translations are not made from translations, but from original Greek text found in ancient manuscripts. We know the New Testament we have today is true to its original form because:

- We have such a huge number of manuscript copies--over 5,000.
- The words among those copies are in agreement with each other--99.5% agreement.
- The copies were found very close to their original date of authorship.

When one compares the text from one manuscript copy to another, the compatibility is amazing. Sometimes the spelling may vary or words may be transposed, but that is of little consequence. Concerning word order, Bruce M. Metzger, professor emeritus at Princeton Theological Seminary, explains: "It makes a whale of a difference in English if you say, 'Dog bites man' or 'Man bites dog'--

sequence matters in English. But in Greek it doesn't. One word functions as the subject of the sentence regardless of where it stands in the sequence."<sup>7</sup>

What about discrepancies? The variations among the manuscripts are "so rare that scholars Norman Geisler and William Nix conclude, "The New Testament, then, has not only survived in more manuscripts than any other book from antiquity, but it has survived in a purer form than any other great book--a form that is 99.5 percent pure."<sup>8</sup>

Dr. Ravi Zacharias, a visiting scholar at Cambridge University, also comments: "In real terms, the New Testament is easily the best attested ancient writing in terms of the sheer number of documents, the time span between the events and the documents, and the variety of documents available to sustain or contradict it. There is nothing in ancient manuscript evidence to match such textual availability and integrity."<sup>9</sup>

The New Testament is humanity's most reliable ancient document. Its textual integrity is more certain than that of Plato's writings or Homer's Iliad. [For a comparison of the New Testament to other ancient writings, click here.](#) (see end of article)

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### **Are there contradictions in the Bible?**

Some claim that the Bible contains numerous contradictions. Here is an example. Pilate ordered that a sign be posted above Jesus' head on the cross where Jesus hung. Three of the Gospels record what was written on that sign:

In Matthew: "This is Jesus, the king of the Jews."

In Mark: "The king of the Jews."

In John: "Jesus of Nazareth, the king of the Jews."

The wording on these is different, though their messages do not conflict with each other. What about the exact wording? In Greek, in which the Gospels were written, they didn't use a quotation symbol as we do in English. So when the authors were writing about Jesus, some could either have been paraphrasing or using a direct quote, we don't know. That would account for the subtle differences in the passages.

Here is another example of an apparent contradiction. Was Jesus two nights in the tomb or three nights in the tomb before His resurrection? Jesus said, prior to his crucifixion, "For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a huge fish, so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth" (Matthew 12:40). Mark records another statement that Jesus made, "We are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be betrayed to the chief priests and teachers of the law. They will condemn him to death and will hand him over to the

Gentiles, who will mock him and spit on him, flog him and kill him. Three days later he will rise." (Mark 10:33,34)

Jesus was killed on Friday and the resurrection was discovered on Sunday. How can that be three days and nights in the tomb? It is a Jewish idiom to count any part of a day or night as a full day and night. So, Friday, Saturday, and Sunday would be three days and three nights in the Jewish culture. We speak in similar ways. If a person were to say, "I spent all day shopping," we understand that the person didn't mean 24 hours.

This is typical of apparent contradictions in the New Testament. Many are usually resolved by the text itself or understanding the historical background of the day.

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### **Does archaeology support the New Testament?**

Archaeology cannot prove that the Bible is God's written Word to us. However, archaeology can (and does) substantiate the Bible's historical accuracy. Archaeologists have consistently discovered the names of government officials, kings, cities, and festivals mentioned in the Bible--sometimes when historians didn't think such people or places existed. For example, the Gospel of John tells of Jesus healing a cripple next to the Pool of Bethesda. The text even describes the five porticoes (walkways) leading to the pool. Scholars didn't think the pool even existed, until archaeologists found it forty feet below ground, complete with the five porticoes.<sup>10</sup> The Bible has a tremendous amount of historical detail, so not everything mentioned in it has been found through archaeology. However, not one archaeological find has conflicted with what the Bible records.<sup>11</sup>

In contrast, news reporter Lee Strobel comments about the Book of Mormon: "Archaeology has repeatedly failed to substantiate its claims about events that supposedly occurred long ago in the Americas. I remember writing to the Smithsonian Institute to inquire about whether there was any evidence supporting the claims of Mormonism, only to be told in unequivocal terms that its archaeologists see 'no direct connection between the archaeology of the New World and the subject matter of the book.'" Archaeologists have never located cities, persons, names, or places mentioned in the Book of Mormon.<sup>12</sup>

By comparison, many of the ancient locations mentioned by Luke, in the Book of Acts in the New Testament, have been identified through archaeology. "In all, Luke names thirty-two countries, fifty-four cities and nine islands without an error."<sup>13</sup>

Archaeology has also refuted many ill-founded theories about the Bible. For example, still taught in some colleges today, the JEPD Documentary Hypothesis suggests that Moses could not have written the Pentateuch (the first five books of the Bible), because writing was non-existent in his day. Then archaeologists discovered the Black Stele. "It had wedge-shaped characters on it and contained the detailed laws of Hammurrabi. Was it post-Moses? No! It was pre-Mosaic; not only

that, but it was pre-Abraham (2,000 B.C.). It preceded Moses' writings by at least three centuries....The 'Documentary Hypothesis' is still taught, yet its original basis has been eradicated and shown to be false."<sup>14</sup>

Another major archaeological find confirmed an early alphabet in the discovery of the Ebla Tablets in northern Syria in 1974. These 14,000 clay tablets are thought to be from about 2300 B.C., which is hundreds of years before Abraham.<sup>15</sup> The tablets describe culture and life in similar ways to what is recorded in Genesis chapters 12-50.

Archaeology consistently and strongly confirms the historical accuracy of the Bible.

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### **Who wrote the New Testament? Why not accept the apocrypha, gnostic gospels, or the gospel of Thomas?**

There are solid reasons for trusting in today's list of New Testament books. The Gospel writers Matthew, Mark, Luke and John were previously mentioned as credible sources, two of them having been Jesus' closest followers. The other New Testament authors were considered trustworthy as well: James and Jude (half-brothers of Jesus, who initially did not believe in him), Peter (one of the 12 apostles), and Paul (whom Jesus made an apostle after his death and resurrection). The church knew about these men and their association with Jesus. Moreover, what they wrote was consistent with what people had heard and seen themselves regarding Jesus, and had passed on to their children. When other books were written and appeared hundreds of years later (e.g., the Gospel of Peter, though Peter had long since died), it wasn't difficult for the church to spot them as phonies, as forgeries.

Another example is the Gospel of Thomas (which Mohammed references in the Quran). The Gospel of Thomas was written around 140 A.D., long after Thomas had died. Though it bore some similarities to the New Testament's authentic Gospel of Matthew, it also contained wildly different messages. The descriptions of Jesus did not fit anything the early church knew to be true of Him.

As books like the Gospel of Thomas were written and circulated among the early church, it was not difficult for people to discern the forgeries. False writings like these and the gnostic gospels countered the known teachings of Jesus and the Old Testament, and often contained numerous historical and geographical errors.<sup>18</sup>

Eventually an official list of New Testament books became necessary for the following reasons: 1) As Christians were being martyred books were being destroyed (so, which ones to protect?); 2) in translating the books into Syriac and Old Latin, a listing of authoritative books was important; 3) false books and false teachings were always challenging the church and leadership needed to be clear. In A.D. 367, Athanasius formerly listed the 27 New Testament books (the same list that we have today). Soon after, Jerome and Augustine circulated this same list.

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## Why did it take 30 or 40 years for the New Testament Gospels to be written?

The main reason the Gospel accounts were not written immediately after Jesus' death and resurrection is that there was no apparent need for any such writings. Initially the gospel spread by word of mouth in Jerusalem. There was no need to compose a written account of Jesus' life, because those in the Jerusalem region were witnesses of Jesus and well aware of his ministry.<sup>19</sup> However, when the gospel spread beyond Jerusalem, and the eyewitnesses were no longer readily accessible, there was a need for written accounts to educate others in Jesus' life and ministry. Many scholars date the Gospels as being written 17-32 years after Jesus' death.

Luke gives us a little more insight into this by stating, at the beginning of his Gospel, why he was writing it: "Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eyewitnesses and servants of the word. Therefore, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, it seemed good to me to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may have certainty of the things you have been taught."<sup>20</sup>

John also gives the reason for writing his Gospel: "Many other signs therefore Jesus also performed in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these have been written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing you may have life in His name."<sup>21</sup>

Have you ever read anything from the New Testament Gospels? To read a sample from the Gospel of John, [click here](#).

And, if you would like to know more about Jesus, this article will give you a good summary of his life: [Beyond Blind Faith](#).

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## Does it matter if Jesus really did and said what is in the Gospels?

Yes. For faith to really be of any value, it must be based on facts, on reality. Here is why. If you were taking a flight to London, you would probably have faith that the jet is fueled and mechanically reliable, the pilot trained, and no terrorists on board. Your faith, however, is not what gets you to London. Your faith is useful in that it got you on the plane. But what actually gets you to London is the integrity of the plane, pilot, etc. You could rely on your positive experience of past flights. But your positive experience would not be enough to get that plane to London. What matters is the object of your faith--is it reliable?

To believe in God requires some objective reasons, or it's a weak, merely hopeful faith that could change as often as a person's experience changes. If life is going well for a person in France, then she could conclude that God is there and He is very

good. But how about for the person in India whose lifestyle is not so comfortable? Is God really there? Is God available and useful to that person? How do you know? You see, faith is not the issue, but what supports the faith.

So the question is important. Is the New Testament an accurate, reliable presentation of Jesus? Yes. We can trust the New Testament because there is enormous factual support for it. This article touched on the following points: historians concur, archaeology concurs, the four Gospel biographies are in agreement, fulfilled prophecy shows divine intervention, there is continuity with Old Testament authors of the Bible, the preservation of document copies is remarkable, there is superior accuracy in the translations, and it presents a consistent view of God over 1600 years. All of this gives a solid foundation for believing what we read in the New Testament: that Jesus is God, the Son, who came to give us life.

If the Bible is reliable, then we need to decide what we will do with Christianity. If Christ really did rise, then we need to make a decision whether to follow him as God or reject him. To find out more about what it means to follow Jesus, please visit "[Getting Connected](#)" or please email us if you have further questions.

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## Endnotes

{1} Isaiah 46:10

{2} McDowell, Josh. *The New Evidence that Demands a Verdict* (Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1999), p. 55.

{3} Tacitus, A. 15.44.

{4} Comments from Dr. William Lane Craig, delivered to a college audience in December, 2001: "From the pages of the Jewish historian Josephus we learn that Jesus was executed by Roman authority under Pontius Pilate by means of crucifixion. And according to Tacitus, the Roman historian, he also names Pontius Pilate as the one responsible for Jesus' execution by crucifixion. According to both Josephus and a Syrian writer, Mara Bar-Serapion, the Jewish authorities participated in the events leading up to Jesus' execution, and they justified this as a proper undertaking against a heretic. So in extra biblical sources, Jewish and Roman, we have evidence for the trial of Jesus, the involvement of both the Jewish authorities as well as the Roman authorities, the mode of his execution, namely by crucifixion. And these facts are fixed so firmly as an anchor point in history no historical scholar, no historian denies these. On the contrary, they are so firmly fixed they actually become a criterion of authenticity."

{5} Wilkins, Michael J. & Moreland, J.P. *Jesus Under Fire* (Zondervan Publishing House, 1995), p. 40.

{6} Ibid.

{7} Strobel, Lee. The Case for Christ (Zondervan Publishing House, 1998), p. 83.

{8} Ibid., p. 85.

{9} Zacharias, Ravi. Can Man Live Without God? (Word Publishing, 1994), p. 162.

{10} Strobel, p. 132.

{11} The renowned Jewish archaeologist, Nelson Glueck, wrote: "It may be stated categorically that no archaeological discovery has ever controverted a biblical reference." cited by McDowell, Josh. The New Evidence That Demands a Verdict (Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1999), p. 61.

{12} Strobel, p. 143-144.

{13} Geisler, Norman L. Baker Encyclopedia of Christian Apologetics (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998).

{14} McDowell, Josh. Evidence That Demands a Verdict (1972), p. 19.

{15} <http://english.sdaglobal.org/story/advent/secret/ebla.htm>

{16} omitted

{17} omitted

{18} Bruce, F.F. The Books and the Parchments: How We Got Our English Bible (Fleming H. Revell Co., 1950), p. 113.

{19} See Acts 2:22, 3:13, 4:13, 5:30, 5:42, 6:14, etc.

{20} Luke 1:1-3

{21} John 20:30,31

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## Major Archaeological Finds

ARCHAEOLOGICAL FIND	SIGNIFICANCE
Mari Tablets	Over 20,000 cuneiform tablets, which date back to Abraham's time period, explain many of the patriarchal traditions of Genesis.
Ebla Tablets	Over 20,000 tablets, many containing law similar to the Deuteronomy law code. The previously thought fictitious five cities of the plain in Genesis 14 (Sodom, Gomorrah, Admah, Zeboiim, and Zoar) are identified.
Nuzi Tablets	They detail customs of the 14th and 15th century parallel to the patriarchal accounts such as maids producing children for barren wives.
Black Stele	Proved that writing and written laws existed three centuries before the Mosaic laws.
Temple Walls of Karnak, Egypt Laws of Eshnunna (ca. 1950 BC) Lipit-Ishtar Code (ca. 1860 BC)	Signifies a 10th century BC reference to Abraham.
Laws of Hammurabi (ca. 1700 BC)	Show that the law codes of the Pentateuch were not too sophisticated for that period.
Ras Shamra Tablets	Provide information on Hebrew poetry.
Lachish Letters	Describe Nebuchadnezzar's invasion of Judah and give insight into the time of Jeremiah.
Gedaliah Seal	References Gedaliah is spoken of in 2 Kings 25:22.
Cyrus Cylinder	Authenticates the Biblical description of Cyrus' decree to allow the Jews to rebuild the temple in Jerusalem (see 2 Chronicles 36:23; Ezra 1:2-4).
Moabite Stone	Gives information about Omri, the sixth king of Israel.
Black Obelisk of Shalmaneser III	Illustrates how Jehu, king of Israel, had to submit to the Assyrian king.
Taylor Prism	Contains an Assyrian text which detail Sennacherib's attack on Jerusalem during the time of Hezekiah, king of Israel.

PAST CHARGES BY CRITICS	ANSWERED BY ARCHAEOLOGY
Moses could not have written Pentateuch because he lived before the invention of writing.	Writing existed many centuries before Moses.
Abraham's home city of Ur does not exist.	Ur was discovered. One of the columns had the inscription "Abram."
The city built of solid rock called "Petra" does not exist.	Petra was discovered.
The story of the fall of Jericho is myth. The city never existed.	The city was found and excavated. It was found that the walls tumbled in the exact manner described by the biblical narrative.
The "Hittites" did not exist.	Hundreds of references to the amazing Hittite civilization have been found. One can even get a doctorate in Hittite studies at the University of Chicago.
Belshazzar was not a real king of	Tablets of Babylonia describe the reign of this coregent

Babylon; he is not found in the records.	and son of Nabonidus.
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**Here is how the New Testament compares to other ancient writings\*:**

Author	Book	Date Written	Earliest Copies	Time Gap	# of Copies
Homer	Iliad	800 B.C.	c. 400 B.C.	c. 400 yrs.	643
Herodotus	History	480-425 B.C.	c. A.D. 900	c. 1,350 yrs.	8
Thucydides	History	460-400 B.C.	c. A.D. 900	c. 1,300 yrs.	8
Plato		400 B.C.	c. A.D. 900	c. 1,300 yrs.	7
Demosthenes		300 B.C.	c. A.D. 1100	c. 1,400 yrs.	200
Caesar	Gallic Wars	100-44 B.C.	c. A.D. 900	c. 1,000 yrs.	10
Tacitus	Annals	A.D. 100	c. A.D. 1100	c. 1,000 yrs.	20
Pliny Secundus	Natural History	A.D. 61-113	c. A.D. 850	c. 7500 yrs.	7
New Testament		A.D. 50-100	c. A.D. 114 (portions) c. A.D. 200 (books) c. A.D. 325 (complete N.T.)	c. +50 yrs.  c. 100 yrs.  c. 225 yrs.	5366

\*McDowell, Josh. *The New Evidence that Demands a Verdict* (Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1999), p. 55.