

Community Church of Mooresville

Why Should I Believe the Bible?

A Discussion on How We Got the Bible and Its Reliability

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1 Introduction

Throughout history, challenges to the authenticity of the Holy Scriptures have arisen as an attempt to undermine their credibility and authority. This is especially true today with the efforts of the Jesus Seminar and author Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code* representing two examples. In every case, arguments are made that claim the Holy Scriptures are nothing more than a collection of legendary writings brought together by an overzealous group of church leaders in an effort to assert control over an unsuspecting public. Allegedly, the writings capture centuries of oral tradition that had suffered significant corruption and embellishment over time. In short, these arguments assert that the Holy Scriptures simply cannot be trusted as accurate.

Fortunately, the credibility of the Holy Scriptures rests on a veritable mountain of evidence that leaves them beyond reasonable assault. Indeed, when the claims against their reliability are examined, they are found to be built on a foundation of shifting sands and crumble easily.

Following is a brief presentation of some of the evidence that supports the reliability of the Bible as an authoritative and trustworthy document. In addition, an explanation of the origin of the writings of the Bible and their inclusion in the Canon of Scripture will be given. With this information in hand, any *unbiased* reader will conclude that God has intruded into his fallen Creation and communicated his truth to us.

2 How Did We Get the Bible?

Nearly every challenge to the Scriptures makes an attack on the books that are included in the Bible. Those that are included are said to have been *selected* for political reasons while others were excluded in an effort to suppress the truth. A careful examination of how the Canon of Scripture was established will reveal the truth and expose the motives of the challengers.

First of all, we must understand the origin of the word, "canon." The word is derived from the Middle English *canoun*, from the Old English *canon* and from Old French, both from the Latin *canōn*, meaning rule, from Greek *kanōn*, meaning measuring rod or rule.¹ The root of this word is "reed" or "cane." In ancient times, "the 'reed' was used as a measuring rod and eventually [came to mean] 'standard.'"² Therefore, when we apply the word canon to the Holy Scriptures, it means "an officially accepted list of books."³

The next logical question is, "Who decided what books belong in the Canon of Scripture?" The short answer is that God determined the Canon of Scripture by revealing his Word through the inspiration of the writers by the Holy Spirit. Men simply *discovered* the canon, or standard, established by God. As Peter said, "For prophecy never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit."⁴ (2 Pe 1:21). Also, Paul said, "All Scripture is God-breathed

and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness...” (2 Ti 3:16).

2.1 *The Canon of the Old Testament*

The books of the Hebrew Bible (our Old Testament) were known as the Law, the Prophets and the Writings indicating a threefold division. The books that belonged in each division were well established prior to the time of Jesus and had been translated into Greek (the Septuagint). A listing of the books in each section follows:

The Law: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy.

The Prophets: Joshua, Judges Samuel, Kings, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, The Twelve.

The Writings: Psalms, Proverbs, Job, Song of Songs, Ruth, Lamentations, Esther, Ecclesiastes, Daniel, Ezra-Nehemiah, Chronicles.⁵

Our Christian Old Testament canon contains the same material but has a different number of books because of different divisions. The Christian canon divides Samuel, Kings and Chronicles into two books each. The Jews consider the Minor Prophets (The Twelve) as one book whereas we divide them into twelve separate books.

The need for an officially recognized list of books in the Hebrew Bible arose as a result of the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple in A.D. 70. The Jews were dispersed and the sacrificial system had been destroyed along with the central repository for the accepted writings.⁶ Therefore, the Jews convened the Sanhedrin, with the permission of Rome, to codify the historically accepted books. The Sanhedrin met at Jamnia so the meeting has come to be known as the Council of Jamnia.⁷ Some discussion occurred regarding the books of Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs and Esther. Some at this meeting argued that these books should not be included, but their use and recognition by previous generations of priests were cited to confirm them.⁸ One purpose of this meeting was to explicitly exclude the early Christian writings from the Hebrew Bible, since the Jewish leadership rejected Christ and his followers as blasphemers. Interestingly, this provides us with a piece of evidence to show that much of what became our New Testament was in existence 37 years after the death and resurrection of Christ.

The New Testament writings also contain many quotations and references to the Old Testament. Jesus himself referred to “the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms.” (Lk 24:44) This was clearly a reference to the entire Hebrew Bible according to its three divisions. These references provide affirmation of the books that were known to be authoritative at the time of Christ.

A group of books known as The Apocrypha are included in the Catholic canon but not in the Protestant canon. Apocrypha comes from the Greek word *apokruphos* and means “hidden or concealed.”⁹ This title was first applied by Jerome in the fourth century.

There are several reasons for their exclusion by Protestants presented in *Unger's Bible Dictionary*:

1. "They abound in historical and geographical inaccuracies and anachronisms.
2. "They teach doctrines which are false and foster practices which are at variance with inspired Scripture.
3. "They resort to literary types and display an artificiality of subject matter and styling out of keeping with inspired Scripture.
4. "They lack the distinctive elements which give genuine Scripture their divine character, such as prophetic power and poetic and religious feeling."¹⁰

Geisler and Nix provide ten historical testimonies from antiquity against their acceptance:

1. "Philo, Alexandrian Jewish philosopher (20 BC – A.D. 40), quoted the Old Testament prolifically and even recognized the threefold division, but he never quoted from the Apocrypha as inspired.
2. "Josephus (A.D. 30 – 100), Jewish historian, explicitly excludes the Apocrypha, numbering the books of the Old Testament as 22. Neither does he quote these books as Scripture.
3. "Jesus and the New Testament writers never once quote the Apocrypha although there are hundreds of quotes and references to almost all of the canonical books of the Old Testament (with the possible exception of Jude 9 and 14).
4. "The Jewish scholars of Jamnia (A.D. 90) did not recognize the Apocrypha.
5. "No canon or council of the Christian church for the first four centuries recognized the Apocrypha as inspired.
6. "Many of the great Fathers of the early church spoke out against the Apocrypha, for example, Origen, Cyril of Jerusalem, Athanasius.
7. "Jerome (340-420), the great scholar and translator of the Vulgate, rejected the Apocrypha as part of the canon. He disputed across the Mediterranean with Augustine on this point. He at first refused even to translate the Apocryphal books into Latin, but later he made a hurried translation of a few of them. After his death, and literally 'over his dead body,' the Apocryphal books were brought into his Latin Vulgate directly from the Old Latin Version.
8. "Many Roman Catholic scholars through the Reformation period rejected the Apocrypha.
9. "Luther and the Reformers rejected the canonicity of the Apocrypha.
10. "Not until A.D. 1546, in a polemical action at the Counter Reformation Council of Trent, did the Apocryphal books receive full canonical status by the Roman Catholic Church."¹¹

2.2 *The Canon of the New Testament*

The New Testament church was built upon the foundation laid by the Apostles. Therefore, a major test of canonicity for any book was apostolic authorship or approval. A set of guiding principals were applied to determine acceptance. These are:

1. Is it authoritative?
2. Is it prophetic?
3. Is it authentic?
4. Is it dynamic?
5. Was it received, collected, read and used?¹²

The “official” listing of books in the New Testament canon came as a response to heretical teachings that began to propagate in the second and third centuries and to other world events. A heretic named Marcion from around A.D. 140 created his own canon and began to circulate it throughout the Christian world.¹³ Furthermore, many of the Eastern churches had begun to use documents known to be false and lacking apostolic authority.¹⁴ Another major factor for identifying officially those books that God had made know to be canonical was an edict of Diocletian (A.D. 303), the Emperor of Rome. This edict mandated the destruction of the sacred books of the Christians. Christians were dying to defend the Scriptures of the New Testament. It became crucial to know for sure which ones were authentic and which ones were spurious.¹⁵

Many claims have been made that the canon was established during councils of the church where political considerations influenced the resulting list. However, this could not be further from the truth. The facts in the historical record show us that Athanasius of Alexandria (A.D. 367), who defended Christianity against the Arian heresy, was the first to generate a list of the accepted books for the New Testament.¹⁶ Following is a quote from his 39th Festal Letter:

Continuing, I must without hesitation mention the scriptures of the New Testament; they are the following: the four Gospels according to Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, after them the Acts of the Apostles and the seven so-called catholic epistles of the apostles -- namely, one of James, two of Peter, then three of John and after these one of Jude. In addition there are fourteen epistles of the apostle Paul written in the following order: the first to the Romans, then two to the Corinthians and then after these the one to the Galatians, following it the one to the Ephesians, thereafter the one to the Philippians and the one to the Colossians and two to the Thessalonians and the epistle to the Hebrews and then immediately two to Timothy, one to Titus and lastly the one to Philemon. Yet further the Revelation of John

These are the springs of salvation, in order that he who is thirsty may fully refresh himself with the words contained in them. In them alone is the doctrine of piety proclaimed. Let no one add anything to them or take anything away from them...

But for the sake of greater accuracy I add, being constrained to write, that there are also other books besides these, which have not indeed been put in the canon, but have been appointed by the Fathers as reading-matter for those who have just come forward and which to be instructed in the doctrine of piety: the Wisdom of Solomon, the Wisdom of Sirach, Esther, Judith, Tobias, the so-called Teaching [Didache] of the Apostles, and the Shepherd. And although, beloved, the former are in the canon and the latter serve as reading matter, yet mention is nowhere made of the apocrypha; rather they are a fabrication of the heretics, who write them down when it pleases them and generously assign to them an early date of composition in order that they may be able to draw upon them as supposedly ancient writings and have in them occasion to deceive the guileless.¹⁷

The Arian heresy stated that Jesus was a created being, nothing more than a glorified angel, and not God in the flesh as established by the apostolic teaching. As a side note, this heresy is the root of the modern heretical cult of the Watchtower Bible and Tract Society, or Jehovah's Witnesses. In A.D. 325 Emperor Constantine called for a council to establish unity within Christianity regarding the nature of Christ. The council met at Nicea. Athanasius attended this meeting and became the chief spokesman for the orthodox view that the Son is fully God and is co-eternal and co-equal with the Father. This council did not address the canon of the New Testament. The outcome of this council was a statement, or creed, that concisely stated the established beliefs of Christianity derived from the Apostles themselves.¹⁸ The statement has become known as the Nicene Creed.

Early church fathers such as Polycarp (A.D. 115, who was a disciple of John the Apostle), Justin Martyr (A.D. 100-165), Irenaeus (A.D. 180, who was a student of Polycarp) and Ignatius (A.D. 50-115) all wrote on the subject of the accepted books, though not in complete form as set out by Athanasius.¹⁹ Not until A.D. 393 at the Synod of Hippo did a church council officially recognize a list of books forming the New Testament Canon. This recognition did nothing to confer authority on the canonical books; it only recognized their inherent authority as established by God and affirmed through apostolic authorship or approval.²⁰

Where, then, do the so called "hidden" Gospels fit into the picture? Allegedly, these "lost" books of the Bible describe a Christianity that is more primitive, and by implication more authentic, than what we know today. These Gnostic Gospels were accidentally found by an Egyptian farmer in 1945 near Nag Hammadi, a small town in northern Egypt. These documents claimed to hold secret teachings of Jesus that were systematically destroyed by the institutional church.

Once upon a time (we are told) there was the Jesus Movement, which was mystical, radical, feminist, egalitarian, and subversive. As time went by, this movement was destroyed by the rising forces of the Christian church, patriarchal and repressive. The earliest followers of Jesus found their ideas dismissed as "heresy" while the power-maniacs of the Great Church grabbed for themselves the grandiose title of

"orthodox." The new world of Churchianity successfully covered its tracks by rewriting most early Christian documents and destroying those that revealed its Orwellian dirty tricks. However, some authentic relics survived in the form of the hidden gospels, which were preserved in the deserts of Egypt. In the twentieth century, these texts re-emerged to astonish the waiting world: We recall the discovery of the collection of ancient documents found at Nag Hammadi in 1945, popularized in Elaine Pagels' bestselling book *The Gnostic Gospels*. Since the 1970s, documents like the Gospel of Thomas have become a recurrent theme in popular culture, in many thriller novels, in the 1999 film *Stigmata*, and even in episodes of the X-Files. In addition, the existence of Thomas has stimulated much revisionist Biblical scholarship, notably that associated with the Jesus Seminar.²¹

In fact, these documents were the product of a heretical belief system known as Gnosticism. The word Gnostic comes from the Greek word *gnosis* which means knowledge. The books contained in the library found at Nag Hammadi include "the *Gospel of Thomas*, *Gospel of Philip*, *Gospel of Mary*, *Gospel of the Egyptians*, and the *Gospel of Truth*."²² The so-called scholars of the Jesus Seminar have drawn heavily on the *Gospel of Thomas* as primary source material giving it credence over the canonical New Testament Gospels. The plot line in *The Da Vinci Code* relies on the *Gospel of Philip* for the idea that Jesus was married to Mary Magdalene and that she was selected by Jesus to found the Christian church.

Clearly the ideas found in these documents are foreign to those familiar with the canonical Gospels. At this point, it should be noted that none of these documents may be dated any earlier than the second century A.D. They all exhibit some dependence upon the canonical Gospels as source material.²³ Intuitively, then, they must have been written afterward. The early church fathers argued that the truth of the Gospel was perverted by these documents and rejected them. "Here we find ourselves agreeing with the early Christian defenders of the faith who maintained that Gnosticism in the church was a corruption of original truth and not an independently legitimate source of information on Jesus or the rest of reality. Fitzmyer drives this home in criticizing Pagels's view that the Gnostics have an equal claim on Christian authenticity: 'Throughout the book [Pagels] gives the unwary reader the impression that the difference between "orthodox Christians" and "gnostic (sic) Christians" was one related to the "origins of Christianity". Time and time again, she is blind to the fact that she is ignoring a good century of Christian existence in which those "gnostic (sic) Christians" were simply not around."²⁴

Further discussion on the Gnostic Gospels will be presented in Section 3.1.1 below.

2.3 *How Was the Bible Prepared?*

Obviously, modern technologies such as the printing press, photocopier or personal computer were not available to the writers of the Bible or other ancient documents. Therefore, all original manuscripts were written by hand as well as any copies that were generated to preserve the document or distribute it to multiple parties. Consequently, to

understand how the Bible came to be, we need to understand the writing materials and tools of the ancient authors and copyists.

2.3.1 Writing Materials²⁵

- Papyrus

This was the most common writing material of ancient times. It is a very perishable material. Our English word “paper” is derived from this word. Papyrus enjoyed popular use until the 3rd century A.D.²⁶

- Parchment

This material is simply animal skins that were prepared specially for writing material. The skins of sheep, goats, antelope and other animals were used.

- Vellum

This material is specifically made of calf skin.

- Ostraca

This material was made from unglazed pottery and was used by common people.

- Stones

The Ten Commandments are an example of documents written on stone. Many ancient documents have been found through archaeology that were written on stone.

- Clay Tablets

These were engraved while the clay was wet, then dried to make a very durable medium for the document.

- Wax Tablets

These consisted of a flat piece of wood covered with wax. Writing was scratched into the wax.

2.3.2 Writing Tools²⁷

- Chisel – The chisel was an iron tool used to engrave stones.

- Metal Stylus – The metal stylus was used to mark clay and wax tablets.
- Pen – The pen was either a pointed reed or a quill and was used to write on vellum, parchment and papyrus using ink.
- Ink – Ink was made from a compound of “charcoal, gum and water.”²⁸

2.3.3 Forms of Ancient Books²⁹

Most ancient books were written on rolls or scrolls. These were constructed by gluing together sheets of papyrus, then winding them around a stick. The size of the book was usually limited by the trouble encountered when using or storing the scroll. The average scroll was 20 – 35 ft. long. Some have been found that are up to 144 ft. long. Scrolls were usually written on only one side, but occasionally both sides were used for writing. (See Rev 5:1).

Later, the Codex form became popular. This form is the root of our modern book form. Sheets of papyrus were assembled together in leaf form. The sheets were usually written on both sides making books much easier to read, store and handle. Christianity has been credited as the driving force behind the development of this form of book.

2.3.4 Textual Divisions³⁰

The first textual divisions appeared in 586 B.C. around the time of the fall of Jerusalem at the hands of Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon. At this time, the Pentateuch was divided into 154 groupings. The Pentateuch is a name for the first five books of the Hebrew Bible (our Old Testament) that are the writings of Moses. About fifty years later, the Pentateuch was further divided into 54 divisions and 669 smaller sections. This was done to ease the location of references within the text.

The Greeks made their own divisions to the text around A.D. 250. The oldest chapter divisions date from about A.D. 350 and were made in the margins of the Codex Vaticanus. Our modern chapter divisions were made in A.D. 1227 by a professor at the University of Paris named Stephen Langton and by the Archbishop of Canterbury. The first standard verse divisions appeared ca A.D. 900. The Latin Vulgate, translated by Jerome, was the first Bible to use both the standard chapter divisions and standard verse divisions in the Old and New Testaments.

3 Can We Trust the Bible that We Have?

Again, the short answer to this question is ***absolutely!*** Over and over again, the Bible has been shown to be historically reliable and textually faithful to the autographs, or original documents. It is impractical in the space allotted here to provide exhaustive documentation of the evidence available upon which this conclusion is based. However,

a brief summary of the evidence will be presented. The interested reader is encouraged to do further research on the subject.

The historical reliability of the Bible may be established through two primary means. The first involves the modern science of textual criticism. The second involves the science of archaeology. Both together give us significant evidence to support the accuracy and reliability of the Scriptures. It should be noted, that this methodology does not attempt to establish the inspiration of the Scriptures although it may be used together with other evidences to support that conclusion.

3.1 Textual Criticism

The original documents for both the Old Testament and the New Testament have been lost. They were largely written on perishable materials that have long since rotted away. Although the Ten Commandments were written on stone tablets that are durable and may still exist today, their location is unknown. According to Ex 25:21 and Dt 10:5, Moses placed the tablets with the Ten Commandments on them in the Ark of the Covenant. The Ark was then placed in the Most Holy Place in the Tabernacle and later the Temple at Jerusalem. The whereabouts of the Ark and the Tablets have been unknown since the fall of Jerusalem and the destruction of the Temple in 586 B.C.

The Bible that we have today is based on copies of the original documents. Since the originals have been lost, charges of corruption in the text or deliberate alteration to fit the agenda of various groups or leaders are often made. Do these charges have any validity? Is there a way that we can analyze the text and determine its authenticity and accuracy relative to the original? Fortunately, we do have an objective means of doing just that.

The science of textual criticism evaluates the number of extant manuscripts available and the interval of time from when the original was written to the date that the copy was created. It also compares the text from one copy to another to determine their similarity. If there are many similar copies of a document and the time interval between the earliest copy and the original is very short, we have high confidence in the historical reliability of the manuscripts that we have. On the other hand, if we only have a few copies that have significant differences in the text and the time interval between the original and the earliest copy is very long, we have low confidence in the historical reliability of the manuscripts. In other words, we have little reason to believe that the extant manuscripts tell us the same thing that the original document did.

3.1.1 New Testament

So how does the New Testament stack up when analyzed through textual criticism? Very well! The New Testament has more extant copies than any other book from antiquity. There are more than 5300 Greek manuscripts of the New Testament available. In addition, we have more than 10,000 manuscripts of the Latin Vulgate and 9300 other

manuscript versions available. This makes more than 24,000 manuscript copies available for analysis. As a point of reference, the second most well attested document from antiquity is Homer's *Iliad* which has 643 extant manuscripts.³¹ “[T]o be skeptical of the resultant text of the New Testament books is to allow all of classical antiquity to slip into obscurity, for no documents of the ancient period are as well attested bibliographically as the New Testament.”³²

The New Testament was written between A.D. 40 and 100. The earliest extant copy dates to around A.D. 125. As you may see, there is a very short time interval between the original documents and the earliest copies. This leaves very little time for legendary material to develop. In fact, many direct lines of transmission were available in A.D. 125. As mentioned earlier, Irenaeus was alive at the time that our earliest New Testament manuscript copy was made. He was a student of Polycarp who was a disciple of the Apostle John.

A comparison of the bibliographic support for several documents from antiquity is presented in Table 1. As stated previously, the New Testament is the most well attested ancient document with *Iliad* in a very distant second place. For further comparison, *Iliad* has suffered 5% textual corruption. This means that we are certain that 95% of the text in the extant manuscripts is authentic. The New Testament, on the other hand, has only suffered 0.5% textual corruption. As before, this means that we are certain that 99.5% of the text in our New Testament is authentic. Of that 0.5% of the text that is in doubt, “No fundamental doctrine of the Christian faith rests on a disputed reading.”³³

Table 1: Comparison of bibliographic support for ancient documents³⁴

Author	When Written	Earliest Copy	Time Span (yrs.)	No. of Copies
Caesar	100-44 B.C.	A.D. 900	1,000	10
Livy	59 B.C. – A.D. 17			20
Plato (<i>Tetralogies</i>)	427 – 347 B.C.	A.D. 900	1,200	7
Tacitus (<i>Annals</i>)	A.D. 100	A.D. 1100	1,000	20
Also minor works	A.D. 100	A.D. 1000	900	1
Pliny the Younger (<i>History</i>)	A.D. 61 – 113	A.D. 850	750	7
Thucydides (<i>History</i>)	460 – 400 B.C.	A.D. 900	1,300	8
Suetonius (<i>De Vita Caesarum</i>)	A.D. 75 – 160	A.D. 950	800	8
Herodotus (<i>History</i>)	480 – 425 B.C.	A.D. 900	1,300	8
Horace			900	
Sophocles	496 – 406 B.C.	A.D. 1000	1,400	193
Lucretius	Died 55 or 53 B.C.		1,100	2
Catullus	54 B.C.	A.D. 1550	1,600	3
Euripides	480 – 406 B.C.	A.D. 1100	1,500	9
Demosthenes	383 – 322 B.C.	A.D. 1100	1,300	200*
Aristotle	450 – 385 B.C.	A.D. 1100	1,400	49†
Aristophanes	405 – 385 B.C.	A.D. 900	1,200	10
Homer (<i>Iliad</i>)	900 B.C.	400 B.C.	500	643
New Testament	A.D. 40 – 100	A.D. 125	25	24,000+

*All from one copy

†Of any one work

Textual criticism also considers references to the documents under analysis from other writings. For instance, the early church fathers quoted extensively from the New Testament. In fact, one index of New Testament quotations from antiquity contains over

86,000 entries.³⁵ Quotations from the New Testament are so extensive in the writings of the church fathers that one could reconstruct all but eleven verses of the entire New Testament from their quotations.³⁶

Considering the Gnostic Gospels discussed previously, what can we determine about them through textual criticism? We find that they fail on several points that will briefly be presented here. Since the books were written no earlier than the second century,³⁷ these books lack historical credibility. The authors were not eyewitnesses to the events or direct recipients of the sayings that they report. In fact, the actual authors are unknown. These documents are “falsely ascribed to noteworthy individuals to lend credibility to the material.”³⁸ They most certainly were not written by those to whom authorship has been ascribed in the titles.

Furthermore, very few extant copies of the Gnostic Gospels exist. In the case of *Thomas*, only one complete copy along with a few fragments is known to exist. This decreases our confidence in their reliability since we cannot compare many manuscripts for accuracy. Consequently, the Gnostic Gospels do not stand up to scrutiny and should not be considered authoritative.

Clearly, the science of textual criticism provides significant evidence as to the authenticity and accuracy of the New Testament. What can we know about the Old Testament books?

3.1.2 Old Testament

The Old Testament does not have the huge volume of manuscript authority that the New Testament does. Therefore, the analysis of the Old Testament must consider other evidences to determine the authenticity of the text.

Prior to 1947, the oldest extant copy of the Old Testament was the Massoretic Text dated ca A.D. 900. This created a fertile environment for critics to claim that the Old Testament texts had been tampered with by Christians to fit their theology. However, the accidental find in 1947 of a cave near Qumran containing several ancient clay jars by a young Arab shepherd boy changed all of that. The clay jars were found to contain many ancient documents that were collected and preserved by an ancient sect of Judaism called the Essenes. These documents have come to be known as the Dead Sea Scrolls because of the proximity of the find to that body of water. In one of the jars was found a scroll with a complete manuscript of the book of Isaiah which dates to ca 125 B.C.³⁹

Prior to this find, the critics claimed that Isaiah 53 was a later addition to the book by Christians who pushed their ideas of Christ as the Messiah onto the ancient texts. Since the oldest manuscripts dated to A.D. 900, this seemed to have some plausibility to some. However, the copy of Isaiah found with the Dead Sea Scrolls is 95% identical to the Massoretic Text. The 5% variation consists of obvious slips of the copyists pen and

variations in spelling of words.⁴⁰ The variation has not introduced any deviations in doctrine.

Of particular interest is Chapter 53 in the Dead Sea Scroll text. A comparison between the Massoretic Text of Is 53 and the Dead Sea Scrolls text of Is 53 shows that of the 166 words in the chapter, there are seventeen letters in question. Ten of those letters are simply a matter of spelling variations. Four letters are different as a result of stylistic changes. The remaining three variant letters add the word “light” to vs. 11. This change does not affect the meaning of the verse and is supported by the Septuagint (the Greek translation of the Old Testament that was widely used during the time of Jesus). The end result is that out of the previously mentioned 166 words in the chapter, only one word which consists of three letters is in question after 1,000 years of transmission from the time that the Dead Sea Scroll copy was created to the time that the Massoretic Text copy was created.⁴¹

The Septuagint is of further interest in establishing the credibility of the Old Testament Scriptures. This translation of the Hebrew Scriptures into Greek was performed around 250 B.C. by seventy scholars near Alexandria, Egypt. This translation was made because the Jews had been dispersed into many lands and were becoming Hellenized. They were losing the ability to read and speak their native Hebrew language. The importance of this translation is in its similarity to the Hebrew of the Massoretic Text. This shows that very little variation was introduced into the text over a span of nearly 1,200 years. God has preserved his word!

In order to understand how hand copied texts could retain such accuracy over thousands of years, we must look at the disciplines applied by those doing the copying. The following list gives us some detail:⁴²

1. A synagogue roll must be written on the skins of clean animals.
2. It must be prepared for use by a Jew.
3. It must be fastened together with strings made from a clean animal.
4. Every skin must contain a certain number of columns that are equal throughout.
5. The length of a column was to be no less than 48 but no more than 60 lines.
6. Each column was 30 letters wide.
7. The ink must be black and prepared according to a certain recipe.
8. A known authentic copy was used as the exemplar.
9. No word or letter was to be written from memory.
10. Between every consonant was to be the space of a hair or thread.
11. Between every new section was to be the breadth of nine consonants.
12. Between every book was to be the space of three lines.
13. The fifth book of Moses must terminate exactly with a line.
14. The copyist must sit in full Jewish dress.
15. He must wash his whole body.
16. He must not begin to write the name of God with a freshly dipped pen.

17. Should a king address him while writing that name he must take no notice of him.

Upon completion, properly produced copies were considered to be equal to the exemplar. Scrolls of substandard quality were buried or burned. Any older, damaged copies were destroyed to prevent corruption. Clearly, extreme care was taken in preserving the texts of the Old Testament.

3.2 *Archaeology*

The science of archaeology has shed significant light on the text of the Bible. A literal definition of the word “archaeology” is “the study of antiquity.”⁴³ The word is formed from two Greek words: *Archaios* meaning “old or ancient” and *Logos* meaning “word, treatise or study.”⁴⁴ The science consists of the systematic recovery and study of material evidence, such as graves, buildings, tools, and pottery, remaining from past human life and culture.⁴⁵

Does archaeology confirm or counter the Scriptural narrative? The short answer is that overwhelming confirmation of both the Old and New Testaments is found through archaeology. “It may be stated categorically that no archaeological discovery has ever controverted a biblical (sic) reference.”⁴⁶ “The excessive skepticism shown toward the Bible by important historical schools of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, certain phases of which still appear periodically, has been progressively discredited.”⁴⁷ “There can be no doubt that archaeology has confirmed the substantial historicity of Old Testament tradition.”⁴⁸

There are limits to what archaeology can tell us. For instance, consider the following:

- “Archaeology does not *prove* the Bible: It confirms its historicity and explains various passages.”⁴⁹
- “Archaeology has not refuted the radical critics, but has caused a questioning of many of their presuppositions.”⁵⁰
- Archaeology “certainly can’t prove whether the New Testament is the Word of God.” But it does show “that its history and geography are accurate.”⁵¹

One major criticism of the Pentateuch has argued that Moses could not have written the documents because writing had not been invented yet. Furthermore, the legal system established in the Pentateuch was said to be too elaborate for that early date. However, the discovery of the Ebla Tablets, which date to ca 2300 B.C.,⁵² has forced a revision to the critical reasoning. Approximately 17,000 stone tablets from the era of the Ebla Kingdom have been unearthed since 1974. These documents prove that writing existed some 1,000 years prior to the time of Moses. They also document elaborate judicial proceedings and case law, similar to that found in the Pentateuch. Furthermore, all five

cities of the plain mentioned in Ge 14 are referred to in the Ebla Tablets. These are Sodom, Gomorrah, Admah, Zeboiim and Zoar. One of the tablets even lists them in the same order as that found in the Genesis account.⁵³ This is of critical importance because critical scholars have long contended that these cities were legendary and never existed.

Another ancient document that sheds light on the Old Testament is Hammurabi's (Hammurapi's) code (ca 2000 B.C.) found at Susa. This document was inscribed on a block of highly polished stone measuring 8' x 2' x 1 ½'. It contains cuneiform script and is 4,000 lines long. This code defined the laws of his kingdom and dealt with issues such as justice, taxes, interest and loans, marriage, international commerce, etc. Hammurabi was king of Babylon at that time and was a contemporary of Abraham. He may be the Amraphel of Ge 14.⁵⁴ Again, this find provides a glimpse into the sophistication of the ancient cultures and provides substantiation for the narratives of the Old Testament.

The Amarna Tablets (ca 1400 – 1350 B.C.) show that considerable correspondence occurred between Egypt, Syria, Palestine and Babylon.⁵⁵ These tablets mention the "Habiru" as attacking the land. "Habiru" is probably a Canaanite word for Hebrew. These tablets likely describe the conquest of Palestine by Joshua from the Canaanite perspective. The Canaanite leaders were pleading with Egypt for military assistance.⁵⁶ These tablets were written in Babylonian cuneiform script. Since the Egyptian language used hieroglyphics, this shows that a standard diplomatic language of the day existed.⁵⁷

Probably the most significant find was the Behistun Rock (516 B.C.). This rock was discovered by Sir Henry Rawlinson, a British officer, in 1835. It is an isolated rock cliff about 1700 ft. high. On the face of the rock is a smoothed surface about 400 ft. above the road. On the smoothed surface were written inscriptions in three languages: Babylonian, Persian and Elamite. These inscriptions describe the conquests of Darius, king of Persia 521 – 485 B.C. These inscriptions provided the key to the Babylonian language.⁵⁸ This is the same Darius mentioned in Da 5:30 and other Biblical passages.

4 Summary

As stated previously, this is merely a brief overview of some of the evidence that supports the historicity of the Bible. The reader is encouraged to dig deeper by obtaining the books by Josh McDowell cited so frequently in this paper. These books have a wealth of information regarding the evidence that supports our faith. They also have an extensive bibliography of other books on the subject.

Even in this brief presentation, we have been able to definitively assert that the Bible as we know it is trustworthy and above reproach. When examined objectively, it withstands all challenges. The evidence supports the conclusion that God has supernaturally preserved his written word for us. We Christians may rest in our faith and on the reliability of our Bible.

Notes

- ¹ *The American Heritage® Dictionary of the English Language, Third Edition* © 1996 by Houghton Mifflin Company. Electronic version licensed from INSO Corporation. All rights reserved.
- ² Josh McDowell, *Evidence That Demands a Verdict: Historical Evidences for the Christian Faith* Vol. 1 (San Bernardino, CA: Here's Life Publishers, Inc., 1979) 29.
- ³ Ralph Earle, *How We Got Our Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1971) 31. As quoted in McDowell, Vol. 1, 29.
- ⁴ All scripture quotations, unless otherwise indicated, are taken from the HOLY BIBLE, NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION®. NIV®. Copyright ©1973, 1978, 1984 by International Bible Society. Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved.
- ⁵ McDowell, Vol. 1, 30.
- ⁶ McDowell, Vol. 1, 29, 30.
- ⁷ McDowell, Vol. 1, 32.
- ⁸ McDowell, Vol. 1, 33.
- ⁹ McDowell, Vol. 1, 33.
- ¹⁰ Merrill F. Unger, *Unger's Bible Dictionary* Rev. Ed (Chicago: Moody Press, 1971) 70. As cited in McDowell, Vol. 1, 33.
- ¹¹ Norman L. Geisler and William E. Nix, *A General Introduction to the Bible* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1968) 173. As quoted in McDowell, Vol. 1, 35, 36.
- ¹² Geisler and Nix 141. As quoted in McDowell, Vol. 1, 29.
- ¹³ McDowell 37.
- ¹⁴ McDowell, Vol. 1, 37.
- ¹⁵ McDowell, Vol. 1, 37.
- ¹⁶ McDowell, Vol. 1, 37.
- ¹⁷ Athanasius of Alexandria, 39th Festal Letter. As cited in Glenn Davis, *The Development of the Canon of the New Testament*, <<http://www.ntcanon.org/Athanasius.shtml>>.
- ¹⁸ James E. Kiefer, *Athanasius, Bishop of Alexandria, Theologian, Doctor*, <<http://justus.anglican.org/resources/bio/152.html>>.
- ¹⁹ McDowell, Vol. 1, 37.
- ²⁰ McDowell, Vol. 1, 38.
- ²¹ Philip Jenkins, "Hidden Gospels: Nag Hammadi Have Acquired an Importance Beyond Their Historical Value" (2000) <<http://www.bibleinterp.com/articles/hiddengospel.htm>>.
- ²² Douglas Groothuis, "The Gnostic Gospels: Are They Authentic?" <<http://www.equip.org/free/DG040-2.htm>>.
- ²³ Groothuis <<http://www.equip.org/free/DG040-2.htm>>.
- ²⁴ Fitzmyer, "The Gnostic Gospels According to Pagels," 123. As cited in Groothuis <<http://www.equip.org/free/DG040-2.htm>>.
- ²⁵ Adapted from McDowell, Vol. 1, 25, 26.
- ²⁶ J. Harold Greenlee, *Introduction to New Testament Textual Criticism* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1964) 20. As cited in McDowell, Vol. 1, 26
- ²⁷ Adapted from McDowell, Vol. 1, 26, 27.
- ²⁸ F. F. Bruce, *The Books and the Parchments* Rev. ed. (Westwood: Fleming H. Revell Co., 1963) 13. As cited in McDowell, Vol. 1, 26.
- ²⁹ Adapted from McDowell, Vol. 1, 27.
- ³⁰ Adapted from McDowell, Vol. 1, 27, 28.
- ³¹ McDowell, Vol. 1, 39.
- ³² John W. Montgomery, *History and Christianity* (Downers Grove, IL 60515: Inter-Varsity Press, 1971) 29. As cited in McDowell, Vol. 1, 40.

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- ³³ Frederic G. Kenyon, *Our Bible and the Ancient Manuscripts* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1941) 23. As cited in McDowell, Vol. 1, 45.
- ³⁴ McDowell, Vol. 1, 42.
- ³⁵ Leo Jaganay, *An Introduction to the Textual Criticism of the New Testament* Trans by B. V. Miller (London: Sands and Co., 1937) 48. As cited in McDowell, Vol. 1, 52
- ³⁶ Charles Leach, *Our Bible. How We Got It* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1898) 35, 36. As cited in McDowell, Vol. 1, 51.
- ³⁷ Groothuis <<http://www.equip.org/free/DG040-2.htm>>.
- ³⁸ Groothuis <<http://www.equip.org/free/DG040-2.htm>>.
- ³⁹ Geisler and Nix 263. As cited in McDowell, Vol. 1, 58.
- ⁴⁰ Gleason Archer, *A Survey of the Old Testament* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1964) 19. As cited in McDowell, Vol. 1, 58.
- ⁴¹ Geisler and Nix 263. As cited in McDowell, Vol. 1, 58.
- ⁴² Samuel Davidson, *Hebrew Text of the Old Testament* 2nd. Ed. (London: Samuel Bagster & Sons, 1859) 89. Excerpted from citation in McDowell, Vol. 1, 53.
- ⁴³ McDowell, Vol. 1, 17.
- ⁴⁴ Josh McDowell, *Evidence That Demands a Verdict: Historical Evidences for the Christian Faith* Vol. 2 (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, Inc., Publishers, 1993) 17.
- ⁴⁵ *The American Heritage® Dictionary of the English Language, Third Edition* © 1996 by Houghton Mifflin Company. Electronic version licensed from INSO Corporation. All rights reserved
- ⁴⁶ Nelson Glueck, *Rivers in the Desert; History of Negev* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publications Society of America, 1969) 31. As cited in McDowell, Vol. 1, 65.
- ⁴⁷ William F. Albright, *The Archaeology of Palestine* Rev. ed. Harmondsworth (Middlesex: Pelican Books, 1960) 127. Cited in McDowell, Vol. 1, 65
- ⁴⁸ William F. Albright, *Archaeology and the Religions of Israel* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1956) 176. Cited in McDowell, Vol. 1, 65.
- ⁴⁹ McDowell, Vol. 2, 22
- ⁵⁰ McDowell, Vol. 2, 22
- ⁵¹ Lee Strobel, *The Case for Christ* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998) 95.
- ⁵² McDowell, Vol. 1, 68.
- ⁵³ McDowell, Vol. 1, 68.
- ⁵⁴ Henry H. Halley, *Halley's Bible Handbook* New Revised Edition (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1965) 50.
- ⁵⁵ A.H. Sayce, *Monument Facts and Higher Critical Fancies* (London: The Religious Tract Society, 1904) 38, 39. Cited in McDowell, Vol. 2, 71.
- ⁵⁶ Archer 164. Cited in McDowell, Vol. 2, 336.
- ⁵⁷ Sayce 38. Cited in McDowell, Vol. 2, 71
- ⁵⁸ Halley 43.