How do I know the Bible is true?

_Dealing with common objections_

By Rob Phillips

Christians believe in the reliability and authority of the scriptures. That is, we trust the Bible to be the inerrant, infallible, and inspired Word of God and the authoritative source of all we believe and practice. By _inerrant_, we mean the original autographs are without error because they come from God (2 Peter 1:20-21). By _infallible_, we mean the Bible is incapable of error because God, as its author, does not lie or make mistakes (Num. 23:19). By _inspired_, we mean the Bible is “God breathed” (2 Tim. 3:16) And by _authoritative_, we mean that the Bible, as God’s Word, is His written revelation to us and must therefore guide our thoughts, words and deeds (Heb. 4:12).

But many people do not share such a high view of scripture. In fact, some raise serious objections to claims about the Bible’s truthfulness and reliability. While there are many objections, eight of the more common objections include:

1. No one really knows what Bible says because the original manuscripts are lost.
2. The Bible has been copied so many times, with so many variations, there’s no way to know what was originally scripted.
3. The books of the Bible were chosen arbitrarily by councils of men in highly political processes. As a result, they left out some very good books – perhaps some equally inspired writings.
4. It’s silly to assume that one book – the Bible – contains all of God’s truth and that other great writings, from the Vedas to the Book of Mormon, do not come from God.
5. The Bible is full of contradictions.
6. The Bible can’t be true because it depicts a different God in the Old and New Testaments.
7. There are so many translations of the Bible today, it’s impossible to know which translation is the right one.
8. There are so many Christian denominations today, it’s clear that Christians can’t agree on what the Bible teaches.

Responding to these objections is a daunting task – in part because critics raise some valid points. For example, it’s true that we do not have the “autographs,” or the original documents. At the same time, the Bible soars above other ancient documents in many convincing ways, providing evidence of reliability and consistency that gives Christians good reasons to trust it as the Word of God. Our faith is not, as some critics say, “blind faith,” but reasonable faith based on the evidence.

Every Christian should be confident the Bible is true because there are good answers to the skeptics’ objections.

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Objection 1: No one really knows what Bible says because the original manuscripts are lost.

The second part of this statement is true: The “autographs,” or original manuscripts, written on a variety of degradable surfaces from parchment to papyrus, no longer exist. But the remarkable number of copies, dating back in some cases to within a generation of their authorship, makes the first half of this objection false. In fact, we have tremendous confidence in the reliability of the Bible because of its manuscript trail. Craig L. Blomberg writes, “In the original Greek alone, over 5,000 manuscripts and manuscript fragments or portions of the NT have been preserved from the early centuries of Christianity. The oldest of these is a scrap of papyrus containing John 18:31-33, 37-38, dating from A.D. 125-130, no more than forty years after John’s Gospel was most probably written” (“The Historical Reliability of the New Testament,” Reasonable Faith: Christian Truth and Apologetics, pp. 193-94). Andreas J. Kostenberger adds, “The total tally of more than 6,000 Greek mss., more than 10,000 Latin Vulgate mss., and more than 9,300 early versions results in over 25,000 witnesses to the text of the NT” (“Is the Bible Today What WasOriginally Written?” found in www.4truth.net).

So how does the Bible stack up against other ancient manuscripts? According to scholar F.F. Bruce, we have nine or 10 good copies of Caesar’s Gallic Wars; 20 copies of Livy’s Roman History; two copies of Tacitus’s Annals; and eight manuscripts of Thucydides’ History. The most documented secular work from antiquity is Homer’s Iliad with 643 copies. But the New Testament, with its thousands of Greek manuscripts alone, is the most highly documented book from the ancient world (The New Testament Documents, Are They Reliable?, p. 16).

In short, while it’s true we are lacking the “autographs” of scripture, we have every sound reason to be confident that what we read today has been faithfully preserved through thousands of copies, many of them written in close chronological proximity to the time they were originally penned.

Objection 2: The Bible has been copied so many times, with so many variations, there’s no way to know what was originally scripted.

Mormons and Muslims allege that the Bible’s documents were substantially corrupted in their transmission, but there is overwhelming evidence that proves these claims wrong. Scholars of almost every theological persuasion attest to the profound care with which the Old and New Testament documents were copied.

For the New Testament, for example, the books were copied in Greek, and later translated and preserved in Syriac, Coptic, Latin and a variety of other ancient European and Middle Eastern languages. In the Greek alone, more than 5,000 manuscripts and manuscript fragments of portions of the New Testament have been preserved from the early centuries of Christianity. As William Lane Craig explains, “The oldest of these is a scrap of papyrus containing John 18:31-33, 37-38, dating from A.D. 125-130, no more than forty years after John’s Gospel was most probably written. More than thirty papyri date from the late second through early third centuries,
including some which contain good chunks of entire books and two which cover most of the
gospels and Acts or the letters of Paul. Four very reliable and nearly complete NTs date from the
fourth and fifth centuries” ("The Historical Reliability of the New Testament," *Reasonable

While it’s true there are variations among the manuscripts, the vast majority have to do with
changes in spelling, grammar, and style, or accidental omissions or duplications of words or
phrases. Only about 400 have any significant bearing on the meaning of the passage, and most of
these are noted in the footnotes or margins of modern translations and editions of Scripture. The
only textual variants that affect more than a sentence or two are John 7:53-8:11 and Mark 16:9-
20. William Lane Craig writes, “Neither of these passages is very likely to be what John or Mark
originally wrote, though the story in John (the woman caught in adultery) still stands a fairly
good chance of being true. But overall, 97-99% of the NT can be reconstructed beyond any
reasonable doubt, and no Christian doctrine is founded solely or even primarily on textually
disputed passages” ("The Historical Reliability of the New Testament," *Reasonable Faith:
Christian Truth and Apologetics*, p. 194).

Objection 3: The books of the Bible were chosen arbitrarily by councils of men in
highly political processes. As a result, they left out some very good books –
perhaps some equally inspired writings.

Athanasius, bishop of Alexandria, compiled a list of the 27 books we now know as the New
Testament in 367 A.D. He also was the first person in the church to use the word “canon,” which
comes from the Greek *kanon* and means measure or rule. The councils of Carthage (393 A.D.)
and Hippo (397 A.D.) fixed the final list of New Testament books, but it’s important to note that
the question of which books were truly “scripture” was being addressed long before this. Even
more important, Christians believe the Holy Spirit, who authored scripture, also managed its
preservation and organization (2 Tim. 3:16-17; 2 Peter 1:20-21).

Four developments prompted the church to act to “close” the canon: 1) heretics began circulating
false writings; 2) counterfeit books, falsely written under the name of an apostle, began to
appear; 3) Christianity spread to new lands, and missionaries needed to know which books
should be translated into the native languages; 4) the edict of Diocletian (A.D. 303) ordered the
destruction of the Christians’ sacred writings and threatened death for those who refused;
believers needed to know which books were worth dying for.

The early church used a number of criteria in discerning which books belonged in the canon: 1)
Evidence/claims of inspiration; 2) apostolic origin (written by an apostle or an associate who
preserved the apostle’s teaching), the only exceptions being granted to James and Jude, brothers
of Jesus who became followers after His death and resurrection; 3) written while the apostles
were still alive; 4) general acceptance and use by the church and in continuous use in worship
services; 5) agreement with accepted and undisputed scripture.
What about the Apocrypha, a collection of 14 books of Jewish history and tradition written from the third century B.C. to the first century A.D.? The argument against these books includes the following: 1) The Jews never accepted these books as scripture and did not include them in their Bible; 2) any acceptance the books enjoyed was local and temporary; 3) no major church council included these books in scripture; 4) many of the books contain errors; 5) some books include teachings that contradict scripture; 6) neither Jesus nor the New Testament quoted from the Apocrypha even though they quoted from the Old Testament hundreds of times; 7) the Christian churches that accepted these books did so many centuries after the Canon was closed.

The term “Bible” derives from the Greek word biblion (book); the earliest use of la biblia in the sense of “Bible” is found in 2 Clement 2:14, around 150 A.D.

Objection 4: It’s silly to assume that one book – the Bible – contains all of God’s truth and that other great writings, from the Vedas to the Book of Mormon, do not come from God.

In addressing this objection, we must begin with the claims of the documents themselves. The Bible specifically and repeatedly declares itself the written Word of God, while the Vedas do not. Even the Book of Mormon is called “another testament of Jesus Christ.” While many religious writings contain good moral and ethical truths, some of which are consistent with scripture, only the Bible claims to be God’s written and complete revelation to mankind. It answers life’s most important questions: Is there a God? Who is He? How did everything get here? What’s my purpose in life? Why is there so much evil in the world? What’s being done about it? Is there life after death? What’s my responsibility to God? And so on. The Bible’s claim to be the Word of God is backed up by unparalleled textual, archaeological, historical and other types of evidence. Most compelling, however, is the testimony of the Holy Spirit, who authored the scriptures and who confirms in our human spirits the truth of God’s Word.

One other note: God’s revelation also has been given to us in creation and in the person of Jesus Christ. All people can observe creation, as the Psalmist did, and conclude that there is a divine designer behind all things (Ps. 8:3-4). And, as Paul wrote, God will hold us responsible for the revelation His has given us of Himself in nature (Rom. 1:18-23). At the same time, God became flesh in Jesus Christ and declared His truth (see John 1:1-3, 14). The testimonies of creation, of Jesus, and of the Bible are in complete harmony in declaring the truth of God’s revelation to us.

Objection 5: The Bible is full of contradictions.
When someone raises this objection, a reasonable first response is, “Show me one.” Often, the person objecting cannot do so. However, it must be acknowledged that there are numerous places in scripture where there are seemingly conflicting testimonies and apparent contradictions. If the Bible comes from God, and if God does not make mistakes, how do we reconcile these Bible difficulties?
First, we should examine the Bible the same way we examine other documents, using the traditional rules of logic and reason. A good place to start is by applying the law of non-contradiction, which maintains that “nothing can both be and not be.” For example, it cannot be day and night in the same place at the same time. Therefore, if a passage of scripture violates the law of non-contradiction, its trustworthiness is undermined. At the same time, based on the law of non-contradiction, two statements may differ without being contradictory. For example, in Matthew, we read that Jesus met two blind men. In Mark and Luke, we only read about one blind man meeting Jesus. Are these contradictory statements? Not according to the law of non-contradiction and the rules of evidence. If Jesus met two men, He certainly met one. (By the way, alleged contradictions such as this provide supporting evidence for the veracity of the eyewitnesses; they show that the New Testament writers didn’t “get their story straight” in order to concoct a hoax.)

Second, we should consider translation and context. Some Bible passages appear contradictory because of the nuances of Bible translation. A case in point: The Book of Acts has two accounts of Paul’s conversion experience. Acts 9:7 (KJV) says the men journeying with Paul heard a voice but saw no one. Acts 22:9 (KJV) says they did not hear the voice. The two passages appear contradictory, but the Greek clears it up, as do some modern translations. The construction of the verb is different in each account. W.F. Arndt explains: “In Acts 9:7 it (the verb “to hear,” akouo), is not the same in both accounts. In Acts 9:7 it is used with the genitive, in Acts 22:9 with the accusative. The construction with the genitive simply expresses that something is being heard or that certain sounds reach the ear; nothing is indicated as to whether a person understands what he hears or not. The construction with the accusative, however, describes a hearing, which includes mental apprehension of the message spoken. From this it becomes evident that the two passages are not contradictory” (Does the Bible Contradict Itself? Quoted in “Bible Contradictions – Appearance or Reality?” found in www.allabouttruth.org.)

Some additional considerations:

- **Time.** Some seemingly contradictory statements are separated by years – even hundreds of years – and must be seen in their proper time frame. For example, Gen. 1:31 records that God was satisfied with creation, while Gen. 6:6 says He was sorry that He made man. Contradictory? No. Keep in mind that hundreds of years, including the fall of man, came between the first and second statements.
- **Context.** A careful study of the chapters and books in which the seeming contradictions occurred often reveals subtle differences that aid understanding.
- **Sense.** Words and phrases can be used literally or figuratively. For example, Matt. 11:14 identifies John the Baptist as Elijah, yet in John 1:21 John denies being Elijah. Contradiction? No. In Matthew, Elijah is described as the spiritual antitype of the great prophet (see Luke 1:17).
- **Quotations.** Many references to Old Testament passages are not word-for-word quotes in the New Testament. Rather, they are paraphrases or summaries.
- **Understanding.** Some critics assume that passages they can’t explain cannot be explained by anyone. But hard sayings do not imply errors in transmission.
Perspective. When two or more writers provide separate accounts of the same events, differences in names, numbers, and conversations may be accounted for by each writer’s perspective: What did he see? Who did he interview? What was most important to record? Who is the audience to whom he wrote? Should numbers be exact or rounded?

Rick Cornish summarizes: “The Bible enjoys a much better track record than the critics. They’ve been proven wrong many times; Scripture, not once. Even though criticized for centuries, it has stood the test of time. But skeptics play a constructive role. Their challenges force us to study and sometimes reevaluate our interpretations. But until they improve their own game, we need not worry about their accusation that ‘the Bible is full of errors and contradictions.’ It’s not” (5 Minute Apologist, p. 68).

Objection 6: The Bible can’t be true because it depicts a different God in the Old and New Testaments.

Critics argue that the God of the Old Testament is distant, vengeful, and harsh, engaging in genocide and punishing the innocent. Meanwhile, they say, the God of the New Testament is a God of love. Further, His Son Jesus is a gentle, meek, selfless and all-too-human being who speaks in adoring terms of His Father in Heaven. Complicating things further, the God of the Old Testament is described as one (Deut. 6:4) while the New Testament hints at a triune Godhead consisting of three persons: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. How can the Gods of the Old and New Testaments be reconciled as one?

First, it’s important to note that this objection reveals a basic misunderstanding of what the Old and New Testaments reveal about the nature of God. The writers of www.gotquestions.org put it very well: “The fact that the Bible is God’s progressive revelation of Himself to us through historical events and through His relationship with people throughout history might contribute to people’s misconceptions about what God is like in the Old Testament as compared to the New Testament. However, when one reads both the Old and the New Testaments it quickly becomes evident that God is not different from one Testament to another and that God’s wrath and His love are revealed in both Testaments.”

For example, the Old Testament in many places describes God as “a compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger and rich in faithful love and truth” (Ex.34:6; see also Num. 14:18; Deut. 4:31; Neh. 9:17; Ps. 86:5, 15; 108:4; 145:8; Joel 2:13). In the New Testament, God’s love for mankind is manifested more fully in the sending of His Son, Jesus Christ, who died for us (John 3:16; Rom. 5:8). Or, consider that in the Old Testament, God deals with the Israelites much as a loving father deals with His children, punishing them for their idolatry but delivering them when they repented of their sin. In much the same way, the New Testament tells us God chastens Christians for their own good. Hebrews 12:6 says, “[f]or the Lord disciplines the one He loves, and punished every son whom He receives.”
But what about God’s wrath – and jealousy? Both the Old and New Testaments tell us that God delivers judgment on the unrepentant. He orders the Jews to completely destroy a number of people groups living in Canaan, but only after allowing them hundreds of years to repent (see, for example, Gen. 15:17). In addition, God’s order to destroy the Hittites, Amorites, Canaanites and others has a divine purpose: “so that they won’t teach you to do all the detestable things they do for their gods, and you sin against the Lord your God” (Deut. 20:18). When the Old Testament describes God as “jealous” (see Deut. 4:24, for example), the word translated “jealous” (qanna) also means “zealous.” God’s jealousy “is an expression of His intense love and care for His people and His demand that they honor His unique and incomparable nature” (Apologetics Study Bible, p. 273). In the New Testament, Paul tells us that “God's wrath is revealed from heaven against all godlessness and unrighteousness of people who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth” (Rom. 1:18). Jesus Himself often had harsh words for hypocrites (see Matt. 23) and even acted violently against them (John 2:15). He spoke more about hell than heaven, and He is depicted as an angry and wrathful judge in verses foretelling His return (Rev. 19:11-16). Put simply, a God who loves what is good must necessarily hate what is evil.

Throughout the Bible we see a God who patiently and lovingly calls people into a relationship with Him. The entire human race is wrecked by sin, resulting in spiritual and physical death and separation from our Creator (Rom. 3:10, 23; 6:23; Eph. 2:1). Paul wrote that the whole world groans beneath the weight of sin (Rom. 8:22). But from the moment Adam and Eve rebelled against God, He provided a way for that broken fellowship to be restored. He began with a promise of a Redeemer (Gen. 3:15); instituted a sacrificial system in which an innocent and spotless animal would shed its blood to atone for – or temporarily cover – man’s sin; and then sent His Son, the Lamb of God, to take away the sin of the world (John 1:29; 3:16). When one reads the entire Bible, it becomes abundantly clear that the God of the Old and New Testaments does not change (Mal. 3:6; Heb. 13:8).

Finally, what about the one God of the Old Testament and the triune God of the New Testament? There is no contradiction here. While the Bible emphatically declares that there is one true and living God (Deut. 6:4; James 2:19), the Old Testament hints at the triune Godhead, and the New Testament more fully reveals one God in three persons (see Gen. 1:1-2, 26; 3:22; 11:17; Isa. 6:8; Matt. 3:16-17; John 1:1, 14; 10:30; Acts 5:3-4; Col. 1:16; 2:9; Heb. 1:8; 1 Peter 1:2). An ancient saying sums up the difficulty of comprehending the Trinity, but the necessity of believing in the Godhead: “He who would try to understand the Trinity would lose his mind, and he who would deny the Trinity would lose his soul.”

Objection 7: There are so many translations of the Bible today, it’s impossible to know which translation is the right one.

Keep in mind that the autographs, or original documents, of scripture are inerrant – not the subsequent copies and translations. Just because there are dozens of English translations that differ from one another, we have a high degree of confidence that the source documents from which these versions came are accurate representations of the autographs.
Andreas J. Kostenberger writes: [T]he task of translating the Bible from its source languages (Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek) into a receptor language such as English involves many issues related to the nature of language and communication. Some translators maintain that accurate translation requires a word-for-word approach, called formal equivalence. The King James Version and New American Standard Bible, for example, employ formal equivalence. Other translators, however, contend that a one-to-one correlation between two languages actually distorts meaning. So they employ a phrase-for-phrase approach, known as dynamic or functional equivalence. The New International Version and New Revised Standard Version are among the translations employing this method. The goal, of course, “is the production of an English version that is an accurate rendering of the text written in such a way that Bible retains its literary beauty, theological grandeur, and, most importantly, its message” (“Is the Bible Today What Was Originally Written?” by Andreas J. Kostenberger, found in www.4truth.net).

Objection 8: There are so many Christian denominations today, it’s clear that Christians can’t agree on what the Bible teaches.

The Handbook of Denominations in the United States (12th Edition) lists more than 200 Christian denominations in 17 broad categories, from “Baptist Churches” to “Community and New Paradigm Churches.” If Jesus prayed that His followers would be one (John 17:11), and if there is to be “one body and one Spirit … one Lord, one faith, one baptism” (Eph. 4:4-5), why can’t Christians get along? Even within denominations such as the Southern Baptist Convention there have been major splits over issues such as the inerrancy of Scripture and the role of women in the church. Doesn’t all this contentiousness prove a fatal flaw in the Bible, since even people who study it and say they believe it can’t agree on what it teaches?

First, it should be noted that many of the disagreements among Christians are over matters of conscience, such as which day of the week to worship, dietary restrictions, or which translation of the Bible to use (see Rom. 14:1-23; 1 Cor. 10:23-33), or they focus on lesser points of doctrine, such as the mode of baptism, church polity or the manner in which missions activities are organized and funded.

Second, it should be acknowledged that Christians often have engaged in petty squabbling, internal power struggles and political wrangling, resulting in unnecessary divisions in the body of Christ, not to mention damage to the church’s reputation. The New Testament implores believers to be gracious toward and forgiving of one another; clearly, this has not always been the case.

At the same time, Christian denominations generally developed out of a desire for fellowship and joint ministry between individual churches – a biblical concept (Acts. 11:27-30), according to Charles Draper (“Why So Many Denominations?” Apologetics Study Bible, p. 1709). In addition, denominations many times began as renewal movements. The Reformed movements of the 1500s sought to restore the doctrines of the sovereignty of God and justification by faith to the
church, which had all but abandoned these biblical teachings. In time, some Presbyterians drifted toward liberalism and new conservative Presbyterian groups emerged to preserve the Reformed teachings. Baptists came along within the Reformed tradition. Pentecostals and charismatics formed new unions based on their view of the Holy Spirit and spiritual gifts.

There is a rich diversity among Christian denominations, and the differences between them often are not as wide as they appear. This is not to say that all differences are minor, or that all should be set aside for the sake of unity, for in Scripture Christian unity is the product of God’s Spirit working in the hearts of regenerate people and anchored in the truth of God’s Word. Some separations are, in fact, necessary. In the New Testament, many false teachers were disciplined or left the churches (see 1 Tim. 1:18-20; 1 John 2:19). In addition, the apostle Paul warns the church that false teachers will rise to prominence in the church in the days before Christ’s return (2 Tim. 3:1-9). The church today should be on guard against those who preach “another Jesus … a different spirit … a different gospel” (2 Cor. 11:4). For example, Mormons and Jehovah’s Witnesses claim to be Christian in their theology and practice, yet both organizations deny the central teachings of Scripture, particularly those having to do with the person and work of Christ, the person and work of the Holy Spirit, and the gospel.

Charles Draper summarizes: “The most important thing to do is to examine a church’s teaching and practice to see if it is consistent with Scripture. And finally we have to realize that in this life Christians will not agree on everything” (Ibid.).