

How do I know the Bible is true?

Sound reasons to trust the scriptures

In *Systematic Theology (Vol. I)*, Dr. Norman Geisler presents many lines of evidence supporting claims for the Bible as the Word of God. In unique fashion, he labels each line of evidence with a word beginning with the letter “S,” making his arguments relatively easy to follow and remember. This article borrows his headings and then incorporates some of Geisler’s research with numerous other sources, all of which are cited.

The testimony of science

Much in the Bible demonstrates advanced scientific knowledge – that is, God revealed through human scribes information that only He knew long before scientists discovered these truths. For example:

- ***The exact order of events in the origin of all things.*** “In a day when the ancient polytheistic myths of origin prevailed, the author of Genesis declared that the universe came into being out of nothing by the act of a theistic God in the exact order that modern science discovered a millennium and a half later,” writes Geisler. “The universe came first (Gen. 1:1a), then the earth (1:1b), then the land and sea (1:10). After this came life in the sea (1:21), then land animals (1:24-25), and finally ... human beings (1:27). This too supports the view that the author of Genesis had access to some intelligence as to how the Creator made the universe” (p. 545).
- ***Reproduction after each creature’s own kind.*** This scientific fact runs contrary to many ancient and even early modern views. Observation and the fossil record demonstrate that each type of life produces its own kind.
- ***The earth as the raw material of human bodies.*** Many ancient polytheistic beliefs claim that people came from the gods; the Koran teaches that human beings were made from a blood clot (Sura 23:14); but the Bible explains that God made Adam from the earth (Gen. 2:7).
- ***Rain water returning to its source*** (Eccl. 1:7). Perhaps without even understanding it, the writer recorded the process of evaporation, condensation, and precipitation long before scientists figured it out.
- ***The shape of the world as it hangs in space.*** Job (26:7) and Isaiah (40:22) make remarkable statements contrary to the ancient belief that the earth was flat, or square. Some myths held that the earth rested on the back of Hercules or on pillars, but the Bible states otherwise.
- ***Life is in the blood*** (Lev. 17:11), a fact declared in scripture more than 3,000 years ago and only fairly recently attested to in science.
- ***The sea’s paths and boundaries*** (Ps. 8:8; Prov. 8:29). The continental shelf that makes this possible is a fairly recent scientific discovery.
- ***The laws of sanitation*** (Lev. 12-15). Long before there was scientific knowledge of bacteria and germs, God instructed His people through laws of sanitation to protect themselves from diseases spread by unseen organisms.

The testimony of the scrolls

While the autographs, or original manuscripts, of the Bible have not survived the ravages of time, no other book from the ancient world has more, earlier, or better copied manuscripts than the Bible. Examples abound:

The number of manuscripts and their age

- Both the Old and New Testaments are attested by a large number of manuscripts in a variety of forms spanning many centuries. The word “manuscript” is used to denote anything written by hand, rather than copies produced from printing presses.
- 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 there are roughly 5,000 Greek manuscripts of the New Testament, making this collection of 27 books the most highly documented book from the ancient world (*The New Testament Documents, Are They Reliable?*, p. 16).
- Generally speaking, the older the manuscript copies, the better. The oldest manuscript for *Gallic Wars* is roughly 900 years after Caesar’s day. The two manuscripts of Tacitus are 800 and 1,000 years later, respectively, than the original. The earliest copies of Homer’s *Iliad* date from about 1,000 years after the original was authored around 800 B.C. But with the New Testament, we have complete manuscripts from only 300 hundred years later. Most of the New Testament is preserved in manuscripts less than 200 years from the original, with some books dating from a little more than 100 years after their composition and one fragment surviving within a generation of its authorship. No other book from the ancient world has as small a time gap between composition and earliest manuscript copies as the New Testament.
- “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” (Craig L. Blomberg, “The Historical Reliability of the New Testament,” *Reasonable Faith: Christian Truth and Apologetics*, pp. 193-94).
- “The versions and Church Fathers provide helpful early attestation that can aid scholars in reconstructing the most plausible original readings. 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 Was Originally Written?” by Andreas J. Kostenberger, found in www.4truth.net).

The accuracy of the manuscript copies

- Mormons and Muslims allege that the Bible's documents were substantially corrupted as they were copied over time, but there is overwhelming evidence that proves these claims wrong.
- Scholars of almost every theological stripe 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.
- The New Testament is the most accurately copied book from the ancient world. Textual scholars Westcott and Hort estimate that only one-sixtieth of its variants rise above "trivialities," which leaves the text 98.33 percent pure. Noted historian Philip Schaff calculates that of the 150,000 variants known in his day, only 400 affected the meaning of a passage; only 50 were of any significance; and not even one affected an article of faith (*Companion to the Greek Testament and English Version*, p. 177).
- Sir Frederick Kenyon, a New Testament authority, writes, "The number of manuscripts of the New Testament, or early translations from it, and of quotations from it in the oldest writers of the Church, is so large that it is practically certain that the true reading of every doubtful passage is preserved in some one or other of these ancient authorities.... This can be said of no other ancient book in the world" (*Our Bible and the Ancient Manuscripts*, p. 55).
- Many of the apparent discrepancies in the gospels, Acts and the writings of Paul – minor as they are – disappear once we judge ancient historians by the standards of their day rather than ours. As Craig L. Blomberg writes, "In a world which did not even have a symbol for a quotation mark, no one expected a historian to reproduce a speaker's words verbatim" ("The Historical Reliability of the New Testament," *Reasonable Faith: Christian Truth and Apologetics*, p. 207).
- "The point is simply that the textual evidence for what the NT authors wrote far outstrips the documentation we have for any other ancient writing, including dozens which we believe have been preserved relatively intact. There is absolutely no support for claims that the standard modern editions of the Greek NT do not very closely approximate what the NT writers actually wrote" (Craig L. Blomberg, "The Historical Reliability of the New Testament," *Reasonable Faith: Christian Truth and Apologetics*, p. 194).
- The only textual variants in the New Testament that affect more than a sentence or two are John 7:53-8:11 and Mark 16:9-20. Craig Blomberg 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).

- “If we compare the present state of the New Testament text with that of any other ancient writing, we must ... declare it to be marvelously correct. Such has been the care with which the New Testament has been copied – a care which has doubtless grown out of true reverence for its holy words.... The New Testament [is] unrivaled among ancient writings in the purity of its text as actually transmitted and kept in use” (Benjamin B. Warfield, *Introduction to Textual Criticism of the New Testament*, pp. 12-13, quoted in *The Case for Christ* by Lee Strobel, p. 70).

The eyewitness accounts in the presence of hostile witnesses

- The New Testament was written by eyewitnesses and contemporaries of Jesus. For example, Luke probably wrote his gospel around 60 A.D., before he wrote Acts. Since Jesus died around 33 A.D., this would place Luke only 27 years after the events, while most eyewitnesses – and potentially hostile witnesses – were still alive and could have refuted Luke’s record.
- The apostle Paul speaks of more than 500 eyewitnesses of the resurrected Christ when he wrote 1 Corinthians, which critics date around 55-56 A.D. John and Peter add similar testimonies (1 John 1:1-2; 2 Peter 1:16).

The testimony of the scribes

- The 40 men who penned the scriptures over a period of 1,500 years insisted that their message came from God. Many were persecuted and even killed for their faith. Of the 11 faithful apostles plus Paul, only John escaped a martyr’s death, although he was boiled in oil and banished to Patmos; even at that, he continued to boldly proclaim divine truth.
- The authors of the Bible claimed to be under the direction of the Holy Spirit (2 Sam. 23:2; 2 Tim. 3:16-17; 2 Peter 1:21).
- The prophets ascribed their message to God. Phrases such as “Thus saith the Lord,” “God said,” and “the Word of the Lord came to me” are found hundreds of times in the Bible.
- The prophets were convinced they were speaking and writing God’s Word. Near the end of the Old Testament, Zechariah mentioned “the law (and) the words that the Lord Almighty had sent by His Spirit through the earlier prophets” (Zech. 7:12). Peter wrote in 2 Peter 1:21 that “prophecy never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.” Many of the prophets suffered and died for their belief that they were speaking God’s Word (Matt. 23:34-35).
- Writing about the Old Testament, Paul declared that “All Scripture is God-breathed ...” (2 Tim. 3:16-17). New Testament writers like Peter referred to the writings of Paul as “Scriptures” (2 Peter 3:16). And the author of Hebrews ranked the New Testament with the Old Testament (Heb. 1:1-2; 2:3).

- Non-Christian ancient writings attest to the truthfulness of the eyewitness accounts of Christ. Ancient history dealt almost exclusively with political or military rulers, or with religious and philosophical leaders of established and respected religions. Since Jesus fits none of these categories, we would expect to see very little about Him in non-Christian writings. Yet the Jewish historian Josephus, in his *Jewish Antiquities*, written in the last third of the first century, corroborates the claims of the New Testament writers that Jesus was more than a man, was the Messiah, and rose from the dead on the third day (18:63-64, quoted in “The Historical Reliability of the New Testament,” Craig L. Blomberg, *Reasonable Faith: Christian Truth and Apologetics*, p. 215).

The testimony of the supernatural

- The Bible features nearly 300 prophecies of the Messiah, the latest of which dates to more than 200 years before the birth of Jesus. Every prophecy has been fulfilled, with the exception of those pertaining to His glorious return. Many are clear and specific, including:
 - † His virgin birth (Isa. 7:14; Matt. 1:21)
 - † His being “cut off” or killed 483 years after the declaration to reconstruct the temple in 444 B.C. (Dan. 9:24-26)
 - † His birthplace in Bethlehem (Micah 5:2; Matt. 2:1; Luke 2:4-7)
 - † His miracle-working authority (Isa. 35:5-6; Matt. 9:35)
 - † His rejection by the Jews (Ps. 118:22; Isa. 53:3; Acts 4:11; 1 Peter 2:7)
 - † His suffering and death (Ps. 22; Isa. 53; Matt. 27:27ff)
 - † His resurrection (Ps. 2:7; 16:10; Mark 16:6; Acts 2:31; 1 Cor. 15:3-8)
 - † His ascension into heaven (Ps. 68:18; Acts 1:9)
 - † His place today at the Father’s right hand (Ps. 110:1; Heb. 1:3)
- Contrast these specific predictions and their fulfillment in Jesus of Nazareth with the predictions of psychics today who, according to *The People’s Almanac*, 1976, are wrong 92 percent of the time. Even the highly reputed visions of Nostradamus are suspect. He often was wrong, especially when being specific, and his predictions were usually so vague as to be practically useless.
- The Bible gives us many supernatural confirmations of its divine origin. For example, Moses, Elijah and other prophets were given the authority to perform miracles to confirm God’s sovereign power and divine message. Jesus, we are told by Luke, was “a man accredited by God to you by miracles, wonders and signs, which God did among you through him, as you yourselves know” (Acts 2:22).

The testimony of structure

- Even though the Bible was recorded by some 40 different authors – from different backgrounds, occupations and levels of education; who spoke in three different languages; who wrote over a period of 1,500 years – there is remarkable unity amid the vast diversity of scripture’s 66 books.
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- There is throughout scripture the unfolding drama of redemption, with Jesus Christ as its central person, seen in the Old Testament by way of anticipation and in the New Testament by way of revelation.
- The Bible proclaims a unified message: Mankind’s problem is sin, and the solution is salvation by grace through faith in Jesus Christ (Gen. 2:16-17; 3:16-19; Luke 19:10; John 3:16; 5:24; Rom. 3:10, 23; 4:4-5; 6:23; 10:9-13; Eph. 2:8-9; Titus 3:5-7).

The testimony of the stones

- Geisler writes, “No archaeological find has ever refuted a biblical claim, and thousands of finds have confirmed in general and in detail the biblical picture” (*Systematic Theology, Vol. 1, p. 557*).
- Noted archaeologist Nelson Glueck states, “As a matter of fact ... it may be stated categorically that no archaeological discovery has ever controverted a biblical reference. Scores of archaeological findings have been made which confirm in clear outline or exact detail historical statements in the Bible” (*Rivers in the Desert, p. 31, quoted in Systematic Theology, p. 557*).
- Examples of archaeological confirmations include the Tower of Babel (Gen. 11); Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen. 18-19); the fall of Jericho (Josh. 6); King David (2 Sam.); and the Assyrian Captivity (Isa. 20).
- In the New Testament book of Acts alone there are hundreds of archaeological confirmations. During decades of research, Sir William Ramsay wrote, “I found myself often brought into contact with the book of Acts as an authority for the topography, antiquities, and society of Asia Minor. It was gradually borne in upon me that in various details the narrative showed marvelous truth” (*St. Paul the Traveler and the Roman Citizen, p. 8, quoted in Systematic Theology, p. 558*).

The testimony of the Savior

- Jesus claimed to be the Messiah / Christ, the divine Son of God and the divine Son of Man (Matt. 16:16-18; 26:63-64; John 8:58). He was confirmed by acts of God (John 3:2; Acts 2:22), and declared that He had been given all authority in heaven and earth to rule and to judge (Matt. 28:18; John 5:22). Therefore, His views on the Bible are extremely important. What did He have to say?

- Geisler writes, “Jesus declared that the Old Testament was *divinely authoritative* (Matt. 4:4, 7, 10); *imperishable* (Matt. 5:17-18); *infallible* (John 10:35); *inerrant* (Matt. 22:29; John 17:17); historically reliable (Matt. 12:40; 24:37-38); scientifically accurate (Matt. 19:4-5; John 3:12); and ultimately supreme (Matt. 15:3, 6)” (*Systematic Theology, Vol. 1*, p. 559).
- Jesus also personally affirmed many things that Bible critics deny, for example: 1) God created a literal Adam and Eve (Matt. 19:4); Jonah was actually swallowed by a great fish (Matt. 12:40); the whole world was destroyed by a flood in Noah’s day (Matt. 24:39); and there was one prophet Isaiah (not two or three) who wrote all of Isaiah (Mark 7:6-7; Luke 4:17-20).
- Jesus called the Old Testament “the word of God” (Matt. 15:6; Mark 7:13; John 10:35). He introduced Biblical quotes with “It is written,” the standard Jewish introduction to Scripture. In Matt. 22:43, he referred to David’s words in Psalm 110:1 as spoken by the Holy Spirit. He also promised that the Spirit would bring more truth, referring to the New Testament (John 14:25-26; 16:13).
- Jesus promised that the New Testament would be God’s Word. He told the apostles that the Holy Spirit would teach them “all things” and lead them into “all truth” (John 14:26; 16:13). The apostles later claimed this divine authority for their words (John 20:31; 1 John 1:1; 4:1, 5-6). Peter acknowledged Paul’s writing as “Scripture” (2 Peter 3:15-16).

The testimony of the Spirit

- The same Holy Spirit who authored all Scripture (2 Tim. 3:16-17) lives in the hearts of all believers and “testifies with our spirit that we are God’s children” (Rom. 8:16). This means the indwelling Holy Spirit confirms the truth of God’s Word to us.
- Jesus taught that the Holy Spirit would convince unbelievers of their sin of unbelief, of the righteousness of Christ, and of the judgment they will share with Satan if they persist in their unbelief – all clear teachings of Scripture (John 16:7-11).

The testimony of the saved

- The Bible’s life-changing power is widely known through the testimony of those who have come to know Christ. The apostle Paul, once known as a Christ-hating persecutor, declared, “For I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is God’s power for salvation to everyone who believes, first to the Jew, and also to the Greek” (Rom. 1:16).
- The writer of Hebrews declares: “For the word of God is living and effective and sharper than any two-edged sword, penetrating as far as to divide soul, spirit, joints, and marrow; it is a judge of the ideas and thoughts of the heart” (Heb. 4:12).

- Peter added, "... you have been born again – not of perishable seed but of imperishable – through the living and enduring word of God" (1 Peter 1:23).
- The celebrated British archaeologist Sir William Ramsay, who began his studies as a skeptic, became a Christian after exploring the sites of Paul's journeys firsthand and comparing them with the testimony of Acts ("The Historical Reliability of the New Testament," Craig L. Blomberg, *Reasonable Faith: Christian Truth and Apologetics*, p. 220).
- Testimonies throughout the centuries and in this day speak emphatically and gloriously of the power of God's Word to bring about a conviction of sin and forgiveness of that sin by faith in Jesus Christ.

Summary

Geisler concludes, "The Bible is the only known book in the world that both claims to be and proves to be the Word of God.... The testimony of science that demonstrates it, of the scrolls that transmit it, the scribes who wrote it, the supernatural that confirms it, the structure that manifests it, the stones that support it, the Savior who verified it, the Spirit that witnesses to it, and the saved who have been transformed by it. These combined testimonies confirm that the Bible is what it claims to be – the divinely inspired, infallible, and inerrant Word of God" (*Systematic Theology, Vol. I*, p. 561).