

Where did the Bible come from, and can we trust it?

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Course web site: www.covingtoninnovations.com/tough (may move to church web site later)

Recommended reading:

Covington, [*The Greek Text of the New Testament*](#) (on line)

How did the text of the Bible get to us?

The New Testament

Written in Koiné Greek, the everyday language of the Greek-speaking (Eastern) parts of the Roman Empire. This is similar to the Greek of Plato and Aristotle but simpler and with some new words. A vast number of other books, papyri, etc., survive that are also written in Koiné Greek.

Different NT writers have different styles. St. Paul was the most eloquent and used a large vocabulary. The Gospels use a Greek sentence structure that resembles Hebrew or Aramaic, as if the writers were more familiar with these languages, or were working from Hebrew or Aramaic notes. (Jews, including Jesus, used Aramaic for everyday speech but would also know Greek and possibly Latin.)

Transmitted to us by hand-copying of manuscripts...

< 100 A.D. original composition

c. 200 A.D. numerous papyrus fragments; first Latin and Syriac translations

400 A.D. widely distributed Latin translation (Vulgate)

c. 500 earliest surviving complete texts (codices)

The Old Testament

Written over a long period of time (1500-500 B.C.?) in several different forms of Hebrew (with passages in Aramaic). Little definite indication of who wrote what when.

Transmitted by Jewish scribes (Masoretes) who took great care to make exact copies, counting words and letters...

200 B.C. widely distributed Greek translation (Septuagint)

< 68 A.D. Dead Sea Scrolls (fragments of OT)

400 A.D. widely distributed Latin translation (Vulgate)

c. 900 A.D. earliest surviving Masoretic manuscripts

The Bible bears the marks of how it got to us. If it did not, we would not know it had actually been through such a long history; we would think it was a modern fake.

Do we know what the Bible originally said?

(Or has it been distorted by being copied over and over?)

We need to guard against 2 sources of prejudice:

(1) 20th-century American concept of progress.

We often don't know much about ancient history, and we assume that if people lived in log cabins 200 years ago, they must have been living in caves 200 years before that. So the composition of the Bible – 2000 to 3000 years ago – seems unbelievably remote and we assume it took place under very primitive conditions. It didn't.

(2) Overestimating the changes that could happen in transmission

Parlor game "Gossip": people pass along a simple sentence by word of mouth until, after 20 or 30 steps, it is changed beyond recognition.

This does not happen with written texts. If you take a document to one typist, then another, then another, to be copied, there's a good chance that after 20 or 30 copyings there will still be no significant change.

Many Biblical manuscripts are much less than 20 generations away from the original – more like 4 or 5.

Do manuscripts differ? Yes, on minor points of spelling and punctuation, but not on doctrine. Even when the manuscripts are split 50-50, the original reading can often be reconstructed by figuring out which reading could have changed into which. (Often it is evident that an error in one direction is more likely than in the other.)

A few passages (e.g. Mark 16:9-20) are missing from some manuscripts. Even then, there are no doctrines at issue.

Old fragments, translations, etc., show us that the text does not change very much through centuries of transmission – i.e., that newer texts are almost as reliable as the most ancient ones.

The Bible is the best-preserved ancient book. Compare...

Iliad and *Odyssey* – Transmitted by word of mouth for perhaps 500 years, with admixture of at least 2 Greek dialects other than the one they were originally written in.

Aristotle's *Metaphysics* – Composed c. 380 B.C.; earliest available manuscripts are 1400 years later!

Vergil's *Aeneid* – Composed c. 100 B.C.; fragments from Pompeii (79 A.D.); about 7 manuscripts from c. 500 A.D.

Are present-day translations reliable?

Yes. The main objection to King James Version (KJV) is that English has changed a great deal since 1611, so we nowadays are likely to misunderstand what was, in its time, an excellent translation. NASB, CSB, and ESV are especially good modern translations that stick close to wording of KJV.

If translations differ, you can assume the original is unclear! Look to context, not translator, for help. I would worry about a translation in which all unclear verses are nicely cleared up – it would indicate the translator's opinions were being put in. Likewise, beware of translations with an axe to grind, such as Oxford University Press's "Inclusive Version."

Paraphrases (Living Bible, etc.) strongly reflect the doctrinal position of the writer; translations should not.

Remember that the Bible is written in simple language (especially NT) and a translation that seems especially remote, flowery, and/or "beautiful" is, to that extent, inaccurate. Remember also that it is not written in modern English, and if the language of a translation seems exactly like your own, the style may not have been preserved well. NIV arguably runs too close to normal modern English, obscuring the style(s) of the original.

Division into chapters and verses is not in the original; it was added around 1500, to make printed editions easier to use. I do not think verses should be indented as if they were paragraphs; this encourages people to take verses out of context.

Italicized words in the KJV and related translations are not for emphasis; rather, they indicate words inserted for the sake of English grammar, or occasionally interpretation ("an *unknown* tongue," I Cor. 14).

Gender is always a tricky issue for translators. Like Spanish and French, Greek and Hebrew mark all nouns, adjectives, and pronouns for gender. They use masculine forms when gender is mixed or unimportant. If taken literally in English, this gives the impression that most of the Bible is only talking about males. Some translations

(e.g., NRSV) try to handle this by using plurals, paraphrases, etc.; they are accurate in some ways but not in others. Compare translations of 2 Thess. 3:10; the original does not say "man."

Does learning Greek and Hebrew radically change your understanding of the Bible?

No. It helps me understand the cultural background, and it helps particularly when a verse in a translation could be taken more than one way in English. But translations are accurate. That's their job.

Should we believe what scholars tell us about the Bible?

2 kinds of study of biblical text (or any other ancient book):

Textual criticism ("lower criticism") studies the wording of the original text as determined from manuscripts. Results are usually sound, and are testable by discovery of more manuscripts, archeology, ancient languages, etc.

"Higher criticism" attempts to reconstruct how the original text came to be written, by studying the structure of the text. (Manuscripts are no help here, because all manuscripts show the finished version of the text – there are no surviving rough drafts.)

Claims coming from higher criticism range from the believable to the unbelievable. Examples:

(1) "The first Gospels of Matthew and Luke have many passages that are almost the same. They were probably based on a single set of notes (sometimes referred to as 'Q' for German Quelle, 'source')." (My response: Could well be true; we'll never really know.)

(2) "The passages in which Jesus claims to be God were all added later by his followers." (My response: Pure speculation, or worse. There are no manuscripts that lack these passages. There is no historical evidence that they were written any later than any other part of the text. They are "identified" by circular reasoning.)

Crucially, many of the claims of higher criticism are speculative and untestable. We should beware of believing things just because "experts" say so. Opinions change.

Why so much speculation?

(1) Scholars in religion, archeology, etc., are under pressure to produce "discoveries" at the same rate as physical and biological scientists. They often respond to this by spinning untestable theories.

(2) There is a ready market for books that debunk the Bible. Many nonbelievers want the Bible eliminated – even uncontroversial historical facts. (N. T. Wright points out that the debunkers are not converging on an agreed-upon story; they all head in different directions; that's reason to think they're not uncovering truth.)

(3) The popular news media do not distinguish well-confirmed results from speculations. Either one may be reported as a "discovery."

Some principles for understanding the Bible

Take things in context. As with any other book, the Bible is meant to be read as a whole. A general characteristic of human language is that if you take single sentences out of context, their meaning is easy to distort.

Let the clear take precedence over the unclear. For various reasons some of the things the Bible says will be hard to understand. In case of uncertainty, we should always give precedence to things that we understand clearly.

(These first 2 principles are just basic linguistics; they apply to the Bible or any other book or communication.)

The Bible describes things in human terms ("the word of God in the language of man"). If it did not, it would be hard or impossible for human beings to understand. The Bible often describes things as they appear to the human

beings who are involved with them at the time. Thus when the Bible says the sun rises, it does not thereby teach that the earth is flat.

We are not the only people to whom the Bible is addressed. We should always remember that the Bible is God's message to everybody on the stage of history, not just us. Parts of it will be expressed in forms that are more familiar to people in other times and places. Parts of it are addressed to people in particular situations. We need to study the ancient world in order to understand the Bible more clearly.

People in ancient times knew more about ancient times than we do. This is important for dealing with alleged contradictions or errors. Example: There may be some uncertainty about the census in Luke 2, but if the description had not made sense to the original audience, they would have corrected it. Don't treat the Bible as if it were something cooked up hundreds of years later.

What do we mean when we say the Bible is inspired?

As normally understood by evangelicals, inspiration means...

when the biblical writers wrote the original text, God guided them and protected them from error, and as a result, the teachings of the Bible are error-free and authoritative.

It does not mean God dictated every word.

– Isaiah and others say that God did dictate some words. This implies that He did not dictate everything.

– If God had dictated every word the different writers would not have had distinctive styles. But they do.

It does not mean the Bible is an adequate source of information on all subjects.

(When talking about matters that are only incidental to its teaching, such as chemistry, geography, etc., the Bible does not give any new information; it relies on the background knowledge of the audience.)

Study what the Bible claims for itself.

"All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the messenger of God may be competent, equipped for every good work."

(2 Tim 3:16-17, ESV, fn)

I believe the Bible is authoritative because this "comes with the package."

If I believe Jesus is God incarnate,
and Jesus views Scripture as authoritative,
then I also have to view Scripture as authoritative.

(The Bible itself claims to be inspired. But this by itself doesn't prove anything. Other books also claim to be inspired, e.g., the Koran, the Book of Mormon...)

Because we consider the Bible authoritative...

– We are not free to re-interpret it our own way; we have to find out, and stick to, its actual original meaning.
(We're not making up this religion, we're finding it out.)

– We are not free to embellish it with additional legends (e.g., that the cross was made of dogwood) or to change its literary style (by using "beautiful" archaic language). It's not supposed to be a nice story, it's supposed to be accurate!