



A BIBLICAL VIEW ON

# Biblical Reliability



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# Biblical Reliability



Is the Bible historically reliable? That is an important question that deserves an answer since so many people today believe that the Bible is not accurate or reliable. But I challenge skeptics to consider the Bible because it makes significant claims about

itself and because the events recorded in the Bible are historical events and can be tested by the same criteria used to evaluate other historical documents.

There are three specific tests scholars, researchers, and archaeologists use to determine the authenticity of historical material. When I was in graduate school, I went to the research library to find a book mentioned by Josh McDowell. The author (C. Saunders) described three basic principles of historiography. These are the internal test, the external test, and the bibliographic test. Let's apply these three tests to the Bible to determine its reliability as an accurate historical source.

## **Internal Test**

The internal test looks at a document to first see what the document claims for itself, and then to see if there are internal contradictions. What does the Bible claim for itself?

The Bible makes some very significant claims. It claims to be the Word of God. “All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness” (2 Timothy 3:16). Just because the Bible claims to be inspired is not enough to accept that claim, but it does serve to remind us about the unique nature of the Bible. Jesus made an even more significant claim: “But it is easier for heaven and

earth to pass away than for one stroke of a letter of the Law to fail" (Luke 16:17).

The Bible is unique in another significant way: its unity. Consider that the Bible was written over a 1500-year period by over 40 authors from many walks of life. It was written in three languages, on different continents, and under different circumstances. It addresses numerous controversial topics, and yet we have unity and consistency throughout the Bible. Imagine if you had three people living at the same time, same place, speaking the same language writing on one controversial topic. Would they agree? They would not. The unity of the Bible suggests its inspiration.

But this raises another question. Skeptics often like to point to contradictions in the Bible. Often, my quick answer is merely to point to the number of books written over the last few centuries that provide reasonable answers to apparent contradictions. These many books illustrate that difficult biblical texts can be resolved.

Professor Gleason Archer has written about Bible difficulties and concludes: “As I have dealt with one apparent discrepancy after another and have studied alleged contradictions between the biblical record and evidence of linguistics, archaeology, or science, my confidence in the trustworthiness of Scripture has been repeatedly certified and

strengthened.”

The reliability of the gospels is also supported by what is called undesigned coincidences. Professor Tim McGrew has been on our program to talk about these, and his wife Lydia has written a book on the subject. The writer in one gospel provides part of a testimony, while the writer of another gospel provides another key fact. These are not planned but give a fuller picture of the event. They are like pieces of a puzzle and provide yet another important piece of evidence for the internal test.

## **External Test**

The external test looks at how the document aligns itself with facts, dates, and persons from



its world. The facts from archaeology and history validate the historical accuracy of the Bible. In our booklet, *A Biblical View on Archaeology*, I provide many examples of archaeological verification of the historical accuracy of the Bible.

Dr. William Albright concluded, “There can be no doubt that archaeology has confirmed the substantial historicity of the Bible.” Yale professor and expert on the Dead Sea Scrolls, Millar Burrows explained, “Archeological work has unquestionably strengthened confidence in the reliability of the scriptural record. More than one archaeologist has found his respect for the Bible increased by the experience of excavation in Palestine.”

One of the most famous and most significant archeological finds were the Dead Sea scrolls. Over 800 fragments were found, including a complete scroll of the book of Isaiah. It has provided a way to check the accuracy of the transmission of the Old Testament.

Another archaeological find occurred in 1993 when a stone monument fragment was discovered near the border of Israel and Syria. It mentions the “House of David” and implies a victory by Ben-Hadad, king of Damascus (1 Kings. 15:20).

More recently, archaeologists uncovered a Curse Tablet found in Joshua’s altar on Mount Ebal (Joshua 8:30). This ancient He-

brew inscription is centuries older than any known Hebrew inscription from ancient Israel. This is the earliest recorded Divine name in Israel and supports the biblical date of the Exodus.

There are also archaeological finds that validate the New Testament. For example, a ring was found at the Herodium (a desert palace outside of Bethlehem) with the inscription “Pontius Pilate.” The ring was not fancy enough to have been worn by Pilate and was likely used for official communications.

Classical scholar and historian Colin Hemer chronicles Luke’s accuracy in the book of Acts.

With painstaking detail, Hemer identifies 84 facts in the last 16

chapters of the Book of Acts that have been confirmed by historical and archaeological research. This includes nautical details, names of gods, designation of magistrates, and proper names and titles.

### **Bibliographic Test**

Since we do not have the original documents of any ancient literature, this test is used to evaluate the transmission from the original document to the manuscripts we possess today. The Bible is far superior to any ancient historical book in its manuscript evidence with respect to time and the number of manuscripts.

Sir Frederic Kenyon observed, "In no other case is the interval of time between the composition

of the book and the date of the earliest manuscripts so short as in that of the New Testament.”

Many of the books on apologetics or biblical reliability provide a chart of the gap between the original manuscript and the earliest copy that we have: Plato (1200 years), Thucydides, History (1300 years), and Tacitus, Annals (1000 years). That smallest gap is Homer’s Illiad (500 years).

By contrast, the gap for the New Testament is just a few decades. Until the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls, there was a significant gap between the original and the earliest copy. The discovery allows us to now see there was an accurate transmission over a 1000-year period.

The number of manuscripts is also important. When we have more manuscripts, we can compare them and have a better understanding of what was written in the original document. We have seven copies of Plato, eight copies of Thucydides, and twenty copies of Tacitus. There are over six hundred copies of Homer's Iliad.

By contrast, the number of manuscripts for the Bible is significant. The total number of Greek and non-Greek New Testament manuscripts is nearly 24,000. The number of Old Testament scrolls is more than 42,000. F.F. Bruce concludes, "There is no body of ancient literature in the world which enjoys such a wealth of good textual attestation as the New Testament."

## **One Last Test: Prophecy**

The previous three tests illustrate that the Bible is historically reliable, especially when compared to other literature of antiquity. But there is an additional test that only the Bible is able to meet.

More than one-fourth of the Bible's content was prophetic at the time that it was originally written. More than half of these one-thousand-plus prophecies have been fulfilled down to the minutest detail. No other book (religious or secular) can make this claim.

Fifty years ago, J. Barton Payne compiled the Encyclopedia of Biblical Prophecy. It lists 1,239 prophecies in the Old Testament and 578 prophecies in the New

Testament, for a total of 1,817. These encompass 8,352 verses.

Our booklet *A Biblical View on Messianic Prophecy* provides an overview of a few of the hundreds of prophecies written down in the Old Testament and literally fulfilled in the person of Jesus Christ. For example, Zechariah records prophecies about the Messiah that were fulfilled by Jesus during the week He entered Jerusalem and was crucified. He predicted that the Messiah would enter Jerusalem riding a donkey (Zechariah 9:9). That was fulfilled during what we often call “Palm Sunday” (Matthew 21:5; Luke 19:32-37).

The price of his betrayal would be thirty pieces of silver (Zechariah



11:12-13) and the money would be cast onto the floor of the Temple. That was fulfilled by Judas and the chief priests (Matthew 27:3-10). Also, he predicted that the betrayal money would be used to buy a potter's field (Zechariah 11:13). We read about its fulfillment in Matthew 27:6-10.

Prophecy is history written before it happens and is another indication of the inspiration of the Bible. It can also give us confidence that prophecies that have not been fulfilled will be fulfilled in the future.

The Bible is historically accurate, and it shows in many ways that it is also the inspired Word of God.



## **Additional Resources**

F.F. Bruce, *The New Testament Documents: Are They Reliable?* Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1964.

Colin Hemer, *The Book of Acts in the Setting of Hellenistic History*, Eisenbrauns reprint edition 1990.

Josh McDowell and Sean McDowell, *Evidence That Demands a Verdict*, Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2017.

Lydia McGrew, *Hidden in Plain View: Undesigned Coincidences in the Gospels and Acts*, Deward Publishing, 2017.

J. Barton Payne, *Encyclopedia of Biblical Prophecy*, London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1973.

Chauncey Saunders, *Introduction to Research in English Literary History*, New York: Macmillan, 1952.



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