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WHY TRUST THE BIBLE?

MAR
20
26

TABLE OF CONTENTS



01 ARTICLE

Why Trust the Bible?

Andrew Dallas

10 BOOK HIGHLIGHT

Choosing a Bible: Understanding Translation Differences

Written by Leland Ryken | Recommended by Kendra Davis

11 BOOK HIGHLIGHT

Can We Trust the Gospels?

Written by Peter J. Williams | Recommended by Clark Cochran

12 BIBLE READING PLAN

Take Up & Read

March

13 NEW MEMBERS

Jeremy Barton, Johnny Disanza, Andrew Gause, Mariah Gause, Grant Sumners, & Olivia Thayer

WHY TRUST THE BIBLE?



There are a dozen ways—even a dozen excellent ways—we might answer a question like “Why trust the Bible?” You might defend its inerrancy, or its inspiration, authority, and self-authenticating nature. You might bear witness to the ways you’ve seen God change you and those around you through his gospel and his Word—this, too, lends credibility to its trustworthiness. Even still, you might say that the Bible is trustworthy because it makes the best sense of the world we live in.

Those are all great answers, essential answers, in fact—answers worthy of our defense. I want to approach this question, though, from an angle that might be more or less familiar to you—the angle of defending the Bible’s (specifically the New Testament’s) historic credibility as a trustworthy historical document.¹

Why consider this angle?

First of all, in answering the question this way, we are not saying that “Because it is the Word of God” is an insufficient answer. In fact, I actually think this is the best and most important one! Scripture is not finally the product of men but of the Holy Spirit speaking authoritatively through the biblical authors (2 Tim. 3:16; 2 Pt. 1:19–21). We aren’t pursuing an investigation into the historical credibility of the Bible as if we need a more sophisticated or complex answer than this.

However, it is essential to know that, when it comes to historic credibility, God’s Word is a steel frame, not a house of cards. Though there is much more to it, to receive Scripture on its own terms is to receive the history that it retells as a credible account of true events. This is climatically demonstrated in the salvation that Jesus, the God-man, accomplished on behalf of his people. He really lived to fulfill God’s righteous requirements for humanity. He truly died on a Roman cross to bear the judgment of a holy God in the place of his people. And he actually came out of the tomb alive, proving himself to be the Son of God (Rom. 1:4). The gospel is an announcement of these real historical events that calls us to respond today with real repentance and faith. So in a world of voices that would say otherwise, I want to convince you that it is actually the most rational and reasonable thing to see the Bible as historically credible.

Furthermore, as Christians, we need to be equipped to engage with non-believers in our lives who may not see the Bible as trustworthy in any sense. I don’t want you to be without an answer when your neighbor tells you that, as far as he’s concerned, the Bible isn’t even worth picking up because the canon was just cobbled together hundreds of years after the events of the New Testament by power-hungry men looking to further their own agenda. Even if our beliefs about the Bible are theologically correct, we can be caught off guard by statements like this if we are uninformed—or even misinformed—about how

we got the Bible as we have it today. We need to be ready and equipped to address objections like this.

In what follows, I want to argue that we can reasonably conclude that the New Testament is historically reliable if we can prove that in its pages we are reading the *right words* from the *right books* written by *trustworthy people* about *true events*.² Let's address these one at a time.

THE RIGHT WORDS: RELIABILITY OF THE BIBLICAL TEXT

We can divide questions about the reliability of the biblical text into two overall categories: questions of *transmission* and questions of *translation*.

Transmission³

Questions of transmission ask, "How did the text of the New Testament pass through history to us today?" Today, we don't currently have the original New Testament documents (i.e., the *autographs*). Instead, we have thousands of Greek New Testament manuscripts. They represent the laborious, tedious work of scribes who hand-copied the New Testament text to preserve it. Scholars estimate that we have well over 5,500 Greek manuscripts alone. These range from small portions of a single New Testament book to complete New Testaments. In addition to Greek, we also have translations of the New Testament into other languages, such as Latin, Coptic, and Syriac.

Who wrote these manuscripts down? Many, if not most, of these scribes are anonymous, and their identities are lost to history. They were simply faithful Christians who preserved the biblical text for future generations by copying it down. Scribal work became a formalized monastic task during the Middle Ages. Broadly speaking, these scribes were faithful to simply record what they had been given. Their goal wasn't revisionist history but faithful transmission. We see this in the fact that, although these scribes would have likely professed Christianity by conviction, they also accurately transmitted pagan literature of the classical Greeks and Romans, even when those texts reflected a paganism that contradicted their own beliefs.

Generally faithful, though, doesn't mean they were perfect. Scribes made mistakes. Some (it appears) may at times have altered the biblical text to clarify something that seemed unclear or difficult, or perhaps appeared to be an earlier scribal error. The

result is variations between our manuscripts. I'm going to give you what might be a startling number at first. If you compare several sources, the number of variants across all manuscripts of the Greek New Testament ranges somewhere from 400,000 to about 500,000 (this likely does not account for spelling differences as well!).

How should we think about these manuscript variations and their relationship to our confidence in the biblical text as we have it?

First of all, it is worth noting that scholars estimate that a sizable portion of those variants (nearly half) are *singular variants*. They appear to be one-off errors in a single manuscript. If they're not singular variants, then some of them are also just clear and obvious mistakes, like swapping two letters in a word in a clearly accidental way.

Second, Christians throughout history have never had their head in the sand with regard to variations between manuscripts. They've also never tried to hide where they might exist. In our modern translations, translators provide footnotes to notify us when there are textual variants that are significant enough to possibly skew how we might read the text.

Third, as one apologist frames it, what becomes significant in this conversation is not the *number* of the variants but the *nature*.⁴ Once we whittle down the variants to those that actually become significant to the meaning of the text, even still, many of these do not *drastically* alter the text's original meaning. It may be a word or phrase that is included in some manuscripts but excluded in others.

Finally, we should be encouraged because there are mechanisms and processes for comparing meaningful variations that aim at determining what the original text most likely says. This is the work of the discipline known as *textual criticism*. John D. Meade and Peter J. Gurry, in their book *Scribes and Scripture: The Amazing Story of How We Got the Bible*, define textual criticism as "a discipline that seeks to recover the original wording of an ancient book by examining the remaining copies of that book." How exactly does this work? Meade and Gurry explain that the "overarching principle is that we should give preference to the reading that best explains how the others were created." In other words, textual critics survey all of the manuscript evidence together—along with all of their variations—and reason critically from those variations about what the original manuscripts

would have most likely contained and how scribal decisions or mistakes could have produced the variations that we have. This requires critical, creative reasoning, but it's not impossible!⁵

There are excellent resources available that walk through how a textual critic might approach some well-known manuscript variations.⁶ For now, though, it is important for you to see that we do in fact have reliable mechanisms for being able to work backwards across manuscript variations to determine with a high degree of confidence what the original biblical text would have most likely said.

Translation

Having considered questions of how the biblical text was transmitted, let's think about a few points that will help us to see that the Bible translations we have are, in fact, reliable.⁷

First of all, accurate translation is possible. Just because it is laborious and Hebrew, Aramaic, Greek, and English are complex does not mean translation is unattainable. If we trust that tools like Google Translate can truly help us communicate across language barriers in day-to-day life, how much more should we trust that gifted, trained scholars in these languages can achieve accurate translations of well-charted languages!

Second, problems of translation are handled very similarly to problems of transmission when it comes to notifying the reader. Translators acknowledge debatable words or phrases in footnotes so that we are aware of passages where translation issues exist.

Third, having multiple accurate scholarly translations is a help rather than a hindrance. They help us to identify when a separate translation deviates from the rest and veers into error.

Fourth, different translations of the Bible in any language exist for a complex number of reasons.⁸ Some translations reflect different commitments on the part of a translation committee. You might have a translation like the NASB or ESV that is more strictly a word-for-word translation, whereas translations like the NIV are more of a thought-for-thought translation or even a paraphrase. Translations may be updated because of the way that the target language and culture have changed over time. And even still, other translations might be made in order to keep up with updated manuscript copies. We

shouldn't be dismayed or confused by the number of translations we have. Broadly speaking, having multiple translations can actually help to preserve our understanding of the original text.

Where issues do exist, either with regard to manuscript variation or translation questions, it's important to step back and think about how much of our New Testament is crystal clear to us. It's easy to lose sight of this overall forest of clarity for the trees of a debated phrase or verse here and there. Significantly, there is no major Christian doctrine that rests either on the outcome of questionable translation or manuscript variation. And where we do come across footnotes that notify us of transmission or translation questions, there is scholarly, critical research that we can seek out to investigate what the original text in those locations would most likely have said and why we might prefer some renderings over others. All of this is to say, then, that when we pick up our Bibles, we can trust that we are in fact reading the right words.

THE RIGHT BOOKS: RELIABILITY OF THE BIBLICAL BOOKS

So we have good reason to believe that we have the right words in the Bibles we have. Let's now consider whether we have the *right books*.⁹

Culturally speaking, there is no shortage of misunderstanding about the formation of the New Testament canon. I can't address every misconception here, and I hope you will read further into this topic.¹⁰ What I want to do is consider a brief sketch of how the New Testament canon was recognized over time, and some key features of the books that have been recognized as canonical. In doing so, I think we'll be well on our way to recognizing that the New Testament books we have are, in fact, historically credible. They are the books we should be reading.

First, a definition: the word "canon" comes from the Greek word meaning "rule" or "standard." When we refer to the New Testament canon, we are talking about those 27 books which the church recognizes as the rule and standard for Christian faith or practice—that is, those words which come from God and which we recognize as authoritative. We find a precedent for what we recognize as the canon in the New Testament books themselves. The apostles, guided by the Holy Spirit, wrote down Jesus' words with the authority which Jesus had given to them, and their writings were read, circulated, and received in the

early church as the Word of God (John 14:26; Col. 4:16; 1 Thess. 2:13; 2 Pt. 3:14-16).

This helps us to consider another crucial aspect of the canon's development: The early church saw themselves as *receiving* the canon, not *selecting* it. The church as a whole received the Word of God through the apostolic teaching, and generations of Christians would pass on to the next those books which they recognized as God's authoritative Word.

Broadly speaking, there were three general categories of writings in the early church: canonical, edifying (spiritually helpful but not canonical), and apocryphal (not to be read; this is also different from the Catholic Apocrypha). This distinction serves our understanding of canonical formation in a few ways. First of all, the category of "edifying" helps explain the inclusion of books like *The Shepherd of Hermas* or *The Apocalypse of Peter* in various collections of New Testament manuscripts that have been discovered. Second, a book's perceived spiritual value alone didn't automatically mean the church would classify it as canon. As we will see shortly, the book needed a direct tie to an apostle.

As decades and centuries progressed, various needs arose, which constituted the need for the church to standardize and agree upon which books were canonical and which were not. At a very practical level, standardization determines which books would be read and preached from in the corporate gatherings of the church. Furthermore, by at least the second century, heretics began teaching false doctrine that demanded refutation. Notably, one heretic named Marcion had his own opinions about which portions of Scripture were truly inspired, and he tried to support his heretical teachings with his own modified versions of New Testament canonical books. Church leaders like Tertullian, who refuted his teachings, also helped to clarify those books which the church recognized as authoritative.

Canonical books were typically classified into sub-groupings of the broader canon.¹¹ For example, the four Gospels were likely the first sub-collection of canonical New Testament books to be solidified and recognized as a closed collection. We know that the four Gospels would have been widely received as a collection by 180 AD based on an excerpt in Irenaeus' *Against Heresies*, but it is likely that they were recognized earlier. Other major sub-groupings would have been the Pauline Epistles (sometimes including Hebrews) and the Catholic (i.e., general or

universal) Epistles (James, 1-3 John, 1-2 Peter, Jude), while Acts and Revelation have their own separate histories of their reception in the early church. For our purposes, it is helpful to know that a majority of the New Testament (the four Gospels, Acts, the Pauline Epistles, 1 John and 1 Peter, and Revelation in some places) would have been widely read and used in the churches by the end of the second century AD.

The first undisputed 27-book New Testament was published by Athanasius in one of his *Festal Letters* in 367 AD. As we have already observed, this was not the first attempt by the church to explain which books were canonical. Rather, Athanasius' letter gathered the various sub-collections into a full canonical list. Other church leaders, such as Jerome, Rufinus, Augustine, and Pope Innocent I, would likewise publish 27-book New Testament canonical lists in the following decades.

This brings us to a question: Why did *these* 27 books rise to the top? Are there any qualities about them that would distinguish them from other books the church did not recognize as canonical? There are. Let's consider four primary attributes of the 27 New Testament canonical books, which set them apart.¹²

The first thing that sets these books apart is their *apostolicity*. This is a complex word that means exactly what it sounds like. It means that either a book was written by an apostle or by a companion of an apostle of Jesus. Theologically, this matters because of the authority that Jesus granted to the apostles to lay a foundation for the early church and to recount the details of his own life and ministry. Historically, though, this also means that the authors of our New Testament books were either themselves eyewitnesses to Jesus or very close to the people who were. This was the most important criterion for the early church.

Related to the first attribute is the *antiquity* of the books. This aspect matters because of its relationship to apostolicity. A book written too late can't have been written authoritatively by an apostle or their companion.

Next, the New Testament books pass the test of *orthodoxy*. This is to say that the books that the church recognized as canonical are theologically and historically consistent with prior revelation.

Finally is the aspect of *universality*, that is, the New Testament books recognized by the church

as canon were ultimately those recognized broadly in the church—not just among a few fringe groups. Historically, this actually works to address some false narratives about the canon’s formation. The canon wasn’t ultimately determined by a few individuals looking to further their own agenda. It was a broad consensus among the Spirit-filled people of God whose final shape emerged over time.

So there is great reason to believe we have the *right text* and that we’re reading the right text from the *right books*.

TRUSTWORTHY PEOPLE: RELIABILITY OF THE BIBLICAL AUTHORS¹³

But can we trust the biblical authors? Do they show themselves to be faithful historians and trustworthy people? Let’s address this by first considering their motives in writing as best as we can discern them.

Luke begins his gospel in this way:

“Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile a narrative of the things that have been accomplished among us, just as those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word have delivered them to us, it seemed good to me also, having followed all things closely for some time past, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, that you may have certainty concerning the things you have been taught.” (Lk. 1:1–4)

First of all, Luke is writing an “orderly account” about Jesus Christ. Although Luke was not himself an apostle and therefore not an eyewitness to these events, he puts himself in the same vein as those who were. He has gathered and compiled these details about events he has studied “closely for some time past.” He was a careful historian seeking to get the facts right.

Luke’s goal, in his own terms, is to provide certainty for what Theophilus has been taught. Luke was not only writing history for its own sake. He wanted to confirm Theophilus in his belief about the details and significance of Jesus’ life, ministry, death, and resurrection. He was a historian writing to persuade and confirm.

We observe the apostle John in his gospel speaking in similar terms. After having witnessed the crucifixion of Jesus and the soldier piercing Jesus’ side with a spear, John says this with reference to himself: “*He who saw it has borne witness – his testimony is true,*

and he knows that he is telling the truth – that you also may believe” (John 19:35). These are just two examples that prove the point that the New Testament authors, and specifically the gospel authors, were faithful historians who sought to teach and persuade.

But what if they were trying to deceive? Greg Gilbert helpfully sums this up: “Nobody dies for a hoax.” The fact that most of the New Testament authors, having seen the risen Christ, were themselves willing to be beaten, persecuted, and some killed for what they believed significantly challenges any notion of an intent to deceive.

But what if *they* were deceived? A fair question. But this claim doesn’t do justice to the fact of just how slow most of the disciples were to accept who Jesus is, his teachings, and even the reality of his resurrection (Matt. 28:17; John 20:24–29). Even two of Jesus’ own half-brothers, James and Jude, who once didn’t believe in him (John 7:5), eventually became convinced that their own brother was in fact the resurrected Son of God and would go on to write two New Testament letters. The unbelief of these men isn’t to be commended or emulated, but it should be proof to us that the New Testament authors would not have been quick to have the wool pulled over their eyes.

Next, let’s think about the New Testament authors’ sources, particularly for the gospels. First of all, Matthew and John were themselves *direct eyewitnesses* to the life and ministry of Jesus because they were apostles. They wrote of that “which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we looked upon and have touched with our hands, concerning the word of life” (1 Jn 1:1).

The second kind of source material is like the first. It is *secondhand eyewitness testimony*. Most scholars believe that the apostle Peter was the primary source for Mark’s gospel. Furthermore, much of Luke’s source material for his gospel and for Acts likely came from direct eyewitnesses to Jesus’ ministry. One could very easily conceive that on Luke’s travels with the apostle Paul in Acts, their interactions with Christians throughout the churches that they visited would have been a direct source of information for Luke.

A third kind of source material for the gospels is *written source material* about Jesus’ life. For one thing, most modern scholars believe that Mark’s gospel came first and that it was a source of material

for both Matthew's and Luke's gospels. Furthermore, there are some scholars who theorize about a written collection of the sayings of Jesus that at least Matthew and Luke might have used as a primary source for their gospels. Though an investigation into this question goes beyond the scope of our current study, it is helpful to know of the possibility of such a source as we inquire about the trustworthiness of the gospel authors.

Lastly, let's consider how the attention to detail in the gospels lends credibility to their writings. From a historical perspective, we might say that the gospel authors were *dangerously detailed* in the accounts they provided. Specificity invites challenge and refutation. Furthermore, the coordination of accuracy and agreement across four men who wrote for different audiences at different times becomes increasingly implausible as their detail gets more specific.

A full discussion of this topic is worthy of a whole book.¹⁴ For now, I would challenge you to simply observe the sheer breadth and depth of detail that the authors include next time you pick up the Gospels and Acts. You might look for details like the names that people have, the geographic details of Jesus' travels, the Jewish customs of Jesus' day with which he and his disciples interact, and the titles of government officials. In all these things, the biblical authors were meticulously accurate. If we can trust them with details like these, we should simply trust that, in all matters, they were men who told the truth.

TRUE EVENTS: RELIABILITY OF THE BIBLICAL EVENTS¹⁵

Now we come to the question of the biblical events themselves. For all we've covered so far, we are still faced with a question: Did the events we read about actually happen?

We've seen that we have great reason to believe that they did based on the text, the canon, and the authors who wrote them. However, let's address one common objection to the reality of the biblical events that people might have—namely, the miracles we find in the biblical accounts. Some would outright reject the New Testament's reliability on the grounds that the miracles of the New Testament aren't historically believable.

Much can and has been said on this. However, let's consider a few key points to show that the miracles at

the heart of our New Testament—and especially the miracle at their center, the resurrection—can, in fact, be trusted as historically credible.

First, we need to recognize at the outset that none of us can help but approach the topic of miracles with our own presuppositions about God and the world in which we live. One author, F.F. Bruce, puts it this way: "Our estimate of the miracles will depend on our estimate of Christ." For example, what if you approach the New Testament even with just an openness to the possibility of a Creator? In one sense, it is of course astounding that we come to the gospels, and we see Jesus speak and the storm obey. In another sense, though, this is exactly the kind of power and authority we would expect the sovereign God to wield. We are amazed as we behold the Incarnate Son of God performing these miracles, while, at the same time, we are confirmed in our understanding that God does, in fact, have that kind of authority.

On the other hand, if you approach the Bible with a commitment to outright reject the notion or possibility of a sovereign, personal Creator, you will feel a *need* to explain the miracles away and to find some other possible explanation. If you find yourself convictionally opposed to the possibility of miracles, you might do well to ask whether this betrays an inward commitment to reject even the possibility of a real and living God, especially when the bulk of the evidence shows that we can trust the events we read about in the gospels.

Second, if we analyze Jesus' miracles as they are presented to us in the gospel accounts, we recognize two things about their nature that should aid us in seeing them as historically plausible and trustworthy events. First of all, the miracles are consistent with the *character* of Jesus presented to us in the gospels. When it comes to miracles, we aren't presented with a Jesus who is flaunting a supernatural ability to gather a cult following. What do we see? We see Jesus grieved and angered at the hard-heartedness of religious hypocrisy and moved with pity, compelled to heal the sick and care for human need (Mk. 2-3). We see a Jesus who saw a great crowd in need of food and of true spiritual shepherding, so from compassion, he taught them the Word of God, multiplied the bread and fish for them to eat, and then pointed to himself as the true bread of God who came down from heaven to give life (John 6; Mk. 6). We see Jesus walking on water to come to his disciples, proving to them that he possesses sovereign authority in his

creation and that he would wield that authority to be with them wherever they go (again, John 6). His miracles reveal in enacted ways what we see to be true of Jesus' heart and disposition toward needy sinners throughout the rest of the gospels.

The miracles are also consistent with the *mission* of Jesus presented to us in the gospels. The physical, miraculous acts Jesus performed cannot be divorced from his claims about himself to be the Son of God. Nor can they be divorced from his divinely appointed purpose to live, die, and be raised from the dead in the place of his sinful people. With regard to Jesus' mission, some have called Jesus' miracles "living parables." That is, the physical miracles teach in practical, physical terms what Jesus was claiming to be able to do spiritually. Just as Jesus healed the physically blind, so he has the power and authority to heal the spiritually blind, giving them eyes to see his glory as the divine Son of God. Just as Jesus raised the physically dead to life, so also he has the power and authority to bring the spiritually dead to eternal life through spiritual union with himself in his own resurrection. This all aids us in thinking about the historical reliability of the miracles of the New Testament because in all the details that the gospels convey, we are presented with a singular, consistent portrait of Jesus Christ. His miracles, his teaching, and all of this culminating in the greatest of his miracles, his own resurrection from the dead, communicate and portray to us one and the same Jesus. He is utterly consistent in all of it.

Let's conclude by giving some specific attention to this greatest of Jesus' miracles—the resurrection. The resurrection is significant enough that the apostle Paul can say that if it's not true, our faith is in vain and we are still in our sins (1 Cor. 15:14–17). Let's consider a few key reasons that show the historical credibility of the resurrection.

First, consider the transformation that we see in the disciples after Jesus' death and resurrection (Jn. 20:19–20; Acts 1–2). Something amazing *must* have happened between the events of John 20, in which we see the disciples fearfully hiding, and the events of Acts 1–2, where a restored Peter preached boldly to the very people who killed their Lord, Savior, and friend. I think the best explanation for this reality is that they actually saw and were convinced that Jesus rose from the dead, proving himself to be the Son of God.

Consider next the sheer number of eyewitnesses to the resurrected Jesus (1 Cor. 15:4–8). We could survey each of the gospels for this fact, but Paul summarizes in 1 Corinthians 15 that Jesus bodily appeared to: Cephas (Peter), the twelve, then to 500 believers at one time, then to James, then finally to Paul (referring to his encounter with Jesus on the road to Damascus in Acts 9). We might have reason to call the resurrection into question if it were just three or four people on a single occasion who claimed to see a resurrected Jesus. But in this text alone, I count six distinct resurrection appearances that Paul recounts. Some of these individuals would have seen Jesus on multiple occasions and with different groups of eyewitnesses at once. Not to mention that on one of these occasions, more than 500 people saw Jesus after he had been raised from the dead! The breadth of eyewitness testimony to the resurrection is too strong to discount. It significantly strengthens our case for the credibility of Jesus' resurrection.

Finally, consider the ways the gospel authors are careful to demonstrate that Jesus did, in fact, rise *bodily* from the dead. For one thing, those who crucified and buried Jesus fabricated stories to explain the empty tomb but never themselves produced his body (Matt. 28:11–15). The Romans and the Jewish leaders, if they had a body, could have easily produced it. But Matthew tells us, instead, the Jewish leaders circulated a fabricated tale, claiming the disciples had taken the body. On its own, maybe this point isn't as strong. But when we consider it in light of all the other evidence, it is a fair point to argue that if Jesus really hadn't risen from the dead, his opponents could have easily proven it by simply showing everyone his body.

The gospel authors also tell us that, on multiple occasions, Jesus ate with his disciples after his resurrection (Lk. 24:42–43; John 21:9–14). Luke tells us that he ate broiled fish in front of the disciples. Furthermore, John recounts Jesus preparing breakfast for the disciples on the shore and inviting them to join him. As simple as these details may seem, their purpose is clear—spirits can't eat. People with human bodies eat. Jesus wasn't resurrected spiritually but bodily. He had died bodily, and he had really risen bodily.

Similarly, we are told that Jesus' body bore the marks from his crucifixion (John 20:24–29). Thomas puts his hands in the marks that Jesus bore in his side and hands from where, days before, nails and spear had

pierced. There was no bait and switch before Jesus went to the cross. The Jesus who rose on the third day is the same one who died on the cross.

Because the tomb is empty, we have good reason to believe the miracles of the New Testament truly happened. And, if they truly happened, we can trust that the other events the New Testament authors record happened as well.

CONCLUSION

When you add it all up, we have excellent reason to believe that, in the Bible, we have the right words in the right books from trustworthy authors about true events. So, what do we do with all of this?

A final quote from F.F. Bruce related to the miracles of the gospels sums it up well:

“The question whether the miracle-stories of the Gospels are true cannot be answered purely in terms of historical research. Historical research is by no means excluded, for the whole point of the gospel is that in Christ the power and grace of God entered into human history to bring about the world’s redemption. But a historian may conclude that these things probably did happen and yet be quite far from the response which the recorders of the events wished to evoke in those whom they addressed. The question whether the miracle-stories are true must ultimately be answered by a personal response of faith—not merely faith in the events as historical but faith in the Christ who performed them, faith which appropriates the power by which these mighty works were done.”¹⁶

We’ve seen that it’s rational to believe the Bible is historically true, but this returns us near to where we began—we must actually trust the Bible and the God who has breathed it out. Agreement with its historical credibility is not enough. Scripture calls us to more, to, as Bruce puts it, the “personal response of faith”—faith in the crucified and risen Christ who died in the place of guilty sinners like you and me and who calls us to walk by a living faith in his Word each and every day. The question we are left with, then, is no longer one of whether the Bible is actually trustworthy. The question is, will you trust it?

– Andrew Dallas

Footnotes

¹ Though I'm focusing on the New Testament here, great resources exist that address similar questions about the Old Testament. Some helpful resources on the historical reliability of the Old Testament include: Tremper Longman III and Raymond B. Dillard, *An Introduction to the Old Testament*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2006); John D. Meade and Peter J. Gurry, *Scribes and Scripture: The Amazing Story of How We Got the Bible* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2022); Paul D. Wegner, *The Journey from Texts to Translations: The Origin and Development of the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2004).

² This line of argumentation follows the general outline of Greg Gilbert, *Why Trust the Bible?* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2015).

³ Unless otherwise noted, the arguments and data in this section are largely taken from JMeade and Gurry, *Scribes and Scripture*, 27-106, and Gilbert, *Why Trust the Bible?*, 41-58.

⁴ Tim Barnett, "Textual Variants: It's the Nature, Not the Number, That Matters," *STR International*, <https://www.str.org/w/textual-variants-it-s-the-nature-not-the-number-that-matters> (accessed February 18, 2026).

⁵ For example, Meade and Gurry explain that, when comparing multiple variations and trying to determine what the original text may have said, textual critics "prefer the reading that: is less harmonized to other passages; shows influence from Hebrew; is attested earlier; is found in wider geographical locales; is more awkward grammatically; fits better with the author's known style and theology; and scribes would find more difficult."

⁶ You can see several helpful examples of how manuscript variations are resolved in *Scribes and Scripture*, 94-5, and *Why Trust the Bible?*, 56.

⁷ These points are mostly borrowed from Gilbert, *Why Trust the Bible?*, 37-8.

⁸ This point summarizes some of the key points of Meade's and Gurry's explanation for the existence of multiple translations. *Scribes and Scripture*, 216-22.

⁹ Unless otherwise noted, the arguments and data in this section are largely taken from F.F. Bruce, *The New Testament Documents: Are They Reliable?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1981), 16-24; Gilbert, *Why Trust the Bible?*, 59-76; Meade and Gurry, *Scribes and Scripture*, 107-68.

¹⁰ Some helpful resources on the canon and some misconceptions around its formation are Michael J. Kruger, *Canon Revisited: Establishing the Origins and Authority of the New Testament Books*, (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012) and Michael J. Kruger, "The Complete Series: 10 Misconceptions About the NT Canon," *Canon Fodder* (blog), August 24, 2012, <https://michaeljkruger.com/>

[the-complete-series-10-misconceptions-about-the-nt-canon/](#) (accessed February 18, 2026).

¹¹ For a full history of the New Testament sub-groupings and a history of canon lists, see *Scribes and Scripture*, 147-68; *The New Testament Documents*, 16-24.

¹² The phrase "attributes" with respect to the canon is borrowed from Kruger, *Canon Revisited*, 97. The four attributes are borrowed from Gilbert, *Why Trust the Bible?*, 68-72.

¹³ Unless otherwise noted, the arguments and data from this section are largely adapted from Bruce, *The New Testament Documents*, 61-74; Gilbert, *Why Trust the Bible?*, 103-24.

¹⁴ See Peter J. Williams, *Can We Trust the Gospels?* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2018), 51-86.

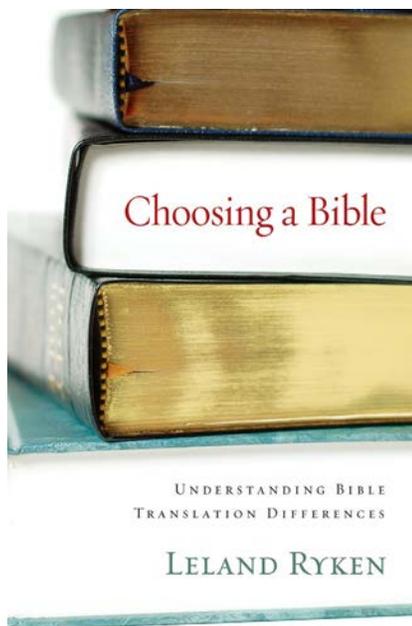
¹⁵ Unless otherwise noted, the arguments and data in this section are largely taken from Bruce, *The New Testament Documents*, 61-74; Gilbert, *Why Trust the Bible?*, 103-24.

¹⁶ Bruce, *The New Testament Documents*, 67.

BOOK HIGHLIGHT

CHOOSING A BIBLE

Written by Dave Leland Ryken | Recommended by Kendra Davis



In *Choosing a Bible: Understanding Translation Differences*, Leland Ryken takes the reader on a quick journey through two major categories of English Bible translations. The book primarily explains the difference between thought-for-thought and word-for-word translation, and how many modern English Bible versions do not provide an accurate translation of the original biblical text. Ryken argues that the fashionable trend of dynamic (also called functional) equivalence—translating the essential meaning of a text and not the actual words—takes liberties in translation that destabilize the text and fall short of what an actual translation should do, which is provide a trustworthy, essentially literal translation of the original text. He compares various verses from different translations throughout and shows how the meaning of certain texts is lost when translators decide to provide their own understanding of the thought behind a particular verse.

Ryken helpfully provides five negative effects of dynamic equivalence in his second chapter. The third chapter is a list of ten reasons we can trust essentially literal Bible translations. It was helpful in my reading to think deeply about how the individual words of the Bible were divinely inspired and not just overall thoughts, like Jesus' response to Satan in Matthew 4:4 that "Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes

from the mouth of God." (emphasis added). It was also enlightening to see quotes from the prefaces of several thought-for-thought Bible translations and their motive for creating yet another English translation in the hopes that it would be more palatable for modern readers. Honestly, how many of us read our Bible's preface?

I would recommend this book to anyone who is wondering what the differences are in current English Bible translations (it is far more than just readability). Ryken provides a helpful, simple Bible Translations Chart in the Appendix that lists specific translations (as of 2005, when this book was published) and whether they fall into the category of essentially literal, dynamic equivalent, or paraphrased. It is a short 30-minute read and is worth your time if you want to know the differences between essentially literal and dynamic equivalent translations, and how translating the Bible thought-for-thought subtly (and sometimes not so subtly) undermines the trustworthiness of the Bible.

BOOK EXCERPTS

An essential literal translation operates on the premise that a translator is a steward of what someone else has written, not an editor and exegete who needs to explain or correct what someone else has written.

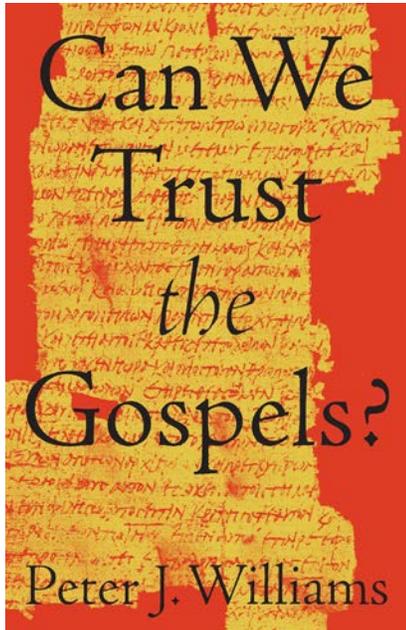
– "Ten Reasons We Can Trust Essentially Literal Bible Translations," p. 27

You can trust an essentially literal translation not to resolve all interpretive difficulties in the direction of what a given translation committee decides to parcel out to its readers.

– "Ten Reasons We Can Trust Essentially Literal Bible Translations," p. 28

CAN WE TRUST THE GOSPELS?

Written by Peter J. Williams. | Recommended by Clark Cochran



As one might expect from its title, *Can we Trust the Gospels?* is a book dedicated to a direct and succinct defense of the trustworthiness of the first four books of the New Testament. Peter Williams has undertaken the daunting task of distilling down an ocean of scholarship and commentary into less than 140 pages. He answers questions regarding the Gospels' historicity, their authors' credibility, their contents' veracity through the millennia, and their reliability not in spite of, but because of, their extraordinary claims. Williams efficiently lays an apologetic foundation on which one can build—that faith in the message of the Gospels of Jesus Christ is divine and also reasonable.

By God's grace alone, I have seen marked growth in my awe and love of the Bible in the last year (what providence, with our 2026 theme and this recommendation!). God's Word is like a precious jewel, and Williams' book uncovered more facets to delight in. For instance, I learned of the “undesigned coincidences” among the Gospel accounts, which are subtle associations (nearly imperceptible) and yet build a strong case for the Gospels' authenticity and coherence between authors. I was also fascinated by the rich historical context from ancient sources, both Christian and non-Christian, that point to a credible account of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. There is nothing on earth like the Bible,

and for so many reasons! May God use this year, and books like these, to continue revealing the measureless value of His Word to our hearts.

I commend this book to any Christian, but especially to those approaching the topic of biblical authenticity for the first time or who have relationships with skeptical non-Christians. It is short and approachable, and yet Williams carefully offers profound evidence for the trustworthiness of the Gospels we have today. It is a wonderful resource to help us be prepared to make a defense for the reason for the hope we have, with gentleness and respect (1 Peter 3:15). Apologetics alone cannot save, but God can use our earnest, gospel-centered reasoning with others to draw His people to Himself and strengthen His Church.

BOOK EXCERPTS

We can conclude that Christ was executed under Pontius Pilate and was shortly afterward treated as God by a group of people who retained the core Jewish belief in one God. Christianity also spread rapidly, and it was at time difficult to be a Christian. All of this raises the question of why Christianity spread so quickly and how someone who had been publicly executed by the Romans, and thus shown to be a loser, could so soon be viewed as one to be worshiped.

– “What Do Non-Christian Sources Say,” p. 31

If the picture of Jesus in the Gospels is basically true, it logically demands that we give up possession of our lives to serve Jesus Christ, who said repeatedly in every Gospel, “Follow Me.”

– “Who Would Make All This Up?,” p. 140

BIBLE READING PLAN

MARCH

TAKE UP & READ

These Scripture readings have been selected to help you prepare for the Sunday morning message.
Take Up & Read!

March 1	Revelation 5:1-14	March 17	Joel 2
March 2	Matthew 10:16-25	March 18	Zechariah 1
March 3	1 Peter 4:12-19	March 19	John 13
March 4	2 Timothy 3:10-17	March 20	Zechariah 6:1-8
March 5	1 John 5	March 21	John 14
March 6	1 Kings 19:1-8	March 22	Revelation 6:1-17
March 7	2 John	March 23	Revelation 7:1-8:5
March 8	Matthew 10:16-25	March 24	Ezekiel 9:1-11
March 9	Matthew 10:26-33	March 25	Isaiah 4
March 10	Psalms 56	March 26	John 15
March 11	Luke 12:1-12	March 27	Genesis 15:1-6
March 12	Isaiah 51:7-16	March 28	John 16
March 13	Psalms 118:1-9	March 29	Revelation 7:1-8:5
March 14	3 John	March 30	Matthew 28
March 15	Matthew 10:26-33	March 31	Hebrews 1
March 16	Revelation 6:1-17		

*Sermons in Bold

NEW MEMBERS



**JEREMY
BARTON**



**JOHNNY
DISANZA**



ANDREW GAUSE



MARIAH GAUSE



**GRANT
SUMNERS**



OLIVIA THAYER

"We must grasp once again, the idea of church membership as being the membership of the body of Christ and as the biggest honour which can come a man's way in this world."

MARTYN LLOYD-JONES



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