

Why Trust the Bible? Doug Hayhoe, November 2022

"Why trust the Bible?" is a different question from "why trust science?", although just as important, if not more so. This essay discusses Scripture's reliability and authority.

Science involves a methodical study of nature, not of a written communication from God, although nature is one of God's revelations to us. The Bible, on the other hand, is a collection of histories, prophecies, biographies, and letters written by various authors over many years that claims to be God's written word. It teaches us about our relationship with God and with each other, our meaning in life and our final destiny. But why trust the Bible as reliable, given its diverse origin? And why trust it as God's voice to us?

Is the Bible reliable?

For my last high school assignment, I had to memorize the translation from Latin to English of Caesar's *Gallic War*. I wasn't interested in how Caesar invaded Gaul over two thousand years ago, although I knew it was a fact. I just wanted to pass the Latin course, so I could get on with my science studies at university. Shortly after, I learned from F. F. Bruce's book (Figure 1) that the *Gallic War* is only based on nine or ten good manuscripts. And the oldest of these only dates back to 900 years after the invasion of Gaul took place. Similarly, there are only eight Greek manuscripts of the ancient book, *History of Thucydides* (c. 460-400 BC), and the earliest belongs to 900 AD. Yet no classics scholar questions the fact that Caesar did invade Gaul, or that Thucydides's history reflects on a real war between Athens and Sparta.

When we come to the New Testament, it is almost embarrassing to compare it with these other ancient histories. For there are more than 5000 Greek manuscripts in whole or in part, of the New Testament, and another 10,000 Latin ones. The earliest date back to the 4th and 5th centuries AD, twice as close to the events they describe as the earliest manuscripts of Caesar's *Gallic War*. Although there are thousands of variations in these Greek manuscripts, when experts examine them they find disagreement on less than 1% of the text. These include two major sections, Mark 16:9-20 and John 7:53-8:11, a dozen other sections of one or two verses each, and hundreds of tiny variations involving parts of a verse, or just a few words. What's important is this: these variations put no essential Christian belief in question. Even the Biblical skeptic, Bart Ehrman, admits, this as Blomberg has pointed out in his book, [*Can We Still Believe the Bible*](#) (Blomberg, 2014, p. 27).

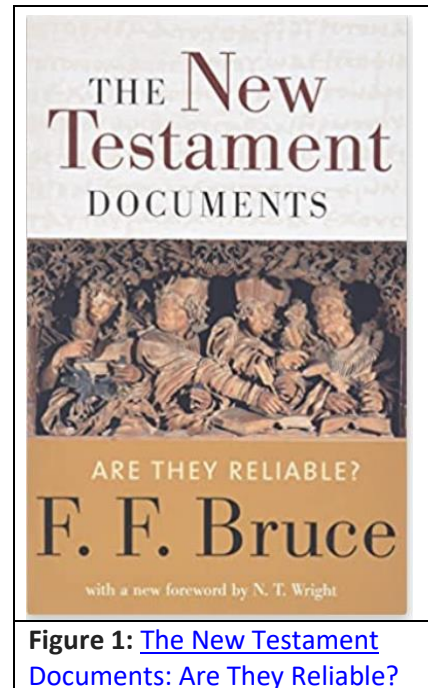


Figure 1: [The New Testament Documents: Are They Reliable?](#)

Manuscript reliability isn't just true of the New Testament. When the Dead Sea Scroll documents were discovered, many people were surprised to see how little they changed the text of the Old Testament. Previous to this, the oldest Hebrew manuscripts of the Old Testament dated back only 1000 years. Now we had a Hebrew manuscript that dated back over 2000 years. Since Isaiah was a favourite of mine, I couldn't wait to read a good English translation of the Dead Sea Scrolls version. When I finally read it, I was surprised to see how few the changes really were ([The Dead Sea Scrolls Bible](#), Abegg, Flint, & Ulrich, 1999).

But what about the canon of the Bible? Does everyone agree on what the Bible should include? Almost all Christians agree on the 27 books of the New Testament. The Old Testament canon raises more questions. Although Protestants only accept the 39 books of the Hebrew Bible, the *Apocrypha* includes an additional 14 books written in Greek. These describe Jewish history and teaching in the centuries prior to Christ: 1 and 2nd Esdras, 1 and 2nd Maccabees, Tobit, Judith, Wisdom, Ecclesiasticus, etc. Although Luther and Calvin originally included them in their translations, they didn't give them the same authority as the 39 Hebrew books. They were later dropped from most Protestant Bibles.

The Catholic church still maintains the *Apocrypha* as an important part of the Old Testament, and the Orthodox church regards them as "worthy of reading." I've read them, myself, with interest. The histories of the brave Maccabees, for example, is quite compelling. It tells the story of the Jewish leaders who resisted to death the paganism that Antiochus, the Syrian ruler, tried to impose on the Jews. None of the books in the *Apocrypha*, however, claim to be God's Word, and none are quoted in the New Testament.

The manuscript reliability of the Bible and the formation of its canon are fully discussed in Craig L. Blomberg's *Can We Still Believe the Bible?* (2014). It also addresses related issues such as the Bible's historical accuracy, the multiplicity of English translations, and the nature of Biblical genres. Blomberg includes many references to scholarly works; in fact, he himself is an acclaimed research scholar. Greg Gilbert's [Why Trust the Bible?](#) (2017) covers the same ground (Figure 2), in a shorter and more readable form. Likewise, Amy Orr-Ewing's [Why Trust the Bible: Answers to Ten Tough Questions](#) (updated in 2020).

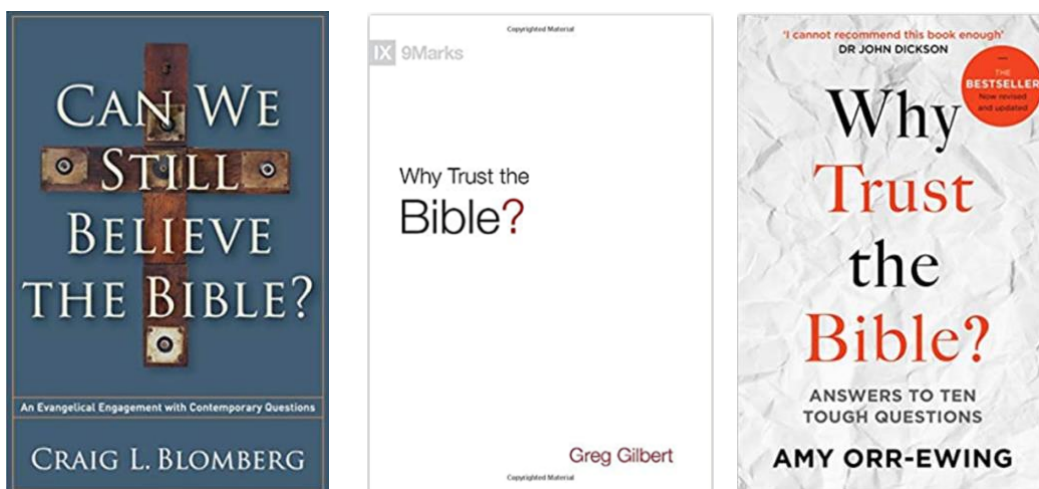


Figure 2: Three recommended books recently published.

Is the Bible authoritative?

First, the Bible itself claims to be God's word. When Moses gave the law and the ten commandments to Israel, he began by saying, "And God spoke all these words" ([Exodus 20:1](#)). The rest of the Old Testament often refers back to the books of Moses and the Law as having supreme authority. Psalm 1, for example, begins with "Blessed is the one ... whose delight is in the law of the LORD." The prophets also spoke as if they were the voice of the LORD: "'Woe to the obstinate children,' declares the LORD, 'to those who carry out plans that are not mine'" ([Isaiah 30:1](#)).

In the New Testament, the apostle Paul taught, "All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness" ([2 Timothy 3:16](#)). The apostle Peter said, "prophets, though human, spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit" ([2 Peter 1:21](#)). And when Peter refers to Paul's epistles, he says, "his letters contain some things that are hard to understand, which ignorant and unstable people distort, as they do the other Scriptures" ([2 Peter 3:15-16](#)). In other words, Peter considered Paul's letters as Scripture, even though the two authors didn't always agree (see [Galatians 2:11-14](#)).

Christ himself always took the Bible as being authoritative. When he was tempted by Satan, at the beginning of his ministry, he answered each temptation by quoting from Deuteronomy, saying "it is written." When he was approaching the cross, at the end of his ministry, he didn't shy away from suffering its terrible agonies, for the Old Testament prophets had foretold it ([Luke 18:31-34](#)). And in his last meeting with his disciples, he taught them that "when he, the Spirit of Truth, comes, he will guide you into all the truth" ([John 16:13](#)). Here he was referring to God's Spirit enabling the New Testament to be written as God's authoritative Word.

Second, we have the personal experience of multitudes of Christians who read the Bible and heard God's authoritative voice speaking to them, over two thousand years. One of these was the great philosopher and Christian leader, Saint Augustine, who underwent a spiritual conversion in 400 A.D. while reading from the book of Romans (see my essay, *The Legacy of Saint Augustine*.) My own personal experience, perhaps yours also, has been the same. So many times, when I read the Scriptures, I experience God speaking directly to my heart and conscience. When I'm in difficulty or when I'm sorrowing, it gives encouragement and comfort of God's love and presence. And above all, it assures me of a sure and certain hope when my present life ends ([Hebrews 6:19](#); [Colossians 1:5](#)).

Finally, we can think presuppositional. In my early years as a science teacher and youth evangelist, Francis Schaeffer's book, *He is there and He is not silent*, helped me greatly in handling the objections thrown at me by quick young minds. One of his arguments that stands out was the question of presuppositions. How did everything begin in the first place. By everything, we mean EVERYTHING, not just the physical universe. This is where we have to begin with some presupposition, something we assume without proving as a logical starting point.

There are only a few strong choices to make as our starting point. Schaeffer mentioned four possible ones, but really only two had any substance as far as I was concerned. Either everything began with a random explosion of raw energy and the laws of physics (the Big Bang), before which there was nothing. Or everything began with an all-powerful Personal God who created the vast universe and created us persons in his image.

If we choose the first presupposition, the idea of a divine revelation seems ridiculous. But if we choose as a starting point the existence of an *infinite personal* God, a divine revelation makes perfect sense. For if God is *infinite*, he can surely figure out how to communicate with humans. And if he is *personal*, he would surely want to communicate with persons made in his image. And this is what the Bible says in [Hebrews 11:3-6](#). Through faith, we begin with a Creator God who made everything and wants to communicate with us.

Ultimately, our acceptance of Scripture as Christians involves the Lordship of Christ. If we believe Jesus is the Son of God, who died and was raised from the dead, we are faced with a decision. Are we willing to confess Christ as Lord ([Romans 10:9](#))? If so, how is his lordship to be worked out in our lives, unless we accept the authority of his words? This includes the words of the Bible that he endorsed. The Bible is not a science textbook. But in the areas in which it is authoritative, we need to give it the final word, just as Jesus did. Otherwise, we elevate ourselves above him!