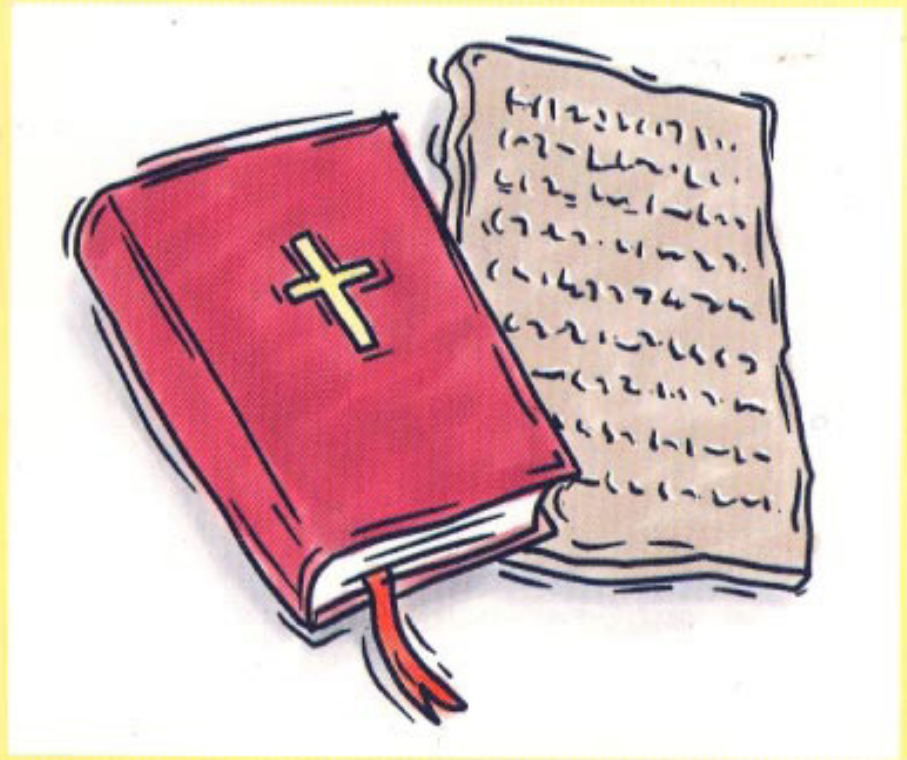


THE BIBLE



**Can We Trust a
Book Written 2000
Years Ago?**

Dick Tripp

THE BIBLE: Can We Trust a Book Written 2,000 Years Ago?

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Foreword

There is a general perception around today that the Bible has been discredited by modern science and historical scholarship. It has been shown to be no more than a religious fairy-tale, with little of relevance to say to our sophisticated, technological age. Only simpletons and fundamentalists take the Bible seriously any more. But nothing could be further from the truth! Quite apart from the extraordinary influence the Bible has had in shaping and energizing Western culture (reason enough to view it with profound respect), evidence for the essential trustworthiness of the biblical documents is very considerable indeed. It is this latter point that this little booklet urges us to take notice of. The author assembles just some of the salient points in support of the reliability of the biblical manuscripts. Much more could be said. But Dick Tripp says enough to show that Christian faith rests on solid historical and

textual data and that those who dismiss the Bible in cavalier fashion are either sadly misinformed or unwilling to face the facts.

I hope this little booklet stimulates much interest in its readers. I especially hope that those who have never bothered to pick up the Bible because they thought it a pious fantasy will be drawn to read "the greatest story ever told", open to the possibility that maybe, just maybe, this story is not only great, but also true.

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Introduction

The Bible contains a message that one would imagine to be the most exciting news to someone looking for real answers to the problems of life.

It answers such basic questions as:

- Why are we here
- Where are we going?
- What is the purpose of life?
- What happens when we die?
- Why can't human beings live happily together?
- How can people be changed from the inside out?

It talks about:

- a God of infinite love who wants to enter our lives and share that love with us;
- how all our sins can be forgiven—and we can know it;
- how we can enjoy a daily, loving relationship with the One who created the universe;
- how to find peace of mind and strength and encouragement for daily living;
- how to grow into what God planned we should be;
- the certainty of a glorious everlasting future.

All this is tied up with the story of how, at a certain point in history, this God entered human experience in the person of Jesus. It records how he revealed his love in works of compassion, how he died on a cross to pay for our sins, how he conquered death and how he will one day return to judge the world and restore heaven and earth to their intended glory, where he and his people will enjoy life together.

The Bible has rightly been called the greatest story ever told, about the greatest person who has ever lived, who is making to men and women the greatest offer that has ever been made. So if the message is so great, why is it that many do not accept it? One reason is simply because people do not know what it is. Leaving aside the Bible statement that the devil **"has**

blinded the minds of unbelievers” (2 Corinthians 4:4), maybe it is simply that they have received faulty or unbalanced information. Or maybe the character and behaviour of some who claim to be Christians has turned them off. Consequently their understanding of what it is all about is distorted.

However, the reason why some do not accept it is simply because they cannot believe it is true. After all, it is 2,000 years since Jesus came. How can we know that he really did and said the things that the Bible says? Having discussed the relevance of this message with hundreds of people over the years I have found that three questions are often raised concerning the accuracy of these written records.

1) The first question goes something like this: Two thousand years ago people were very primitive, illiterate and superstitious. How do we know that Jesus wasn't a person with a few unusual healing gifts who, sincerely or otherwise, convinced people he was someone unique? Being as gullible as they were, they were easily deluded into believing he was some kind of a god or, more specifically, as the New Testament clearly portrays him to be, the Lord of heaven and earth.

2) The second question concerns the time gap that exists between the death of Jesus and the writing down of the stories about him. People imagine that there was sufficient time for all kinds of legends to develop about him and so how do we know that the picture we have been given is not very distorted?

3) The third question concerns what has happened to the written records *since* they were written down. Suppose the original writers of the New Testament did give us a reasonably accurate account of the character and ministry of Jesus. That was two thousand years ago. The writings have been copied and translated very many times since then, so how do we know that they haven't got very distorted in *that* process?

As regards question 2, this gap is not as great as is commonly imagined. Also, there is far too much eye-witness testimony embedded in the writings to make this argument credible as a reason for ignoring the unique claims of Jesus Christ. However, I have dealt with this question more fully in a separate booklet, *Did the Writers of the New Testament Get Their Picture of Jesus Right?* In this booklet I want to deal briefly with the first question, concerning the ignorance of the people in those days. Then I will focus on question 3, the historical evidence for the accuracy of the Bible as it has come down to us today.

Were the people of first century Palestine primitive?

People in the Roman Empire of the first century A. D. were not nearly as ignorant as is often imagined. It may be helpful here to give a brief history of the development of writing. Masses of cuneiform tablets have been discovered in the Middle East area going back to 3,000 BC. The so-called Proto-Canaanite alphabetic script, from which our modern alphabet eventually developed, is known from early inscribed objects; a potsherd from Gezer (c. 1800 - 1650 B. C.), a plaque from Shechem of approximately the same period, a dagger from Lachish (c. 1700 - 1550), and others. The so-called Proto-Sinaitic texts written by slaves working in the turquoise mines of the Sinai Peninsula, dating c. 1500, are of much the same type.

In 1929 a library of tablets was discovered in the North Canaanite city of Ugarit (Ras Shamra). They were written in a thirty letter alphabet more closely related to Hebrew than to any other known dialect and dated to about 1400 B. C. By the mid-eleventh century BC the twenty-two letters of the later Proto-Canaanite had become the standardised Phoenician script. Presumably this was taken over by the incoming Israelites in which to write their Hebrew language. The Greek alphabet, from which our English alphabet is derived, developed from the Phoenician script. The earliest known Hebrew inscription is the Gezer Calendar (c. 925 BC). From then on writing became more common.

About 295 BC Ptolemy 1, who succeeded Alexander as King of Egypt, appointed Demetrius, a former pupil of Aristotle, to build a library in Alexandria. Earliest reports assert that Demetrius had at his disposal a large budget to collect "all the books of the world." The goal was to reach a total of half a million manuscripts and the successive Ptolemaic kings were indomitable in their efforts to acquire them. The universal library that was envisaged had also "to contain writings of all nations." The Royal Library proved too small for the wealth of books acquired, so Ptolemy III (246-221 BC) decided to attach the newly built Serapeum as a branch library.

The accepted total estimate of manuscripts in both libraries is about half a million, though an estimate of 700,000 has also been reported. This library was a major factor in facilitating the development of knowledge generally in the three centuries before Christ, particularly in the fields of mathematics, medicine and astronomy. Other extensive libraries developed in the Roman Empire, the largest being at Ephesus and Rome. When the library at Alexandria burned down in the first century BC the Roman general, Mark Anthony, gave his beloved Cleopatra 200,000 manuscripts from his cherished library at Pergamum in Asia Minor. Education was highly valued in the world of Jesus' day, not least amongst the Jews.

Luke, who wrote two-fifths of the New Testament, was an educated Greek. Professor E. M. Blaiklock, who was a lecturer in the classics of Greece and Rome at Auckland University and who had studied in that field for 40 years, says:

Luke is a consummate historian, to be ranked in his own right with the great writers of the Greeks.

Paul, who wrote the next biggest chunk of the New Testament was a highly educated Jew. F. F. Bruce, who was a highly respected British New Testament scholar, thoroughly familiar with classical Greek, wrote of Paul:

I have learnt to regard Paul as the greatest man who ever wrote in Greek. If anyone should call him the greatest writer of all time, I would not dispute that claim.

The New Testament accounts can't be dismissed simply on the basis of the primitive nature of society in first century Palestine!

The accuracy of modern translations of the New Testament.

Most of this booklet will be concerned with the New Testament, as it is that which records the life of Jesus, though I will have a brief look at the Old Testament, which foretells his coming.

In considering this question of the reliability of the documents we possess today, it is helpful to compare the evidence supporting the accuracy of the New Testament with that supporting the accuracy of other ancient writings. There are two areas in which the New Testament is streets ahead of any other writings of antiquity. The first is in the number of manuscripts that have come down to us. The second is in the length of the time gap that exists between the death of the authors and the writing of the first manuscript copies that have survived to the present.

Numbers of surviving manuscripts of ancient writers

The following are some examples of the number of manuscripts of ancient writers that have survived. The plays of Aeschylus are preserved in perhaps 50 manuscripts, of which none is complete. Sophocles is represented by about 100 manuscripts, of which only 7 have any appreciable independent value. The Greek Anthology has survived in one solitary copy. The same is the case with a considerable part of Tacitus' Annals. Of the poems of Catullus there are only 3 independent manuscripts. Some of the classical authors, such as Euripides, Cicero, Ovid, and especially Virgil, are better served with the numbers rising into the hundreds.

The numbers of manuscripts of other writers are: for Caesar's *Gallic War* 10, Aristotle 49, Plato 7, Herodotus 8, Aristophanes 10. Apart from a few papyrus scraps only 8 manuscripts of Thucydides, considered by many to be one of the most accurate of ancient historians, have survived. Of the 142 books of the Roman History of Livy only 35 survive, represented in about 20 manuscripts. Homer's *Iliad* is the best represented of all ancient writings apart from the New Testament with something like 700 manuscripts. However, there are many more significant variations in the *Iliad* manuscripts than there are in those of the New Testament.

The wealth of New Testament manuscripts

When we come to the New Testament, however, we find a very different picture. Altogether we possess about 5,300 partial or complete Greek manuscripts. Early on the New Testament books were translated into other languages, which seldom happened with other Greek and Latin writers. That means that, in addition to Greek, we have something like 8,000 manuscripts in Latin and an additional 1,000 or so manuscripts in other languages such as Syriac, Armenian, Ethiopic, Coptic, Gothic, Sahidic and Georgian. As these translations began to be made before the close of the second century they provide an excellent source for assessing the text of the New Testament writings from a very early date. On this latter point Charles H. Welch, in his book *True from the Beginning*, quotes from the third edition of the Encyclopedia Britannica:

This argument is so strong, that, if we deny the authenticity of the New Testament we may with a thousand times greater propriety reject all the other writings in the world.

A further source of valuable information is found in the numerous quotes from early Christian writers from the end of the first century onwards. As a result of recent research done at the British Museum, we are now able to document, in early Church writings, 89,000 allusions to passages in the New Testament. For instance, Polycarp, who was personally acquainted with the apostle John, quotes from the New Testament in his letter to the believers in Philippi. Ignatius does also in the seven letters he wrote while awaiting execution about 115 AD. Clement of Rome cites numerous passages in a letter to Corinth about 95 AD. 330 allusions have been documented from Justin Martyr, 1,819 from Irenaeus, 2,406 from Clement of Alexandria, 7,258 from Tertullian, 1,378 from Hippolytus and 17,922 from Origen. These are all from the 2nd and early 3rd centuries. Not all these are direct quotations. However, it would be almost possible to construct the whole of the New Testament from these writings alone, even if we had no other.

Finally, there is the evidence from the Lectionaries, the reading lessons used in early public Church services. More than 1800 of these reading lessons have been classified. Though they did not appear until the 6th century, the texts from which they quote may themselves be early and of high quality.

All this material gives scholars an excellent resource for comparing copies and determining where discrepancies or scribal comments may have crept into the text.

Sir Frederick Kenyon, a former Director of the British Museum and one of the greatest authorities on the subject, said in his book *Our Bible and the Ancient Manuscripts*:

The number of manuscripts of the New Testament, or early translations 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.

The time gap to the earliest surviving manuscripts

When we consider the time that elapsed from the date of the writer's death to the writing of the earliest surviving manuscript, we find that there is often something like a 1,000 year gap.

To give some examples:

Time gap from date of author to date of earliest surviving manuscript

Tacitus	700 years
Livy	400 years
Caesar	900 years
Catullus	1,600 years
Aristotle	1,400 years
Plato	1,200 years
Aristophanes	1,200 years
Thucydides	1,200 years
Euripides	1,500 years
Sophocles	1,400 years
Herodotus	1,300 years

The first complete copy of the *Odyssey* we have is from 2,200 years after it was written! Yet no classical scholar would listen to an argument that the

authenticity of Herodotus or Thucydides is in doubt because the earliest manuscript of their works which are of any use to us are over 1,300 years later than the originals.

The date of New Testament manuscripts

Again the evidence is impressive. The best and most important New Testament manuscripts go back to somewhere about 350 AD, the two most important being the Codex Vaticanus, the chief treasure of the Vatican Library in Rome, and the well-known Codex Sinaiticus. This latter codex (a codex is book with leaves, as opposed to a scroll) was discovered by a Russian nobleman and scholar, Count Tischendorf, at St. Catherine's Monastery in the Sinai Peninsula in the mid-nineteenth century. On Christmas Day, 1933, it was purchased from the Soviet Government by the British Government for 100,000 pounds and is now the chief treasure of the British Museum. The Chester Beatty Papyri, the existence of which was made public in 1931, contain most of the New Testament and are dated 200 - 250 AD. The Codex Alexandrinus, also in the British Museum was written in the fifth century, and the Codex Bezae, in Cambridge University Library, in the fifth or sixth century.

The earliest discovery of all is a fragment of a papyrus codex containing a part of John's Gospel, chapter 18, now in the John Rylands Library, Manchester. This was acquired in Egypt in 1917, where it was probably written, and is dated on palaeographical grounds around 130 AD. This means that John's Gospel was circulating in Egypt within a generation of having been written, though he wrote his gospel, according to tradition, at Ephesus in modern day Turkey.

It is because many of the significant manuscript discoveries have only been comparatively recent that a good modern translation of the Bible is considerably more accurate than the Authorised Version (otherwise called the King James Version) of 1611 AD. New tools and texts have opened up worlds of thought and life of which our predecessors a century ago were ignorant. We can also now say that the New Testament text is far better attested to than any other ancient writings, and this would include the Hindu Vedas, the Bhagavad Gita, and the Muslim Koran.

The cumulative effect of this wealth of evidence was summed up by F. J. A. Hort of Cambridge University, one of the greatest textual critics of the New Testament, in his book *Introduction to the New Testament in the Original Greek*. He said that, leaving aside the comparatively trivial variations between the manuscripts:

the amount of what can in any sense be called substantial variation is but a small fraction of the whole...and can hardly form more than a thousandth part of the entire text.

To quote Sir Frederick Kenyon again, from *The Bible and Theology*:

The interval between the dates of the original composition and the earliest extant evidence becomes so small as to be in fact negligible, and the last foundation for any doubt that the Scriptures have come down to us substantially as they were written has now been removed. Both the authenticity and the general integrity of the books of the New Testament may be regarded as finally established.

It is probably true to say that the New Testament Greek text, as we have it today, is about 98% pure, and this is a conservative estimate! One thing is certain—no variant readings are significant enough to call in question any of its doctrines.

Some examples of alternative readings

Three examples demonstrate how variant readings can occur in the Greek text:

In Romans 5:1 Paul says, **“Therefore, since we are justified by faith we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.”** Some of the manuscripts have **“we have peace with God”**. However, others have **“let us have peace with God.”** In the Greek text it is merely the difference of one letter that changes the tense of the verb. At some early point a scribe who was copying the letter made a slip of the pen which gave a slight change of meaning. Both these readings are fairly equally attested to in the early manuscripts we possess. The only way to tell which Paul actually wrote is to look at the context in which it occurs, compare it with what he writes elsewhere, and have an educated guess. In this particular case either one makes good sense so it doesn't really matter much!

Modern translations omit John 5:4 (which is in the Authorised Version) as it is not in earliest and most reliable manuscripts. It is obvious that some early scribe felt it necessary to add an explanation as to why the locals believed that the waters of the pool of Bethesda had healing properties.

Mark's Gospel in the Authorised Version ends at verse 20 of chapter 16. However, modern translations end at verse 8 with the report of the young man (angel?) that Jesus had risen and the effect of this message on the women who had come to visit the tomb. The reason for this is that verses 9 - 20 do not occur in the two most reliable manuscripts and are obviously later additions.

It seems odd that Mark should not have included some of the resurrection appearances of Jesus as he would certainly have been familiar with them, if not actually present on some of those occasions. He was a young man in Jerusalem at the time and a member of the early Christian community. However, it may well be that his original ending has been lost and someone copying the manuscript felt it necessary to round off the story by adding a summary of those appearances that appear in the other gospel stories. It certainly reads like such a summary. Indeed, several other endings to Mark's gospel have turned up where other scribes have also done this.

If such variations are important to you then it is best to get a good modern translation which has notes at the bottom of the page which tell where such variant readings occur in the early manuscripts. The New International Version and the New American Standard Version are two very good translations.

The reliability of the Old Testament

So far we have looked only at the reliability of the New Testament writings. It is pertinent also to say a little also about the Old Testament. Here the question is a little more complicated, but it is important to point out the evidence brought to us by the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls. These scrolls began to be discovered in caves by the Dead Sea in 1947. They had been hidden by members of the Jewish Community at Qumran when their community was destroyed by the Romans during the Roman-Jewish War of 66-70 AD. From the 40,000 inscribed fragments recovered over 500 books have been identified. About 100 of these are copies of the 39 books of the Old Testament. Only Esther is not represented among them. Many of these writings predate the community. For example, a text of Exodus is dated to about 250 BC.

Up to the time of this discovery the main text of the Hebrew Bible in use was that which was standardised by a group of Jews working in the eighth and ninth centuries who were known as Masoretes, from a Hebrew word meaning "tradition". They assembled the best Hebrew texts of the Old Testament available at the time and sought to preserve their purity. They gave us what is known as the Masoretic text. However, because of the remarkable discoveries in the caves by the Dead Sea, we now have copies of the Old Testament books that are 1,000 years earlier! It is possible to compare these to see how the copying of the text over such a long period has affected it and to what extent changes have occurred.

To give an example, it is possible to compare the text of one of the Dead Sea copies of Isaiah, which is dated about 100 BC, with that of the Masoretes

of 1,000 years later, in order to see how faithfully scribes have preserved the text. For instance, if we take Isaiah 53, (the chapter that foretells the sufferings of Christ, and which is quoted at least 10 times in the New Testament in connection with those events), we find that the Qumran manuscript has 17 letters different from the Masoretic text. 10 of these letters are mere differences in spelling, similar to our spelling of “honor” or “honour”, and produce no change of meaning at all. Four more are very minor differences, such as the presence of a conjunction, which is often a matter of style. The other three letters are the Hebrew word ‘light,’ added after ‘they shall see’ in verse 11. Of the 166 words in this chapter, only this word is really in question, and it does not at all change the sense of the passage. This is typical of the whole manuscript. Thus we can see in what high regard the Jewish scribes held their sacred scriptures and with what care they copied them. On the basis of the Qumran Isaiah scroll, the Revised Standard Version of 1952 made only 13 minor changes to the whole of Isaiah.

By comparing the standard Hebrew Old Testament text used today with that of the Dead Sea Scrolls, Gleason Archer, in *A Survey of the Old Testament*, found that they:

...proved to be word for word identical...in more than 95% of the text. The 5% variation consisted chiefly of obvious slips of the pen and variations in spelling.

Facing the facts

To quote Sir Frederick Kenyon again:

It is reassuring at the end to find that the general result of all these discoveries and all this study is to strengthen the proof of the authenticity of the Scripture, and our conviction that we have in our hands, in substantial integrity, the veritable Word of God.

Is the Bible really the Word of God? After all, if Jesus is the most complete revelation of the person and character of God that we have been given, and if he did die on the cross to pay the penalty for our rebellion against him, and if he is offering to us the incredible gift of his forgiveness and love for all eternity, then it would have been foolish of him not to have taken steps to see that we had a reasonably accurate account of these things. And if this is so, would it not be foolish of us to reject his love because we imagined wrongly that the record was distorted.

Clark Pinnock, professor of systematic theology at McMaster Divinity School in Ontario, concludes, after extensive research:

There exists no document from the ancient world, witnessed by so excellent a set of textual and historical testimonies and offering so superb an array of historical data, on which an intelligent decision may be made. An honest person cannot dismiss a source of this kind. Scepticism regarding the historical credentials of Christianity is based on an irrational basis.

Of course the reasons are legion why people may reject the claims of Jesus Christ on their lives. They may be unwilling to give up things that displease God and to allow him to change their ways. They may be too proud to admit their need of forgiveness. They may be too interested in their own concerns to give him any attention. They may care too much what others might think if they became followers of Jesus. However, it would be foolish to reject him on the grounds that the historical evidence is unreliable. We cannot be excused for ignoring evidence.

There is a fable about a meeting that took place in hell. Satan gathered his demons and asked them, "What can we do to prevent the message from going out: what shall we tell people?" One worker raised his hand and said, "I will go up and tell them that there never was a Christ." The Devil shouted at him, "You've got to be crazy! There's more historical evidence for Christ than for Herod!" Another worker said, "I will tell them the Bible is a lie." Satan responded, "That's stupid. Look at all the prophecies already fulfilled. They will know it is not a lie." Another worker said, "I will tell them that Christ never rose from the dead." But Satan said, "Then why were his disciples so transformed?" The meeting got very quiet. Finally, one of them said, "All right, I have a plan. I will tell them there really is a Bible, and it's true. I will tell them there really is a Christ, and he's powerful. I will tell them that Christ is coming again to judge the world. He really is coming. But I will tell them this: they don't have to worry about it yet. There is plenty of time!" And Satan exclaimed, "That's the plan. That will succeed!"