

Is the Bible Reliable?

Part 4 of 4 in "Can I Trust the Bible?" · Putting the Bible under the same microscope as every other ancient book

The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God stands forever.

ISAIAH 40:8

AT A GLANCE

BIG IDEA	Historians test ancient documents by how well they were preserved, what they say about themselves, and what outside evidence shows. By those same tests, the New Testament is the best-attested book of the ancient world.
SCRIPTURE	Isaiah 40:8 · Luke 1:1-4 · 1 John 1:1-3 · 1 Corinthians 15:3-8 · 2 Peter 1:16
LENGTH	About 25 minutes
BEST FOR	High school; final talk in a four-part series
YOU WILL NEED	Bibles and a whiteboard for the comparison chart

Start here: why the Bible?

Many religions have sacred books. How can we be confident the Bible is the true Word of God, and that the Bible we hold today is what was originally written? Last time we saw how carefully the Old Testament was copied. This time we'll put the New Testament under the microscope.

There is a field of study called **textual criticism**. ("Criticism" here doesn't mean complaining; it means careful evaluation.) Scholars use it on every ancient document, from Plato to Caesar, to figure out what the original said. They look at the manuscripts, the writing style and language, archaeology, other writings from the same period, and historical records. These tests are used on all ancient literature, not just the Bible.

1 Test one: how well was it preserved?

Historians ask two simple questions: *How many copies do we have?* and *How close are the earliest copies to the original?* More copies, closer to the original, means more confidence.

WORK	WRITTEN	MANUSCRIPTS	GAP TO EARLIEST COPY
Julius Caesar, <i>Gallic War</i>	50s B.C.	About 10 early copies (plus later ones)	About 900 years
Homer, <i>Iliad</i>	8th century B.C.	About 1,800	Several centuries for the earliest fragments
New Testament	A.D. 50-95	About 5,800 in Greek, plus over 10,000 in Latin and thousands in other languages	Decades for the earliest fragments; whole books within about 150 years; complete New Testaments within about 300 years

The oldest known fragment, a small piece of John's Gospel known as P52, is generally dated to the second century, possibly within a few decades of when John wrote. Nobody doubts that we have what Caesar wrote, yet the New Testament has far more manuscripts, far closer to the originals. No other ancient book comes close.

BEING HONEST ABOUT VARIANTS

With thousands of hand-copied manuscripts, there are differences between copies, mostly spelling, word order, and small slips. That is actually a strength: with so many copies to compare, scholars can reconstruct the original with great confidence, and no core Christian teaching depends on a disputed reading. Most study Bibles mark the few significant variants in footnotes. Students who encounter skeptics online will appreciate your honesty here.

2 Test two: what does it say about itself?

The New Testament writers claim to be eyewitnesses or to have carefully researched eyewitness testimony.

- Luke says his account came from "eyewitnesses and ministers of the word," and that he had "perfect understanding of all things from the very first" (Luke 1:2-3).
- John writes about "that which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes... and our hands have handled" (1 John 1:1).
- Paul lists people who saw the risen Jesus, including more than 500 at once, "of whom the greater part remain to the present" (1 Corinthians 15:6). In other words: go ask them.
- Peter: "we did not follow cunningly devised fables... but were eyewitnesses of His majesty" (2 Peter 1:16).

These writers had nothing to gain and everything to lose. Most of the apostles suffered or died for what they said they saw. People may die for something they believe is true, but they don't die for something they know is a lie.

3 Test three: what does outside evidence show?

Writers outside the Bible confirm many of its basic facts. The Roman historian Tacitus (early second century) mentions "Christus," who "suffered the extreme penalty" under Pontius Pilate. The Jewish historian Josephus mentions Jesus and His brother James. And archaeology continues to confirm the places, rulers, and customs the New Testament describes, from the Pool of Siloam to an inscription bearing Pilate's name.

So, is the Bible reliable?

When we put the Bible under the same microscope historians use for every ancient book, it doesn't just pass the test. It stands in a class by itself. But in the end, the Bible's reliability isn't only a matter of evidence. It's an invitation. "The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God stands forever" (Isaiah 40:8). The same Word that has been preserved for thousands of years can be trusted with your life.

SERIES RECAP: CAN I TRUST THE BIBLE?

Central: one story from one Author, about Jesus. **True:** prophecy, history, unity, impact, and changed lives back its claims. **Accurate:** the God who cannot lie gave a Word without error and preserved it. **Reliable:** by every historical test, it is the best-attested book of the ancient world.

TALK IT OVER

1. What is textual criticism, and why do scholars use it on all ancient books?
2. What stands out to you in the comparison chart? Why does the number and age of manuscripts matter?
3. Why is it important that the New Testament writers claimed to be eyewitnesses?
4. How would you explain manuscript variants honestly to a friend who has doubts?
5. After this series, how would you answer the question, "Can I trust the Bible?"

TAKE IT HOME

Read Luke 1:1-4 and 1 Corinthians 15:1-8 this week. Then write a short paragraph, in your own words, explaining why you trust the Bible. Keep it in your Bible, and be ready to share it when someone asks (1 Peter 3:15).

The word of our God stands forever.

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