

Defending Faith Against Atheism and Skepticism

Using Evidences and Reasoning to Answer Attacks against Christianity

While God communicated through various personal means to the prophets and inspired writers, we have scriptures in written form for several reasons:

Precision of message: Information would be clearly understood

Permanence: Not reliant on memory to transfer information

Objectivity: Preserve against misinterpretation

Dissemination: Easier to spread message

We have a document that contains the history of God's people from creation to the years after Christ, as well as the wisdom and code of ethics that is to guide a Christian's actions and morality. But, how can we be assured that the document that we have now is an accurate replication of the original writing? How can we know that there has not been centuries of corruption, mistranslation, and manipulation that has resulted in an aberrant copy that misleads people today?

When compared to other manuscripts of antiquity, biblical texts are the most numerous in copy and more reliable than other texts we never question the validity of.¹ After examining the manuscript evidence for the reliability of the Bible, to doubt the reliability of the Bible would be to disregard hundreds of writings from antiquity that are used in scholarship and study today. The Bible manuscripts are more numerous than comparable documents from antiquity, more accurately translated, written closer in time to the original autograph (original document which manuscripts are a copy of), and subsequent manuscripts in time are more continuous, having no gaps in the timeline of transmission.

¹ Doy Moyer, "*Mind Your Faith*"

Defending Faith Against Atheism and Skepticism

Author and work	Date of writing	Earliest manuscript date	Gap between autograph and manuscript	Copies
Plato, <i>Dialogues</i>	4th century BC	900 AD	1,250 years	20
Homer, <i>Iliad</i>	9th century BC	400 BC	500 years	643
Herodotus, <i>The Histories</i>	484-425 BC	900 AD	1,350 years	8
Aristotle, assorted works	4th century BC	1100 AD	1,400 years	5
Sophocles, assorted works	448-385 BC	900 AD	1,400 years	193
New testament authors	45-100 AD	125-325 AD	30-300 years	5,600+

Table 5: Comparison of ancient manuscripts²

A common criticism of Biblical reliability is that there are no surviving autographs. How can one be assured that the manuscripts we have are accurate copies of the original? How can we be sure the manuscripts are free of errors without the original to compare you? It is unreasonable to assume that there are miniscule superficial discrepancies among thousands of manuscripts, but they are all exactly deviated from the original autograph. Inerrancy is not empirically provable, but the manuscript evidence supports Biblical claims of inerrancy, and judging by the same criteria used for other ancient manuscripts, the Bible is the most reliably and accurately translated of all works of antiquity.

Could God not have preserved the autographs? Is the lack of autographs evidence of the powerlessness of God to preserve his word? God could have protected the autographs to provide them to us, but perhaps they were not preserved for several practical reasons. They would have become an object of worship, rather than the contents, or they could have become an object to fight over, build temples around, etc. They would be considered to sacred to read, except by kings or priests, and then without popular copies then followers could be manipulated if the only people authorized to read were corrupt. There are examples of physical items becoming idolized, the people attributing near-shamanistic attributes to the physical while neglecting the spiritual meaning. Consider example of Moses' bronze serpent (Numbers 21:8-9) having to be destroyed by Hezekiah 700 years later because it had become the object of idolatry (2 Kings 18:4).

There is a multitude of New Testament manuscripts - over 5,000 have been discovered, documented, and catalogued so far. More may yet be found. Compare this to other works of antiquity: Homer's *Iliad*: 643 copies; Livy's *History of Rome*: 20 copies; Caesar's *Gallic Wars*: 9 copies; Works of Tacitus: 2 copies. There is not a scholastic movement calling these works into question for lack of autographs, doubting translational accuracy, or accusing readers of being fooling or superstitious.

New Testament manuscripts survive in higher quantities than other works for several reasons. Copies were made by the faithful rather than scribes or academics, while other ancient literature was not available to the general populace. Extra copies made in case manuscripts were destroyed during persecution, and also extra copies were made and circulated since there was no central temple or church that controlled or issued manuscripts. These are personal copies rather than official copies.

On the other hand, there are less copies of Old Testament manuscripts due to both practical and cultural reasons. Practical limitations on the number of surviving manuscripts include the age and materials of the manuscripts causing unavoidable decay and disintegration. Also, between 1800 BC and 1948 AD, Jerusalem was conquered 47 times, so many objects of antiquity have been destroyed, including repositories of religious writings (both canonical and non-inspired). Cultural factors that led to a smaller quantity of

² Josh McDowell, *"The New Evidence that Demands a Verdict"*

Defending Faith Against Atheism and Skepticism

manuscripts include scribal laws that demanded the burial of worn or flawed manuscripts – this kept mistakes out of preserved copies but limited the number of copies available. Though there are fewer copies, they all tend to be high quality recording scribal accuracy. These are officially created and controlled copies. The text was copied under extremely strict scribal rules and inspected for mistakes – any mistake found resulted in the document being systematically destroyed.

The other New Testament writers also used the Law and the Prophets for examples, exegesis, and authority for their message. They put the gospel and sermons in their own words, but everything they said was reinforced by scripture. The book of Hebrews is a continuous apologetic for the new law under Christ, based on scriptural evidence from the Old Testament. The New Testament does not have long intervals between references to the history and scriptures of the Old Testament.

After the time of Christ, the early church fathers (within the first two generations after the twelve apostles: Clement of Rome, Ignatius of Antioch, Polycarp of Smyrna, Justin Martyr, etc.) reference all of the NT throughout their works. There are enough historically reliable secondary references that the entire NT could be reconstructed from their writings alone, if there was not a single NT manuscript. They quoted with accuracy every single verse of the NT throughout their collected works. Even though the writings of the early church fathers were not divinely inspired, they still reveal information about the sociopolitical and cultural background in the time of Christ and serve as first-hand witnesses to the initial spread of Christianity. As their work extensively quotes and is reliant on New Testament scriptures, their writing is evidence of the impact of scriptures as well as the accuracy of transmission.

Logical resolution of discrepancies, errors, and difficulties

Atheists will criticize the Bible as being full of errors and contradictions, undermining the inerrancy of scriptures in an effort to deny the infallibility of scriptures. Believers that fall for this criticism will perceive the Bible as a collection of human wisdom rather than a book of divine revelation. The Biblical manuscripts have been studied and analyzed more than any other document in the world, using the same criteria as other documents of antiquity. It is illogical and a double standard to evaluate Biblical manuscripts using the same criteria we have for contemporary works, composed with modern technology, publishing techniques, and other advantages. While Bible manuscripts are not perfect, evaluating them by the same critical standards as other ancient works shows that the Bible has been preserved and translated with amazing accuracy, with errors being only superficial, and no discrepancies that bring contradiction to the overall message.

Writers in Biblical times were more focused on transmitting a faithful message rather than a word-for-word replication. The emphasis was on “actual voice” rather than “actual words”. During New Testament times, the Septuagint (LXX) was used, since it was the authoritative translation commonly used through Greek speaking lands. The Septuagint was also the only version of scriptures in circulation outside of Palestine. It was used by New Testament authors because it was what the target audience was familiar with and had access to. It has its own deviations in wording from the original Hebrew text, but concepts and doctrine were unaffected. Since New Testament writers used Septuagint translations it can be assumed they considered the variations inconsequential and focused on the context, concepts, and doctrine more than syntax. The Biblical narrative is composed of condensed conversations: simple phrases could have great implications, since biblical writers would often represent summaries of conversations with profound implications but few words. For example, in Luke 9:59-60, the phrase “bury my father” would include caretaking of dying father, burial, settling family affairs, allocating birthright, etc. not a one-time funeral event. This would imply an indefinite time period of potential responsibility changes – there’s Jesus’s response. He was not saying skip a funeral, he was saying make a decision on where your focus will be – indefinite responsibilities or time frames or dedication to discipleship. For another example of a compressed narrative, compare the abbreviated story of Jesus

Defending Faith Against Atheism and Skepticism

withering a tree in Matthew 21:18-22 to the more detailed account of Mark 11:12-14 & 20-25. The authors of the Bible used cultural expressions and literature devices in their writing. While the content of scriptures is divinely inspired, the authors were allowed to put the message they were gifted into their own words, cultural vernacular, and writing style. The authors also generally wrote to a specific target audience, influencing the literary aspect of their works without compromising the content. One gospel might elaborate more on specific detail due to its target audience; another gospel might omit detail based on presupposition of knowledge that is explained elsewhere. For example, in Matthew 8:5-13 and Luke 7:1-10, a name to represent a group – in one passage the centurion comes to Jesus, in the other representatives are sent. One is literal, the other uses a figure of speech.

The consideration of the target audience's needs and knowledge base are a major reason why the gospels tell the same stories but with variation in detail. The variation does not imply error, it is simply a result of writing to a specific group.

Historians evaluate reliability of ancient narratives with the following criteria:³

- Do we possess copies that are reasonably close to the originals?
- Did the authors intend to convey reliable history to the readers?
- Were the authors in a position to know what they were talking about?
- Did the author's bias distort their historical reporting?
- Are the reports consistent with what we know about eye-witness testimony?
- Is there self-damaging material in the documents?
- Are the documents reasonably self-consistent and consistent with other documents that tell about the same events?
- Are the recorded events believable?
- Is there other literary evidence that help to establish the reliability of the events recorded in the examined documents?
- Does archaeology help to shed any light on the recorded events?

There is a difference between a textual error and an interpretive difficulty. Some passages are harder to translate or put into language that is understandable in today's vernacular – all languages have idiosyncrasies and idioms that would be nonsensical if translated literally. Thus, many passages have to be carefully phrased to retain the connotation or inference made in one language using verbiage unique to that language. There are standard principles for understanding apparent discrepancies in the Bible:⁴

- The unexplained is not necessarily unexplainable
- Fallible interpretations do not mean fallible revelation
- Understand the context of the passage
- Interpret difficult passages in the light of clear ones
- Don't base teaching on obscure passages
- The Bible is worded by humans and contains human characteristics
- Just because a report is incomplete does not mean it is false
- New Testament citations of the Old Testament need not always be exact
- The Bible does not necessarily approve of all its records
- The Bible uses non-technical, everyday language
- The Bible may use round numbers as well as exact numbers

³ Doy Moyer, *"Mind Your Faith"*

⁴ Josh McDowell, *"The New Evidence that Demands a Verdict"*

Defending Faith Against Atheism and Skepticism

- Note when the Bible uses different literary devices
- An error in a copy does not equate to an error in the original
- General statements don't necessarily mean universal promises □ Later revelation supersedes previous revelation

The errors in translation are largely superficial, with no errors that lead to significant dispute over doctrine. These are unintentional errors of syntax and grammar, not errors that influence meaning.

Human errors in transmission does not nullify the divinely inspired aspect of scriptures. An error that led to a contradiction would be more serious, and potential to undermine the inerrancy of scripture. For example, if one gospel described meat in the Lord's supper instead of bread, the symbolism of the bread of life, bread representing his crucified body, etc. would be changed. In addition to the symbolism being changed, the doctrine of the Lord's supper would also be disputable. However, no such errors exist in the Bible manuscripts. Human errors can be generalized into errors of the eye (mistake during reading source material), and errors of transmission (mistake during copying to new document). Both errors of the eye and transmission are understandable considering the circumstances of the average ancient scribe. Both types of errors can be resolved using context clues and common sense. More difficult errors are resolved with comparison to other documents – with the vast majority of manuscripts being nearly identical, any variant is easily identifiable, standing out from the crowd.

Examples of errors of the eye include:⁵

Incorrect placement of vowels: The early manuscripts do not have punctuation, spacing, or vowels. These would have to be read out loud to get the greatest accuracy of interpretation. As written language developed, these features of grammar were added to new manuscripts. The oral tradition of public reading and memorization of scripture assisted reading the text with no vowels or punctuation, but occasionally during the modernization of manuscripts mistakes were made. This could lead to incorrect words due to multiple options on spacing: HEISNOWHERE could be read as HE IS NOW HERE or HE IS NO WHERE. However, context clues lead to the correct interpretation.

Repetitions: The same word duplicated, either adjacently or interspersed elsewhere in a passage.

Transposition: The reverse position of letters or numbers, or accidental substitution. For example, some versions mix up the age of Ahaziah in 2 Chronicles 22:2 and 2 Kings 8:26: one passage lists his age as 42 years, the other at 22 years.

Misreading letters: Differences in scribe's writing style, development of the alphabet, the similar appearance of some letters, and other penmanship considerations can cause some letters to be easily confused. The letters j and i look very similar and can be identical depending on handwriting, and for printed material, dependent on font as well. i.e. "John" vs "Iohn."

Examples of transmission errors include:

Haplography: Writing something one that should have been written twice. i.e. "writen" vs "written."

Dittography: Writing something twice that should have been written once. i.e. "ttwice" instead of "twice."

Metathesis: Reversal in order of letters or words. i.e. "letters reversed" vs "reversed letters", or "erversed letters"

Fusion: Combining the last letter/letters of a preceding word with the beginning of the next word, i.e.

⁵ Error types compiled from Gleason Archer, *"The Encyclopedia of Bible Difficulties"* and Josh McDowell, *"The New Evidence That Demands a Verdict"*

Defending Faith Against Atheism and Skepticism

“they spoke” vs “the yspoke”

Fission: The separation of one word into two, i.e. “abundances” vs “a bun dances”

Homophony: The substitution of words that sound the same phonetically but have different meanings and spellings, i.e. “bread” vs “bred”

Homoeoteleuton & homoeoarkton: The omission of phrases when two adjacent sentences had the same endings or same beginnings, respectively. i.e. “His hands hurt from writing. His eyes hurt from writing. He wanted to sleep.” Vs “His hands hurt from writing. He wanted to sleep.” Similar wording causing the scribe to accidentally overlook an intervening phrase.

Omission or inclusion of words: Accidentally skipping or adding a word, often conjunctions, i.e. “He was writing a book” vs “He was a book” or “he was not writing a book”

Omission or inclusion of letters: Accidentally adding or leaving out a letter, i.e. “Sing and be joyful” miscopied as “sin and be joyful” or “Do not cause your brother to sing” instead of “Do not cause your brother to sin”

There are general practices for determination of accuracy when evaluating divergent manuscripts. These practices are used by translators, scholars, researchers, and theologians alike. Perceived errors and difficulties must be resolved systematically and without bias in order to reach a complete and accurate understanding of the text. Difficulties must not be solved with a preconceived end in sight – this could lead to a false, misleading solution. The principle behind these guidelines is that the more reliable manuscript must be identified as a baseline to resolve ambiguity. These practices include:⁶

- The older manuscript should be preferred, since normally the older the manuscript is, the closer it is to the original and thus less opportunity for mistakes
- The more difficult writing should be preferred, since a scribe seeking to make a passage easier would be more likely to make a mistake
- The shorter manuscript should be preferred, since longer manuscripts are more likely to have points added for clarification

Despite variants and mistakes, the manuscript preservation and translation of the New Testament is considered over 99% pure⁷ Compare this to the Iliad, with less manuscript copies and less opportunity for error, and is considered 95% pure. Since there are thousands of New Testament manuscripts, written over centuries by hundreds of people, one would expect them and the translations to be impossibly tainted with mistakes. However, the accuracy and purity of the manuscripts itself is evidence towards divine preservation of these documents, revealing the God intended for them to endure for all his people to learn from. Considering the evidence, the Bible as we know it today is entirely reliable. The fact that there are dubious and biased translations in the market today does not mean that the manuscripts and faithful, accurate translations are untrustworthy. The question should not be “do Biblical manuscripts contain errors?” There are errors made during duplication of manuscripts, but at a lower rate of frequency and magnitude than documents of comparable age. The questions should be “are there mistakes that introduce ambiguity of the message, or introduce conflicting doctrine?” That answer is no - no doctrine is changed by any mistakes or errors found in manuscripts.

⁶ Gleason Archer, *“The Encyclopedia of Bible Difficulties”*

⁷ Geisler & Nix, *“From God to Us”*