

08.11.24  
Stand Alone Sermon  
Is the Bible Reliable?  
2 Peter 1:12-21

Yesterday, I approached the sermon with the goal of addressing a crucial question: ***Is the Bible Reliable?*** At first glance, this might seem like a straightforward, Sunday school answer. However, as we delve deeper into the question, its profound significance becomes even more evident. Even as I write this, I'm reminded of the various questions the world poses about the Bible's reliability. These questions speak very deeply to me and I long for opportunities to have genuine conversations around questions like...

- Can we truly believe that what we have in the New Testament writings is historically accurate and what the authors originally wrote?
- Are the words found in legitimate English translations what Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, Paul, Peter, James and Jude were inspired to write two thousand years ago?
- Has the Bible been corrupted over the centuries and why do other religions say that they have?
- Has the original meaning been lost since it's been translated so many times?
- Can the Bible still be viewed as God's word?
- Ultimately the question at the heart of these is a simple question...
  - Can I trust that this is God speaking to us?

The reliability of the Bible is a crucial question because it opens the door to many other important considerations. If the Bible is reliable, meaning it accurately reflects what was originally written, then it can be upheld as God's word and our ultimate source of authority. A reliable Bible ensures that God's revelation to humanity remains intact, allowing believers to build their lives upon its teachings. Conversely, if the Bible were not reliable, it would lose its significance and power, and the revelation of God would be in jeopardy.

Understanding the Bible's reliability is therefore essential. I hope you see the gravity of this issue. Let's delve into some of the information I presented to better understand why we can confidently stand before the world and assert that the Bible remains reliable and trustworthy.

### **1- Eyewitnesses Not Myths**

- 2 Peter 1:16-18- 16 ***For we did not follow cleverly devised myths*** when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, ***but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty***. 17 For when he received honor and glory from God the Father, and the voice was borne to him by the Majestic Glory, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased," 18 we ourselves heard this very voice borne from heaven, ***for we were with him on the holy mountain***.
  - This is where we begin our sermon notes: it's crucial to recognize that all we know about Jesus comes from eyewitness accounts. These are individuals who were present with Jesus throughout His ministry and who came to believe that

He was indeed God. Christianity is not founded merely on an inspiring story; it is built on the life of Jesus and the testimony of those who witnessed His life and message firsthand. Their accounts form the bedrock of our faith and the foundation of the story we share.

- 1 Corinthians 15:3-8
  - 3 For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, 4 that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures, 5 **and that he appeared to Cephas**, then to **the twelve**. 6 Then he appeared to **more than five hundred brothers** at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep. 7 Then he appeared to **James**, then to all the apostles. 8 Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to **me (Paul)**.
  - In Paul's letter to the church in Corinth he gives us a glimpse of how many people saw and interacted with Jesus after his resurrection.
    - Cephas (Peter)
    - The Twelve
    - More than 500 people at once & most were still alive when Paul was writing this letter in 53-54 AD. Some 20 years after Jesus' Resurrection and Ascension.
    - James
    - All the Apostles
    - Lastly to Paul
      - Many people are included here.
- Luke 1:1-4
  - 1 Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile a narrative of the things that have been accomplished among us, 2 just as those who from the beginning were **eyewitnesses** and ministers of the word have delivered them to us, 3 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, 4 that you may have certainty concerning the things you have been taught.
  - Luke opens up his gospel account by telling Theophilus the same message. Jesus' story is not a myth but accurate accounts of the life that Jesus lived.
- The inception of Christianity was not based on the naivety of people eager to believe any pleasant story. Instead, it was founded on the robust eyewitness testimony of numerous individuals. Belief in Jesus was not a cultural trend or a superficial attraction when the Church began; it came with genuine risk and persecution. The early believers were not gullible; they were steadfast witnesses who faced significant trials for their faith.
- Quick Note→ This most important thing that I forgot to mention in the sermon.
  - It is a very important fact that all of the New Testament letters were written within the lifetime of the Apostles.
    - The first letter, 1 Thessalonians, is dated to 50-51 AD.
    - The last letter, Revelation, is dated to 95-96 AD.
  - It's crucial to remember this fact because it underscores the reliability of the New Testament. Some people mistakenly believe that the New Testament was written

hundreds of years after the events it describes, but this is not true and needs to be firmly refuted. Within approximately 60 years of Jesus' life on earth, all the New Testament writings were produced and were already regarded as significant. This early dating and recognition are remarkable aspects of the New Testament and are not commonly seen in ancient writings—a point we will explore further later on.

## **2- Original Manuscripts**

- Important Fact: We do not possess any of the original manuscripts of the Bible. As far as we know, the original documents have all been lost or destroyed. The reliability of the Bible is not based on having these original manuscripts, and this fact does not undermine its trustworthiness. Many skeptics argue that the absence of original documents weakens the Bible's reliability, but this concern is mitigated by the absurd amount of manuscripts and extensive scholarly work that goes into understanding and preserving what we have. If asked about this, here are two reasons I firmly believe this is not a significant issue. I wholeheartedly believe God orchestrated His plan without the original documents because...
  - First, if we possessed the original manuscripts, there is a risk that they might become objects of worship rather than the focus on God Himself. Humanity might fight over control of these scrolls, and rather than strengthening faith in God, their presence could shift worship from God to the physical artifacts. The original documents could become idols, diverting our attention from the divine message to the tangible objects.
  - Secondly, if we had the original manuscripts, there would always be the potential for them to be altered or corrupted, which could tarnish their integrity. By decentralizing the preservation of His Word, God has ensured that the reliability of the Scriptures remains intact. This approach means that any alterations made to individual copies do not affect the integrity of the entire text. Instead, the widespread manuscript evidence allows for rigorous scholarly work to maintain the accuracy of the Bible, preserving its reliability across all copies.
    - Last Note→ It's important to note that this does not imply that every English translation is reliable. Some translations and entire denominations have altered their texts, sometimes with the intent to deceive. While there are undoubtedly unreliable translations, this issue does not stem from the volume of manuscript evidence supporting legitimate translations. The wealth of evidence helps ensure the accuracy of trustworthy translations, even if some versions may be compromised.

## **3- Manuscript Evidence**

- The original manuscripts of the New Testament were written in Greek, the most widely spoken and understood language of that era. Greek served as a common lingua franca across the Roman Empire, much like English does in today's globalized world. Although Jesus and His disciples primarily spoke Aramaic, Greek was chosen for the New Testament writings to ensure that the message could reach the highest possible number of people.

- Some critics, particularly within the Muslim community, argue that translating the Bible into various languages weakens its authenticity and may lead to a loss of meaning. They often compare this to the Quran, which is only to be read in Arabic in order to preserve its original meaning.
- However, one could argue that the Bible's ability to be translated into countless languages is a strength rather than a weakness. If God intended His message to be accessible to all people, then it would be reasonable to expect it to be translatable and understandable into every language and culture. The Quran's reliance on a single language, could be seen as a major limitation, whereas the Bible's universality allows it to be comprehended and embraced by people from every corner of the world.
- List of Manuscripts & Fragments that we have in each language...
  - Greek Manuscripts → 5,500 copies
  - Latin Manuscripts (beginning in the 2nd Century) → 10,000 copies
  - Other languages such as Coptic, Syriac, Armenian, Arabic, Hebrew, Georgian & more → 5,000-10,000 copies
- Church Fathers
  - The Church Fathers were influential leaders of the Christian Church during its formative first eight centuries. They played a crucial role in shaping and overseeing the development of Christian doctrine, while also addressing and combating heresies as the Church evolved. Their extensive writings have become foundational to Christian theology and tradition.
  - One remarkable aspect of the Church Fathers' work is their frequent quoting of the Bible. From their writings, which contain **over a million quotations** of the New Testament alone, it is said that we could reconstruct at least 95% of the New Testament, even if all the original manuscripts were lost. This demonstrates not only their deep engagement with Scripture but also the enduring preservation of the New Testament through their dedicated scholarship and teaching.
- All of this evidence might not seem particularly persuasive to someone unfamiliar with the context. While the numbers are impressive, they might not hold much meaning without a proper comparison to other ancient writings. To truly appreciate the significance of the evidence supporting the Bible, it's helpful to compare it with what we have for other works from antiquity.
- When we examine the historical manuscripts of other ancient texts, we often find that the Bible stands in a class of its own. For example, works by authors like Homer, Plato, or Julius Caesar have far fewer surviving copies and a much larger gap between the time they were written and the earliest copies we possess. In contrast, the New Testament has thousands of manuscripts, with some dating back to within a few decades of the original writings. This level of textual evidence far surpasses that of any other ancient document, underscoring the reliability and preservation of the biblical text through history.
  - The Average Classical Writer (Pliny the Elder, Plutarch, Josephus, Polybius as a few examples) has **less than 15 total copies or fragments of their work**. Hold that against the mountain of evidence we have to the New Testament!

- The average gap between when a classical work was originally written and the earliest surviving manuscripts or fragments is typically **over 1,000 years**. In contrast, for the New Testament, we have manuscripts and fragments that date much closer to the time of the original writings. For example, the John Rylands Papyrus (P52), a fragment containing portions of John 18:31-33 and John 18:37-38, is dated to around 100-150 AD. This means it was written within just a few decades of the original text, highlighting the remarkable preservation and reliability of the New Testament compared to other ancient writings.
- We have discovered at least **967 Greek manuscripts that can be dated to the first 900 years** (Year 1-900 AD).
  - 2 Century- 12 copies
  - 3 Century- 61 copies
  - 4 Century- 121 copies
  - 5 Century- 179 copies
  - 6 Century- 258 copies
  - 7 Century- 302 copies
  - 8 Century- 370 copies
  - 9 Century- 585 copies
  - 10 Century- 967 copies
  - When it comes to Classical Writings we have 0 manuscripts within the first 900 years.
- Daniel Wallace, a prominent New Testament scholar, offers a striking comparison to illustrate the abundance of manuscript evidence for the New Testament. He notes that if we were to stack up all the manuscript evidence for ancient classical writers, the pile would average around four feet tall. In contrast, if we stacked all the New Testament manuscripts, the height would reach an astounding 6,600 feet—or roughly 4.5 times the height of the Empire State Building! This visual comparison underscores the overwhelming amount of evidence supporting the New Testament, far surpassing that of any other ancient text.

#### **4- Variants Writings within the New Testament**

- I include this section because this will most likely be much of the criticism that we would hear on a day to day basis. People hear that there are textual variants in the New Testament and they believe that these make the New Testament unreliable. We can quickly explore some ideas around this...
- The definition of a Variant is this...
  - “Any place in the manuscripts in which there is a variation in wording, including word order, omission or addition of words, even spelling differences. “
- Skeptics often point to variations in the Bible's manuscripts as evidence that the text is unreliable. However, serious Christian scholarship acknowledges the presence of many variants but asserts that this is not a problem when you understand what these variations actually represent.
- The vast majority of textual variants are minor, such as differences in spelling, word order, or the use of synonyms—none of which affect the core message or doctrines of

the Bible. In fact, the abundance of manuscript evidence allows scholars to cross-check these differences and arrive at a highly reliable text. The presence of variants is a natural result of the Bible's extensive transmission history, but they do not undermine its reliability. Instead, they provide scholars with a rich tapestry of evidence to work with, ensuring that the Bible we have today is faithful to the original writings.

- The New Testament has around 138,000 words and about 500,000 variants in the Greek Manuscripts alone. At face value this seems problematic but it actually does nothing to change our ability to know what was originally said. Let's put some context into this...
  - Daniel Wallace...
    - Says that “Over 99% of variations make no difference at all.” We have every right to believe that we can reason with these variations because of the sheer amount of manuscripts that we have.
    - Many variants are spelling differences that do not change the meaning of anything that is being communicated. You know can tell that I’m not spellign some of these werds correctly but you can still see what i’m trying to right.
    - Many Variants are based on word order. This is when a passage is saying the same thing but the sentences might be structured differently.
      - Example of Word Order Variation...
        - Romans 5:1 is found saying this...
          - We have peace with God .
          - Peace we have with God.
            - This is a variant but the obvious meaning is not changed in any way. We still know what is being said.
    - Daniel Wallace→ How many ways can you say “John loves Mary”?
      - Daniel Wallace came up with over 1,200 ways to write this simple phrase. All 1,200 ways say the same thing but they would appear as variants from one another. Greek is a dynamic language that can get very, very creative while saying the same thing.
      - “If we can say “John loves Mary” over 1000 times in Greek without substantially changing the meaning, the *number* of textual variants for the NT is meaningless. What counts is the *nature* of the variants.”
      - “The smallest group of variants: are meaningful and viable, meaning that they have a good chance of being authentic.” Meaning that they could potentially change the meaning of what is being said.”
        - “Less than 1/100 of 1% of all textual variants fit this group.”
  - No essential part of the New Testament is in question when it comes to key Christian doctrines. Every manuscript ever discovered is in agreement on the foundational

teachings such as Jesus' deity, His virgin birth, His sinless life, His death on the cross, His bodily resurrection, and His second coming. All manuscripts align on these core Christian beliefs, which is an astounding and reassuring fact. This consistency across thousands of manuscripts, despite minor variations, underscores the reliability of the New Testament and affirms that the essential truths of Christianity have been faithfully preserved throughout history.

### **Conclusion**

The Bible is the most reliable book of all time. Its meaning has not been lost or changed because we can meticulously trace how it has been preserved over the centuries. While it's true that we need to apply scholarship to determine the precise wording of the New Testament, this work has been rigorously undertaken. With advancements in technology and the discovery of more manuscripts, our understanding and accuracy continue to improve, further solidifying the reliability and integrity of the biblical text. The ongoing work of scholars only strengthens our confidence in the Bible's consistency and authenticity over time. There is no reason for any Christian to wonder about the Bible's reliability.

### Quotes...

- Sir Frederic Kenyon World famous Paleographer & Principal library of the British Museum
  - "The general result of all these discoveries and all this study is to strengthen the proof of the authenticity of the Scriptures, and our conviction that we have in our hands, in substantial integrity, the veritable Word of God.
- Bart Ehrman (perhaps the world's most outspoken Atheist Bible scholar)
  - Essential Christian beliefs are not affected by textual variants in the manuscript tradition of the New Testament.

As Christians, we have every reason to believe in the reliability of the Bible. We can be confident that we understand what the New Testament is meant to say, thanks to the meticulous preservation and study of its text. God has ensured that His Word remains intact, and now it is up to us to decide how we will engage with it in our lives. I pray that you grow in your appreciation for the Word of God and, with increased certainty about its reliability, build your life upon the truths you read.

### Incredibly Helpful Videos to Watch from Experts...

- Daniel Wallace- The Veritas Forum- [Link](#)
- Voddie Baucham- [Link](#)
- Debate between Wallace & Ehrman- [Link](#)
- Dr. Daniel Wallace- Is What We Have Now What They Wrote Then?- [Link](#)