

CHAPTER 2: THE BIBLE IS THE WORD OF GOD

All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.

- 2 Timothy 3:16-17 (ESV)

For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.

- 2 Peter 1:21 (ESV)

Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.

- Matthew 4:4 (ESV)

All Scripture Is God-Breathed

Scripture has a consummately high view of Scripture! Writing to the young pastor Timothy, the Apostle Paul attests to the perfection and sufficiency of the written Word of God, calling it *theopneustos*—literally “breathed out by God”. The words of the Bible did not have their ultimate origin in the finite minds and hearts of man, rather in the infinite reservoirs of God’s wisdom and knowledge! Accordingly, when you and I read the Bible, we are hearing directly from God Himself!

Of course, the skeptic adamantly rejects the truth of this proposition. Their objections abound. “Don’t you know that the Bible was just written by a bunch of old, scientifically-illiterate, misogynistic, power-hungry, goat-herding men?!” “People wrote the Bible to control other people!” “The Bible is filled with errors and contradictions!” “Do you know how we got the Bible? It’s just like the game

‘telephone’ where one person whispers a message into the next person’s ear and this continues all around the room. The message at the end is always way different than the original message. It gets changed over time.” “Which books exactly? Don’t you know that people voted books in and out for centuries before your Bible arrived in its present form?” “I don’t believe in any book of superstition; I believe in SCIENCE!”

The purpose of this chapter is to introduce you to these types of objections and to prepare you to give a Christ-honoring answer. We will briefly discuss 5 ways in which the Bible is, by far, the most amazing book ever written. However, let me issue a caveat up front: Accepting the Bible as the very words of the eternal God does require a step of faith (or, perhaps more appropriately, a step *from* faith).

The evidence to be presented is powerful and persuasive, but it alone will not convince a person. Scripture itself declares that, “God resists the proud but gives grace to the humble” (1 Peter 5:5; James 4:6). The grace of God is required to convince any person that the Bible is God-breathed. So, let’s be learning and sharing evidences, but let’s also be asking God to graciously provide humility of hearts and minds so that the seed of the Word will fall on fertile soil.

Now, let’s consider three ways in which the Bible is the most spectacular book ever written. First, the Bible is incomparably unique. It is unique in its continuity, its circulation, its translation, its survival, and in its teachings (an especially in its fulfilled prophecies). Second, in contrast to the claims skeptics make about its the Bible being changed over time, we have remarkable access to manuscript evidence *across thousands of years* to demonstrate its preservation and reliability. Third, we will explore how the story of the Bible is true history! That is to say, the message of the Bible is not only reliable but also valid.

The Phenomenal Uniqueness of the Bible

Consider the Bible “by the numbers”. The Bible was composed over a period of nearly 1500 years. It consists of 66 books. These were written by over 40 authors from all walks of life—from shepherds to fishermen to a rabbi who moonlighted as a tent-maker to physicians to prophets. It was composed on three continents. It was originally written in three languages (Hebrew, Greek, and Aramaic).

Yet, despite this enormous diversity, the message of the Bible centers around a singular theme—redemption! The first three chapters of Genesis tell us how we got here and how we humans messed things up. The rest of the Bible is all about how our loving heavenly Father sets about to redeem a people for Himself. Such unparalleled unity emerging from such diversity is truly astonishing! This discovery alone has been enough to change the minds of many former skeptics.

Let's take a closer look at just one of those numbers—the 40+ authors of the books of the Bible. (I say "40+" because some of them were co-authored.) We contrast this with the Vedas and Upanishads of Hinduism which are considered by Hindus not to have involved human authors at all. In other words, Hindus believed that, although these "holy writings" were *compiled* by humans, they were written by the gods. On the other hand, there are books like the Qur'an and the Book of Mormon, both of which claim to be the perfect words of God as relayed through a human agent (Muhammad and Joseph Smith, respectively).

Interestingly, I've heard both Muslims and Mormons point to the singularity of authorship of their so-called holy books as arguments favoring their accuracy over against the Christian Bible. Certainly, it would be true that more than 40 authors reporting events from across three continents over a time course of nearly 1500 years would be expected to contradict themselves if their writings were merely their thoughts and words. However, the harmony and focus of the Bible given such a diverse background bears powerful witness to its divine authorship. A good question to ask skeptics when this topic comes up is, "Apart from divine oversight, how do you explain the focused theme of the Bible, its accuracy, and its coherency across more than 40 authors from all different walks of life and a 1,500-year time span?"

The Bible is also unique in its languages. Consider the language of the Hebrew Old Testament (i.e., the "Tanakh"). Except for a few chapters in Daniel which are written in Aramaic, the entirety of the Old Testament is written in Hebrew. Hebrew was a very specific language particular to one very specific people group. By contrast, the New Testament was written in Greek—specifically, what is known as "Koine Greek", or "common Greek". This was the language of the nations. It functioned much like the English language does today. It was the language of international commerce. Think about the significance of this. The Old Testament

records the history of God's covenant with a very specific nation—the Children of Israel. The New Testament records that Jesus said was established “in my blood” (Luke 22:20). This covenant in His blood purchased salvation “for God from every tribe and language and people and nation” (Revelation 5:9). The very languages the Holy Spirit chose for the Bible to be written in attest to God's scheme of redemption!

Hands down, the Bible is the number one best-seller of all time! Nothing else even comes close. It is phenomenally unique in this respect. As the most widely-published book of all time, some five *billion* copies were printed between 1815 and 1975. Between 2002 and 2015 alone (just a 13-year period), one *billion* copies were printed! To give you some idea of what one billion Bibles would look like, supposing we had Bibles 8-inches and length and laid them end-to-end. One billion Bibles would encircle the earth nearly three and half times! Four times as many Bibles are printed each year compared to the Qur'an, with 50 to 100 times more Bibles being produced than Books of Mormon.

Moreover, the Bible is unique in its translation. As of 2017, the Bible had been translated into 670 languages (a number that is growing), with the New Testament being available in 1521 languages. The Bible is among the earliest books to be translated, with the Hebrew Old Testament being translated into Greek (producing the “Septuagint”, often abbreviated LXX) around 250 B.C.! By way of comparison, the Qur'an and Book of Mormon have been translated into 114 languages and 110 languages, respectively.

Partly due to its wide translation and distribution, the Bible is unique in its survival. Think about it: What other book as been as loved and as *hated* as the Bible? In an almost paradoxical fashion, the fact that so many people have hated (and continue to hate) the Bible attests to its divine inspiration. People hate the Bible because the Bible exposes their selfish and sinful hearts. As the Hebrew writer so eloquently states it, “For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and spirit...discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart” (Hebrews 4:12).

Did you catch that? God's Word probes our hearts (our innermost being) and reveals even the intentions of why we think what we think and do what we do! The next verse helps explain why this soul-bearing power of the Word engenders

such a vitriolic response in those who reject it: “But all are naked and *exposed* to the eyes of him [God] to whom we must give an account” (Hebrews 4:13). What people fear most is that their wickedness, sinfulness, rebellion, selfishness, and so on should be exposed.

The Bible is hated because it so effectively, so divinely *exposes* the wicked and sinful human heart. No wonder that so many efforts have been made throughout history to stamp out the Bible! Yet, at we just reviewed, the Bible is breaking records every year in terms of volumes being printed, translations being made, and distribution of God’s Word “to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8). The global expansion of God’s Word corresponds to this amazing prophecy of Jesus: “And this gospel of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the whole world as a testimony to all the nations [i.e., to all people groups], and then the end will come” (Matthew 24:14). As the Word of God goes forth, the return of the Lord Jesus Christ draws near. Maranatha!

The Bible is also unique in its teachings. We already considered the diversity of Biblical authorship—how the authors came from every walk of life and station in life. Let’s go even further and consider that the Bible was written by men in all emotional states—from the snow-capped summits of spiritual exhilaration to the deep, dark valleys of depression and despondency. David and Solomon wrote from the King’s palace. Paul wrote while chained to the walls of dungeon prisons. In the Davidic Psalms alone, we see the range of the human experience unfiltered and unrestrained. From furious imprecatory prayers calling for the unmitigated wrath of God to fall on his enemies (e.g., Psalm 5, 17, 79, 137) to the childlike fascination and wonder of gazing out into a nighttime sky in fascination at the testimony of the heavens (Psalm 19:1-4), the Bible captures the gamut of the human experience in a way other so-called holy books simply do not.

The literary richness of the Bible furthers this distinction. Biblical genres include historical narrative, poetry and songs (including a love song—the Song of Solomon), biography, autobiography, letters of group and personal correspondence (i.e., the epistles), books of law, wisdom literature, parable and allegory, and prophecy. Other so-called holy books like the Qur’an, the Vedas, the Book of Mormon, et cetera, simply fail to stack up to God’s true Word!

We'll close this section with a deeper look at that final genre—Biblical prophecy. It has been estimated that there are over 450 Old Testament prophecies about Jesus. While estimates vary because some of the more obscure references do not share unanimous recognition among Bible scholars, there are other “messianic prophecies” that are literal unmistakable. Let's consider an excerpt from the 53rd chapter of Isaiah, composed 700 years *before* Jesus of Nazareth was born in Bethlehem:

Surely, he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned—every one—to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all. He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth; like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so he opened not his mouth. By oppression and judgment he was taken away; and as for his generation, who considered that he was cut off out of the land of the living, stricken for the transgression of my people? And they made his grave with the wicked and with a rich man in his death, although he had done no violence, and there was no deceit in his mouth. Yet it was the will of the Lord to crush him; he has put him to grief; when his soul makes an offering for guilt, he shall see his offspring; he shall prolong his days; the will of the Lord shall prosper in his hand. Out of the anguish of his soul he shall see and be satisfied; by his knowledge shall the righteous one, my servant, make many to be accounted righteous, and he shall bear their iniquities. Therefore, I will divide him a portion with the many, and he shall divide the spoil with the strong, because he poured out his soul to death and was numbered with the transgressors; yet he bore the sin of many, and makes intercession for the transgressors (Isaiah 53:4-12, ESV).

Often on campus we will challenge a student who is not a believer to tell us who they think these verses are talking about. What are they describing? Almost without exception, the student will confirm that the passage is about Jesus. It's

about his death, burial, and resurrection. What we don't tell them up front is that we're reading from a book written 700 years before those events! How did Isaiah describe "the passion of the Christ" with such uncanny accuracy seven centuries prior to the events? The only rational answer is that Isaiah's words were inspired by the Holy Spirit of God. The Bible is replete with prophetic confirmation of its supernatural authorship!

Question to Consider:

Identify and discuss three ways in which the uniqueness of the Bible points to its divine authorship. Which reason do you find the most compelling and why?

Reliability: Preservation of the Biblical Texts Over Time

Skeptics love to impugn the reliability of the Bible. "Don't you know that the texts have been edited and reedited so much over the years that we now have no idea what the original texts said?" The most common (false) analogy appealed to here is the child's game of "Telephone". This game is usually conducted to illustrate how stories change over time. Often, the take-home message is to avoid gossiping, because you never know if you got the right story to begin with, and the story that you tell to others is likely to get more and more distorted over time.

To play the game, a short message is written down by the originator then whispered into the first person's ear. For example, "Jack's favorite dessert is lemon meringue pie, and he eats it by himself every Friday evening after work." The message is then relayed person-to-person, mouth-to-ear in such a way that no one else can hear the correspondence. The message finally reaches the last person in the chain who then announces it out loud: "Jack eats ice cream cake at Dairy Queen with his friends after work on Tuesdays". Although there is a vague similarity between the messages, many of the facts have been lost or changed. The claim is that this is parallel to the way we received the books that now comprise the Holy Bible. Is this true?

To answer in a word—no! Emphatically no! In fact, this is as opposite a scenario as could be imagined to describe how the texts of the books of the New Testament were transmitted, received, and collated. In fact, it almost seems like God, in His providence, anticipated this objection and furnished robust proof to

rebut it! You may know that many of the original writings that were eventually collated into the 66 books of the Bible were written on a substance called papyrus. This ancient paper perished quickly!

“Wait”, you say, “Isn’t that a bad thing?” Well, no. Here’s why: Because those receiving the papyrus scrolls were aware of the tendency of this material to perish quickly, they diligently made copies—copies to keep for themselves and copies to pass along to others. Whenever a copy—say of one of Paul’s epistles—reached a church, it was read multiple times before the entire assembly out loud. Then more copies were made and passed along. A special class of worker known as “scribes” were trained to copy by hand (to make manually make scripts, resulting in “manuscripts”), and they did this with extraordinary care and precision.

“But, wait!” the skeptics like Dr. Bart Ehrman of UNC Chapel Hill say, “Among the manuscripts we have today, there are some 200,000 to 400,000 variants!” By comparison, there are only approximately 138,000 words! Isn’t this a catastrophic disaster for today’s New Testament in terms of copying errors over time? Again, not at all! Here’s why: We can now look back on *tens of thousands of manuscripts* and manuscript fragments and use advanced linguistic software to make comparisons among this enormous corpus of writings. This enables us to pinpoint when, where, and how copyist errors (“variants”) crept in.

Moreover, the vast majority of these variants have absolutely nothing to do with the meaning of a text and represent nothing more than alternate spellings and alternate grammatical constructions. As it stands, only about 50 variants (out of the 200,000 to 400,000 figure that Bart Ehrman and his ilk like to throw around to undermine confidence in the Bible) are significant to the meaning of a passage. What’s more, none (read: ZERO) of the variants rise to the level of affecting any article of essential Christian doctrine or practice!

How do Professor Ehrman and skeptics like him arrive at this figure of 200,000 to 400,000 variants? The answer is that they are reporting the fact that a variant such as “Bethany” versus “Bethabara” in John 1:28—i.e., “This took place in *Bethany/Bethabara* across the Jordan where John was baptizing”. We must note here that “Bethany” and “Bethabara” were both commonly-used names for the same place! In other words, there is no error whatsoever in using one name rather than the other. Whichever name a copyist used, there is zero net effect on

the accuracy of the manuscript! Similarly, some manuscripts alternatively used “Jesus” or “the Lord” or “he” all to refer to Christ in certain passages, and Ehrman counts these as “variants” even though he readily admits they have no effect on the meaning of the text.

Still, hundreds of thousands of variants sounds like a daunting number, doesn't it? How were the variants counted? Let's suppose, for the sake of argument, that the original manuscript used the name “Bethany” in John 1:28. Let's further suppose that around A.D. 300 one scribe used the alternate name “Bethabara” to refer to the same location and that manuscript went on to be copied 3,000 times. The net effect was to introduce 3,001 “variants” into the collective body of manuscripts we now have at our disposal involving nothing more significant than the use of an accepted alternate name for a town. Skeptics argue that such variants represent “errors”, but clearly these are not errors. What's more, as the body of ancient manuscripts has grown over the years (and continues to grow), we can be more and more certain that we know exactly what the original said! Thus, we are more confident than ever today in the reliability of the New Testament, not less confident!

How much manuscript evidence do we presently have for the New Testament? An enormous amount! As of the time of this writing, there are over 5,800 Greek manuscripts, over 10,000 in manuscripts in Latin, and nearly 10,000 more in ancient languages such as Syriac, Ethiopic, Coptic, Armenian, Gothic, and Slavic. In fact, the New Testament has more manuscript evidence to support it than *any* group of ten works of classical literature *combined*! Lawyer, professor, and theologian John Warwick Montgomery says, “To be skeptical of the resultant text of the New Testament books is to allow all of classical antiquity to slip into obscurity, for no documents of the ancient period are as well attested bibliographically as the New Testament”.

If we are going to question the reliable transmission of the New Testament, then we're also going to have to throw out anything Plato, Aristotle, Homer, Herodotus, Sophocles, Demosthenes, Pliny, and Julius Caesar wrote as well! Why is it that people are so willing to accept the reliability of these other texts but maintain—in the face of mountains of evidence to the contrary—that the Bible has been corrupted over time? Talk about double-standards!

Not only do we have vastly more manuscripts of the New Testament books compared to other works of antiquity, we also have manuscripts that date much earlier. Our earliest manuscripts of the New Testament date back to a time much closer to the writing of the originals than we see with writings from other ancient authors (such as those mentioned above). Let's compare. We have manuscript fragments like Ryland's fragment P52 which date to the early 2nd century and possibly even to the late 1st century. Several complete manuscripts of New Testament books have been recovered dating prior to AD 200. And by AD 250, most of the New Testament appears together in complete works. Thus, the dates for fragments, books, and the New Testament go back to 50, 100, and 150 years, respectively, of the time of the original writings.

What about other works of antiquity that have been preserved? How do they compare to the New Testament manuscripts? Coming in at a distant number 2 is Homer's *Iliad*. More than 800 copies of the *Iliad* have been discovered, the earliest of which dates to about 400 years of the time of Homer. (A partial manuscript of Livy's *History of Rome* also dates to within 400 years of the original but exists as a single partial copy.) Following Homer at number 3 is Pliny the Younger's *Natural History*, with 7 copies discovered dating to within 750 years of the writing of the originals. Way down the list are the works of Plato, existing as 7 copies, originally composed around 400 BC, with the earliest copies dating to AD 900—a time gap of some 1400 years!

Isn't it baffling how skeptics will accept these works non-critically, on face value, never raising any significant questions about their preservation over time? Yet, when it comes to the New Testament, they expect us to doubt its preservation. Going back to the ancient Greek philosophers for a moment as we close this section, consider the timeless wisdom of Aristotle as pertains to textual criticism. This sagacious advice has come to be known as "Aristotle's Dictum" and states the following: "The benefit of the doubt is to be given to the document itself, and not arrogated by the critic to himself". In other words, unless it can be demonstrated *how* (and preferably *when* and *where*) the meaning of a historical document has been changed, we are wise to assume that the extant copies convey the same meaning as the original. If only critics of the Bible applied this wisdom to recognize their entrenched biases against the New Testament!

Question to Consider:

What's the difference between a textual variant and an error? How does the New Testament compare to other ancient texts in terms of its reliability? Why do you think Bible critics are so quick to dismiss the New Testament in spite of the robust evidences for its reliability and validity?

Activity:

Assemble 10 or 12 volunteers and play the game "telephone". Make sure each person only gets one chance to hear the message before passing it along to the next person, and make sure nobody else can hear what is being whispered. How much did the original message change? Now give everyone a piece of paper and pen or pencil. Have the first person write out a brief message which is carefully copied by the second person who checks it carefully for errors before passing his or her paper on to the next person. Make sure everyone writes as legibly as possible. Repeat until the last copy is transcribed. How many errors are there between the first and last copies?

Canonization—Why These 66 Books and Not Others?

The set of 66 books that we recognize today at the Holy Bible is referred to by scholars as the "canon of Scripture". What is a "canon"? If you're like me, the word "canon" conjures up images of huge weapons used in warfare, especially prominent in Civil War museums and battlefields. In this application, the word "canon" derives from the ancient Greek word *kanōn*, meaning "rule" or "standard of measure". Think of a plastic or wooden "ruler" that an elementary school student might use. These are usually a foot long and marked in increments of one-inch with half-inch, quarter-inch, and sixteenth-inch tick marks in between whole numbers. As such, the student can use these to measure various objects. Similarly, the Biblical "canon" refers to the books that passed the tests ("standards") required for inclusion in the final set of books recognized by the historical Christian churches.

Skeptics frequently target the process of Biblical canonization, making what amounts to a "strawman" case against it. (A *strawman* argument involves making a shallow and often distorted case against something, misrepresenting it at crucial

points or ignoring critical evidence completely. This is done in order to give the *impression* of a successful refutation and is extremely common among the “meme” objections to Christianity, the Bible, et cetera that are frequently encountered online.) So, skeptics will say things like, “Don’t you realize that the books in your Bible were arbitrarily cherry-picked by the Catholic Church four centuries after Jesus and the apostles lived?” “Why do you trust the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John but ignore the Gospel of Thomas and the Gospel of Peter?”

On the surface, these types of statements can seem to indicate that the New Testament as we now have it is nothing more than the final set of arbitrarily-chosen books and that we just as easily could have ended up with a very different set. Is this true? Again, no, not at all! Let’s take a closer look. First of all, it is extremely common for your garden-variety skeptic to mistakenly (but confidently) point to the Council of Nicea as the convention that hand-picked the books of the New Testament, voting them “in” or “out” by popular vote.

In fact, the Council of Nicea never took up the issue of canonization. This popular historical misattribution was popularized in Dan Brown’s *The DaVinci Code* (a 2003 book and 2006 movie, starring Tom Hanks) but quite possibly originated with a misreport by Voltaire (1694-1778) in the 3rd volume of his *Philosophical Dictionary*. The skeptic is essentially repeating the fallacious claim that an elite group of bishops appointed by Emperor Constantine in AD 325 conspired to rule specific books “in” and others “out” in an effort to maximize political control.

The actual history couldn’t be more different. As pointed out above, the Council of Nicea had nothing to do with canonization. The primary issue it took up was whether or not the Son of God existed alongside the Father and the Holy Spirit from eternity past (the orthodox, trinitarian view) or whether the Son of God was a “lesser” deity that represented the first creation by the Father. (By the way, Scripture incontrovertibly affirms the former view and rejects the latter view.)

As far as an official final listing for the sake of posterity, it was a bishop named Athanasius, the 20th bishop (elder) of the church in Alexandria (Egypt), that recorded the 27 books of the New Testament in AD 367. (It wouldn’t be until AD 393 at the Synod of Hippo that Athanasius’ list would be formally registered by the church.) But, this hardly involved any “cherry-picking”! Athanasius was in no

way “forming” or “declaring” or “choosing” the canon. Rather, Athanasius was passing along the list of books that had been already been recognized by the churches as authoritative, God-breathed Scripture since the time of the apostles three centuries earlier! In other words, Athanasius and other leaders in the 4th century church were simply recognizing the books that were considered divinely-inspired and authoritative from the beginning.

As it stands, *God* selected the canon, then the church officially *recognized* it! Here’s what Scripture itself says on this matter: “Knowing this first of all, that no prophecy of Scripture comes from someone's own interpretation. For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit” (2 Peter 1:20-21, ESV). In these Scriptures, God has provided Christians with “all things that pertain to life and godliness” (2 Peter 1:3). In the original manuscripts, Scripture is the perfect, infallible, inerrant, all-sufficient Word of God. As the Apostle Paul writes the young pastor Timothy, “All Scripture is breathed out by God, and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work” (2 Timothy 3:16-17, ESV).

As Peter makes evident, the books of the New Testament are also to be considered Scripture. In 2 Peter 3:15-16, Peter refers to Paul’s letters that were being circulated among the churches as being part of “the Scriptures” (*graphas*). In a first-century work by Clement of Rome, the fourth bishop of the church in Rome who was personally discipled by the Apostle Peter, Clement quotes directly from Paul’s letter to the Corinthians, saying, “Thus saith the *Holy Spirit*”. (By the way, this is likely the same Clement mentioned by Paul as a fellow worker in the gospel in Philippians 4:3.) Notice that Clement was a prominent elder in the church in Rome, personally familiar with the Apostles Peter and Paul, is writing in the 1st century, and refers to Paul’s writings not as carrying the authority of Paul, but with the full weight of authority of the eternal God! Indeed, all Scripture is God-breathed!

We clearly see that the church of Jesus Christ had recognized certain first-century apostolic writings as being the very Word of God all along. Without a doubt, other writings besides the books that now make up the New Testament were circulated among the churches and between certain churches and other churches. How then

was the early church able to distinguish what was inspired and authoritative and what fell short of that standard (*kanōn*)? Here, briefly, are five criteria for the canonization of New Testament books: (1) It was written by an apostle, prophet, or an official firsthand assistant of an apostle; (2) The authors were often confirmed through miraculous signs; (3) The writing was consistent with former revelation; (4) The application of the writing evinced the power to transform people's lives, and (5) The writing was widely accepted by the people of God.

It's worth noting that the canonization criteria were invoked only to exclude books, not to include them. With the exception of transient, local incorporation of the Didache and the Shepherd of Hermas (both second-century works, in contrast to the first-century authorship of every book of the New Testament canon), along with the letter of Clement mentioned above, books were not admitted into the canon and later removed. Incidentally, it was Clement himself that argued against his epistle to the Corinthians being incorporated into the Biblical canon. Also, it should be pointed out that over 36,000 quotes from the "church fathers" corroborate the texts of the New Testament. So high was their view of Scripture that most of the New Testament could be reconstructed from the letters of these early church leaders alone.

Let us also note here that exclusion of a work from the canon does not in any way imply that the book contained erroneous teachings or was not regarded as authoritative. It was certainly the case that a number of writings circulated among the churches, including some that were authored by the apostles themselves (for example, Paul's letter to the Laodicean church mentioned in Colossians 4:16) were not included in the canon. This does not imply that anything was lacking in those letters. Rather, it should be taken as evidence that the Holy Spirit sovereignly superintended the collation of the Word of God to be relayed to posterity.

A separate but related issue is the historical impetus for canonization. In other words, why, historically, did church leaders put forth lists of books to be regarded as the inspired and authoritative Word of God? Here are six reasons: (1) To preserve the apostolic teachings; (2) To encourage the early church within a cultural context of hostility and persecution; (3) To combat the rise of heretic teachings; (4) To testify against spurious writings (e.g., the "gnostic" gospels, like

the so-called Gospel of Thomas); (5) To further international missions; and (6) To define what doctrines and practices were worth dying for. An example of number 3 above is the heretical teachings of Marcion, an early 2nd century heretic who denied the deity of Christ and who put forth his own partial canon. On number 4 above, it should be noted that the so-called Gospel of Thomas (often cited by skeptics who ask why it was left out of the canon) did not appear until the middle of the second century, and, as such, could not have been written during the lifetime of the apostle whose name it bears.

On a final note, critics will often point to the fact that a “final list” wasn’t put forth until the latter part of the fourth century as supposed evidence for the relativistic nature of the New Testament canon. Again, this is completely wrongheaded. The reason for this is the intact “chain of custody” (or chain of authority) that connects the first century apostles (e.g., Paul, Peter) and church fathers (e.g., Clement of Rome) with the finalized list that was put forth for the sake of posterity by Athanasius in AD 367. Let’s consider just one such chain of authority.

The Apostle John disciplined a man named Polycarp who would go on to help lead the church in Smyrna and who was eventually martyred in AD 155. Another second-century “church father” named Irenaeus, who wrote prolifically, was disciplined in Christ by Polycarp. In *Against Heresies*, Irenaeus states that the fourfold gospels are as axiomatic as the four points of the compass. He also puts forth a canon that included Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, Acts, Romans, 1 Corinthians, 2 Corinthians, Galatian, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, 1 Thessalonians, 2 Thessalonians, 1 Timothy, 2 Timothy, Titus, 1 Peter, 1 John, and Revelation. Those 20 books should sound very familiar to anyone who has taken the time to read and study the New Testament. This canon was put forth in the 2nd century by a church leader who was disciplined by the man who was disciplined by the Apostle John! Irenaeus can hardly be accused of “cherry-picking”!

Incidentally, books like 2 John and 3 John were not dubious due to questions of authorship or false teaching. Rather, they were simply considered too short to be preserved. Hebrews was not admitted due to the question of who exactly wrote it (which is still debated). Philemon (Paul’s personal letter about the runaway slave, Onesimus, who became a believer and now was returning home) was considered by some to be too personal of a correspondence to carry a message to the

churches in general. To restate the point about these books that were admitted only later, there was never any questions of potential error or spuriousness. In summary, renowned Bible scholar F.F. Bruce gets it exactly right when he writes, “When at last a Church Council—the Synod of Hippo in A.D. 393—listed the twenty-seven books of the New Testament, it did not confer upon them any authority which they did not already possess, but simply recorded their previously established canonicity”.

Finally, critics often point to the books that have become known as the “Apocrypha” and ask why they were not included in the New Testament. Although the complete list consists of more than 100 books, you may have heard of some of these volumes—gospels spuriously attributed to Thomas, Peter, Judas, Mary, Philip, along with many other books. By appealing to these books, the skeptic is usually intimating that there was just as good of reasons to include these books as to include, say, 1 Corinthians or 1 John. Once again, historical analysis reveals the absurdity of these claims. Virtually all of the books that constitute the “New Testament Apocrypha” appeared after AD 100—most of them much later. None of these books enjoyed anything more than temporary, local recognition, often due to alleged apostolic authority (which was later disproved, leading to their rejection). No major council or canon included them. In an almost paradoxical way, the existence of the New Testament Apocrypha bears witness to the validity of the canonization of the New Testament and of the 27 books that comprise it!

Taken together, the evidence is robust in its overwhelming support of the reliability of the New Testament. We have every reason to be confident that the message we read in God’s Word today is the same message that was written by the holy men of God that were “carried along by the Holy Spirit” (2 Peter 1:21). The onus is on the skeptic who seeks to dismiss the profound evidences for the preservation of the books of the Bible.

No mere appeal to the tendency of humans to distort and change messages across time will suffice to undermine the reliability and validity of the New Testament canon. The skeptic needs to reason his or her case based on the merits of the evidence, not based on vague generalities about the tendencies of humans in general to get things wrong. No doubt, the skeptic trusts many other books

written by fallible human authors. The more one examines the evidence for the New Testament, the more the humble and teachable individual will become convinced that God's Word has been accurately preserved over the past two millennia. Read a good, modern translation of the New Testament today, and you're reading the authentic message given through the first-century authors by the Holy Spirit!

Question to Consider:

How should we respond to the claim of the skeptic that the early church "cherry-picked" books for the New Testament? Be able to describe two or three of the criteria for canonization and relate how these help refute the claims of cherry-picking.

The Bible Is a True Story

So common are the allegations by critics that "The Bible is filled with errors and contradictions" that we should take a moment to address this before moving on. While I was still an atheist, I received as a birthday present a volume of the Christian Scriptures titled *The Skeptic's Annotated Bible*. This work comes as a bound volume and is also currently viewable for free online (by searching for its title). It purports to have identified thousands of errors and contradictions, in addition to pointing to passages about injustices, intolerance, the subjugation of women, slavery, and so forth. Websites like atheists.org, infidels.org, and evlbible.com maintain similar lists.

On campus, when skeptics make the charge (almost always with complete and unwavering confidence) that "the Bible is filled with errors and contradictions", we usually respond by asking them for their favorite. It's remarkable that the vast majority of them cannot cite a single example off the top of their heads. At this point, out comes their smart phone and they conduct an internet search for "Bible contradictions" or something similar. While it's far beyond the scope of this primer to catalogue supposed errors and contradictions and to respond to each of them, I have noticed some clear patterns that are helpful and illustrative. These can help you in giving a reasonable answer to the skeptic and in challenging them

to engage in critical thinking and a more objective consideration of the texts at hand.

First, we need to define what a contradiction is and what it is *not*. A contradiction occurs when it is claimed that both “A” and “not-A” are true at the same time and in the same way. Let’s illustrate. Suppose that the gospels recorded Jesus making both of the following claims (and, to be perfectly clear, they *don’t!*): (1) “I am the Son of God”; and (2) “I am not the Son of God”. If that were the case, we could reasonably conclude that the gospels record contradictory claims about the divinity of Jesus Christ.

On the other hand, if Jesus is recorded in one passage as referring to himself as “the only-begotten Son” (John 3:16) and in another passage as “the Son of man” (Matthew 18:11), one cannot reasonably claim to have discovered a contradiction. Why not? Because it is logically possible that Jesus is, at the same time, the Son of God and the Son of Man—the same person filling two different roles or “offices”. An every day example is this: I am one person, but I am, at the same time, Melissa’s and Wendy’s *brother* and Annabel, Lydia, and Lola’s *father*. It would be absurd to the point of laughability for someone to claim that I was contradicting myself in making both of these claims!

Here’s another example (perhaps a more common one): Did the women at the empty tomb of Jesus find one angel there or two? In Matthew’s account (in the beginning of chapter 8), a single angel is mentioned who comforts the terrified women and announces that Jesus has risen from the dead. Mark similarly mentions “a young man” who speaks to the women, announcing Jesus’ bodily resurrection. On the other hand, Luke (see Luke 24:1-10) states that there were two men there “in dazzling clothing” that made the announcement to the women. Isn’t this a clear example of contradictory accounts of the announcement of Jesus’ resurrection?

As you’ve probably realized by now, when I set up a question like that, my answer is going to be an emphatic “no”! This time is no exception. It is very common—in fact, it is expected—that when two or more people tell factual stories of the same event, some of the details will vary. This is so common, that police detectives become extremely suspicious if two people give tell the exact same story in the

exact same way, pointing out the exact same details. This often points to the story being fabricated and rehearsed beforehand.

In real life eyewitness situations, the same major event is reported (e.g., the blue truck ran the stoplight and hit the silver car), but different “incidental” details will be remembered by different eyewitnesses (e.g., two women got out of the car; a woman in a red jacket got out of the driver’s seat of the car). There is no contradiction. After all, if *two people* are present, then it is also true that *a person* is present. It’s to be expected that different eyewitnesses will recall different specifics of a real, historical event. No one should find it unusual if two people are present but only one of the two *speaks*.

One final example is the frequently-heard charge that Paul and James disagree over the nature of saving faith. Skeptics will argue that, while Paul said people are saved by grace apart from works, James tells us that good works must accompany saving faith, going so far as to say that, “faith without works is dead, being alone” (James 2:26). Which is it? Are we saved by faith alone or by faith plus works?

As it turns out, Paul and James are addressing two different questions. Paul is speaking of what must be done in order for one to be saved. He tells us plainly that Christ completed the work that results in our salvation and all we “do” is believe on the Lord Jesus and receive salvation as the gift of God. James is making a completely different point. How will the presence of saving faith reveal itself in a believer’s life (over against the mere *professions* of faith of those who do not have genuine, saving faith)? James tells us that the kind of faith that saves is the kind of faith that produces fruit of salvation in the believer’s life! Anyone can claim to have turned to Jesus and gotten saved. The test of whether or not that person’s faith is genuine is what type of fruit it is producing in his or her life!

Question to Consider:

What’s the difference between an inconsistency between two (or more) accounts of an event and a contradiction? Come up with your own example to illustrate.

Internal Evidence for the New Testament

Let's consider how the New Testament was written. What genres of literature do we find in the books of the New Testament? The gospels and the book of Acts written in the form of historical narrative (with parts of Acts being autobiographical). They contain episodes, events, and teachings pertaining to the birth, life, ministry, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus of Nazareth, the Son of God. Moreover, the gospels were written either by eyewitnesses of the events themselves (in the disciples/apostles Matthew and John) or firsthand associates of the apostles as they traveled and preached. Mark (John Mark) was the cousin of Paul's traveling companion and co-minister Barnabas. He traveled with the two early in Paul's missionary career and was sent back to him (per Paul's request) closer to the end. Mark also traveled with Peter, serving as a travel companion and interpreter. The historian and physician Luke was a traveling companion and co-missionary alongside the Apostle Paul (as is further evidenced in various passages in Acts, Luke's sequel to the Gospel of Luke, where he uses the first-person plural form "we").

The rest of the New Testament is comprised of personal correspondence letters—messages from the apostles (Paul, Peter, John, Jude) either to churches or to individuals. There is also a letter from James, the half-brother of Jesus, to the churches and the book of Hebrews with unknown authorship (but clearly written by someone with saturated exposure to apostolic teaching). Thus, the testimony of the New Testament collectively is a direct testimony to historical events from specific, identified (with the exception of Hebrews) individuals and often to specific other individuals. As a result, there is the "internal evidence" of several independent, early eyewitnesses all bearing testimony to the same set of events, and centering their message around the life, death, burial, resurrection, ascension, and future return of the Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

Now we must ask ourselves this crucial and diagnostic question: How did these authors live? Did their lifestyles reflect their being convinced of the truthfulness of the message they were proclaiming? Or did the stories of their lives show that they likely fabricated stories about Jesus in order to control people and to win fortune and fame (as some particularly misguided skeptics will sometimes allege)? Well, it is well-established that the church of Jesus Christ expanded throughout the ancient world and into three continents within the lifetimes of the original twelve apostles. It is also unmistakable that these apostles and the members of

the churches they planted suffered some of the worst treatment as a result of their proclamations about Jesus Christ.

While people have been known to fabricate and propagate false stories in pursuit of influence or power or prosperity, I would challenge anyone to find a community as devoted as the original disciples of Jesus who persevered amid such persecution as these faced for a story they knew was false because they had, in fact, made up the story themselves. You simply will not find anything like that anywhere. Based on the corpus of New Testament writings and backed up by the most extreme perseverance of the authors under manifold tests, trials, persecutions, imprisonments, beatings, culminating in the martyrdom of all of them except John, there is every reason to accept the truthfulness of their witness and testimony about Jesus! One need look no further than to the pages of the New Testament itself for proof that the narratives being read are true throughout!

External Evidence for the New Testament

We shouldn't require more proof for the New Testament than what is discovered within its pages. Fortunately, however, strong and persuasive external evidences corroborate the central claims of the Christian faith. These external evidences back up New Testament claims about Jesus' miracles, his death by crucifixion, the belief of the first Christians in his resurrection, their conviction that Jesus is the Son of God, and the persecution and martyrdom of many of these believers as the gospel began to be proclaimed to the nations. We'll briefly examine a subset of these external evidences in this section.

If a skeptic ever asks you, "Does anything outside of the New Testament back up its story?" you need not hesitate to answer "Yes!". We'll look at seven sources here: Tacitus, Suetonius, Josephus, Pliny the Younger, Thallus, the Talmud, and Lucian. These comprise a collection of independent data points from early Jewish, Roman, and Greek sources, both secular and religious, that corroborate the historicity of the New Testament's claims. It's worth noting that most of these sources are from hostile witnesses—that is, people who stood against early Christianity. This is considered by historians to be very powerful corroboration of the truthfulness of an account.

Tacitus (Publius Cornelius Tacitus) was a first-century Roman politician and historian. He records Emperor Nero's blaming of the Christians and the subsequent persecution and execution of many of them following the great fires that destroyed Rome in AD 64. Here's an excerpt from Tacitus' *Annals*: "Nero fastened guilt and inflicted the most exquisite tortures on a class hated for their abominations, called Christians by the populace". He goes on to identify the origin of this group of people, writing that, "Christus, from whom the name had its origin, suffered the extreme penalty during the reign of Tiberius at the hands of one of our procurators, Pontius Pilatus". Here we see a direct corroboration of the gospel accounts of Jesus' crucifixion. What's more, Tacitus even alludes to the Christian story of the resurrection of Jesus, recording that, "a most mischievous superstition, thus checked for the moment, again broke out not only in Judea...but even in Rome..."

Seutonius (Gaius Seutonius Tranquillus) was another Roman historian. He lived and wrote during the early half of the second century and served as chief secretary to Emperor Hadrian. Seutonius confirms an expulsion of the Christians from Rome in AD 49 under Claudius, an event that is recorded by Luke in Acts 18:2. In *Life of Claudius*, 25.4, Seutonius writes, "As the Jews were making constant disturbances at the instigation of Chrestus, he expelled them from Rome". In case you're wondering, "Chrestus" is the Latinized form of "Christ", and "the Jews" would have been how a Roman historian at the time would have identified the early Christians, since they lived in the Jewish district of Rome and most of them in AD 49 would have been Jewish. In *Life of Nero*, Seutonius also records Nero's martyrdom of Christians. He records that, "Punishment was inflicted on Christians, a body of people addicted to a novel and mischievous superstition" (another highly probable reference to their belief in the bodily resurrection of Jesus).

Flavius Josephus was a first-century Pharisee and historian. In *Antiquities of the Jews* 18, Josephus makes clear and unambiguous reference to Jesus and John the Baptist, including their executions. In *Antiquities of the Jews* 20, he records the execution of James, brother of Jesus, under the high priest Ananias. This same event is recorded by Luke in Acts 12:2. The longer excerpt in about Jesus known as the "Testimonium Flavianum" reveals that it is possible that Josephus had a high regard for Jesus and possibly even came to recognize him as the Messiah,

although it has been hotly debated whether or not that passage was edited by Christians at a later date. Regardless of whether or not the Testimonium Flavianum involves a Christian interpolation, Flavius Josephus still provides direct, early, external corroboration for the life and death of Jesus of Nazareth as recorded in the gospels. That much is indisputable.

Pliny the Younger (Gaius Plinius Caecilius Secundus) was born in AD 61 and was a lawyer, senator, and author in ancient Rome. In a letter to Emperor Trajan written in AD 112, Pliny seeks guidance regarding whether he should punish those who were once accused of being Christians but have since renounced their faith, cursed Christ, and worshipped the Emperor as required. In this fascinating letter, Pliny records that true Christians could not be forced to do these things, and many of them he sentenced to imprisonment or death, although their crime amounted to the following: “They were in the habit of meeting on a certain fixed day before it was light, when they sang in alternate verses a hymn to Christ, as to a god”. Thus, the extrabiblical (and hostile) testimony of Pliny not only corroborates the widespread persecution of Christians that endured well into 2nd century Rome, but also confirms that the early Christians worshipped Christ as “a god”, because they understood him to be God.

Thallus was a 1st century writer whose original works were destroyed but recovered through the writings of Julius Africanus (late 2nd, early 3rd century). Writing in AD 52, Thallus records a midday darkness (which he called “a most fearful darkness”) and earthquake at the time of Jesus’ death. He also gives a specific date, which corroborates the testimony of Scripture: “It was the season of the paschal full moon that Jesus died”. Whereas Thallus attributed the midday darkness to a solar eclipse, Julius Africanus (correctly) points out that this cannot be the correct explanation as solar eclipses cannot happen when there is a full moon.

The Talmud is the core text of Rabbinic Judaism. It expounds Jewish law and theology. As is clear from the gospel accounts, the vast majority of the Jewish authorities at the time of Jesus ardently opposed his ministry and message. While these opponents could not deny the evidence of the supernatural works Jesus was doing, they rejected his claim to be working by the power of God and attributed his miracles to Satan. In Matthew 9:24, for example, Jesus’ religious

opponents claimed that he cast out demons “by the prince of demons”. In response to Jesus’ claims to be the Son of God, the Jews charged him with blasphemy. The execution of Jesus is recorded in *Talmud Sanhedrin 43a*: “On the eve of Passover, Yeshu was hanged. For forty days before the execution took place, a herald went forth and cried, ‘He is going forth to be stoned because he has practiced sorcery and enticed Israel to apostasy’. The name “Yeshu” is the Talmudic name for Jesus, and “hanging” was how the Talmud referred to Roman crucifixion.

Finally, we come to Lucian (of Samosata), a Greek satirist of Syrian descent born in AD 120 in present-day Turkey. Lucian was a vitriolic critic and enemy of the Christian faith. His writings trumpeted his mockery, scorn, and utter contempt for Christianity. Lucian writes, “The Christians, you know, worship a man to this day—the distinguished personage who introduced their novel rites, and was crucified on that account”. He goes on to issue this backhanded compliment as a testimony of the devotion of the early Christians: “You see, these misguided creatures start with the general conviction that they are immortal for all time, which explains the contempt of death and voluntary self-devotion which are so common among them”. Lucian corroborates the lavish generosity and community sharing that characterized the early church, as described in Acts 4:32 (“Not one of them claimed that any of the things which he possessed was his own...”), writing that the Christians “despise all worldly goods alike, regarding them merely as common property”. What Lucian clearly understood to be an absurd way of life went down in history as powerful testimony to the unyielding devotion of the early Christians to Christ and to each other!

A very fitting summary of these historical data points was provided by the late Dr. Norman Geisler. He argued convincingly for the witness for the corroboration of the teachings of the New Testament based solely on early, non-Christian (i.e., extrabiblical) writings. According to Geisler, here’s what history alone would tell us even if there was no New Testament: (1) Jesus was from Nazareth; (2) He lived a wise and virtuous life; (3) He was crucified in Palestine under Pontius Pilate during the reign of Tiberius Caesar at Passover time, being considered a Jewish king; (4) He was believed by his disciples to have been raised from the dead 3 days later; (5) His enemies acknowledged that he performed extraordinary feats they called “sorcery”; (6) His small band of disciples multiplied rapidly, spreading

as far as Rome; and (7) His disciples denied polytheism, lived moral lives, and worshiped Christ as God.

As we have surveyed in this section, the historical witness for the truthfulness of the New Testament is astonishingly strong. When considered objectively by a mind that is willing to go wherever the evidence leads, confidence in the fidelity of the New Testament record will be strengthened and confirmed. The evidence is so powerful, in fact, that the onus of proof is appropriately shifted to the one who denies the historicity of the New Testament. Once again, we are mindful of Aristotle's Dictum—"The benefit of the doubt is to be given to the document itself, not arrogated by the critic to himself". No amount of handwaving or dismissiveness by the critic of the can effectively nullify the robust, historical testimonies of the New Testament witnesses. Such gestures amount to nothing more than willful ignorance.

In drawing this chapter to a close, I am reminded of a keen observation made by fellow campus evangelist Tom Short. Tom has interacted with literally hundreds of thousands (perhaps even millions) of college students over the years from all walks of life. Many of these students claim to have "grown up Christian" only to abandon their faith at some point during their journey through college. Tom is fond of saying that, if you listen closely, you'll hear two reasons students give for leaving Christianity. The first is the reason that sounds good; the second is the real reason.

The reason that sounds good often sounds something like this: "I started learning science and realized that science disproves the Bible" or "I studied other religions and realized that humans have defined all kinds of different paths to God, and Jesus is just one of those ways" or "I came to see that the Bible is riddled with errors and contradictions". The real reason is often something like this: "I got to college and got caught up in the party scene and hook-up culture" or "I started dating a girl who was an agnostic and we started sleeping together" or "I just really wanted to fit in and for people to like me and I realized that Biblical Christianity is very unfashionable among my friends, classmates, and peers".

Scripture is plain in revealing that the fallen, sin-depraved human mind has mastered the task of "suppressing the truth in unrighteousness" (Romans 1:18). In other words, our sin obscures evidence that God has made clear—evidence

that He has placed right before our eyes. The evidence is there. It is powerful, and it is undeniable.

So far in this short primer, we have considered what should be, to any sober and humble thinker, compelling and impressive evidences for the truth of Christianity. These robust evidences derive from nature, from conscience, and from the phenomenally unique collection of 66 books called the Bible. In our final chapter on classical apologetics, we will focus on the ultimate proof God has provided that Christianity is true—the bodily resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ! Since Jesus Christ alone conquered death, hell, and the grave, he has proved beyond a shadow of a doubt that he and he alone is the only Way back to God!

Questions to Consider:

How do internal and external evidences provide evidence for the truthfulness of the New Testament witness?

Which do you find more persuasive and why?

What is Aristotle's Dictum, and how might it apply to conversations about the truthfulness of the New Testament documents?