



# Is the Bible Reliable?

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Scholars devote entire books to the question of the Bible's historical reliability. For the sake of space and time, this essay will merely sample some work on three parts of the Bible: the time of the patriarchs; Israel's history as recorded in 1 and 2 Kings; and Jesus' time.<sup>1</sup>

## Comparing Biblical Accounts with Their World

The question of historical reliability is relevant only to particular kinds of writings in the [Bible](#). For example, one does not ordinarily speak of letters or parables as historically reliable. Clearly, however, many books of the Bible recount historical information.

The practice of history-writing developed over time, and some periods exercised more flexibility than others. For example, audiences in the day of the gospel writer Luke had clearer expectations for what history-writing would involve than did audiences in King David's era. Likewise, ancient writers did not use footnotes. Nevertheless, by definition, history-writing involved the arrangement of information.

Modern historians depend in great measure on ancient historical reports in order to reconstruct ancient history. When modern historians evaluate the degree of an ancient work's historical reliability, one approach is to compare the work in question with information available to us from other sources. This approach is easier for some periods than for others. For example, far more information exists about the United States in 1960 CE than about Assyria in 720 BCE.

Several variables factor in to the ability to corroborate biblical information with historical records. For instance, Assyrian annals confirm many details of the Bible during the Assyrian period, but the same approach is not possible for the later Persian period, because Persia's annals were lost. We have considerable information about the time of the biblical figure Paul, who preached in urban areas, but comparatively little about the time of Abraham, who wandered about and settled in the ancient Near East nearly four thousand years ago.

Where less direct information is available, scholars compare the reports of biblical or other ancient authors with what can be known of the era about which they wrote. Traditional cultures often preserve and pass on core elements of stories over centuries. The stories about Abraham may have been passed on for centuries as oral sagas. Yet they reflect not merely the period in which they were written down—though some updating of language over time is to be expected—but also some clear elements of the period they claim to describe.

The evidence available for historical examination often increases as we move forward in time, and we will notice this pattern as we examine three eras of biblical history.

## Abraham and the Patriarchs

Scholars generally date the biblical patriarchs to the early second millennium BCE—and we have far less information about this time period than about later eras. Most evidence from the second millennium BCE has not survived the past four thousand years. Moreover, of what has survived, only a small portion has been excavated; of what has been excavated, only some has been published; and of what has been published, only some has been sifted through and applied to the Bible.

Regarding antiquity more generally, one scholar has estimated that as little as 1 piece of evidence in 60,000 is available to us.<sup>2</sup> With such odds, we cannot expect to find records of particular ordinary individuals from the period—especially when those individuals were nomadic shepherds. And we could not expect to have direct extra-biblical information about Abraham any more than we have about other leaders of nomadic tribes or clans.

The best that one can do with these very early biblical accounts is check whether they are consistent with what is known about the period in general. Happily, some information about this does still remain.<sup>3</sup>

A legitimate example to which scholars point is the fact that biblical names are consistent with their period. Name preferences changed from one era to the next, just as they do today. In the United States, for example, Beatrice and Mildred usually belong to a different generation than Shamika or Kelly. In the same way, many sorts of names in the Bible's patriarchal narratives—Abraham, Nahor, Terah, Jacob—fit records of the second millennium BCE much better than other periods, such as the years when the narratives were first written down.

More significantly, Abraham's journey to Canaan also fits the second millennium better than it does the later era during which the narratives were recorded. Abraham's era was fairly peaceful, with plenty of travel between northwest Mesopotamia and Canaan. Although no massive migration existed, many Amorites traveled from Syria to Palestine. Most of the cities that the biblical accounts mention—even in passing (Harran, Bethel, Dothan, Gerar, Hebron, and Shechem)—were inhabited by this period, though some were abandoned for centuries afterward. Politically, tribal confederacies predominated in this period; city kings rarely appear in the narratives except on the Jordan plain (the king of Gerar and Melchizedek). Moreover, the warfare depicted in Genesis 14—including the routes taken and the description of the eastern kings' alliance—best fits Abraham's general era.

Egyptian sources show that the patriarchs' lifestyles fit that of the second millennium BCE rather than later Israel in several ways, including the fact that pastoral nomads were in contact with agrarian villages. Relations with Canaanites reflect the patriarchal period rather than the way later Israelites would likely have depicted them. Furthermore, patriarchal practices often depart from what later Israelites would have envisioned or approved, including, for example, Abraham marrying his half-sister or Jacob marrying two sisters.<sup>4</sup>

It is very possible that Joseph found favor in Egypt during the period of rule by the Asian people known as the Hyksos. Much land was nationalized under Pharaoh during that period, as it is in Joseph's story (Genesis 47:20). Many elements of the story fit local Egyptian customs. Particularly dramatic is the preservation of a specific detail: Joseph was sold into slavery for twenty shekels of silver (Genesis 37:28). Slaves averaged 30–40 shekels in the fifteenth century BCE, 50 shekels in the early first millennium, and 100 shekels by the Persian period—but precisely 20 shekels during the period in which Joseph would have lived. This correlation suggests that even this minor detail was preserved accurately for centuries before the account was written down.

Some language in the biblical patriarchal narratives—such as the titles for local peoples or possibly the use of camels alongside other animals for which more evidence remains—was updated for audiences in a later period. (Still, some camels may have been domesticated many centuries before Abraham's time.)<sup>5</sup> As noted earlier, the style of writing stories about the past also differed in this era. What is more striking, however, is the preservation of signs of tradition from the era that is described. Given the limited evidence that survives from the period, such observations are significant but remain limited in scope. The available evidence expands, however, for more recent periods.

## Israel's History in 1 and 2 Kings

The biblical literary sources, though composed in their final form long after most of the events, preserve accurate recollections of rulers and events from the corresponding periods. Egyptologist Kenneth Kitchen has elaborated on these recollections particularly compellingly, and I summarize some of his material in this section.<sup>6</sup> (The accuracy of these accounts may be contrasted with [apocryphal](#) works such as Tobit or Judith, which confuse various details about the past.)

For example, 1 Kings 14:25–26 reports the assault of Pharaoh Shishak against Jerusalem; inscriptions of this Libyan-Egyptian ruler elaborate more fully on his ravaging of Palestine in 926 BCE. Assyrian records attest that Omri seized Israel's throne (1 Kings 16:16–23); excavations confirm that Omri's capital of Samaria was built in this period (1 Kings 16:24), and Samaria's costly Phoenician masonry indicates trade ties with Phoenicia—fitting Omri's marriage of his son to the Phoenician princess Jezebel (1 Kings 16:31).

Assyrian annals report a battle against the Aramean (Syrian) king and Israel's King Ahab (cf. 1 Kings 16:26–30). Archaeologists have found much ivory in eighth-century-BCE Samaria that fits the description of ivory decorations in the royal palace in 1 Kings 22:39. An Assyrian inscription confirms that Hazael usurped the throne from Ben-Hadad (2 Kings 8:15); another Assyrian source attests Israel's king Jehu (2 Kings 9:13). Archaeologists have recovered the tomb of Judah's king Uzziah, who died in 742 BCE (2 Chronicles 26:23). Assyrian annals confirm that around 739 BCE, the Israelite king Menahem paid tribute to Assyria (2 Kings 15:19), as did King Rezin of Aram (cf. 2 Kings 16:9). Assyrian sources also confirm that Tiglath-Pileser overthrew Hazor during the reign of Pekah (2 Kings 15:29), and supported a new king, Hoshea, to replace Pekah as Israel's king (2 Kings 15:30).

Other biblical kings who are attested in archaeological sources include Jeroboam II, Jotham, Ahaz, Hezekiah, Manasseh, and so forth—all in the exact periods in which the Bible reports them. Even Baruch, Jeremiah's scribe (Jeremiah 32:12), and various persons mentioned only peripherally (such as Jehoiachin's son Pedaiah in 1 Chronicles 3:18) are sometimes confirmed in surviving inscriptions.

Although Assyrian records usually verify the accounts in 2 Kings, for a time some scholars believed that the limited evidence exposed a minor error in the book. Historically speaking, Sargon II claimed credit for conquering Samaria, but 2 Kings 17:3–6 appears to credit the previous Assyrian king, Shalmaneser V (727–722 BCE) with this victory. Further study, however, revealed that Shalmaneser did not die until December 722—after the city fell. Thus Shalmaneser did indeed conquer the city; his next-in-command successor, Sargon, just tried to take the credit. Sargon's inscriptions do confirm Israel's deportation (2 Kings 17:6) and that his field marshal conquered Ashdod in 712 BCE (Isaiah 20:1).

In 701 BCE, the new Assyrian king Sennacherib campaigned against Jerusalem. Assyrian sources confirm that, as reported in 2 Kings 18:19–25, Assyrians began with psychological warfare against their enemies, seeking their surrender. The possibility that the Nubian royal official Tirhakah—who eleven years later became king of Egypt—might support Judah's King Hezekiah against the Assyrians (2 Kings 19:9) fits the period. Assyrian records boast of the fall of Lachish (2 Kings 19:8), and excavations show remains of Assyrian weapons there.

Like the inscriptions of most ancient kings, Assyrian rulers' inscriptions focused on their victories. Thus the Assyrian king reports that he captured forty-six walled cities of Judah and then besieged Hezekiah in Jerusalem “like a bird within a cage.” But Assyrians usually did not settle for merely humiliating their opponents; they often continued their siege until they prevailed.

However, Sennacherib cannot boast of capturing Jerusalem, and no archaeological evidence indicates its destruction in this time. Instead, some scholars argue, Sennacherib may have been the one humiliated. Assyrians obviously did not boast about defeats in their inscriptions, but they did stay away from Jerusalem for a number of years—behavior that normally characterized the Assyrians only when they experienced significant setbacks. A later oral tradition in the region attributes the Assyrian army's demise to a plague; the Bible attributes it to the angel of God striking it (2 Kings 19:35). Archaeology also confirms Hezekiah's conduit (2 Kings 20:20), and the visit of messengers from the Babylonian rebel Marduk-Baladan to King Hezekiah (2 Kings 20:12) fits the period.

One could continue. Babylonian records, archaeology, and even some Judahite pottery fragments confirm many of the subsequent events surrounding Judah's Babylonian exile. However, the examples above should be sufficient to show that, where external evidence remains to test them, these historical Israelite sources clearly depended on a significant body of genuine historical information (often mentioned as annals in the books of Kings and Chronicles) rather than representing mere tales or fantasies.

## Accounts about Jesus

The second half of the book of Acts abounds with correlations with information from other sources, because it addresses the wider Mediterranean world.<sup>7</sup> Stories about Jesus, by contrast, involve Galilee, a region of relatively little interest to other ancient writers. (However, Jesus does appear more than most Jewish religious and political figures of the period, indicating that he was particularly intriguing.)<sup>8</sup> Nevertheless, what we know of the period offers strong evidence for confidence in the [New Testament](#) gospels.<sup>9</sup>

The genre of the gospels is one reason to expect significant historical information to be contained within them. The preface of one of the gospels explains its purpose as confirming matters about Jesus that his disciple already knew (Luke 1:3–4). Such statements of purpose normally characterized ancient historical prefaces.<sup>10</sup>

The majority of scholars recognize the first-century gospels as biographies,<sup>11</sup> a type of historical genre.<sup>12</sup> One may readily test this theory by comparing multiple ancient biographies about a person who lived within a generation or two before the biographers. Biographers often tried to teach moral or political lessons through their narratives, but they sought to do so based on genuine prior information. They varied in their accuracy in details (for example, Suetonius appears more careful than Josephus), but those who wrote about recent ancient figures normally preserved large amounts of accurate information.

For example, when the information in a brief biography of some twenty-eight paragraphs was tested, roughly fifty points could be verified as existing before the biographer wrote it. That count includes only cases where the biography could

be tested, but such cases are certainly enough to show that the writer depended heavily on prior information.<sup>13</sup> If this is the result when we can test it, we can safely assume roughly the same degree of reliability where we cannot. An ancient biographer had no way of knowing which sources would survive.

The most reliable ancient biographies by modern standards are those written within a generation or two of their subject's life and those that make careful use of their sources. The gospels fare well by these standards. They are works about a person active within one to two generations before their writing. Mark, for example, is most often dated to about forty years after Jesus' ministry, give or take a few years (many scholars date it about thirty-four years after his ministry). And Mark is by no means the only early source. By the time that Luke writes, he knows of "many" written accounts about Jesus (Luke 1:1).<sup>14</sup> Unfortunately, most of these accounts have not survived, though Luke himself did have access to them.

Moreover, when we compare the gospels, we can test how carefully they used their sources. According to the most widely accepted theory, Matthew and Luke both used Mark as a source. Comparison shows that they usually followed Mark closely, sometimes supplementing with information from another shared source.<sup>15</sup> This overlap in material resembles what we find among other ancient biographers. And just as those biographers tried to depend on sources that they believed were [trustworthy](#), Matthew and Luke undoubtedly deemed Mark an accurate source. Because they wrote relatively soon after Mark did, they were in a good position to know how precisely Mark had followed his sources (according to early tradition, his primary source was Peter).

Today we obviously lack the means to interview the original witnesses or confirm their sources. Luke, however, had that opportunity. When Luke claims to have thorough knowledge of the events about which he writes (in Luke 1:3, many translations say he "investigated"), referring to oral tradition from the eyewitnesses (Luke 1:2), there is good reason to believe him. Luke spent up to two years with Paul in Judea (Acts 24:27). In Acts, Luke occasionally notes his presence with Paul when traveling (he uses first person plural ["we"] in Acts 16:10–17; 20:5–28:16). Scholars have proposed various other explanations for the "we," but the majority recognizes that Luke undoubtedly intended it to function the way that other ancient historical writers did—to claim his own presence.<sup>16</sup>

Two years was certainly ample time for Luke to do what he claimed he did—confirm many of the widely circulated accounts about Jesus (Luke 1:4). That Luke claims to confirm the stories about Jesus makes clear that he is not simply making them up; the bulk of what he had to say was already circulating by his day. That is clear because one does not normally appeal to an audience's fairly extensive knowledge of events if, in fact, one's audience has no such knowledge.<sup>17</sup>

But how accurately would the information have been transmitted before it was written down?<sup>18</sup> Some cultures are better at orally passing on information than others. Dependent on media resources, Western culture today does not value memory skills very highly, but they were esteemed in earlier eras, even in the West. In Mediterranean antiquity, some proved particularly skilled. Exceptional persons, such as Seneca the Elder, could memorize hundreds of names in quick succession and could recall the substance of speeches he had heard years earlier.

Even ordinary people, however, could train their memories. Public speakers might memorize their speeches, which could easily be up to two hours in length. Traveling storytellers could recite entire books from memory. This skill was not limited to the literate—most of these storytellers were considered uneducated and memorized by recitation rather than by reading.<sup>19</sup>

Memorization was common in education, starting from the most basic level. A major duty of disciples at more advanced levels was learning by careful repetition the views of their teachers, so as to be able to promote those views in the future. (Even when some disciples came to disagree with their teachers, they continued to owe them respect and would seek to represent their views accurately and fairly.)

Advanced disciplines for Greeks included especially philosophy and rhetoric (focused on public speaking); more common among [Jews](#) was studying Torah (the law) under teachers (later called rabbis). All sources that survive indicate that ancient teachers expected their students to learn and remember their teachings, and it is more reasonable to base our views on all surviving sources than to contradict those sources without evidence. Our sources about Jewish teachers are more limited, but those that survive also emphasize oral memory.

Nearly everyone recognizes that [Jesus](#) was a teacher who had disciples. It is also clear that these disciples continued to lead the church for probably some three decades (Galatians 2:9; cf. 1 Corinthians 15:5, 7). Not everyone realizes the implications of this situation: in the period between Jesus' death and the writing of the gospels, the leading voices in the church were disciples of Jesus. Like other disciples, they would have passed on his teachings. Because they would have

repeated Jesus' behavior and teachings over and over, they would have remembered key events and teachings very well. To argue otherwise is to ignore what ancient disciples were or to treat Jesus' disciples as different from other disciples. Arguing otherwise is not ordinarily how one studies history; it is instead how one tries to explain away evidence in order to maintain one's skepticism.

In the Greek world, disciples often took notes and even published books recounting their teachers' views. Jesus' original disciples may have actually taken notes when Jesus was teaching or right after. If so, someone early in the process would have begun writing down the stories—most likely well before Mark's gospel.

Given the standard dating of the gospel of Mark, the exclusively oral period for the perpetuation of Jesus' teachings was at most a generation; as we have noted, it was probably less. Even today, we would not simply dismiss eyewitness testimonies about events that occurred four decades before. Most of us know people who were alive during, say, the Vietnam War (and some of us were alive then ourselves). This is roughly the same historical distance between Jesus' ministry and the earliest written accounts of Jesus' life.

Still less should we dismiss memories of those who viewed passing on memories as their job, whose recollections were sharpened by telling and retelling the stories. Of course, the process of retelling stories standardizes them and shapes memory, but the basic stories that were retold would be remembered in those forms and available to subsequent writers.

That Jesus' audiences passed on his teachings can be confirmed from our sources. Although they were written down a generation later, outside the Holy Land, and in Greek, they retain many traits of a Galilean Jewish setting and Aramaic figures of speech. Of course, sayings would be translated and edited to make them more comprehensible for hearers outside the land, so it is surprising how many signs of early tradition remain. At the least, these features show that these traditions go back to the earliest followers of Jesus, those who had the most direct experience with his ministry.

Here are just a handful of examples: "Son of Man" is an Aramaic figure of speech that made no sense to later Greek readers. Jesus' response to some Pharisees' question about divorce fits a debate among Pharisees that was occurring in exactly Jesus' generation. The first half of the Lord's Prayer is very similar to the Kaddish, which Jewish people prayed regularly. Some of Jesus' parables resemble the parables told by other Jewish teachers of his day, but were unknown elsewhere in the Mediterranean world. The gospels abound with such examples.

Critics today sometimes echo a challenge raised against the gospels' reliability by nineteenth-century critic David Strauss. Strauss asserted that the miracle stories in the gospels must reflect a period of legendary development; he did not believe that eyewitnesses would offer such claims. Yet most scholars today recognize that Jesus' contemporaries considered him a miracle-worker. This picture of Jesus appears in every form of early Christian tradition. Even Jesus' enemies viewed him as a worker of wonders, although they attributed his success to evil spirits or sorcery.<sup>20</sup> The earliest version of a passage in the book *Antiquities*, written by first-century Jewish historian Josephus, also acknowledges Jesus as a worker of wonders.<sup>21</sup>

Moreover, research shows that hundreds of millions of people today claim to have witnessed [miracles](#).<sup>22</sup> The point here is not how many of these experiences are obvious divine actions; people recover from injuries and illnesses for various reasons and observers explain these recoveries in various ways. Some of the accounts are indeed particularly dramatic (e.g., curing of blindness), but the point here is not how we explain these events. The point is that these accounts come from eyewitnesses who believe they have experienced or witnessed miracles. No one supposes that these accounts arose only by legend. Neither is there any reason to dismiss eyewitness tradition in the gospels simply because they recount people's experience with Jesus as a miracle worker.<sup>23</sup>

## Conclusion

The kinds of evidence for biblical history vary from one era to another. When we examine the evidence available, however, the biblical documents fit our expectations for historical sources from their time. In some cases—such as where we can compare biblical reports with contemporary Assyrian annals—the evidence is substantial. In the case of the gospels, the history was written soon after the events, drawing on the accounts told repeatedly by key eyewitnesses. The gospels provide better access to information about [Jesus](#) than we have for the majority of figures in antiquity who interest us.

Today some critics complain that we are biased if we heed works such as the gospels. Yet few critics would so readily dismiss the information in ancient biographies about other persons. One must wonder, then, in which direction is the bias really working?

## References

- <sup>1</sup> For books, see Kenneth A. Kitchen, *On the Reliability of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003); Craig S. Keener, *The Historical Jesus of the Gospels* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009); Edwin M. Yamauchi, *The Stones and the Scriptures: An Introduction to Biblical Archaeology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1972); F. F. Bruce, *The New Testament Documents: Are They Reliable?* 5th rev. ed. (Leicester, UK: InterVarsity, 1981).
- <sup>2</sup> Yamauchi, *Stones*, 156–157. Yamauchi notes that of more than one hundred million estimated pay vouchers for soldiers from the early Roman Empire, only about seven have survived—a survival rate of 0.00000007 percent. To find attestation of particular nomads, then, would require a find that, statistically speaking, would itself be a miracle!
- <sup>3</sup> For information here, see especially William Sanford LaSor, David Allan Hubbard, and Frederic W. Bush, *Old Testament Survey: The Message, Form, and Background of the Old Testament*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996), 41–43. Also see Kitchen, *Reliability*, 313–372; Craig S. Keener and Glenn Usry, *Defending Black Faith* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1997), 154–160, notes on 210–214.
- <sup>4</sup> Compare Genesis 20:12 with Leviticus 18:9, 11 and Deuteronomy 27:22. There are many examples of such customs (e.g., compare Genesis 21:33 with Deuteronomy 16:21).
- <sup>5</sup> See Cornelia Becker, “Camel: Ancient Orient,” *Brill’s New Pauly*, 2:1019; R. J. Forbes, *Studies in Ancient Technology*, 9 vols. (Leiden, Netherlands: Brill Academic Publishers, 1955–64), 2:187–208; A. R. Millard, “Methods of Studying the Patriarchal Narratives as Ancient Texts,” in A. R. Millard and D. J. Wiseman, *Essays on the Patriarchal Narratives* (Leicester, UK: InterVarsity Press, 1980), 49.
- <sup>6</sup> See Kitchen, *Reliability*, 7–64.
- <sup>7</sup> See Colin J. Hemer, *The Book of Acts in the Setting of Hellenistic History*, ed. Conrad H. Gempf; Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament, vol. 1 (Tübingen, Germany: Mohr Siebeck, 1989), 108–220, especially 108–192; Craig S. Keener, *Acts: An Exegetical Commentary*, 4 vols. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2012–14), 1:166–219.
- <sup>8</sup> See sources in Keener, *Historical Jesus*, 67–68; discussion in David Flusser with R. Steven Notley, *The Sage from Galilee: Rediscovering Jesus’ Genius*, 4th ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2007), 1; “Jesus, His Ancestry, and the Commandment of Love,” *Jesus’ Jewishness: Exploring the Place of Jesus within Early Judaism*, ed. James H. Charlesworth (New York: The American Interfaith Institute, Crossroad, 1991), 154; Gerd Theissen and Annette Merz, *The Historical Jesus: A Comprehensive Guide*, trans. John Bowden (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998), 93.
- <sup>9</sup> The following arguments are documented in Keener, *Historical Jesus*, and in Keener’s articles cited below.
- <sup>10</sup> See Keener, *Acts*, 1:93–96, 173–176, and sources cited there.
- <sup>11</sup> See Richard A. Burridge, *What Are the Gospels? A Comparison with Graeco-Roman Biography*, Society for New Testament Studies Monograph Series 70 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 109–239; Charles H. Talbert, *What Is a Gospel? The Genre of the Canonical Gospels* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977); George A. Kennedy, “Classical and Christian Source Criticism,” *The Relationships Among the Gospels: An Interdisciplinary Dialogue*, ed. William O. Walker Jr., (San Antonio, TX: Trinity University Press, 1978), 128–134; David E. Aune, *The New Testament in Its Literary Environment* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1987), 46–76; Graham N. Stanton, “Matthew: BIBLOS, EUAGGELION, or BIOS?” *The Four Gospels 1992: Festschrift for Franz Neirynck*, eds. F. Van Segbroeck, C. M. Tuckett, G. Van Belle, and J. Verheyden (Leuven: Leuven University, 1992), 1187–1201; G. N. Stanton, *Jesus of Nazareth in New Testament Preaching* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1974), 117–136.
- <sup>12</sup> See Kennedy, “Source Criticism,” 136; Benedetto Bravo, “Antiquarianism and History,” *A Companion to Greek and Roman Historiography*, 2 vols., ed. John Marincola (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007), 516; Philip Stadter, “Biography and History,” *A Companion to Greek and Roman Historiography*, 528.
- <sup>13</sup> See Craig S. Keener, “Otho: A Targeted Comparison of Suetonius’ Biography and Tacitus’ History, with Implications for the Gospels’ Historical Reliability,” *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 21:3, 2011): 331–355. More generally, see Craig S. Keener, *Historical Jesus of the Gospels* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2012).

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- <sup>14</sup> There is no consensus on the date of Luke's two-volume work, but there is reason to believe that it dates to soon after the events depicted in the book of Acts, perhaps to the mid-70s of the first century (roughly forty-five years after Jesus' crucifixion). See the arguments in Craig S. Keener, "Paul and Seditious: Pauline Apologetic in Acts," *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 22, no.2, (2012): 201-224; Craig S. Keener, *Acts*, 1:383-401.
- <sup>15</sup> Given the differences in their infancy narratives and their accounts of Judas's death, Luke likely did not use our present Gospel of Matthew, nor the reverse, but they did use a common source. Whatever view of the order of the sources, however, the issue of frequent dependence on some common material seems obvious.
- <sup>16</sup> See Keener, *Acts*, 1:402-422, especially the discussion of the meaning of "we" in Acts 16:10 (in *Acts*, vol. 3, forthcoming).
- <sup>17</sup> Similarly, in 2 Corinthians 12:12, Paul appeals to his audience's eyewitness knowledge that miracles happened during his ministry. Such a claim would be counterproductive if the Corinthian believers had not witnessed events that they understood in this way.
- <sup>18</sup> On biography and oral tradition, see also further comments in Craig S. Keener, "Reading the Gospels as Biographies of a Sage," *Buried History* 47 (2011): 59-66; Craig S. Keener, "Assumptions in Historical Jesus Research: Using Ancient Biographies and Disciples' Traditioning as a Control," *Journal for the Study of the Historical Jesus* 9, no.1 (2011): 26-58.
- <sup>19</sup> A modern comparison would be, for example, how even illiterate youth in some Islamic societies can recite by memory vast sections of the Qur'an.
- <sup>20</sup> Cf. Mark 3:22; the views of some later rabbis (*tos. Hul. 2:22-23*); the pagan critic Celsus.
- <sup>21</sup> Josephus, *Antiquities* 18.63. See Geza Vermes, "The Jesus Notice of Josephus Re-examined," *Journal of Jewish Studies* 38, no. 1 (1987): 1-10; Geza Vermes, *Jesus the Jew: A Historian's Reading of the Gospels* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1973), 79. See also John P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus*, 4 vols., Anchor Bible Reference Library (New York: Doubleday, 1994-), 2:621; Theissen and Merz, *Historical Jesus*, 74. The term used for "wonders" is the same term that Josephus uses elsewhere for Elisha's miracles (*Antiquities of the Jews*, 9.182).
- <sup>22</sup> See "Spirit and Power: A 10-Country Survey of Pentecostals," *Pew Forum*, 2006, available at <http://pewforum.org/surveys/pentecostal>. The survey includes estimates for both charismatic and non-charismatic witnesses, with high figures for the latter as well. For China (not included in the above report), see Währisch-Oblau, "Healthy," 87. Even a significant proportion of doctors affirm that they have witnessed miracles ("Science or Miracle? Holiday Season Survey Reveals Physicians' Views of Faith, Prayer, and Miracles," *Business Wire*, Dec. 20, 2004).
- <sup>23</sup> See Craig S. Keener, *Miracles: The Credibility of the New Testament Accounts*, 2 vols. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011).

Of all challenges to a Christian's faith, one of the most troubling may be the skeptic's charge that the Bible is filled with discrepancies. But do such criticisms hold up under serious scrutiny? Can a person have a rational belief in the inspiration and inerrancy of Scripture? Join Eric Lyons in this 10-lesson program as he uses the Bible and common sense to answer some of the most frequently asked questions about the reliability of the Bible. [World Video Bible School \(WVBS\)](#). [World Video Bible School \(WVBS\)](#).  
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3. Many skeptics today will say the Bible is not reliable. But there are many things Christians can research, both in God's word and externally, to build a good case for the reliability of the Bible. Namely, canonization of the Bible, historical accuracy of the Bible, Messianic prophecies, and New Testament manuscripts. [Edward Antonio](#).  
Canonization of the Bible. One of the most important issues when it comes to the Bible is the number of books. Protestant Bibles contain 66 books. Whereas, Catholic Bibles hold 73 books, the Ethiopic Bible has 83. Who is correct? As Christians, we know the voice of God by the power and guidance of the Holy Spirit. The issue of Canon, meaning: an authoritative list of books accepted as Holy Scripture, can be broken down into three categories  
Is the Bible Reliable? Engage with the debate on whether we can trust the Bible. Consider the evidence for and against the reliability and trustworthiness of the Bible. Go to [The Bible](#) for wider questions about what it means for the Bible to be God's Word, whether it can be relevant to us today and how the contents of the Bible were decided. Filter By: All levels. Question: "Is the Bible reliable?". Answer: Using the same criteria by which we judge other historical works, not only is the Bible reliable, it is more reliable than any other comparable writings. Reliability is a question of truthfulness and accurate copying. Writings that are historically and factually correct and that have been faithfully preserved over time would be considered reliable. Higher levels of historical verification and better confidence in transmission make it easier to determine whether an ancient work is worthy of trust. By those measures, we can consider the Bible ...  
A. The Bible claims that it is uniquely inspired  
1. 2 Timothy 3:16 "All scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness"  
2. 2 Peter 1:20, 21 "Above all, you must understand that no prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet's own interpretation. For prophecy never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit."  
2. What other evidence is there that the Bible is inspired by God? A. Supernatural change. The Bible causes supernatural change in people's lives when its message about sin and salvation is accepted. A visit to any Bible-believing church will give plenty of examples. B. Fulfilled prophecy. C. The Bible contains many prophecies recorded and then later fulfilled.