

Our Bible: Is It Trustworthy?
 Selected Scriptures
 ABC 3/11/18

A question I've been hearing a lot the last few weeks is this: *After Romans, what are we going to be studying on Sunday mornings?* & the answer I've been giving is Ps 119 & that is true. We will get there & after an introductory sermon we'll spend 22 weeks in it. But what is Ps 119 all about? It's about God's Word. The heartbeat of these 176 vss *is the God of the Word powerfully internalizing the Word of God in the child of God.*¹ Ps 119 is a rich gold mine on Bibliology, the study of the nature of the Bible as God's revelation to man. The psalmist calls it by at least 8 different names: Law, Testimonies, Ways, Precepts, Statutes, Commandments, Judgments or Ordinances, & Word. This is all well & good, but can we really trust that the Bible we currently hold in our hands is truly God's Word, His revelation to us? After all, the OT was written in Hebrew (& a little Aramaic) & the NT written in Greek. Any of you reading in Hebrew or Greek this morning? No? All English? Can we really trust an English translation of an ancient text as conveying God's revelation to us? Is our doctrinal statement true when it says, *We believe the Holy Scriptures of the Old & NT to be the verbally inspired Word of God, the final authority for faith & life, inerrant in the original writings, infallible, & God-breathed.*² *Infallible* signifies the quality of neither misleading nor being misled & so safeguards the truth that Holy Scripture is a sure, safe, & reliable rule & guide in all matters. Similarly, *inerrant* signifies the quality of being free from all falsehood or mistake & so safeguards the truth that the Scriptures are entirely true & trustworthy in all its assertions. Why do we say God's Word is *inerrant in the original writings, infallible*...? Does it even make sense to affirm the inerrancy of manuscripts we don't have? None of the originals are in existence. Does the fact that we state that the original autographs, the actual leather, papyrus, parchment, or whatever the authors of Scripture wrote on, are without error mean that our copies & translations have errors in them? People throughout history, including today, say things like, *We don't have the originals, so what good does it do to say anything about them; we should make statements about what we have, not what we don't have.*

¹ George J. Zemek, *The Word of God in the Child of God*, p xiv

² *ABC Statement of Faith*, Article 1

In other words, *It doesn't matter what you say about the inspiration & inerrancy of manuscripts you don't have!* I disagree. This brings us to the scientific field called *textual criticism*. (Don't worry, we're not going to going deep into this but instead looking at the results of it.) John Piper gives this analogy in his book, *A Peculiar Glory* (which is available free as a pdf³):

Suppose I wrote you a letter (the old-fashioned way, on real paper) with careful instructions about how to get to my house for an important meeting. & suppose I asked you to share this information with others who need to come to the meeting. So (imagine yourself living in the 90s!) you scan the letter into a computer twice on two different days. Then you send out the scanned letter in two batches of emails to those who should come.

But, unfortunately, in one version of the scanned letter, the scanner had misread the original letter & had converted my address on "Fanny Street" to "Parry Street." In the other version of the scanned letter, the address was correct. "Fanny Street" came through accurately. Then suppose that the original letter was lost.

The people receiving the emails discover that their instructions for how to get to my house do not agree; so they come to you & ask which is correct. But you say that you have lost the original. Does anyone say: "Oh, well, it doesn't matter whether the original was correct or not; we'll just guess"?

No, some research is done—the text criticism... For example, a computer genius in the group suggests that you do some tests with the scanner. Remarkably, you discover that in dozens of tries the scanner never converts a P to an F but often converts an F to a P. & it never converts "rr" to "nn" but often converts "nn" to "rr." So you conclude that the original letter almost certainly read, "Fanny Street," which got converted to "Parry Street," not the other way around. & so you all get to the important meeting.

Now everyone getting to the meeting depended on the firm belief that the original letter was accurate & that every effort to get back to that wording was crucial—even though the original letter no longer existed. Similarly, if the wording of Scripture in the original manuscripts is not affirmed as inerrant, there would be little incentive to try to get back as close as possible in our text-critical studies, which form the basis of all our translations.⁴

With all that being said, do the Bibles we hold in our hands have errors in them or are they inerrant? & if we say they aren't inerrant how do we deal with apparent contradictions & footnotes that occasionally say, *this verse or these verses aren't found in the oldest or best manuscripts* or *that this is a copyist error*? In other words, can we trust that the Bible we have in our hands right now is God's Word to us? Let's pray & then get into it. PRAY

It's not unusual to talk with people who say you can't trust the Bible because it's a copy of a copy of a copy translated by humans with their own agendas into English. & there are some who

³ <https://document.desiringgod.org/peculiar-glory-en.pdf>

⁴ Pp 77-78

say that Christians who believe the Bible is inerrant in its original writings are actually worshipping Scripture as an idol & not worshipping God's true Word, Jesus. They say that the most powerful sect of Christianity chose what would be included in the Bible hundreds of years after Jesus' life & they only chose the documents that agreed with their thinking. What do we do with these kind of statements? How do we respond to them? Does it weaken our faith when we hear them?

1. Inerrancy What do we mean when we say the Bible is inerrant & how can we support that in light of alleged discrepancies in the Bible? Let's define some terms 1st. What does *inerrant* mean? In relation to the Bible it means that the Bible is completely truthful in all things that the biblical authors assert. Why? Because they were inspired of God to write what they did. In other words, they wrote what God wanted them to write. Does God ever lie? No (Num 23:19; 1 Sam 15:29; Ps 33:4; Prov 12:6; 30:5; etc), by definition He's incapable of telling falsehoods. Therefore, His words are true. Although the human authors of Scripture chose to write what they did, God superintended the writing process so that every word written was according to His will. Wayne Grudem puts it this way: *The inerrancy of Scripture means that Scripture in the original manuscripts does not affirm anything that is contrary to fact.*⁵ Another author says *inerrancy holds that the Bible tells us truth & never says what is not so.*⁶ Does the Bible itself claim to be inerrant? Yes & here's a few of the places:

Psalm 12:6 – **The words of the LORD are pure words; As silver tried in a furnace on the earth, refined seven times.** We'll see many similar things in Ps 119 as well.

2 Tim 3:16 – **All Scripture is inspired by God & profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness.** While the Bible has human authors, the words they wrote must be attributed ultimately to divine inspiration, the breathing out of God.

2 Pt 1:21 – **No prophecy was ever made by an act of human will, but men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God.** Again, each word written in the Bible is the exact word God intended to be written. & because God cannot lie & is the epitome & standard of truth, His words are true.

Up until 150 years ago, there was consensus that the Bible was inerrant. With Darwin's theory of evolution, people started doubting the Bible was without error. In the early 20th century the church split into those who believed the Bible was inerrant & those who didn't. In the late 70's

⁵ *Systematic Theology*, p 90

⁶ Kenneth Kantzer, forward to *Encyclopedia of Bible Difficulties* by Gleason Archer, p 7

conservative theologians (JI Packer, RC Sproul, Francis Schaeffer, James Boice, etc) got together in Chicago in 1978 as *The International Council on Biblical Inerrancy* & put together the *Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy*.⁷ I encourage you to look it up & read it in its entirety. The preface of this document starts like this:

The authority of Scripture is a key issue for the Christian Church in this & every age. Those who profess faith in Jesus Christ as Lord & Savior are called to show the reality of their discipleship by humbly & faithfully obeying God's written Word. To stray from Scripture in faith or conduct is disloyalty to our Master. Recognition of the total truth & trustworthiness of Holy Scripture is essential to a full grasp & adequate confession of its authority.

Article X of this document says,

*We affirm that inspiration, strictly speaking, applies only to the autographic text of Scripture, which in the providence of God **can be ascertained from available manuscripts with great accuracy**. We further affirm that copies & translations of Scripture are the Word of God to the extent that they faithfully represent the original.*

We deny that any essential element of the Christian faith is affected by the absence of the autographs. We further deny that this absence renders the assertion of Biblical inerrancy invalid or irrelevant.

As a church, we agree with this. But keep in mind, the Bible's inerrancy isn't the inerrancy of any one published text or version, nor of anyone's interpretation, nor of any scribal errors, or well-meaning additions or corrections during transmission. Inerrancy relates to the human writer's expressed meaning in each book & to the Bible's whole body of revealed truth & wisdom. The Bible's inerrancy simply means that all of the Bible, in its original manuscripts, never asserts anything that is contrary to fact, but always speaks the truth on every matter it discusses. Scripture, & all of Scripture, is free from falsehood, fraud, & deceit. If we reject this truth there are serious consequences. A denial of this creates a serious moral problem: How can we trust God if His Word is not true? Scripture is God-breathed (2 Tim 3:16). Therefore, if it contains errors it would have to follow that God intentionally misled us, even if it be in what some would say are less important matters. But what does all this mean? This brings us to the science of ...

2. Textual Criticism How do we know the Bible in our hands is a faithful transmission of the words that the inspired authors originally wrote? As I've said, we have none of the original autographs that the biblical authors wrote. We have nothing actually written by David or John or Paul. What

⁷ http://library.dts.edu/Pages/TL/Special/ICBI_1.pdf

we do have is thousands of ancient copies of what the original authors wrote. This is where textual criticism comes in which is, to oversimplify, comparing ancient copies with one another to arrive at what was written originally. We owe our Bible to the meticulous love & care given by countless monks & scholars of the 1st 1500 years of the Christian era. The challenge of getting back to the original manuscripts that the biblical authors wrote is the challenge of working with those hand-copied documents.

A. OT Prior to the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls in the late 1940's the most significant Hebrew OT manuscripts were the Leningrad Codex (1008 AD) & the Aleppo Codex (ca 900 AD). The discovery of the DSS gave scholars manuscripts from 1,000 years earlier. What did this prove to us? That the OT was meticulously & faithfully copied because the Leningrad Codex & the DSS were virtually the same. Obviously, much more could be said but if you want to learn more, let me know.

B. NT Even within the NT, we find evidence of the epistles being hand-copied & circulated (Col 4:16; 1 Thes 5:27; 2 Pt 3:15-16). As copies of the originals were made they too were copied & circulated. Many of these manuscripts can be seen online at the *Center for the Study of NT Manuscripts*.⁸ To get a perspective on the astonishing number of manuscripts we have, it helps to compare the quantity to other surviving historical documents. Daniel Wallace puts it this way:

*NT Scholars face an embarrassment of riches compared to the data the classical Greek & Latin scholars have to contend with. The average classical author's literary remains number no more than 20 copies. We have more than 1,000 times the manuscript data for the NT than we do for the average Greco-Roman author. Not only this, but the extant (existing) manuscripts of the average classical author are no earlier than 500 years after the time he wrote. For the NT, we are waiting mere decades for surviving copies.*⁹

For example:

Caesar's *Gallic Wars* (composed between 58 & 50 BC): There are about 10 manuscripts available & the oldest is 900 years after the event.

Parts of the Roman *History of Livy* (composed between 59 BC & AD 17): These are preserved in about 20 manuscripts only 1 of which, containing only fragments, is as old as the 4th century.

⁸ www.csntm.org/Library/Manuscripts

⁹ www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/justin-taylor/an-interview-with-daniel-b-wallace-on-the-new-testament-manuscripts/

The Histories & the Annals of the Roman historian Tacitus (composed ca AD 100): These are preserved (partially) only in 2 manuscripts, one from the 9th century & 1 from the 11th.¹⁰

What about Shakespeare's writings? His 37 plays have no surviving original copies & there are missing sections in every one of his works. But Shakespeare's writings are only about 400 years old & were all written after the invention of the printing press, which gives their survival rate a huge boost in comparison to the biblical manuscripts. Nevertheless, no one seriously questions the works of Shakespeare & their authorship is accepted with much less manuscript evidence.¹¹ The point is that by comparing these various copies with each other we can approach with amazing accuracy the wording of the original documents.

*Ever since the 1700s ... scholars have embraced what is called "the orthodoxy of the variants." For more than two centuries, most biblical scholars have declared that no essential affirmation [of Christian doctrine] has been affected by the variants.*¹²

Similarly DA Carson sums up saying, *What is at stake is a purity of text of such a substantial nature that nothing we believe to be doctrinally true, & nothing we are commanded to do, is in any way jeopardized by the variants.*¹³ What all this implies is that there is no historical evidence at all for a different Jesus or a different Christianity than the one we have in the NT we all use. As a matter of fact, in the NT only 1 word per 1,000 is in any way doubtful, & no point of doctrine is lost when verses not *in better manuscripts* are omitted (Mt 6:13b; 17:21; 18:11; Mk 9:44, 46, 49; Lk 23:17; Jn 5:4; Acts 8:37; etc). Scholars & scientists put the reliability of the Scriptures accurately representing what was originally written higher than 95%. Here's the conclusion of one of the great textual critics, Sir Frederic Kenyon: *It is reassuring at the end to find that the general result of all these discoveries & all this study is to strengthen the proof of the authenticity of the Scriptures, & our conviction that we have in our hands, in substantial integrity, the veritable Word of God.*¹⁴ Or as John MacArthur summarizes,

With this wealth of biblical manuscripts in the original languages & with the disciplined activity of textual critics to establish with almost perfect accuracy the content of the autographs, any errors which have been introduced &/or perpetuated by the thousands of translations over the centuries can be identified & corrected by comparing the translation or copy with the

¹⁰ Piper, *Peculiar Glory*, p 82

¹¹ Jeff Lasseigne, *Unlocking the Bible*, p 32

¹² Daniel Wallace, thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/justin-taylor/an-interview-with-daniel-b-wallace-on-the-new-testament-manuscripts/

¹³ *The King James Version Debate*, p 56

¹⁴ *The Story of the Bible*, p 113

*reassembled original. By this providential means, God has made good His promise to preserve the Scriptures. We can rest assured that there are translations available today which indeed are worthy of the title, "The Word of God."*¹⁵

Why is all this so important? Why are we taking a week to talk about it? What happens if we deny the Bible's inerrancy? Several things. 1st, if we deny inerrancy we make God a liar. If there are errors in the original manuscripts, 1 of 2 things must be true: either God purposely lied or He mistakenly lied. Either way this would indicate that God is capable of making or producing errors which would destroy our ability to trust any of God's revelation & cause us to doubt God Himself. 2nd, if we deny inerrancy we lose trust in God. If there are errors in Scripture, even if in the smallest detail, & these were placed there intentionally by God, how are we to trust that He didn't lie in other matters? 3rd, if we deny the clear testimony of Scripture that it is inerrant, we make our minds a higher standard of truth than the Bible itself. We must give the Bible the place it claims for itself. We can't stand in judgment over it. 4th, if we deny inerrancy, & say small details are incorrect, we can't consistently argue that all the doctrines the Bible teaches are correct. Admitting error in even the smallest detail is the thin edge of a wedge because we now allow the possibility that there may be errors in doctrine as well.

So what do we do with accounts like 2 Sam 8:4 & 1 Chron 18:4 which describe the same event but give different numbers? Samuel says **David captured from him 1,700 horsemen** (NASB) while Chronicles says **David took from him 1,000 chariots, 7,000 horsemen** (NASB). Footnotes in Samuel often say this is a copyist error. Apparently an early copyist inadvertently left out the word **chariot** in Samuel that is given in Chronicles. This created problems for a later copyist who recognized it wasn't proper Hebrew to write *one thousand seven thousand horsemen*, so he reduced the 2nd *thousand* to *hundred* resulting in the reading we now have. Undoubtedly, the Chronicles passage retains the proper number.¹⁶ That's how textual criticism works. Therefore, when challenged with an alleged contradiction in Scripture, after giving a brief explanation for it, I believe there's often little value in answering charge after charge. Anyone who is really seeking the truth can easily find not only the contradictions but the many answers to them. Rather, it's

¹⁵ The MacArthur Bible Handbook, p xxii

¹⁶ Norman Geisler, *When Critics Ask*, p 171-172; Gleason Archer, *Encyclopedia of Bible Difficulties*, p 184

better, I think, to point people to what is true. Point people to the Bible's claims of truth: what it claims about us as humans & what it claims about God. Point people to the gospel of Jesus Christ & ask God to do His work in them.

3. Canon So who decided what would be included in the Bible? When we refer to the Canon of Scripture it isn't a large gun. The Greek term *kanon* originally meant reed or measuring rod & came to mean norm or rule. The canon is the closed list of books that Christians view as uniquely authoritative & inspired. How was it decided what writings were included in Scripture & who decided it? The simple answer is God did. But many people believe there were competing religious views in ancient Judaism & in early Christianity. As one view won out, the winners only included documents that endorsed their views into Scripture. If you've read Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code*, you're familiar with this type of conspiracy theory. In this viewpoint, at some point a sect of Christianity took over & selected the writings that agreed with their ideas & claimed them as God's Word & tried to destroy all competing documents. That's simply not true. What we have in the Bible are the biblical writings that have inherent authority as works uniquely inspired by God. Canonization is the process of recognizing that inherent authority, not bestowing it from an outside source. I won't spend time on the establishment of the OT canon because *it seems clear that by the time of Jesus, most Jews were in agreement as to their own canon—a list that matches our current OT in content.*¹⁷ It's much more common to hear doubt about the NT. But the early church insisted that recognized NT biblical books be:

- Written by or closely tied to an apostle. Mark & Luke, while not apostles, were closely tied to Peter & Paul respectively.
- Be widely, if not universally, recognized by the churches.
- Not be in contradiction to any recognized apostolic book or doctrine.

Discussions over which manuscripts were truly God's Word prompted the early church to begin ranking them, prizing those written closest to the time of Jesus, those written by people with direct connections to Jesus, & those who stayed truest to the teachings of Jesus. The first list still

¹⁷ Robert L Plummer, *The Story of Scripture*, p 62

in existence that matches our 27 book NT is by Athanasius in his Easter letter of 367 AD. If I can oversimplify, here's a summary of the recognition of the NT canon.

- The NT books were written during the period 45-100 AD
- They were collected & read in the churches from 100-200 AD
- They were examined & compared with other writings from 200-300 AD. Complete agreement was obtained during the period 300-400 AD.¹⁸

Some are troubled by this, but keep in mind all the NT documents were viewed as authoritative & were circulating among the churches by 90-100 AD (Col 4:16; 2 Pt 3:16). From the earliest post-NT Christian writings it's clear that an implicit canon existed. We therefore agree with the statement...

that the Gospel entrusted to the church is...God's Gospel (Mk 1:14; Rom 1:1). God is its author, & He reveals it to us in & by His Word. Its authority & trust rest on Him alone. We deny that the truth or authority of the Gospel derives from any human insight or invention (Gal 1:1-11). We also deny that the truth or authority of the Gospel rests on the authority of any particular church or human institution.¹⁹

Many Christians are troubled by differences in wording among various biblical texts. They say things like: *The Bible has scribal errors in it? Then how can I be sure what I'm reading is God's Word?* Here are 3 reasons we shouldn't be troubled by textual variants.

A. No theologies or denominations claim a particular text. Yes, there are differences between Bible manuscripts, & from a certain perspective, they can look alarmingly serious. For example, those manuscripts (& resultant Bible translations) which leave out 1 Jn 5:7-8 seem to some readers to undermine the doctrine of the Trinity. For example, the KJV reads, **For there are three that bear record in heaven, the Father, the Word, and the Holy Ghost: and these three are one. & there are three that bear witness in earth, the spirit, and the water, and the blood: and these three agree in one.** Whereas the NASB says, **For there are three that testify: the Spirit and the water and the blood; and the three are in agreement.** The omission of 1 Jn 5:7 in some Bibles (in the judgment of almost all textual scholars, those words were actually added very late in the

¹⁸ TC Hammond, *In Understanding Be Men: An Introductory Handbook of Christian Doctrine*, p 29

¹⁹ *The Gospel of Jesus Christ: An Evangelical Celebration*, Christianity Today, 6/14/1999

manuscript tradition, not appearing before the 10th century AD²⁰) hasn't caused a single Christian denomination to deny the trinity because the NT elsewhere clearly teaches the doctrine of the Trinity. In fact, none of the Greek writings of the early church ever mentions this passage, even in their discussions of the Trinity! If the church fathers recognized & formulated that vital doctrine without referring to this verse, then its presence in the NT of their day is highly unlikely, & certainly its absence from a Bible text or translation today creates no defect in doctrinal truth. There's a simple way to demonstrate how trivial the differences between ancient manuscripts really are in terms of their effect on the body of truth that the Bible reveals. We have lots of doctrinal differences within Christianity, right? But there are no Calvinist manuscripts/versions, Arminian manuscripts/versions, Pentecostal, Reformed, Presbyterian, Episcopal, Congregationalist, Complementarian, Cessationist, or Continuationist versions. To prove this take any systematic theology textbook you want, & the set of proof texts offered for particular points is version independent. What does that mean? The authors don't care which translation you use, so they just give references. The difference in doctrinal things among the various manuscripts & translations is very close to zero. If the differences between Greek texts were doctrinally significant, we'd expect certain sects to adopt certain Greek texts as their Bibles. But that's not the case. Different Christian denominations & beliefs bring various lenses to the Bible, but it's the lenses that differ, not the Bible.

B. Even if we had absolutely perfect copies, the work of interpretation would still have to go on. If we had the originals themselves, the actual documents Paul wrote to the Romans & Ephesians, or if no copies contained any textual variants at all, understanding the Bible's message would still require us to do exactly what we do now: search the Scripture's truth, carefully interpreting, comparing Scripture with Scripture, & making personal application. Nothing would change except that we'd be able to dismiss the possibility that the text we're working with may not preserve God's exact inspired words with complete perfection. But my own weaknesses as a reader expose me to far more significant misunderstanding than the manuscript differences do, so by

²⁰ John MacArthur Bible Commentary, p 1967

far the greatest problems that God must overcome in order to talk to me are within me, not within the transmission process.

C. Perfection is a property of the next world, not (generally) of this one. It's true that the Greek & Hebrew manuscripts we have can't all preserve the exact wording of the originals (& by definition, a translation cannot do so). The fact that no 2 manuscripts are identical in every way means that at most only one manuscript of any given Bible book can be *perfect*. All manuscripts of any size (some are less than a few vss or fragments of vss) contain some obvious scribal slips, so it seems clear that God hasn't given us access to the one perfect manuscript of any book of the Bible. God has ordained that perfection is a property of the next world, not this one, so we need to conform our expectations to that reality. The textual imperfections that generate so much controversy are well within an easily tolerable range, & while of course we must make the wisest choices we can, we can be completely at ease that, with the exception of extreme paraphrases or Bibles translated by cults, any Bible we may use is fully trustworthy as God's Word.

If the manuscripts were hopelessly confused & contradictory about salvation, the deity of Christ, Jesus' atoning death & victorious resurrection, & such, then identifying the correct text would obviously be a matter of theological importance. Jesus did call some matters of the law weightier than others (Mt 23:23), so if serious differences existed among those, we'd have major difficulties. But the variations we have raise far different questions. Questions like, *Does the inspired text say we have redemption through Christ's blood twice or only once? Does it testify to Jesus' atoning blood 44 times or only 43? Does John say "his anointing" or "the same anointing" (one letter different in Greek) in 1 Jn 2:27?* Even the 2 major passages that are textually questionable (Mk 16:9-20 & Jn 7:53-8:11) don't affect the doctrinal character of the NT. The Mark passage basically duplicates material found in the other gospels. John 8 illustrates truths we know well from other passages: the scribes & Pharisees are self-righteous & Jesus is forgiving & yet demanding. If such textual variants represent Satan's best attempt to corrupt the doctrinal character of Scripture, then God is clearly keeping him on a very short leash! The bottom line is

that God has arranged things so that we can take any good English Bible translation, based on any textual or translation philosophy, treat it as if its every English word were straight from God, & get everything we need from that Bible to know, love, & live for Him in a way that will bring Christ's, *Well done!*, when we stand before Him. Wherever a problem in transmission or in our own reading may tend to lead us astray, there's a corrective somewhere else in Scripture that, when we interpret the parts in light of the whole, will keep us within the bounds of God's truth.

As John Piper writes,

From history & from my own experience, I can say that it is almost impossible to exaggerate the importance of the Bible. We humans are incapable of finding out what we need so much to know: how to overcome sin, to escape the wrath of God, to become new creatures, to walk pleasing to the Lord. God must reveal this to us or we perish. This He has done & continues to do by means of a written Word, the Bible. When a man has understood the Bible he has understood the revelation of God infallibly, inerrantly & verbally.²¹

As we come to Psalm 119 in the weeks ahead may we remember this is God's Word to us. In it He reveals Himself, His gospel, His future to us all as we come to Him through Jesus Christ our Lord.

²¹ <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/how-is-the-bible-without-error>