

ANSWERS TO THE NEW CRITICS

Why Trust *the* BIBLE?

Was the Bible
tampered with?

How do we know
the Bible was
copied accurately?



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Can the Bible Be Trusted?

Before the invention of the printing press, scribes copied the Scriptures by hand for more than one thousand years—

- ◆ without eyeglasses
- ◆ by the light of candles
- ◆ using quill pens and ground charcoal mixed with gum and water to scratch the sacred words of Scripture on rough papyrus and vellum

What if these scribes got it wrong?

Some recent bestselling books—such as Bart Ehrman’s *Misquoting Jesus*—argue that the scribes *did* get it wrong. Here’s a summary of recent claims about the surviving manuscripts of the Bible: “Not only do we not have the originals [of the biblical manuscripts], we don’t have the first copies of the originals. We have only error-ridden copies, and the vast majority of these are centuries removed from the originals and different from them in thousands of ways. Mistakes multiply and get repeated; sometimes they get corrected and sometimes they get compounded. And so it goes. For centuries. In some places, we simply cannot be sure that we have reconstructed the text accurately. It’s a bit hard to know what the words of the Bible mean if we don’t even know what the words are.”¹

Thousands of people read and believe these attacks on the Bible. Still, millions of people continue to trust the Bible as an authoritative, written record that conveys consistent and reliable truth about God. So which is it?

Does the Bible still convey the truths that the original authors intended? Or were the ancient texts changed with such reckless abandon that contemporary biblical scholars are left with manuscripts so “error-ridden” they can’t even be certain what the texts originally meant?

With these questions in mind, let’s look at the history of the biblical texts to see what the historical record actually tells us!

Here’s what we’ll find:

- ◆ The Bible can be trusted.
- ◆ We can know what the Bible says.
- ◆ We can be confident that our Bible today is faithful to the original manuscripts, despite differences that exist in ancient copies.

GOSPEL	DATE (APPROXIMATE)	SOURCE
MARK	AD 65	Peter, written by Mark
MATTHEW	AD 75	Matthew
LUKE	AD 75	Luke, a companion of Paul
JOHN	AD 90	John

How Were the Stories Passed Down?

■ What the skeptics claim:

“[The Gospels] were written thirty-five to sixty-five years after Jesus’ death, . . . not by people who were eyewitnesses, but by people living later.”²

■ What history actually tells us:

Yes and no. While it’s true that the Gospels were probably written between thirty-five and sixty-five years after the death of Jesus, historical evidence strongly suggests that the sources of the New Testament Gospels were eyewitnesses of the events of Jesus’ life. Mark’s Gospel emerged around AD 65; the Gospels According to Matthew and Luke began to circulate a decade or so later. John’s Gospel seems to have been penned around AD 90. Even with these dates, it is at least *possible* that the sources of these books were eyewitnesses of Jesus. The emergence of Mark’s Gospel only thirty years or so after Jesus’ death makes it unreasonable to deny that the Gospels, at the very least, *could* have been written by eyewitnesses.³

What matters most, though, isn’t *when* the Gospels were written. *What matters most is whether the Gospels accurately represent eyewitness accounts of the life and ministry of Jesus.* According to ancient recollections from such early Christian leaders as Papias of Hierapolis, Polycarp of Smyrna, and Irenaeus of Lyons, each of the four New Testament Gospels represents eyewitness testimony about Jesus Christ. According to these recollections—recollections that bear every mark of originating in the first century AD—

- The anecdotes recorded in the Gospel According to Mark are the testimony of Peter, preserved in written form by his translator Mark.
- Luke’s Gospel integrates written and oral sources gathered from eyewitnesses by Paul’s personal physician, Luke.
- The materials that are unique to the Gospel According to Matthew came from Matthew, a tax collector who deserted a profitable profession to follow Jesus.
- The accounts in the Gospel According to John find their source in the apostle John.⁴

■ What the skeptics claim:

“Stories based on eyewitness accounts are not necessarily reliable, and the same is true a hundredfold for accounts that . . . have been in oral circulation long after the fact.”⁵



(Courtesy of CSNTM.org)

In ancient epistles, the author’s name appeared at the beginning of the letter, as in this copy of Paul’s letter to the Romans. In ancient historical writings—such as the Gospels—the author’s name was sometimes omitted.

■ What history actually tells us:

In a culture that passed on information orally—such as the biblical world—it was possible for oral histories to remain reliable for remarkably long periods of time. People in today’s world—surrounded by high levels of literacy and easy access to writing materials—are accustomed to recording important information in *written form*. But, especially among the ancient Jews, important teachings were told and retold in rhythmic, repetitive patterns so that students could memorize key truths.⁶ These teachings were known as *oral histories*. In these forms, it was possible for teachings and accounts of historical events to remain amazingly consistent from one generation to the next.⁷ Much of the Old Testament and some portions of the New Testament—for example, the eyewitness accounts mentioned in Luke 1:2—may have been passed down as reliable oral histories before they were written.



This painting from the ruins of Pompeii shows how widely wax tablets and styluses were used to record thoughts in written form.

■ What the skeptics claim:

Stories in the New Testament “were changed with what would strike us today as reckless abandon. They were modified, amplified, and embellished. And sometimes they were made up.”⁸

■ What history actually tells us:

The New Testament accounts of Jesus were not made up or changed with “reckless abandon.” Consistent oral histories about the life of Jesus and the early church emerged among eyewitnesses shortly after the events occurred; these oral histories remained consistent as they spread across the Roman Empire.

As an example, let’s take a look at one of these segments of oral history, recorded in written form in 1 Corinthians 15:3-7.⁹ How do we know that these words from the apostle Paul represent part of the oral tradition about Jesus? Paul introduced this summation with two Greek words—*paradidomi* (“handed over” or “delivered”) and *paralambano* (“received”)—that indicated it was oral tradition. Ancient readers understood these two words, when used together, to imply that the writer was citing oral history.¹⁰

A quick examination of these verses demonstrates how quickly oral histories emerged among the eyewitnesses of Jesus

The word “canon” comes from the Greek word *kanon*, which meant “measuring stick.” In the fourth century AD, the writings that Christians accepted as authoritative began to be known as a “canon” because these witnesses measured the church’s faithfulness to Jesus Christ. Christians embraced the Jewish canon—the books known to us as “the Old Testament”—because they believed that the God of the Jewish Scriptures was also the Father of Jesus Christ. Each writing in the New Testament was expected to be connected to an eyewitness of the risen Lord, to be recognized in churches throughout the known world, and not to contradict other writings about Jesus.