



The Bible

as the Reliable Word of God

by Rev. Chris Daniel

Executive Director of the Richmond Center for Christian Study

(Part of an apologetics course designed to give roots to the faith of Christians, assist seekers in their quest for truth, and gently and respectfully challenge those who hold to competing worldviews)

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How Has God Spoken to Us?

God's communication to us has come through a "chain" made of four links:

- 1) Inspiration – "Has God really spoken in the first place?"
- 2) Canonization – "In what books has God spoken?"
- 3) Transmission – "Have those books been faithfully preserved?"
- 4) Translation – "Have they been accurately translated?"

First Link: Inspiration

"Has God really spoken in the Old Testament?"

- 1) Jesus himself believed and taught that the Old Testament was the very Word of God.

How do we know this to be so?

Jesus was a Jewish rabbi.

Jewish rabbis in that day believed and taught that the Old Testament (Hebrew Bible) was the very Word of God.

- 2) Inescapable implication of the fact that God raised Jesus from the dead: God approved of Jesus' mission and message, including his assessment that the Old Testament was the Word of God.

"Has God really spoken in the New Testament?"

- 1) We should expect New Testament revelation.

Divine pattern → Follow up major acts of salvation history with revelation...

- a) When God delivered his people out of Egypt, he followed up by revealing the Pentateuch
- b) When God brought his people back from the Exile, he followed up by revealing Ezra and Nehemiah

So certainly revelation should have been expected after such a major salvific event as the arrival of the Messiah himself!

2) The first disciples believed that this pattern had indeed continued.

“Bear in mind that our Lord’s patience means salvation, just as our dear brother Paul also wrote you with the wisdom that God gave him. He writes the same way in all his letters, speaking in them of these matters. His letters contain some things that are hard to understand, which ignorant and unstable people distort, as they do the other Scriptures, to their own destruction.”

~ 2 Peter 3:15-16

[When Peter says “as they do the other Scriptures,” he is implying that Paul’s writings themselves are Scripture.]

“For the Scripture says, ‘Do not muzzle the ox while it is treading out the grain,’ and ‘The worker deserves his wages.’”

~ 1 Timothy 5:18

[Paul is taking a quote from the OT (“Do not muzzle the ox while it is treading out the grain”) and a quote from Luke’s Gospel (“The worker deserves his wages”), and in one breath is referring to both of them as Scripture.]

3) According to John, Jesus taught that he would equip the apostles for this task.

“The Counselor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you [referring to the apostles] all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you.”

4) The fact that the apostles were so equipped was confirmed by signs.

“This salvation, which was first announced by the Lord, was confirmed to us by those [i.e., the apostles] who heard him. God also testified to it by signs, wonders and various miracles, and gifts of the Holy Spirit distributed according to his will.”

~ Heb 2:3-4

“The things that mark an apostle – signs, wonders and miracles – were done among you with great perseverance.”

~ 2 Cor 12:12

[Historically speaking, it's a real stretch to suggest that Paul would have told the Corinthian church that he had performed these signs "among them" if indeed he had not. If he had lied in this way, the Corinthians of course would have known that he was lying and Paul would have lost all credibility.]

The key is Point #1...

If Jesus really did rise from the dead, then you should *expect* New Testament revelation to follow, and it seems from what we can tell (points 2-4) that it did.

Second Link: Canonization

"How do we know we have the right books in the Old Testament?"

The Jews in Jesus' day, and Jesus himself, saw the inspired books as consisting of what now makes up our Old Testament.

Inescapable implication of the fact that God raised Jesus from the dead: God approved of Jesus' mission and message, including his assessment that the Old Testament was the Word of God.

"How do we know we have the right books in the New Testament?"

Three tests:

- 1) Apostolicity – Was it written by an apostle or close associate? (which would have had apostolic approval)
- 2) Orthodoxy – Is the content of the writing consistent with the teaching of the apostles?
- 3) Early Usage – Was it used in worship by the early church? (a sign that it was recognized as Scripture by those who would have known best)

This led to the acceptance of the 27 New Testament books pretty much from the beginning.

Homologoumena – the 20 New Testament books that were universally accepted right away

Antilegomena – the books that took a little longer to become universally accepted (Hebrews, James, 2 Peter, 2 and 3 John, Jude and Revelation)

Two observations regarding the Antilegomena:

1) The books of the Homologoumena contain in themselves all the essentials of a Biblical worldview, so even if it were true that the books of the Antilegomena are not inspired, a Biblical worldview remains.

2) There is more than sufficient reason for thinking that the books of the Antilegomena are inspired because once the whole church had sufficient time to compare notes and consider these books more carefully in light of the tests mentioned above, they were then recognized by the whole church. (Remember, communication at that time simply took longer than it does today.)

Third Link: Transmission

“Have the Old Testament books been faithfully preserved?”

Jewish scribes (like the Masoretes) were known to be incredibly meticulous in their copying and preserving of the Old Testament throughout the centuries.

Confirmed by the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls (found in 1947).
Dead Sea Scrolls date from the 3rd cent. B.C. to 1st cent. A.D.
Include all of Isaiah and portions of every other Old Testament book except for Esther.

“For example, even though the two copies of Isaiah discovered in Qumran Cave 1 near the Dead Sea in 1947 were a thousand years earlier than the oldest dated manuscript previously known (A.D. 980), they proved to be word for word identical with our standard Hebrew Bible in more than 95 percent of the text. The 5 percent of variation consisted chiefly of obvious slips of the pen and variations in spelling. They do not affect the message of revelation in the slightest.”

~ Gleason Archer, *A Survey of Old Testament Introduction*, 25

“Of the 166 *words* in Isaiah 53, there are only seventeen *letters* in question. Ten of these letters are simply a matter of spelling, which does not affect the sense. Four more letters are minor stylistic changes, such as conjunctions. The remaining three

letters comprise the word 'light,' which is added in verse 11, and does not affect the meaning greatly.... Thus, in one chapter of 166 words, there is only one word (three letters) in question after a thousand years of transmission – and this word does not significantly change the meaning of the passage.”

~Millar Burrows, *The Dead Sea Scrolls*, 304

“Have the New Testament books been faithfully preserved?”

How to determine reliability in the transmission of a text

- 1) look at the number of manuscript copies (the more the better)
- 2) look at the elapsed time between when the original was written and when the earliest remaining copies were written (the less time the better)

The reliability of the New Testament is known to be unparalleled by any other ancient text.

Homer's *Iliad* (2nd most reliable ancient text):

- 1) Almost 650 Greek manuscripts in existence
- 2) Written around 800 B.C., earliest copies around 400 B.C. (400 year gap)

New Testament (most reliable ancient text by far):

- 1) More than 5,500 Greek manuscripts in existence (25,000 including other languages)
- 2) Written in 1st century A.D., earliest copies in 2nd cent. A.D. (100 year gap, fragments as early as 25 years after original writing)

Scholars simply don't question the reliability of the New Testament.

Nonetheless, the New Testament has not been preserved perfectly.

The authenticity of Mark 16:9-20 and John 7:53-8:11 are questioned even by conservative scholars because of manuscript variation.

There are also other minor variations every once in a while, but they don't tend to amount to anything (e.g., one manuscript says “Christ Jesus” while another might say “Jesus Christ”).

Three things to note:

- 1) These variations are rare (only about 2% of the text).
- 2) They do not call into question any of the teachings of Christianity.
- 3) They are noted in most of today's Bibles (so you know right where they are).

So, the New Testament and the Bible as a whole have been faithfully preserved over the centuries in a way that no other work of ancient literature has been, so that what we have today is (amazingly) virtually identical to what was originally written.

Fourth Link: Translation

Myth – “The original Greek and Hebrew texts of the Bible were translated into another language, and then into another, and then another, and then another, until finally it was translated into English. Thus, after so many generations of translations, you can't be sure that we still have the original message intact.”

Reality – Our English Bibles today are direct translations from the original Greek and Hebrew.

How the translation of languages works:

Though every once in a while you might find an example of something that doesn't perfectly translate from one language to another, generally speaking, messages translate quite well from one language to another without notable loss of information.

So, how does God speak to us?

Through four links in a chain...

- 1) Inspiration – God has spoken in Scripture.
- 2) Canonization – We have correctly recognized the books in which God has spoken.
- 3) Transmission – These books have been faithfully preserved.
- 4) Translation – They have been accurately translated.

As a result, God's Word has come to us today in our English Bibles.

Resource Recommendations

Craig Blomberg, *The Historical Reliability of the Gospels*

F. F. Bruce, *The New Testament Documents: Are they Reliable?*

F. F. Bruce, *The Canon of Scripture*

Bruce Metzger & Bart Ehrman, *The Text of the New Testament: Its Transmission, Corruption, and Restoration*

R. C. Sproul, *Knowing Scripture*

Lee Strobel, *The Case for Christ: A Journalist's Personal Investigation of the Evidence for Jesus*