

Is the Bible Credible?

If someone approached me off the street and said, “Hey, here’s a book; your eternal destiny depends on it,” I would probably refuse the book or quickly discard it. So questioning the Bible’s credibility is certainly open game. When I think about its credibility, three questions come to mind. Is it authentic? Is it accurate? And is it authoritative?

The question of authenticity asks if what we have today is representative of the original writings. If the Bible is a book that has been changed throughout the centuries, there is hardly reason to give it much credence. Heck, if it’s always changing, it will say something different 100 years from now.

So how do we know if the Bible today is authentic? The ideal way to test authenticity would be to take the original and compare it with the copies we have today (like we can do with the Declaration of Independence in Washington, D.C.). The problem is that for ancient documents like the Bible, the originals have likely long disintegrated and even if we found them we probably would not know we did. (It’s not like they come with a certificate of authenticity!) But this does not mean, we are at a loss for having confidence in the Bible’s authenticity.

Scholars studying ancient texts of any kind believe we can have confidence in what an original document said if 1) there are lots of copies, 2) the differences among copies is generally insignificant (for example, obvious missing words or simple differences in spelling), and 3) the earliest copies were written close to the date of the original. Relative to other ancient documents, the Bible scores very well on all three counts. Consider the New Testament. There are more copies of the New Testament than perhaps any other ancient text (about 6,000 Greek manuscripts alone); these copies compare very well with one another; and the earliest copies are within 100 years of the original. Compare this with the famous writings of Josephus for which we only have about 150 copies written some 1,000 years after the originals and you get a sense of how well authenticated the Bible is.

Second, there is the question of accuracy. We could have something that is authentic, but that represents fiction. The Bible purports to tell us historical events not fantasy, so the question of accuracy addresses whether what we have in the Bible really happened or not. Some of the ways, we might answer this question is by looking at other historical writings, archaeology, and the existence of any “embarrassing” details. In regards to other historical writing, we can consider writings like those of Josephus, Tacitus, or Bar Serapion. These men were unsupportive of Christianity, but nonetheless spoke of Jesus’ life, miracles, death, and even resurrection. We find similar supporting data for the Old Testament in writings such as the Babylonian Chronicles, which speak of Nebuchadnezzar’s defeat of the Jews as does the Bible. In addition to historical writings, there are archaeological findings like inscriptions that speak of Hebrew kings or Roman governors. In other cases, archaeological digs support the existence of biblical places, like particular cities or civic landmarks.

One of the most convincing elements of the Bible, is the great deal of “embarrassing” information about its main characters. If the Bible was meant to make Christianity’s leaders look good, it does a terrible job! Biblical heroes like Abraham, David, and Peter are all shown to make big blunders like lying, committing adultery and murder, and denying Christ. If the Bible was made up, it’s unlikely its main characters would have so many blemishes.

It seems then that we have good reason to believe that the Bible is both authentic and accurate, but the question of authority still remains. We might have authentic and accurate ancient writings about Romans wars, but that does not mean we should shape our lives by them. So why should we consider the Bible as authoritative over our lives? Three good reasons are fulfilled prophecy, miracles, and changed lives.

The Bible includes a great number of prophecies, many of which have been fulfilled. In particular, there are prophecies made about where Christ would be born, what his lineage would be, his betrayal, the nature of his death, and even about those who would die alongside him. The odds of these happening are too great to think God wasn't involved. One statistician took just ten of the prophecies about Jesus and estimated the odds at 1 in 10^{17} —a number equal to how many seconds there have been since the beginning of the universe!

The Bible has a good number of miracles recorded in it. If we consider the Bible to be an accurate record of history as supported earlier, it gives reason to believe that the Bible is from God. In fact, several times in the Bible, miracles are specifically referred to as the reason why we should believe what God says in the Bible.

A final reason we might conclude the Bible is authoritative is the remarkable change it has made in people's lives. When people have looked to the words of Scripture as authoritative, both in the time the Bible was written and today, their lives are often changed in ways that are hard to explain apart from supernatural intervention. You may even know of someone like this. They came to trust in the God of the Bible, and they are not the same person anymore.

We started with the question is the Bible credible? My answer is yes, because I see good reasons to believe it is authentic, accurate, and authoritative.

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