



“Understanding the Bible”

Section 4: Why Can We Trust the Bible?

Unit 4.2: Reaffirming the Historical Reliability of Holy Scripture



I) Celebrating a Faith Supported by Fact

- In Unit 4.1, as we introduced the concept of the Bible’s trustworthiness, we began our defense of this claim by making a logical case for biblical inerrancy. We stated that if God is inerrant, and the Bible is His Word, then the Bible also must be free of error. Skeptics often respond to this claim for an inerrant Bible by demanding that we as Christians use external evidence outside of Scripture to support our conviction. Although it is imperative that we start any argument for the Bible’s authority by citing the internal evidence of what the Bible says about itself because its claims are God’s claims, we don’t have to shy away from providing outside support for those claims either. In the next few units, we will continue to build our case for the trustworthiness of Scripture examining a wealth of evidence **historically, scientifically, prophetically, Christologically, and experientially**. In this session, we will point to the **historical reliability** of Scripture, by looking at documents, discoveries, and other details that present the biblical record as true and trustworthy.

II) Reliving the Journey of a Jewish Nation

- As we begin to engage God’s revelation of Himself to mankind in the pages of the Old Testament, what we find is that God’s plan of redemption all started with the calling of a holy nation. **Israel** was a people chosen by God to be a testimony to the rest of the world of God’s holy standards and unspeakable grace through which the messiah would come. Taking a closer look at the history of Israel, the question is often asked, *“Does Scripture’s account of Israel match up with other historical records?”* The evidence is an overwhelming “yes.” Here are some areas of Jewish history that have documented support outside of Scripture to confirm the accuracy of Israel’s biblical record:
 - The Patriarchs** – The names of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob are found listed in several ancient texts written in surrounding regions like Assyria and Babylon during the same era as the biblical account. The Mari letters, written from the city of Mari on the Euphrates River around 1760 BC, list many of these names and support the record of a war in Genesis 14.
 - The Land** – Ancient clay tablets from Syria, known as the Ebla tablets, list many biblical towns including Hazor, Megiddo, Jerusalem, Lachish, Dor, and Ashtarot. Also, archeological excavations have also uncovered historical land, including Dr. John Garstang’s six-year project that was completed in 1936 and uncovered the remains of Jericho providing evidence for its destruction around 1400 BC.
 - The Kings** – In 1 & 2 Kings, a complete chronological listing of Hebrew kings, including their time of reign and significant events during their reign, are listed in detail. Historians such as Dr. Edwin Thiele at the University of Chicago have done extensive research that validates these records.
 - The Present-Day Nation** – Although Israel is currently a geo-political nation and no longer a theocracy, one of the most obvious questions we have to ask is this: *“Why are Jews still around today?”* The answer is because the Bible is true and God still has a plan to save His people.

III) Defended by a Dead Sea Discovery

- Back in Unit 2.4, we discussed Christianity’s greatest discovery of the twentieth century as the **Dead Sea Scrolls**, found in 1947 by a Bedouin shepherd named Muhammad Ahmad el-Hamed. Before the discovery of these scrolls, the oldest Old Testament manuscripts available were known as the Masoretic Text. This text was named after Masorete scribes who copied and cared for its scrolls, and the material dated back to AD 800. However, the Dead Sea Scrolls are dated as early as 140 BC. So, these documents serve as strong independent confirmation from an ancient source prior to Christ that the Old Testament text we have today represents the same Hebrew Scriptures from two millennia ago.

IV) Considering the Customs & Culture of a Biblical World

- Another measuring stick for determining the historical accuracy of Scripture is to compare how relevant the **cultures** and customs of the Bible are with what historians have recorded elsewhere. Further examination reveals Scripture reliability portrays many ancient people groups including Israelites, Egyptians, Samaritans, Pharisees and Sadducees. The Bible also offers detailed accounts of world empires such as Assyria, Babylon, Persia, Greece, and Rome, as well as warfare tactics, weaponry, and primitive forms of government. And regarding the accuracy of the New Testament gospels compared to other records of Palestinian culture in the first century AD, scholar N.T. Wright states, *“What you find in Matthew, Mark, Luke and John comes up in three dimensions. It belongs, it makes sense, it fits. It gives us a vivid portrait of who these people were and what they were doing.”*

V) Mulling Over a Multitude of New Testament Manuscripts

- Perhaps the strongest piece of evidence that Christians have for an historically accurate New Testament comes from the immense wealth of manuscript support. Historians have preserved over **5,000** Greek manuscripts or portions of manuscript copies of the New Testament. This collection represents more support for the New Testament than for any other set of documents in all of antiquity. In comparison, there are only 210 remaining copies of the written works of ancient philosopher Plato, who lived around 400 BC. Also, fragments of New Testament manuscripts date back as old 100 AD (John Ryland’s P52 fragment of John 18). For Plato’s works, the earliest manuscript on file is from AD 895, which is 1,200 years after its original authorship.

VI) Telling the Truth About Textual Variants

- Skeptics often try to disqualify New Testament manuscript support by pointing out the thousands of variants that exist between them. A variant is a discrepancy between manuscripts on any given word, letter, or punctuation mark. These skeptics will argue that since there are no original autographs, we can’t trust any manuscripts because of the thousands of disagreements among them. However, the vast majority of these variants were simply grammatical mistakes that were common with hand-written copies from this time period. According to scholar Bruce Metzger, after 2,000 years of being copied exclusively by hand, the remarkable truth is that only **forty** of the twenty thousand lines of the New Testament are in dispute, and no variants undermine even the most basic teachings of Scripture.

VII) The Life of Jesus According to Josephus

- So far, we have discussed the historical evidence of Scripture’s trustworthiness based on the teachings of other Christians. Critics might balk at these findings because of the supposed influence of an ulterior motive. This is where the writings of ancient non-Christian historians such as **Flavius Josephus** become so important. Born in AD 37 shortly after the earthly ministry of Christ, Josephus was a first century Jewish Pharisee who later became one of the most prominent historians of his generation. Despite not believing in the deity of Christ, he documented the undisputed claim by many Jewish Christians in the first century that Jesus of Nazareth was hailed as the Messiah, and that His followers genuinely believed that He was crucified, buried, and rose again three days later as the Son of God.

VIII) That’s How the Story Goes

- Even though critics of biblical historicity say the facts refute Scripture’s reliability, there is evidence that their very own research has disproven this claim. Dr. Gary Habermas of Liberty University developed a **“minimal facts theory”** to defend the historical reliability of Scripture, by identifying the minimal amount of reported facts that most skeptical scholars have traditionally affirmed. He currently offers these six facts as truths that even skeptics can agree on: **(1)** Jesus died by crucifixion; **(2)** Jesus’ disciples had real experiences that they thought were appearances of Jesus; **(3)** the disciples were transformed even to the point of being willing to die for their message; **(4)** James, the brother of Jesus, had a real experience he thought was an appearance of Jesus and was converted; **(5)** Paul also experienced a similar appearance of Jesus and was converted; and **(6)** the gospel message was proclaimed within two years after the crucifixion. If even skeptics can agree to these basic facts, then the basic storyline of the New Testament has been proven to be an historically reliable account that can be trusted.