

Can you trust the bible?

Why would someone ask that question? Why is it important to trust some books more than others? For instance would you trust this book? 101 Uses for an Old Farm Tractor? Does it even matter if you trust it or not? If they are actually good uses or not for a tractor? Will it affect your life? Well, maybe if you are someone who has a old tractor around the place, but generally speaking, it wouldn't matter so much if the book actually had amazing uses for a tractor or not. What about other books though? Growing up, we had this book in the house (Readers Digest Family Medical Adviser). Often mum would refer to it if my brother or I was sick and use the symptom sorter as a guideline of whether or not she should take us to the doctor or do something else. I would say that she trusted that book to a certain degree. The reason it was more important to know if she could trust that book is that it was dealing with life and health. If it wasn't trustworthy it could have had a disastrous impact on someone's health. The bible is more like that. It not something trivial, it is something dealing with life itself.

In fact I would say it's one of the most important revelations about life, God, the universe and everything. Christians base their life (or should be anyway) on the person of Jesus who is revealed in the bible. The bible sets up a world view that puts a unique God at the centre of everything. Page 1 of the bible, "In the beginning *God* created the heavens and the earth" Genesis 1:1

It shows the history of mankind's relation with that God. It talks about how we are separated from God, and that separation is the cause of all evil and pain in the world. It has a main character, the star of the story, Jesus, whom the bible and indeed all of life hinges on. It basically talks about how in the timeline of eternity we have a choice, to follow Jesus or not.

And our *eternal destiny* rests on that decision.

As far as decisions go, it's a pretty big one.

So in terms of something being trustworthy or not, I think it's really important to know whether you can trust the bible. How can you know if it is trustworthy?

Let's look at the idea of getting a book from a library or even searching the internet for some research. When you are looking for reliable information you generally have some criteria about what you are going to be reading. For instance, you probably wouldn't look at Wikipedia, an online encyclopaedia that anyone in the world can edit and cite it as a 100 percent reliable source. Unless you can know and trust the author, you'd find it hard to trust what they have written. You might look for a book by a known author, an expert on the subject you are studying. You aren't going to pick up a book on advance quantum mechanics by Cletus the slack-jawed yokel over one by say Stephen Hawking.

So who wrote the bible? Can they be trusted? And how do we know if the bible we have today is the same compared to what was written way back whenever it was written?

I'll start by answering that last question first. To know if the bible we have today the same as what they wrote back then, we can look at it in terms of a test that is sometimes called a bibliographical test. Basically since we don't have the original document, the test checks how accurate the copies we have are. This is judged based on two criteria: the number of manuscripts available to examine, and the time interval between the original and the existing copies. With enough manuscripts of the same text over a lengthy period it is possible to check the accuracy of the copies by comparing the later manuscripts to earlier ones. You can observe the rate of corruption due to scribing mistakes and translations which might have crept in and changed the message. For the bible, it has been found that the accuracy of the copying process is beyond reasonable doubt. Minor variations have crept in, but they are insignificant and do not change the meaning of the passage.

Some comparisons for you:

Aristotle's poetics – written around 343 BC had 5 manuscripts dated around 1100AD about 1400 years after the original

Julius Caesar's history of the Gallic Wars (written between 58-50 BC) 9 or 10 manuscripts dated 1000 years after his death.

Homer's Iliad (uncertain when it was written though around 750-700BC) has 643 Manuscripts, the earliest copy was around 400BC – around 250 years afterwards

The New Testament (estimated written around 40-80AD) has 20,000 manuscripts, the earliest fragments dated from around 125AD an interval of only 90 years.

The authenticity of all these writings tend to be undoubted by people except for one. Guess which? I could go into more detail on this sort of thing, the historical accuracy of the bible and so forth, but far more skilled people have looked into it and have written some great books on it. Josh McDowell has a book "Evidence that demands a verdict", which looks at it more in terms of answering someone who is questioning the bible and Christianity and "the Christ files" by John Dixon that just tries to show how historians know what they know about Jesus. Dixon tries to make it very clear what a historian can argue and where a more personal faith comes in to play. You may have also seen the TV series that looks at the same thing.

In terms of that other question can we trust the author; it is a little more difficult to answer. The bible is a collection of books written over a period of about 1500 years, and was written by about 40 different people from many different types of backgrounds such as kings, peasants, poets and so on. It was written in three different languages, Aramaic, Hebrew and Greek.

Normally you would imagine that having such a diversity of people from different times would mean that there are contradictory points of view at least somewhere within the bible. I imagine that you could perhaps say that if they were writing from each other's notes they might keep it consistent for a little bit, but over 1500 years? I think the change in culture over time and places would have crept in

and made for some interesting discrepancies. The message remained consistent throughout the bible because the message was from God, not because of the people who wrote it down.

Let me use an example by Josh McDowell in his book about the bible's continuity and God's inspiration.

"Contrast the books of the Bible with the compilation of Western classics called the Great Books of the Western World. The Great Books contain selections from more than 450 works by close to 100 authors spanning a period of about twenty-five centuries: Homer, Plato, Aristotle, Augustine, Calvin, Shakespeare, Hume, Kant, Darwin, Tolstoy to name but a few. While all these people are part of the Western tradition of ideas, they often display an incredible diversity of views on just about every subject. And while their views share some commonalities, they display numerous conflicting and contradictory positions and perspectives. In fact they frequently go out of their way to critique and refute key ideas proposed by their predecessors.

A representative of the Great Books of the Western World came to my house one day (that is Josh McDowell's) attempting to recruit salesmen for the series. He spread out a chart describing the series and spent five minutes talking to my wife and me about it. We then spent an hour and a half talking to him about the Bible, which we presented as the greatest book of all time.

I challenged this representative to take just ten of the authors from the Great Books series, all from one walk of life, one generation, one place, one time, one mood, one continent, one language and all addressing just one controversial subject. I then asked him, would the authors agree with one another?"

He paused and then replied, "No"

Two days later he committed his life to Christ.

The uniqueness of the Bible as shown in that example does not *prove* that it is inspired. It does however challenge any person sincerely seeking truth to consider seriously its unique quality in terms of its continuity.

The bible says in 2 Timothy 3:16 that "All scripture is God breathed and useful for teaching" and as we read in 2 Peter 1:20-21 it says that "Above all, you must understand that no prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet's own interpretation. For prophecy never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit." God spoke through the writers of the bible to present the salvation story, the true meaning of life the universe and everything and its central character is Jesus.

In asking the question 'Can you trust the bible?' part of what you are asking is can you trust Jesus? The bible is all about Jesus. For people who think that trusting the bible just means we can rely on it for some good Christian ethical teaching they are missing the point. It makes no sense to talk about the Christian ethic and ignore Christ. You can't take the words of Jesus and pretend that they came from the lips of any other person. How would it sound if any other man, however great they might be, were to talk about himself in the way Jesus did? Think for instance how it would sound if Barack Obama said "I am the resurrection and the life" The only person who that makes sense for is Jesus because he was the

Son of God. A devotional book put it this way – ‘In him (that is Jesus) all the Old Testament truths converge and from him all the New Testament truths emerge’

The bible is not just a book of facts. If the question was “is the bible trustworthy” I could have answered it very simply. Yes. But that isn’t the question. The question is can YOU trust the bible. I could speak for hours on the various findings people have made studying the bible, or of great thinkers and writers like C.S. Lewis and Josh McDowell who became Christians when they picked up the bible and really read it in an effort to disprove it and ended up committing their lives to Christ. But the question we asked tonight is a more personal one. Can YOU trust the bible?

### **What is the impact of trusting the bible?**

Some people, no matter what evidence is before them, will not believe that something is true. They are either too scared about what it means, or challenged by it in ways that make them feel uneasy. If they followed it, it would mean that they have to change their life. And they are comfortable in how they live.

I’ll give you an example from the bible. The Pharisees, learned men, who had spent their life studying the scripture, kept pestering Jesus for a sign to prove himself. But Jesus had already been doing that. He had been around them for a few years already, teaching, healing the sick and performing other miracles. Jesus was right in front of them and they didn’t accept him as who he said he was, the son of God.

I think part of the reason they rejected Jesus was because he was a challenge to them. He challenged their authority by questioning them in public and in some regards downright humiliating them in front of the crowds. In Matthew 15 the Pharisees come and ask Jesus why his disciples ‘break the tradition of the elders’ ‘they don’t wash their hand before they eat!’ Jesus turns around and says ‘And why do you break the command of God for the sake of your tradition?’

So if they could reject the Jesus as the son of God who they had been expecting, who had stood before them teaching and performing miracles in their sight that fulfilled Old Testament prophecies, what kind of proof is there that could exist on its own merit to convince someone to be a Christian?

In the end it comes a calling from God, election as it is sometimes called, but if you are someone who doesn’t trust the bible I want to challenge you with this. Are you ignoring God’s call because you are afraid of the implications? Have looked thoroughly at the evidence presented in the bible but still aren’t sure if it’s trustworthy? Could the reason be that you might doubt it is not so much based on the uncertain nature of that evidence but that it might be because you don’t like what it implies for your life.

I wonder if in some regards that can be a danger for Christians as well? I believe the bible is true, wholeheartedly. I trust that Jesus was real, that he was the Son of God, and that there is a heaven and hell, about salvation through accepting Jesus as Lord. Yet all too often, that doesn’t really turn up in my life. I believe, yet sometimes it doesn’t change how I act. I even go as far as putting off reading the bible too closely about some issue or praying about it, because I suspect that it would mean I will have to do something that is uncomfortable. And that’s a very bad thing! I have committed my life to Christ. That

means I should be checking what he wants, and that should be first all the time, but it can be hard, really hard.

I thought of a passage from James chapter 1. It says "Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says. Anyone who listens to the word but does not do what it says is like a man who looks at his face in a mirror and, after looking at himself goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like."

If we are following the bible, saying we are Christian, then walk out the door on Sunday and 'forget' what we have just heard, acting like everybody else in the world we are *denying the truth* of the bible. In essence you are saying that you don't trust the bible to people who may be watching. The lead singer of DC Talk mentions on one of their CD's "The greatest single cause of atheism in the world today is Christians who acknowledge Jesus with their lips and walk out the door and deny Him by their lifestyle. That is what an unbelieving world simply finds unbelievable."

That's the challenge I want to leave with my brothers and sisters in Christ. Do YOU live as though you trust the bible? Are you living in such a way that denies Christ through your actions? The bible is trustworthy, it reveals Jesus as Lord of all, but does how YOU live reflect that you trust and believe that?

I want to pray.

Lord I pray that you be with us all here tonight. Let the truth of the bible stir our hearts and remain close to us as we walk out the door tonight. Let it convict us of your truth and lead us closer to Jesus every day until he comes again in glory.

Amen