

## **Bonus Lesson: What is the Bible?**

### **BIG IDEA**

We cannot understand how to follow Jesus without first understanding the Bible. The objective in this lesson is to establish a basic understanding of what the Bible is, how it is structured, and why we can trust it as the dominant authority in our understanding of who Jesus is and what it means to follow Him.

### **NOTES**

## ARTICLE 1.1: WHAT IS THE BIBLE?

When it comes to following Jesus and making followers of Jesus, the Bible is the primary and dominant authority in our understanding of following Jesus. Therefore, we'll start by better understanding what it is and why we can trust it.

### The Structure of the Bible

At its simplest, the Bible is a book. Well actually, it is many books within a book – 66, to be exact! Perhaps, then, it is better to think of the Bible as a *library* of books compiled into one volume with a unified purpose and theme.

Thirty-nine books make up what is known as the “Old Testament.” These books recount God’s story *before* Jesus was born. Twenty-seven books make up what is known as the “New Testament.” These books continue the story *after* the birth of Jesus.

Why Old and New “testament?” The word “testament” also means “witness,” “evidence,” or “reminder”. These books are the witness, evidence, and reminder of the Story of God and the truth that is in it.

### The Writing of the Bible

Over forty authors were involved in the writing of the Bible. These authors were a diverse group of people, ranging from fishermen to poets to doctors to kings.

The Bible was written over a period of more than 1,000 years. The last books were written toward the end of the 1<sup>st</sup> century AD.

### Biblical Genre

One fascinating thing about the Bible is that it isn’t just one genre! Just like a library contains many different genres of literature, so does the Bible.

The Bible is made up of at least seven genres, including law, prophecy, poetry, wisdom, gospels, letters (also known as epistles), and apocalyptic.

To correctly understand what you read in the Bible, it’s imperative to consider the genre of the book that you are reading. Poetry is read and understood differently than prophecy, as letters are understood differently than law, and so forth. Failure to correctly understand the *genre* you are reading will impact your interpretation and application.

Apart from *genre*, we could categorize *literary style*. Narrative is the predominant literary style in the Bible, followed by poetic and discourse (teaching). Given that at least half of the biblical text is narrative, we should remember that ultimately, the Bible is a story.

***DISCUSS***

*What words or mental pictures come to mind when you think of the Bible?*

## ARTICLE 1.2: CAN I TRUST THE BIBLE?

The structure is great and all...but is the Bible reliable? How do we know it is more trustworthy than any book off the shelves of our local library? Why should it serve as the authority on understanding God, faith, and all of life?

### How the Bible Identifies Itself

2 Peter 1:20-21 tell us that the Bible was written under the inspiration of God.

*“...knowing this first of all, that no prophecy of Scripture comes from someone's own interpretation. For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.”*

Even though there are over 40 human authors involved in penning the Bible's words, this verse informs us that there is *one* primary author – God Himself.

It doesn't end there. The Bible isn't just *inspired* by God, like when a movie says “inspired by true events” for a story that is loosely based on reality. The Bible says Scripture is *breathed out by God* and is the *word of God*<sup>1</sup>. The Bible is God's very words to us!

### Objective Evidence & Original Manuscripts

If you are willing to take the Bible at its own word, then the above two points make the Bible seemingly reliable.

*“Yeah, but...” you might say. “A frog isn't a horse just because it says it's a horse. What about objective evidence?”*

If you're looking for the exact pieces of parchment on which the biblical authors wrote their words so you can read them yourself, you won't find them (and even if you did, you might want to become fluent in ancient Hebrew, Greek, and Aramaic, first!). While we don't have original manuscripts, copies were made of those documents. Archaeological findings have given us access to ancient copies.

*“Still, isn't it possible that the text we have is different than what the authors wrote?”*

Did you ever play the game Telephone as a kid? You know, where everyone lines up and one kid whispers a message to the next kid in line who whispers the same message to the

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<sup>1</sup> 2 Timothy 3:16-17, Hebrews 4:12

next kid in line and so on and so forth until you get to the last kid who then shares with everyone a message that is significantly different from the original message?

Couldn't that have happened with the Bible? How can we know that what we have in our Bible today is what was originally written and what God intended?

Without the original documents in hand, that's a valid question to ask, and one that's imperative to answer.

### Tests for Accuracy

In answer to the question above: Yes. It's possible that what we have is different than the original text. However, we have solid evidence to show this is not the case.

There are several tests that can be performed on a literary work to determine the reliability of its accuracy with the author's original writing. When used on the Bible, scholars and apologists have repeatedly proven that the Bible IS trustworthy.

Here are some key points about the reliability of the Bible:

- 99% of the New Testament can be reconstructed beyond any reasonable doubt.<sup>2</sup>
- The Bible has stronger bibliographical support<sup>3</sup> than any other book in classic literature, including works of authors such as Homer, Pliny, and Aristotle.
- No Christian doctrine is founded solely or even primarily on textually disputed passages. All key Christian doctrines come from texts that have extremely high validity and accuracy based on the bibliographical test.
- The Bible's historical assertions have been affirmed by secular historians and archaeological findings repeatedly.
- The Bible has a high degree of internal consistency, meaning that it is highly consistent within itself and any seeming contradictions can be explained and understood with in-depth study and contextual comprehension.
- The Bible demonstrates extremely high predictive ability, meaning it correctly prophesies things that could not have been known in advance through common sense or other means. It is preposterous to think that the Bible's highly specific, detailed prophecies could have all come true by chance.
- It is equally preposterous to think that over 40 authors over 1,500 years could have written a book in 3 different languages and 7 genres with a unified purpose and theme apart from divine inspiration.

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<sup>2</sup> See *The Historical Reliability of the New Testament* by Craig Blomberg

<sup>3</sup> See *Supplement 1 for an understanding of the bibliographic test*

Between the historical, archaeological, and bibliographical evidence that the Bible is authentic, valid, and true combined with the things the Bible says about itself, we can be confident that the Bible is the Word of God.

If the Bible is the trustworthy and true written Word of God – the Creator and King of the universe – then it must be authoritative for our lives.

### **SUMMARY:**

The Bible is God's Word to us. It was written by human authors, under the supernatural guidance of the Holy Spirit. It is the supreme source of truth for Christian beliefs and living. Because God inspired it, it is the truth without any mixture of error.

### **DISCUSS**

Look up the following passages and discuss what the Bible says about itself:

- Deuteronomy 32:47
- Psalm 19:7-9
- Proverbs 30:5
- Matthew 4:4
- 1 Thessalonians 2:13
- Hebrews 4:12
- 2 Timothy 3:14-17
- 2 Peter 1:20-21
- Revelation 22:18-19

**HANDS: EXERCISE 1**

Meditate on Psalm 119 each day this week. Write down everything you learn about the word of God.

*Note: Psalm 119 has 22 sections. You may want to read 3 sections per day, with a 4<sup>th</sup> on the final day. Or you may randomly choose 1 section to meditate on each day.*

Day 1:

Day 2:

Day 3:

Day 4:

Day 5:

Day 6:

Day 7:

## SUPPLEMENT 1: BIBLIOGRAPHICAL TEST

The Bibliographical test looks at two items to determine the reliability and accuracy of a copy to an original – the number of copies available for a literary work and the time gap between when the original work was written and when the copy was transcribed.

*More copies* give you more evidence to determine what the author originally wrote. *Less time* between copies and the original supports the idea that the copy is accurate to the original.

This chart shows the number of manuscript copies for various ancient works of literature along with the time gap between the work's composition and the earliest manuscript we have. The New Testament has more than *3 times* the number of copies as Homer's *Illiad*, which is the work on the list with the next highest number of copies. The New Testament also has a time gap of less than 100 years – the next closest contenders are around 400 years.

On both criteria of the bibliographical test, the Bible overwhelmingly wins!

| Author    | Work               | Date Written | Earliest Manuscript | Time Gap | # Copies |
|-----------|--------------------|--------------|---------------------|----------|----------|
| Homer     | <i>Iliad</i>       | 800 BC       | c. 400 BC           | 400      | 1,757    |
| Herodotus | <i>History</i>     | 480–425 BC   | 10th C              | 1,350    | 109      |
| Sophocles | Plays              | 496–406 BC   | 3rd C BC            | 100–200  | 193      |
| Plato     | Tetralogies        | 400 BC       | 895                 | 1,300    | 210      |
| Caesar    | <i>Gallic Wars</i> | 100–44 BC    | 9th C               | 950      | 251      |



|                                       |                        |                 |   |                   |                              |
|---------------------------------------|------------------------|-----------------|---|-------------------|------------------------------|
| Livy                                  | <i>History of Rome</i> | 59 BC–<br>AD 17 | Early 5th C                                     | 400               | 150                          |
| Tacitus                               | <i>Annals</i>          | AD 100          | 1st half:850, 2nd:<br>1050 (AD 1100)            | 750–950           | 2 + 31<br>15 <sup>th</sup> C |
| Pliny, the Elder                      | <i>Natural History</i> | AD 49–<br>79    | 5th C fragment:<br>1; Rem. 14–15th<br>C         | 400<br>(750)      | 200                          |
| Thucydides                            | <i>History</i>         | 460–400<br>BC   | 3rd C BC (AD<br>900)                            | 200<br>(1,350)    | 96                           |
| Demosthenes                           | Speeches               | 300 BC          | Some<br>fragments from 1<br>C. BC. (AD<br>1100) | 1,100+<br>(1,400) | 340                          |
| New Testament<br>(Various<br>authors) | New<br>Testament       | AD 50–<br>100   | AD 130 (or<br>earlier)                          | 40                | 5,795                        |

\*This chart is adapted from the Christian Research Institute. For full commentary, notes, and citation of sources, visit <https://www.equip.org/article/the-bibliographical-test-updated/>