

*WHY...*  
TRUST THE BIBLE

CHAPTER 4

Why: Finding answers to 5 of life's big questions

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Why? Finding answers to 5 of life's big questions.

Revised Edition

Chapter 4, Why Trust the Bible?

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# WHY... TRUST THE BIBLE

This booklet contains chapter 4 of  
*“Why? Finding answers to 5 of life’s big questions”*

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# *Chapter 4*

## *Why trust the Bible?*

Have you ever played Chinese Whispers? The concept of the game is pretty simple; a group of people stand in a line, and the first person whispers a message to the person next to them, who whispers it to the person next to them, and so on. When the last person receives the message, they repeat what they've heard to all the group, and the person who originated the message shares the original – usually to much amusement. The game demonstrates how easy it is for a simple message to get changed as it's passed from person to person.

There are many people who think that the game of Chinese Whispers goes a long way towards explaining how the Bible we have today came into being. Some go on to say that the game illustrates the danger of believing what's written in the Bible, since they suppose we can have no confidence in its origins. Certainly lots of my friends are happy to concede that maybe there's a kernel of truth in the stories about what happened in Palestine, Jerusalem and Galilee all those years ago. Maybe Jesus really existed.

Maybe he really did perform amazing feats.

Maybe people really did flock to him to hear him teach.

But, by the time the accounts of all those things were written down, translated, written down again, and translated again, what we've ended up with bears little resemblance at all to history! – so the explanation goes.

So, can we trust the Bible or not? In trying to find an answer, let's look first at what is called the "documentary evidence," that is the evidence of the ancient documents. And hopefully we'll find some answers as to whether the Bible is just the result of a very long game of Chinese Whispers, or if it's something more than that.

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## *The Documentary Evidence*

You may be familiar with ancient texts like Homer's *Iliad*, Julius Caesar's commentaries on his *Gallic Wars* or the *Annals* by the Roman senator and historian Tacitus.

You can find copies of these in any bookstore or at your local library. You may have even studied them in school. These books were all written about 2000 years ago and, as is almost always the case with ancient documents, we no longer have the original piece of parchment that that person sat down and physically wrote on. This original document is called the “autograph.”

However, we can pick up these books and read them today, because in each case, at some point after the original was penned, copies were made. By hand, for the first 1500 years or so. And from these copies, more copies were made. Which is fortunate for us, because not only is the autograph lost to us, we don’t have the very first copy either. Or the second one. Or the third. For any of these ancient texts. But at some point in history, somebody made a copy that’s been preserved until today. For documents that date from around 2000 years ago, like those mentioned above, the length of time between the writing of the original and the creation of the oldest copy we have today, is generally measured in centuries.

As we know from our experience of Chinese Whispers, whenever copies are made (verbal copies in the case of our game, written copies in the case of these ancient documents), there’s a risk that the message or text will be copied incorrectly and the content changed.

This change might happen accidentally, the skipping of a letter, a word, or even a whole line.

Or the change might be deliberate, if the scribe making the copy intentionally introduces a change of meaning or content.

## *How Much Time Passed From the Original to the Copies we Have Today?*

If a lot of time passed between the writing of the original, and the production of the oldest copy that we have access to today, that means there was likely to be higher number of intermediate copies made in the years between. Consequently, a large time gap generally means a greater chance of errors or changes being introduced. Conversely, if there's only a small gap between the original and the oldest copy that exists in a museum somewhere today, that typically means fewer intermediate copies. And fewer intermediate copies suggests less chance of either deliberate or accidental changes being introduced, corrupting the content and the intentions of the original author.

All this means that the length of time between the writing of the autograph and the creation of the earliest extant



copy is extremely significant for our confidence that what we read today is what the author originally wrote.

## *How Many Ancient Copies Can we Compare?*

When historians are studying a document and seeking to find an answer to the question, “Can we trust this?” they consider not only the length of time between the original and the earliest known copy, they also consider the *number* of ancient copies that we have access to today. If we have only one copy of a document from the first few hundred years after it was first penned, there is really no way of knowing how that one compares to the original. But if we have a large number of ancient copies, and especially if those copies were made in different cities, or even better, in different countries, then we can compare the different copies to get closer to the original.

If a unique word or phrase is evident in one copy, but not in other copies that we know were made earlier, then we know that that word or phrase is a change from the original. Similarly if a particular variation in the text is apparent in a group of copies that were produced in one particular city or country, but that variation is absent from

all other copies, we can conclude that it wasn't present in the original, but was introduced in that particular place.

So, if there's just a few ancient copies of a document, it's difficult to determine which words are original and which may have been introduced. But a large number of ancient copies means historians can compare them against each other and be much more confident in concluding what the original document actually said. Errors can be identified, variations traced through the generations of copies, and the original message clearly understood.

## *Looking at the Numbers*

Let's see what this looks like in reality. We'll use Tacitus as an example. His major work the *Annals* is a history of the Roman Empire, and a commentary on the imperial government between the reigns of the emperors Tiberius and Nero. Although the *Annals* records events that occurred in the years 14 – 68 AD, Tacitus wrote it around 100 AD. The oldest copy of this work in existence today was made in about 1100 AD. So, around a thousand years passed between when Tacitus sat down to write it, and when the oldest copy that we know about was made. A thousand years for changes and errors to be introduced,

either deliberately, by someone trying to polish or obscure history, or accidentally, with a scribe mis-copying a word or letter. Remember that the other metric the historians consider is the number of ancient copies. There are 20 old copies of the *Annals* in existence that we can compare and cross-check.

The numbers are similar for many other ancient works. Caesar's *Gallic Wars*, for example, has a gap of around 800–900 years between the autograph and the oldest known copy, with 10 ancient copies (or partial copies) available for comparison.

Homer's *Iliad* fares much better. The gap between the original and the oldest copy known to us is only 500 years. And a remarkable 643 ancient copies are still in existence today! As far as the historians are concerned, this makes for a highly trustworthy document.

*Homer's Iliad fares much better. The gap between the original and the oldest copy known to us is (only) 500 years. And a remarkable 643 ancient copies are still in existence today!*

When you go to your local bookstore and pick up a paperback copy of the *Iliad*, there's really no doubt that what you hold in your hand is an accurate reflection of

what Homer actually wrote down. No one suggests that “You can’t really be sure,” or that “It’s all been changed.” People like you and me read it and scholars study it, confident that what we really are reading the message originally written.

There might be the odd phrase here or there where we can’t quite decide what it’s supposed to say, or which possible variation is the original. But with such a relatively small time gap between the autograph and the extant copies, and with so many ancient copies to compare, the original message can be easily determined. Even for those other works, with their longer time intervals and smaller numbers of ancient copies, there is still enough evidence for historians to be confident in the accuracy and reliability of what we read.

## *The New Testament Numbers Don’t Lie!*

So, let’s take a look at the Bible, and the New Testament in particular, because it was written around the same time as these other works. The books of the New Testament were penned by a range of authors between about 45 AD and 100 AD. Jesus was crucified around 33 AD, so these documents

were originally written very close in time to the events they record.

As is the case for those other ancient works, we don't have the original document for any of the books of the New Testament. However, the oldest copies that we have were made in around 125 AD. Yes, 125 AD! Just 25 years after the last of the New Testament documents were written! The time during which any errors or changes could be introduced starts at only 25 years! An interval of 25 years compared to 1000 years or more for other books from the same era is staggering!

Of course, with such short interval of time from the events themselves, to their being recorded in the New Testament, to the creation of the copies still in existence today, there is also the likelihood, the certainty even, that eyewitnesses to the events would be around when those copies first started circulating. If any error had crept in during those first intervening years, the people who had been there in the first place would dispute the incorrect account and correct the record. Most of us can remember significant detail about major events that happened 25 years ago.

In 1989 *Exxon Valdez* ran aground off the coast of Alaska. Australian pilots walked off the job in one of the largest workers' strikes in the country's history.

The Hillsborough Stadium disaster claimed the lives of 96 soccer fans in the UK.

Federal Police Assistant Commissioner Colin Winchester was killed in his driveway, the highest-ranking Australian Police Officer ever to be murdered.

In historical terms, 25 years is nothing! I can remember those events and could correct details of an incorrect account, even though I was a child at the time.

Author & Work <sup>1</sup>	Date Written	Earliest Copy	Interval to Earliest Copy	Number of Ancient Copies
Plato <i>Tetralogies</i>	427 – 347 BC	900 AD	1200 years	7
Tacitus <i>Annals</i>	100 AD	1100 AD	1000 years	20
Suetonius <i>De Vita Caesarum</i>	75 –160 AD	1000 AD	950 years	8
Julius Caesar <i>Gallic War</i>	58-50 BC	900 AD	850 years	10
Homer <i>Iliad</i>	900 BC	400 BC	500 years	643
<b><i>The New Testament</i></b>	<b>45 – 100 AD</b>	<b>125 AD</b>	<b>25 years</b>	<b>24,000 +</b>

So even if changes had been introduced very early in the life of the New Testament documents, at the time when the

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<sup>1</sup> Adapted from Geisler, N. *Christian Apologetics*, McDowell, J. *A Ready Defense*, & Yardley, J. C. *The Annals, The Reigns of Tiberius, Claudius, and Nero*.

copies we can compare today were being made and distributed, any errors or changes would have been noted and corrected by the people who were part of the events being described! Knowing human nature, I imagine that had any error been introduced, there would have been no shortage of people willing to say, “No, that’s not how it happened! I was there, I heard it with my own ears! I saw it with my own eyes!”

Remember, we also need to look at the number of ancient copies available to historians for comparison and cross-checking. In contrast to the 10 or 20 ancient copies for some of those other works, or the rather surprising 643 copies for the *Iliad*, the number of ancient copies of the New Testament documents in libraries, museums and universities around the world is over 24,000!

Needless to say, comparing and cross checking isn’t a problem! If we have reason to believe that one ancient scribe made a mistake in his copy, there are still 23,999 other copies we can compare to see what the text is supposed to say! But as it turns out, there is less than 0.1% variation in all of the copies of the old manuscripts of the New Testament that have ever been found.

Sir Frederick Kenyon, who was the Director and Principal Librarian of the British Museum concluded:

*“The interval between the date of the original composition and the earliest extant evidence becomes so small as to be in fact negligible, and the last foundation for any doubt that the Scriptures have come down to us substantially as they were written has now been removed. Both the authenticity and the general integrity of the books of the New Testament may be regarded as finally established.”<sup>2</sup>*

The New Testament documents; the eye-witness accounts of Jesus’ life, the record of Jesus’ words, and the testimony of his life and death, and even his resurrection, are the most reliable and most well-attested ancient documents we have. As far as historians are concerned, the reliability of the Bible is orders of magnitude greater than any other ancient document.

That’s the conclusion we’re led to by the documentary evidence. But what does the Bible say about itself as to why it’s trustworthy? Or why we should believe what it says?

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<sup>2</sup> Kenyon, K, *The Bible and Archeology*, Harper & Row, New York, 1940. p 288.



## *What does this remarkably well-attested book say about itself?*

There are a number of different ways of answering these questions, so let's choose two. We'll look at how Jesus himself views the Bible, and then take a look at how the leaders of the early church understood the Bible. Since we focused on the New Testament in the first section, we'll mainly consider the Old Testament now.

## *What does Jesus Think About the Bible?*

Take a look at the following section from chapter 12 of Mark's gospel.

*<sup>24</sup> Jesus replied, "Are you not in error because you do not know the Scriptures or the power of God? <sup>25</sup> When the dead rise, they will neither marry nor be given in marriage; they will be like the angels in heaven. <sup>26</sup> Now about the dead rising—have you not read in the Book of Moses, in the account of the burning bush, how God said to him, 'I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob'?"*

*27 He is not the God of the dead, but of the living. You are badly mistaken!"*

*Mark 12:24 - 27*

We're joining in part-way through a discussion between Jesus and some members of a religious group called the Sadducees. In truth, it's not so much a discussion as an attempt by the Sadducees to trick Jesus, but the part we're interested in is Jesus' response. They've asked Jesus a question about the resurrection, but Jesus answers in such a way as to make a different point; it's in the Bible that we find out what God is really like, because God speaks to us through the Bible.

Let's unpack that a bit!

The Sadducees didn't believe in the resurrection. They said once you were dead that was pretty much the end. They did generally believe the first five books of the Jewish Scriptures; Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy – known together as the book of Moses, and they believed that these books contained God's Word.

In answering their questions, Jesus takes the Sadducees to their own Scriptures. The quotation in verse 26 comes from Exodus 3:6, and Jesus shows that these Scriptures teach about God and reveal his nature.

In effect, Jesus says to the Sadducees, “You should know from your own Scriptures, from Exodus 3:6, that when God speaks to Moses it’s the same God who spoke hundreds of years before to Abraham, and to Isaac, and to Jacob.”

*If you know your Scriptures, you’ll know the power of God. You’ll know how God acts. You’ll know how God has revealed himself. You’ll hear God speak the truth.*

“If you know your Scriptures, you’ll know the power of God. You’ll know how God acts. You’ll know how God has revealed himself. You’ll hear God speak the truth.”

The Sadducees who came to Jesus with this trick question were very religious men. Every day devout men like these recited the traditional Jewish prayers, which means that twice each day they would have recited these very words from Exodus 3. That is to say, every morning and every evening they would have recited these words from their Scriptures, words that Jesus says make God known and reveal his power.

Little wonder that Jesus seems exasperated at the Sadducees’ failure to understand. He considered that they should have learnt from their own Scriptures that God speaks to his people and has done for generations.

Well, those Scriptures are also our Scriptures; the book of Moses from which Jesus taught the Sadducees is, as I mentioned, also the first five books of our Bible. The Scriptures that we read today are the same Scriptures that Jesus said speak of an unchanging God who makes himself known to his people in generation after generation.

Jesus says it's in the Bible that we hear God speak the truth about himself. It's through the Bible that God makes himself known.

## *The Early Church Leaders Believed the New Testament to be Christian Scripture*

Finally, let's look at what the leaders of the early church, such as the Apostles Paul and Peter, say about the Bible. In the first years of the church, people didn't have their Bibles all neatly bound up in a single volume like we do. They had the Old Testament. They knew that was God's Word, but obviously, in the New Testament era, the New Testament was still being written.

We mustn't think though, that there was some point much later on when someone suggested "Let's have a look at all these bits of paper floating around our churches, and we'll decide which ones we think have actually come from God. Those ones we'll add to the Bible." It wasn't like that at all. In fact, when the earliest Christians received the letters that make up the bulk of our New Testament, they received them as God's Word, on an equal footing with their Old Testament, which they also knew was God's Word. This was because they understood that the Apostles who were writing and sending these letters had been especially commissioned by Jesus and enabled to speak (and write) authoritatively to his church.

The Apostle Peter, makes this point explicit at the end of his second letter in the New Testament, saying that the letters sent by the Apostle Paul to the churches scattered around the Roman Empire are considered to be Christian Scripture, just the same as the Old Testament. The danger of ignoring or rejecting what Paul writes is therefore exactly the same danger as ignoring or rejecting what we read in the Old Testament.

So, what do we learn about the Bible from Paul, the man who wrote a large part of the New Testament?

## *Both the Old and New Testaments Speak of God's Rescue Plan in Christ.*

Consider these words written by Paul late in his life, to his friend and fellow Christian leader, Timothy.

*But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of, because you know those from whom you learned it, <sup>15</sup> and how from infancy you have known the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. <sup>16</sup> All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, <sup>17</sup> so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.*

*2 Timothy 3:14 - 17*

First, let's get some context. Paul is in prison, probably in Rome, and he's writing to Timothy who is leading the church in Ephesus. It's around 65 AD, 30 years or so after Jesus' death and resurrection. We know from elsewhere in the Bible that Timothy was a young man, and that he was taught the Christian faith from his infancy by his mother and his grandmother. This means that it was likely in the

first few years after Jesus' earthly ministry that Timothy was taught the "Holy Scriptures" as Paul explains here. Since the New Testament hadn't been completed at that time, the Scriptures Timothy learned can only have been the Old Testament.

It's important that we grasp what Paul teaches us here about the Old Testament writings; those Scriptures, that Timothy learned at a young age, "*are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus.*" That is, although written centuries before the time of Christ, the Old Testament points to Christ, prepares God's people for Christ, and is ultimately fulfilled in Christ.

The Old Testament lays the foundation for the life and ministry of Jesus, as he lives, suffers, dies in the place of rebellious humanity, and rises again reconciling us to the God we have ignored and rejected.

Paul says, the Old Testament prepares us for Jesus. Or put it another way, the Bible is one package. One unfolding story of God's great rescue plan. It's the same idea as what Jesus wanted the Sadducees to learn from that encounter in Mark 12; the God who spoke through the Old Testament writings is the same God who speaks through the New Testament.

## *The Bible is God's Word to Us, For Us*

Notice also that Paul tells us that the Bible is “God-breathed.” It’s an unusual expression, but it simply means that the Scriptures come straight from God himself.

The Bible comes from God to his people.

That is, when we read the Bible, or hear it read to us, we hear God speak. And because the Bible is God’s Word to us, it is of supreme value in every area of our lives, which is Paul’s next point. Scripture is useful for “*teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness,*” with the goal that every Christian person, man, woman, boy, or girl, “*may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.*”

In the Bible, in God’s Word to Timothy, to you and to me, to people right around the world, we find everything we need to be equipped for the fruitful life that God wants us to lead.

Do you want to know what God thinks is good?

Perhaps you want to know what you should be doing with your life.

Are you trying to work out what’s right and what’s not?

Maybe you’d like to know how you can please God at work?

Or how to conduct relationships that honour God?

Or how you can serve your family for God’s glory?



Or how to take your place in God's church?

Or how to live a life that's consistent and has integrity?

Well, God has spoken.

God speaks through the Bible, through all of it, so that you  
*"may be thoroughly equipped for every good work."*

So why trust the Bible?

It's one of the most historically reliable documents in the entire corpus of written language.

It's in the Bible that God makes himself known.

It's through the Bible that God reveals his plan of salvation, for people to be brought near to him, regardless of how good or bad they think they've been.

It's through the Bible that God says we can be equipped for the life for which we were created.





# Why: Finding answers to 5 of life's big questions

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## **In this series**

Why Jesus?

Why did Jesus die?

Why believe in the resurrection?

Why trust the Bible?

Why have faith?

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