



Week 3 – “The Inerrant Word of God”

in·er·rant adjective
free from error; infallible.

in·fal·li·ble adjective
1. absolutely trustworthy or sure: an infallible rule.
2. unfailing in effectiveness or operation; certain: an infallible remedy.

“The Bible in its entirety is God’s written word to man, free of error in its original autographs, wholly reliable in history and doctrine. Its divine inspiration has rendered the Book ‘infallible’ (incapable of teaching deception) and ‘inerrant’ (not liable to prove false or mistaken). Its inspiration is ‘plenary’ (extending to all parts alike), ‘verbal’ (including the actual language form), and ‘confluent’ (a product of two free agents, human and divine). Inspiration involves infallibility as essential property, and infallibility in turn implies inerrancy.” (Clark H. Pinnock, A Defense of Biblical Infallibility, page 1, source)

***Adapted from the article: Are the Biblical Documents Reliable?
by James F. Williams***

Introduction

How do we know that the Bible we have today is even close to the original?

How do we know it is trustworthy and accurate?

If we don’t have the originals how do we know what they really said?

Haven’t copiers down through the centuries inserted and deleted and embellished the documents so that the original message of the Bible has been obscured?

These questions are frequently asked to discredit the sources of information from which the Christian faith has come to us.

Three Errors To Avoid

As we study this out we must follow these simple rules:

1. Do not assume inspiration or infallibility of the documents, with the intent of attempting to prove the inspiration or infallibility of the documents. Do not say the bible is inspired or infallible simply because it claims to be. This is circular reasoning.
2. When considering the original documents, forget about the present form of your Bible and regard them as the collection of ancient source documents that they are.
3. Do not start with modern "authorities" and then move to the documents to see if the authorities were right. Begin with the documents themselves.

Procedure for Testing a Document's Validity

In his book, *Introduction in Research in English Literary History*, C. Sanders sets forth three tests of reliability employed in general historiography and literary criticism.^[1] These tests are:

1. Bibliographical – (i.e., the textual tradition from the original document to the copies and manuscripts of that document we possess today)
2. Internal evidence (what the document claims for itself)
3. External evidence (how the document squares or aligns itself with facts, dates, persons from its own contemporary world).

It might be noteworthy to mention that Sanders is a professor of military history, not a theologian. He uses these three tests of reliability in his own study of historical military events.

We will look now at the bibliographical, or textual evidence for the Bible's reliability.

The Old Testament

For both Old and New Testaments, the crucial question is: "Not having any original copies or scraps of the Bible, can we reconstruct them well enough from the oldest manuscript evidence we *do* have so they give us a true, undistorted view of actual people, places and events?"

The Scribe

The scribe was considered a professional person in antiquity. No printing presses existed, so people were trained to copy documents. The task was usually undertaken by a devout Jew. The Scribes believed they were dealing with the very Word of God and were therefore extremely careful in copying. They did not just hastily write things down. The earliest complete copy of the Hebrew Old Testament dates from c. 900 A.D.

The Massoretic Text

During the early part of the tenth century (916 A.D.), there was a group of Jews called the Massorettes. These Jews were meticulous in their copying. The texts they had were all in capital letters, and there was no punctuation or paragraphs.

The Massorettes would copy Isaiah, for example, and when they were through, they would total up the number of letters. Then they would find the middle letter of the book. If it was not the same, they made a new copy.

All of the present copies of the Hebrew text which come from this period are in remarkable agreement. Comparisons of the Massoretic text with earlier Latin and Greek versions have also revealed careful copying and little deviation during the thousand years from 100 B.C. to 900 A.D. But until this century, there was scant material written in Hebrew from antiquity which could be compared to the Masoretic texts of the tenth century A.D.

The Dead Sea Scrolls

In 1947, a young Bedouin goat herdsman found some strange clay jars in caves near the valley of the Dead Sea. Inside the jars were some leather scrolls. The discovery of these "Dead Sea Scrolls" at Qumran has been hailed as the outstanding archeological discovery of the twentieth century.

The scrolls have revealed that a commune of monastic farmers flourished in the valley from 150 B.C. to 70 A.D. (Around the time John wrote the book of Revelation 70 A.D.-95 A.D.) It is believed that when they saw the Romans invade the land they put their cherished leather scrolls in the jars and hid them in the caves on the cliffs northwest of the Dead Sea.

The Dead Sea Scrolls include a complete copy of the Book of Isaiah, a fragmented copy of Isaiah, containing much of Isaiah 38-6, and fragments of almost every book in the Old Testament. The majority of the fragments are from Isaiah and the Pentateuch (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy). The books of Samuel, in a tattered copy, were also found and also two complete chapters of the book of Habakkuk. In addition, there were a number of nonbiblical scrolls related to the commune found.

These materials are dated around 100 B.C. The significance of the find, and particularly the copy of Isaiah, was recognized by Merrill F. Unger when he said, "This complete document of Isaiah quite understandably created a sensation since it was the first major Biblical manuscript of great antiquity ever to be recovered. Interest in it was especially keen since **it antedates by more than a thousand years** the oldest Hebrew texts preserved in the Massoretic tradition." [\[2\]](#)

The supreme value of these Qumran documents lies in the ability of biblical scholars to compare them with the Massoretic Hebrew texts of the tenth century A.D.

If, upon examination, there were little or no textual changes in those Massoretic texts where comparisons were possible, an assumption could then be made that the Massoretic Scribes had probably been just as faithful in their copying of the other biblical texts which could not be compared with the Qumran material.

What was learned? A comparison of the Qumran manuscript of Isaiah with the Massoretic text revealed them to be extremely close in accuracy to each other: "A comparison of Isaiah 53 shows that only 17 letters differ from the Massoretic text.

- Ten of these are mere differences in spelling (like our "honor" and the English "honour") and produce no change in the meaning at all.
- Four more are very minor differences, such as the presence of a conjunction (and) which are stylistic rather than substantive.
- The other three letters are the Hebrew word for "light." This word was added to the text by someone after "they shall see" in verse 11.

Out of 166 words in this chapter, only this one word is really in question, and it does not at all change the meaning of the passage. We are told by biblical scholars that this is typical of the whole manuscript of Isaiah."[3](#)

Old Testament Conclusion

In his book, *Can I Trust My Bible*, R. Laird Harris concluded, "We can now be sure that copyists worked with great care and accuracy on the Old Testament, even back to 225 B.C. . . . indeed, it would be rash skepticism that would now deny that we have our Old Testament in a form very close to that used by Ezra when he taught the word of the Lord to those who had returned from the Babylonian captivity."[4](#)

The New Testament - The Greek Manuscript Evidence

There are more than 4,000 different ancient Greek manuscripts containing all or portions of the New Testament that have survived to our time. These are written on different materials.

Papyrus and Parchment

During the early Christian era, the writing material most commonly used was *papyrus*. This highly durable reed from the Nile Valley was glued together much like plywood and then allowed to dry in the sun.

In the twentieth century many remains of documents (both biblical and non-biblical) on papyrus have been discovered, especially in the dry, arid lands of North Africa and the Middle East.

Another material used was *parchment*. This was made from the skin of sheep or goats, and was in wide use until the late Middle Ages when paper began to replace it. It was scarce and more expensive; hence, it was used almost exclusively for important documents.

Examples

1. Codex Vaticanus and Codex Sinaiticus - These are two excellent parchment copies of the entire New Testament which date from the 4th century (325-450 A.D.).[5](#)

2. Older Papyrii - Earlier still, fragments and papyrus copies of portions of the New Testament date from 100 to 200 years (180-225 A.D.) before Vaticanus and Sinaiticus. The outstanding ones are the Chester Beatty Papyrus (P45, P46, P47) and the Bodmer Papyrus II, XIV, XV (P46, P75).

From these five manuscripts alone, we can construct all of Luke, John, Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, 1 and 2 Thessalonians, Hebrews, and portions of Matthew, Mark, Acts, and Revelation. Only the Pastoral Epistles (Titus, 1 and 2 Timothy) and the General Epistles (James, 1 and 2 Peter, and 1, 2, and 3 John) and Philemon are excluded.[\[6\]](#)

3. Oldest Fragment -Perhaps the earliest piece of Scripture surviving is a fragment of a papyrus codex containing John 18:31-33 and 37. It is called the Rylands Papyrus (P52) and dates from 130 A.D., having been found in Egypt.

The Rylands Papyrus has forced the critics to place the fourth gospel back into the first century, abandoning their earlier assertion that it could not have been written then by the Apostle John.[\[7\]](#)

4. This manuscript evidence creates a bridge of extant papyrus and parchment fragments and copies of the New Testament stretching back to almost the end of the first century.

Versions (Translations)

In addition to the actual Greek manuscripts, there are more than 1,000 copies and fragments of the New Testament in Syria, Coptic, Armenian, Gothic, and Ethiopic, as well as 8,000 copies of the Latin Vulgate, some of which date back almost to Jerome's original translation in 384 400 A.D.

Church Fathers

A further witness to the New Testament text is sourced in the thousands of quotations found throughout the writings of the Church Fathers (the early Christian clergy [100-450 A.D.] who followed the Apostles and gave leadership to the fledgling church, beginning with Clement of Rome (96 A.D.).

It has been observed that if all of the New Testament manuscripts and Versions mentioned above were to disappear overnight, it would still be possible to reconstruct the entire New Testament with quotes from the Church Fathers, with the exception of fifteen to twenty verses!

The evidence for the early existence of the New Testament writings is clear. The wealth of materials for the New Testament becomes even more significant when we compare it with other ancient documents which have been accepted without question.

In Comparison

Author and Work	Author's Lifespan	Date of Events	Date of Writing*	Earliest Extant MS**	Lapse: Event to Writing	Lapse: Event to MS
Matthew, <i>Gospel</i>	ca. 0-70?	4 BC - AD 30	50 - 65/75	ca. 200	<50 years	<200 years
Mark, <i>Gospel</i>	ca. 15-90?	27 - 30	65/70	ca. 225	<50 years	<200 years
Luke, <i>Gospel</i>	ca. 10-80?	5 BC - AD 30	60/75	ca. 200	<50 years	<200 years
John, <i>Gospel</i>	ca. 10-100	27-30	90-110	ca. 130	<80 years	<100 years
Paul, <i>Letters</i>	ca. 0-65	30	50-65	ca. 200	20-30 years	<200 years
Josephus, <i>War</i>	ca. 37-100	200 BC - AD 70	ca. 80	ca. 950	10-300 years	900-1200 years
Josephus, <i>Antiquities</i>	ca. 37-100	200 BC - AD 65	ca. 95	ca. 1050	30-300 years	1000-1300 years
Tacitus, <i>Annals</i>	ca. 56-120	AD 14-68	100-120	ca. 850	30-100 years	800-850 years
Seutonius, <i>Lives</i>	ca. 69-130	50 BC - AD 95	ca. 120	ca. 850	25-170 years	750-900 years
Pliny, <i>Letters</i>	ca. 60-115	97-112	110-112	ca. 850	0-3 years	725-750 years
Plutarch, <i>Lives</i>	ca. 50-120	500 BC - AD 70	ca. 100	ca. 950	30-600 years	850-1500 years
Herodotus, <i>History</i>	ca. 485-425 BC	546-478 BC	430-425 BC	ca. 900	50-125 years	1400-1450 years
Thucydides, <i>History</i>	ca. 460-400 BC	431-411 BC	410-400 BC	ca. 900	0-30 years	1300-1350 years
Xenophon, <i>Anabasis</i>	ca. 430-355 BC	401-399 BC	385-375 BC	ca. 1350	15-25 years	1750 years
Polybius, <i>History</i>	ca. 200-120 BC	220-168 BC	ca. 150 BC	ca. 950	20-70 years	1100-1150 years

*Where a slash occurs, the first date is conservative, and the second is liberal.

**New Testament manuscripts are fragmentary. Earliest complete manuscript is from ca. 350; lapse of event to complete manuscript is about 325 years.

Conclusion

In his book, *The Bible and Archaeology*, Sir Frederic G. Kenyon, former director and principal librarian of the British Museum, stated about the New Testament, "The interval, then, between the dates of 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." [\[8\]](#)

To be skeptical of the twenty-seven documents in the New Testament, and to say they are unreliable is to allow all of classical antiquity to slip into obscurity, for no documents of the ancient period are as well attested bibliographically as these in the New Testament.

B. F. Westcott and F.J.A. Hort, the creators of *The New Testament in Original Greek*, also commented: "If comparative trivialities such as changes of order, the insertion or omission of the article with proper names, and the like are set aside, the works in our opinion still subject to doubt can hardly mount to more than a thousandth part of the whole New Testament." [\[9\]](#) In other words, the small changes and variations in manuscripts change no major doctrine: they do not affect Christianity in the least. The message is the same with or without the variations. We have the Word of God.

Things to Mull:

1. Why do you think the debate about inerrancy has become such a large issue in this century?
2. Why do people on both sides of the question think it to be important?
3. If you thought there were some small errors affirmed by Scripture, how do you think that would affect the way you read Scripture?
4. Would it affect your concern for truthfulness in everyday conversation?
5. Do you know of any Scripture texts that seem to contain errors? What are they?
6. Have you tried to resolve the difficulties in those texts? If you have not found a solution to some text, what further steps might you try?
7. As Christians go through life learning to know their Bibles better and growing in Christian maturity, do they tend to trust the Bible more or less?
8. Does belief in inerrancy guarantee sound doctrine and a sound Christian life?
9. How can Jehovah's Witnesses say that the Bible is inerrant while they themselves have so many false teachings?
10. If you agree with inerrancy, do you think belief in inerrancy should be a requirement for church membership? For teaching a Sunday school class? For holding a church office such as elder or deacon? For being ordained as a pastor? For teaching at a theological seminary? Why or why not?
11. When there is a doctrinal controversy in the church, what are the personal dangers facing those whose position is more consistent with Scripture? In particular, how could pride in correct doctrine become a problem? What is the solution?
12. Do you think inerrancy is an important issue for the future of the church? Why or why not? How do you think it will be resolved?

Questions used from: Grudem, Wayne (2009-05-18). Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine (p. 101). Zondervan. Kindle Edition.

Notes

1. C.Sanders, *Introduction in Research in English Literacy* (New York: MacMillan, 1952), 143.
 2. Merrill F. Unger, *Famous Archaeological Discoveries* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1957), 72.
 3. R. Laird Harris, *Can I Trust My Bible?* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1963), 124.
 4. *Ibid.*, 129-30.
 5. Merrill F. Unger, *Unger's Bible Handbook* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1967), 892.
 6. *Ibid.*
 7. *Ibid.*
 8. Sir Fredric Kenyon, *The Bible and Archaeology* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1940), 288ff.
 9. B.F. Westcott, and F.J.A. Hort, eds., *New Testament in Original Greek*, 1881, vol. II, 2.
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