

Evidence of Biblical Accuracy

By David Feddes

I'd like to offer some evidence of biblical accuracy. Before I do that, however, let me first admit that there's something silly about any attempt to present evidence of biblical accuracy. Nothing in the world is more certain than the Word of the living God. Isn't it silly to seek evidence for something which is already the most certain thing in the world? The Bible, as the Word of God, is more accurate and more sure than any evidence that can be found in favor of it!

Still, the certainty of a thing in itself is not always matched by certainty in our thinking about it. We're not always as sure of the Bible as we should be. So even though the Bible's reliability is greater than the reliability of any evidence for it, knowing some evidence can help us trust the Bible more confidently. This evidence is not the *foundation* for the Bible's truthfulness, but the evidence does *confirm* the Bible's truthfulness to minds that wonder or waver. We're going to look at five types of confirming evidence:

- Old Testament prophecy fulfilled in the New Testament
- Findings of archeology
- Reliable manuscripts
- Inner testimony of the Holy Spirit
- The Bible's power to transform lives and cultures

Old Testament Prophecies Fulfilled in the New Testament

Hundreds of prophecies in the Old Testament came true in Jesus' birth, life, death, and resurrection. The Old Testament Scriptures spoke of many events that were yet to come, events that took place in the life of Jesus Christ as described in the New Testament. These predictions came centuries in advance, sometimes even more than a thousand years in advance. For instance, Old Testament prophecies speak of a king riding into his capital city on a donkey while people wave palm branches. Other prophecies speak of hands and feet being pierced, gambling for the victim's clothing, and other things that happened to Jesus when he was crucified. Ancient predictions that came true in the life of Jesus give us good reason to take both the Old Testament and the New Testament very seriously.

Besides specific predictions, the Old Testament also had various feasts and rituals and foreshadowings of God's Savior that were fulfilled in Jesus. Here's just one example. At Passover time, Jesus was killed. For many years, people had been sacrificing a Passover lamb each year, taking some of its blood, and smearing it around the door of their homes. They did this in memory of how a lamb's blood was used to mark Israelite homes and save them from death when God killed the firstborn of Egypt. This lamb, which helped the Israelites be spared, was pointing ahead to a much greater Lamb. Jesus died at the time of Passover, showing he was God's Lamb who takes away the sins of the world.

Here's another example of ancient prophecy being fulfilled. Worldwide gospel preaching fulfills the original promises God made to Abraham thousands of years earlier. God said that through Abraham's seed all nations would be blessed. That has come true as the gospel of Jesus, Abraham's descendant, has spread to every nation.

Every time we notice that an Old Testament prophecy came true in New Testament times, the accuracy of the Bible is confirmed for us afresh.

Findings of Archeology

More confirmation of Scripture appears in the findings of archeology. Throughout history there have been scholars who were skeptical about the Bible, but trends in scholarship became even more skeptical during the 1800s. Some scholars went so far as to claim that Jesus never existed, that other major biblical characters were mere myths, and that just about everything in the Bible was made up. That kind of extreme skepticism has been fading, however, as more and more archeological discoveries confirm the Bible and contradict the skeptics.

Some big books have been published about various archeological discoveries and how they match statements in the Bible. I own a smaller book that presents fifty archeological proofs for Old Testament facts and fifty archeological proofs for New Testament facts. We don't have time in a short presentation to consider the 100 proofs from archeology that are mentioned in that small book, let alone the vast wealth of information found in the bigger books. But here are a few examples of how archeology has confirmed the Bible and refuted skeptics.

Was King David a real person? For a while, some people claimed he was just a myth. They said, "Sure, there are stories in the Bible about David that claim to be true history. But we have no proof outside the Bible that David ever existed or was king over Israel at that time." But then archeologists found some fragments of black basalt stone, and inscriptions on these stone fragments referred to Israel as "the house of David." This inscription proved beyond any reasonable doubt that King David really lived and ruled over Israel.

Was Pontius Pilate a real person? There were skeptics who said, "The New Testament gospels just made up stuff about Jesus and invented characters. The Bible says the Roman ruler Pontius Pilate ordered the crucifixion of Jesus, but we have no record outside the Bible of anyone named Pontius Pilate being a procurator, a governor, in the land of Judea. We don't think Pontius Pilate ever existed. The gospel writers dreamed him up as part of their fictional story about Jesus." Now, what did it really prove that they had found no evidence of Pilate outside the Bible? It only proved that there are a lot of people and things from two thousand years ago that didn't leave a lasting trace, or that the traces they did leave remain buried. We can't expect to find evidence of everybody who lived two thousand years ago. However, in the case of Pilate, evidence eventually did turn up in the hands of archeologists. A stone inscription dedicated a temple "to Tiberius by ____ius Pilatus" (part of the inscription was no longer readable). Pontius Pilatus is Latin for Pontius Pilate. Tiberius Caesar was emperor in Rome when Jesus was executed. The inscription showed that Pilate was governor of Judea at the time of Tiberius. So it is literally written in stone that Pilate did exist. Again, the New Testament writers were right and the skeptics were wrong.

Is the gospel according to John reliable? John was Jesus' beloved disciple, his dearest friend. John's gospel, the fourth book of the New Testament, is treasured by Christians everywhere. But skeptical scholars insisted that this book could not have been written by one of Jesus' inner circle. In the 1800s, some skeptics claimed the author of John had never been to Jerusalem and had no firsthand knowledge of Jerusalem's geography, buildings, and events. Some of these scholars also declared that the book must have been written much later than Jesus' lifetime, as late as 200 AD, because it spoke of Jesus as God and as the divine Word who became flesh. Only a later writer could have such an evolved theology, said these scholars; none of Jesus' original disciples could have viewed Jesus as God. They figured that any document speaking of Jesus as God must have been written long afterward, after the belief had evolved that Jesus was divine. These scholars believed in evolution, not in revelation. However, the book of John is not

a piece of evolved theology but a book of divine revelation. Anyhow, skeptical scholars claimed that the author of the gospel of John didn't know the city of Jerusalem very well and couldn't have known Jesus directly. Archeology has refuted the skeptics.

John 5:2 introduces a healing miracle by Jesus: "Now there is in Jerusalem by the sheep gate a pool in Aramaic called Bethesda which has five roofed colonnades." The skeptics crowed, "The author of John obviously was never in Jerusalem. Jerusalem contains no sign of a pool with five columns or colonnades. John just made up that pool as a setting for a tale about Jesus, and he gave the pool a mythical meaning." But then, in the late 1800s, somebody was digging in Jerusalem and came upon something that had once been a pool with five colonades. It fit exactly John's description of the Pool of Bethesda. John had accurate, detailed knowledge of the places he was writing about—because he'd been there! It turns out that John knew the Jerusalem of his day better than the modern skeptics knew the ancient city.

As for the claim that John's gospel must have been written 200 years after the birth of Jesus, archeology also destroyed that notion. Archeologists found a papyrus fragment in Egypt with words from John chapter 18. This fragment and other artifacts found with it were dated to around 125 AD. Obviously something written in the year 200 can't show up in the year 125! Rather, if a fragment of John's gospel was already in Egypt by the year 125, then the writing of the original book of John had to be considerably earlier than that in order for it to be copied and circulated as Scripture and for copies of it to spread to places far from where John had lived.

Archeology proves that John knew Jerusalem better than the skeptics did. Archeology proves that John's gospel was written much earlier than skeptical scholars claimed. Evidence indicates that Jesus' best friend John really did write the book and that he understood Jesus better than the skeptics did.

Again and again, those who treat the Bible as false until proven true have been embarrassed by the discoveries of archeology. This doesn't mean confidence in the Bible should depend on archeology. But the findings of archeology do confirm the accuracy of the Bible.

Reliable Manuscripts

Another kind of evidence is found in ancient manuscripts of Scripture. Some people question whether the Bibles we have today can be accurate because thousands of years have passed since the biblical books were originally written. Even if the original texts were true, what if they became corrupted over centuries of copying and recopying by hand? When we look into that question, our confidence in the Bible grows stronger rather than weaker. There's a field of research called textual criticism, which studies ancient manuscripts, compares them with one another, and tries to determine the wording of the original manuscript.

In the case of the New Testament, many ancient manuscripts have been found. In fact, the number of ancient New Testament manuscripts far surpasses other ancient writings about history or philosophy. For instance, there are seven surviving copies of books by the Greek philosopher Plato. There are more than 5,700 surviving copies of parts of the New Testament. 5,700 to 7! The earliest copy we have of Plato's writing was produced 1200 years after the originals were written. The earliest copy and fragment of the New Testament is dated less than forty years after the original was written. Many other copies are dated within a few hundred years of the originals.

When we compare these thousands of ancient manuscripts of the New Testament, what do we find? The wording agrees 99 percent of the time—and where there is any difference, it's never on a major matter or an important aspect of doctrine. It may be in a variant spelling of a

word or a slight difference of wording. Usually careful textual criticism can determine the original wording. If a vast majority of the earliest manuscripts have the wording one way, and only one manuscript is a little different from the others, we can safely say, “Oops, the copyist of this manuscript made a tiny mistake at this point.” Because of the huge number of manuscripts we have available for comparison, we can know with almost complete accuracy and certainty the wording of the original New Testament books.

If we can’t trust the New Testament, we can’t trust any ancient documents. What we know about ancient Greece and Rome is based on far fewer and much less reliable manuscripts. Julius Caesar’s *Gallic Wars*, books by historians such as Herodotus, Tacitus, and Suetonius, or the writings of Plato, Aristotle, and Marcus Aurelius—the manuscripts we have of these writings are very few compared to the tremendous amount of New Testament manuscripts.

The reliability of Old Testament manuscripts has also been strongly confirmed. Perhaps the strongest confirmation comes from the Dead Sea Scrolls. In the mid-1900s, a shepherd boy came upon a cave containing many ancient scrolls. These writings dated from the time of Jesus and even somewhat earlier. A scroll of almost the whole book of Isaiah was found, a copy dated to at least a century before the birth of Jesus. Portions of other Old Testament books were also found. This was one of the most important finds in the history of archeology and textual criticism. Before the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls, the most ancient Hebrew manuscripts we had of the Old Testament were the Masoretic Text, copies made by very careful Jewish scholars around 1000 AD. Some of the Dead Sea Scrolls were 1,100 years older than that. It turned out that the Masoretic text was almost identical to the wording found in the Dead Sea Scrolls. In more than a thousand years of copying and recopying, nothing significant had changed. The Dead Sea Scrolls confirm that the Old Testament was copied accurately throughout the centuries.

Even without knowing much about ancient manuscripts and the science of textual criticism, Christians can count on the Bible’s accuracy by simply trusting God to preserve his written Word. Still, manuscripts provide hard evidence of what faith already knows: God has preserved the wording of the Scriptures very reliably.

Inner Testimony of the Holy Spirit

Thus far we’ve considered the fulfillment of prophecy, the findings of archeology, and the reliability of biblical manuscripts, as evidence confirming biblical accuracy. Another enormously important confirmation—the most important of all—is the inner testimony of the Holy Spirit.

I usually don’t try to talk people into believing that the Bible is the Word of God. Instead of making a case for the Bible or presenting evidence for biblical accuracy, I just say, “Read it for a while. See what happens.” When reading the creation story or the words and actions of Jesus, something happens inside them. They sense they’re reading a book like no other. At that point, they don’t need other evidence; they know who is speaking to them in the pages of Scripture. The Holy Spirit testifies in their heart that they’re hearing the voice of the living God.

The Holy Spirit, who inspired the original authors of the Scriptures, makes his voice heard in the hearts of those reading the Scriptures. This is more powerful and more sure testimony than any other evidence for the Bible. The Spirit of God makes the Bible ring true and gives us minds and ears to hear what God is saying.

Transforming Lives and Cultures

Another kind of evidence for the Bible is its power to transform individual lives and cultures

and nations, making them very different from what they were before they had the Bible. When people take the Bible to heart, they hear its message of salvation and find that God is love. They learn that “the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control” (Galatians 5:22-23) They hear, “Do to others as you would have them do to you” (Luke 6:31). They listen to Jesus say, “Love each other as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, that he lays down his life for his friends” (John 15:12-13). They experience that they are made right with God through faith in Jesus Christ, and they experience peace with God. People who were troubled find peace. People who were corrupt and cruel become decent and loving. The transformation that occurs in people who believe and live by the Bible is strong evidence for the reliability and accuracy of the Bible.

Look at what cultures were like before the Bible came to them, and then look at those same cultures after the Bible had its impact. At first there might not be much change in the culture, but over time the gospel changes public life. Jesus compared it to yeast working its way through a whole batch of bread, or a seed starting small and then growing and growing (Matthew 13:31-33). The greatest freedoms and flourishing of human life have occurred in cultural settings where the Bible was taken with the greatest seriousness and where the Bible affected public life.

Trusting and Treasuring the Bible

Nothing on earth is more certain and reliable than the Bible. If human thinking conflicts with God’s Word, then “let God be true and every man a liar” (Romans 3:4). We shouldn’t think that the Bible’s reliability depends on our ability to gather evidence for it, but sometimes evidence can serve to confirm the Bible and support our confidence. The evidence is strong:

- Old Testament prophecy fulfilled in the New Testament
- Findings of archeology
- Reliable manuscripts
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This is not just a matter for scholarly analysis. Biblical accuracy is not just an academic notion to file away with other ideas we happen to believe. We must trust and treasure the Bible and put it to good use. Scripture makes us wise for salvation through Jesus and is profitable for equipping us to live a godly life. As the inspired apostle Paul told his friend Timothy,

But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it and how from childhood you have been acquainted with the sacred writings, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be competent, equipped for every good work (2 Timothy 3:14-17).

As we trust and obey the Bible, we must also guard the treasure of biblical truth against all challenges, holding firmly to Scripture ourselves and guiding others in Scripture. Again Paul speaks words to Timothy that are also God’s guidance for us: “O Timothy, guard the deposit entrusted to you. Avoid the irreverent babble and contradictions of what is falsely called knowledge” (1 Timothy 6:20). The Bible is to be trusted. Anything that contradicts the Bible is to be avoided.