

WHY TRUST THE BIBLE?

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EVIDENCE FOR THE BIBLE

Years ago I managed my family's trucking company. We had a profitable business, but we operated in a very old and broken down building. When the snow would melt in the Canadian spring, we found leaks in our roof. We didn't worry too much about it because of our impending move to new offices. But one morning, we could ignore the leaks no longer.

First I saw water on the floor. Then I saw small drops of water coming from another location. But when I saw water oozing down from the ceiling in yet another location, I took notice. When the fourth leak appeared, I knew we were in trouble. And by the fifth leak, we mobilized an army of people to save our business records – the roof was caving in from a flood of water. Life is often like that, isn't it? We sort-of-notice many things, but do not give them our focused attention until circumstances make it necessary.

On a spiritual basis, we may find the Bible intriguing. We may know Christians who live a good moral lives. We may even learn other things about Christianity that we find intriguing. But then again, we say to ourselves, "there are lots of holy books, the Bible can't be that special."

Just as I was surprised by how much water was coming from our office ceiling that spring morning, most non-Christians are truly surprised when they see the amount of evidence that supports the Bible. There are several key lines of evidence that show us that the Bible is true and that God has revealed himself in it. Some of the evidence is personal and subjective, other parts are objective. Our task is to survey some of the lines of this evidence. If we were to explore the evidence at an in-depth level, the task would be massive, so we will just survey samples of the evidence.¹ Taken as a holistic package, the evidence explains why people have good reason to believe in Jesus and the Bible.

An Inner Conviction

Most Christians believe because of a strong intuitive conviction gained after reading the Bible or reflecting upon biblical teaching. This conviction is a personal and

inner awareness that says “Jesus is the Son of God” or “what Jesus Christ says in the Bible is right.” The conviction is self-authenticating within our hearts.

We all believe in the truth of many things in this same way. The rightness of such beliefs does not require any more proof than a man does when he knows that his wife is madly in love with him. Like “being in love” or “just knowing some things are right and wrong,” we also can know that there is something right about Christ before we have external and objective proof.

Think about some examples of things that we know to be intuitively true without proof. How can you externally prove that the Holocaust was morally wrong (what objective standard could we use)? How can you prove that there is purpose in life (what external evidence is there for it)? How can you know for sure that another person loves us (how can we absolutely know another person’s mind)? Yet almost all of us know that there is truth in statements like these. Again, we know them intuitively.

The Bible was written, in part, to produce such conviction within our hearts. John 20:31 says it was “written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.” Many people who read the Bible or hear what it teaches about Jesus Christ come to faith in him without any other proof. People also reacted this way when Jesus was alive.

When Jesus had finished saying these things, the crowds were amazed at his teaching, because he taught as one who had authority, and not as their teachers of the law. (Matt. 7:28-29)

They asked each other, "Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us?" (Luke 24:32)

When these people heard Jesus’ teachings, they instantly knew that there was something intuitively right in what he taught, it rang true in their hearts.

When you fully grasp the teaching about Jesus in the Bible, you too may have an intuitive sense that his teaching is somehow true. The Bible describes it this way: “But we know these things because God has revealed them to us by his Spirit” (1 Corinthians 2:10, NLT). The conviction can be so strong that you do not feel a need for further proof.²

According to the Bible and common experience, this “inner conviction” is the primary reason that Christians believe in Jesus Christ and are willing to trust the Bible (John 16:7-11 and 1 Corinthians 2: 10-14; 12:1-2). Not everyone experiences this

conviction in the same strong way. Many of us sense it, but we want objective confirmation and facts to back it up. But it is supremely important because, deep down, we know inner conviction is the most profound evidence to us personally.

Some people reject the intuitive sense that God is present, even when they experience it in their own hearts. We push away from thoughts about God or even Christian people, because it makes us feel uncomfortable.

This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but men loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that his deeds will be exposed. But whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what he has done has been done through God." (John 3:19-21)

We must decide that we will "live by the truth," even though certain truths about ourselves, which are hard to face. R.C. Sproul tells an all too common story of a man pushing God out of his conscious awareness.³ It is about a man playing golf with the President of the United States and the Christian evangelist, Billy Graham.

After the round of golf was finished, one of the other pros came up to the golfer and asked, "Hey, what was it like playing with the President and with Billy Graham?" The pro unleashed a torrent of cursing, and in a disgusting manner said, "I don't need Billy Graham stuffing religion down my throat." With that he turned on his heel and stormed off, heading for the practice tee.

His friend followed the angry pro to the practice tee. The pro took out his driver and started to beat out balls in fury. His neck was crimson and it looked like steam was coming from his ears. . . His friend said quietly, "Was Billy a little rough on you out there?" The pro heaved an embarrassed sigh and said, "No, he didn't even mention religion. I just had a bad round."

According to the Bible, subtle, imperceptible spiritual forces were at play. Billy Graham's presence (as a Christian leader) was enough to make the man uncomfortable. There was a spiritual tug-of-war within the man's heart that showed itself in an emotional over-reaction to a golf game.

Like those who believe in love, morality, and honor, most Christians believe in Jesus Christ, not because of an abstract rational proof, but because of an inner sense of Christ's presence and conviction in our hearts (1 John 4:13-14). At a personal and theological level, this is the most important of the lines of evidence we will review.

The Da Vinci Code

We are going to look at the reliability of the manuscripts of the Bible so that we can have confidence in it and trust it. When drawn to Jesus Christ and the teachings of the Bible at an intuitive and spiritual level, we naturally want to know about the factual and historical basis for belief. “How do we know that we can trust the Bible on objective grounds?” we ask ourselves. “Maybe our inner, subjective conviction was wrong?” “How do we know that the Bible has come down to us in an accurate form?” A person can’t help but want confirmation that the modern Bible accurately represents Jesus Christ’s original teachings.

The evidence we will look in the next few pages at doesn’t prove that the Bible is true, but it confirms that the Bible has come down to us, on all points of substance, as it was originally written. We can know that our experience with the teaching of the Bible is the same as the experience of those who first heard and believed these things. This is what we should expect if God has preserved the Bible to be our teacher and the safeguard of God’s truth. If Christianity is true, faith and reason should work together. But what have you heard about whether or not the modern Bible is a reliable representation of the original manuscripts?

Many people have read Dan Brown’s *The Da Vinci Code* or seen the movie. Before the movie came out in the summer of 2006, it had already become the most widely read book with a spiritual theme, other than the Bible, in our time. Beyond that, the book has sold more copies than any other fictional work in U.S. history – by 2006, it had been read “cover to cover” by one out of every four⁴ to five adults.⁵

The book is a captivating read, with an interesting story which exploits the current mistrust in the Roman Catholic Church, caused by all the scandals related to priests. It also exploits the mistrust about how Christians have treated women and common questions about how we received the Bible down to our day . . . and whether or not the Bible was changed by the early church.

But it is based on false and misleading assertions, like the view that Jesus was married and had children, or that the Bible was the product of human beings like the Roman emperor Constantine, not God, or that other books should also be in the Bible. Many people believe that Dan Brown was using factual information about these matters to tell his story. Dan Brown even makes that bold statement that the background facts in the book accurately represent “artwork, architecture, documents, and secret rituals.”⁶

But Brown is badly wrong and the book misrepresents historical truths. He twists facts and makes false assertions, especially in his basic presentation about how we got the Bible. New Testament scholar Ben Witherington III represents the consensus of biblical scholarship by pointing out that Brown “is not merely out of his depth, he is also a purveyor of errors of both fact and interpretation, including some mistakes that even the most amateur student of history should never make.”⁷ The *Da Vinci Code* contains so many factual errors, distortions, and corruptions that anyone disturbed by the questions it raises about the Bible should read one or more of the many books that have been written to give the historical facts to the confused public.⁸ Contrary to *The Da Vinci Code*, as we will see, the Bible can be trusted.

Reliable Manuscripts

In what follows, we will look at the reasons why many believe that the modern Bible is an accurate rendition on the original manuscripts. Due to space and time constraints, we will focus on the reliability of the New Testament, where we learn about Jesus and the way of salvation. For those who want to study the reliability of the Old Testament, the respected scholar Walter Kaiser has recently written a book entitled, *The Old Testament Documents: Are They Reliable and Relevant*.⁹ He presents all the background evidence that supports the authenticity of these older writings, which make up the first part of the Bible. The evidence for the reliability of the New Testament is convincing and extensive.¹⁰

The books in the New Testament were all written between 50 - 95 A.D. The early Christians recognized that only certain books had divine authority. These books were considered to be inspired by God and to be the final standard for Christianity. To be in the New Testament they met three key criteria: 1) they had apostolic authors (or writers closely associated with apostles), 2) they taught the orthodox faith of the apostles, and 3) they had been widely accepted in the churches from their earliest beginnings.¹¹ We can have confidence that they have come to us substantially as they were originally written because of two additional means: (4) the ancient manuscripts from the earliest times (which have been preserved), and (5) the quotations of the New Testament which are found in the writings of the church fathers (those who lived in the period immediately after the originals were written).¹²

Most people do not know the basis by which books made it into the New Testament, but the three criteria listed above have forever established which books belong in the New Testament and which books do not. Because these three criteria were established for all time in ancient Christianity, there is no chance that more books will ever be added to the New Testament. The scholar F.F. Bruce, in his book *The Canon of Scripture*, discusses the background material on this point at length.¹³ Lets now turn to the two sources which show us that the manuscripts of the Bible have not been materially altered.

1. Ancient Manuscripts.

All the books of the Bible were written and then copied by hand. The number of ancient copies of the New Testament text is dramatic. We have fragments and copies of the scriptures that go back very close to the time of the originals. For example, recently a fragment of the gospel of John was uncovered that has been positively dated on scholarly grounds around 130 A.D. (about forty years after the original was written).¹⁴ Another significant set of manuscripts called the Chester Beatty Papyri have also been discovered, and they contain a much larger number of New Testament passages. These manuscripts are dated at 155 A.D. And then these recent discoveries were supplemented by the discovery of the Bodmer Papyri II, dated at 200 A.D.

These are just a few examples of the great abundance of ancient manuscripts in existence and available to be examined, all dated from ancient times. In fact, there are over 24,000 complete or partial copies of the entire New Testament. The complete copies include Codex Sinaiticus, dated at 350 A.D. (discovered in the 1840s), Codex Vaticanus, dated at 350 A.D., and Codex Ephraemi, dated 400 A.D.

Compare the manuscript evidence for the New Testament with other ancient books below.

Work Written	When	Earliest Copy	Time Lapse	Number of Ancient Copies
Herodotus	488-428 B.C.	A.D. 900	1,300 years	8
Thucydides	460-400 B.C.	A.D. 900	1,300 years	8
Aristotle	384-322 B.C.	A.D. 1100	1,400 years	49
Caesar	58-50 B.C.	A.D. 900	950 years	10
Tacitus	A.D. 100	A.D. 1100	1,000 years	20

Livy	A.D. 17	A.D. 900	900 years	20
The New Testament	A.D. 50-95	A.D. 130	35 years	24,300

The New Testament has far more support for its authenticity than other books from the ancient world. Though hand copied manuscripts contain minor textual variations, we can know that the New Testament we have today is an accurate reflection of the earliest ancient text. By comparing existing copies of the Bible with these old manuscripts, scholars and experts affirm that the textual variations do not materially affect any significant teaching in the Bible.¹⁵

Some people might erroneously think that minor textual variations are a significant fact. The minor variations are things like a change in the order of words (from “Jesus Christ” to “Christ Jesus”), dropping a word (from Jesus Christ to Christ), or “spelling something in a slightly different way (like English variations of “Smith” and “Smythe”). All the important variations are listed in the footnotes of the major modern Bible translations; no one tries to hide them because they do not have a significant impact. They change no major teaching.

2. The Early Christian writers.

The historical facts and writings of the earliest Christian leaders support the reliability of the Bible. These writings came from church leaders (outside the Bible) who wrote about the Christian faith in the period immediately following the apostles, and in one case, when a book of the New Testament was actually being written (Revelation). The men who wrote these books are known as the “Church Fathers.” Their works were produced between 90 A.D. and 160 A.D. (and later) and they quote from most of the books of the New Testament.¹⁶

Some Church Fathers, such as Ignatius (115 A.D.) and the Didache (125 A.D.), describe the beliefs and practices of the early church in great detail. The earliest church fathers were very familiar with the New Testament, and they provide a rich information source by which modern scholars can compare the modern Bible with the ancient Greek text and confirm its accuracy. By reviewing these writings, the historical accuracy and authenticity of the Bible manuscripts have been firmly established.¹⁷

With so many ancient sources and manuscripts of this sort in existence, scholars have been careful to compare manuscripts to make sure that no significant changes have crept into the text of the modern Bible. Few of us can speak authoritatively on this topic, but Princeton's Bruce Metzger can. His authority in this regard is second to none.

Review what he has to say about the reliability of the New Testament manuscripts:

There are no doctrines in the church which are in jeopardy because of variants . . . the variations, when they occur, tend to be minor rather than substantive . . . We can have great confidence in the fidelity with which this material has come down to us, especially compared with any other ancient literary work.¹⁸

This is why informed Christians can turn to their Bibles with confidence, knowing that it is a reliable representation of the original New Testament documents. Our second line of evidence shows us that God has guided the transmission of the Bible. God has safeguarded the truth about Jesus Christ and the way of salvation.

Ancient History Backs the Bible

The Bible did not just drop out of the sky. It was written by real people, who lived in real places, and who experienced things in real history. In ancient writings, many non-Christians describe the same people, places, and things. Consider some of the following statements by Roman writers and historians. These are the oldest statements from outside the Bible about Jesus Christ and Christianity. They support what the Bible teaches.

Josephus was a Jewish man who wrote a history of the Jews for the Romans. He says the following about Jesus, when he wrote in 90 A.D.

"Now, there was about this time Jesus, a wise man, if it be lawful to call him a man. For he was a doer of surprising feats - a teacher of such men as receive the truth with pleasure. He drew over to him both many of the Jews and many of the Gentiles. He was [the] Christ; and when Pilate, at the suggestion of the principal men amongst us, had condemned him to the cross, those that loved him at the first did not forsake him, for he appeared to them alive again the third day, as the divine prophets had foretold these and ten thousand other wonderful things concerning him; and the tribe of Christians, so named from him, are not extinct to this day." Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews* 18.3.3.

Pliny was a Roman Governor in Bythinia (modern Turkey). He records one of the first and most extensive pieces of correspondence by a non-Christian about Christians. Many New Testament books were written to Christians in the area of

Bythinia, just a few years before he writes these words. His description of Christians perfectly matches what the Bible says (see for example, 1 Peter). It was written in 112 A.D.

Christians were "meeting on a certain fixed day before it was light, when they sang in alternate verse a hymn to Christ as to a god, and bound themselves to a solemn oath, not to do wicked deeds, never commit fraud, theft, adultery, not to lie nor to deny a trust. . . "
Pliny the Younger, *Epistles X96*.

In 117 AD, the Roman historian Tacitus wrote in his *Annals* (Book 15, chapter 44). He said the following about Christians. It matches perfectly with what we find in books like the Gospel of Mark.

"Nero looked around for a scapegoat, and inflicted the most fiendish tortures on a group of persons already hated for their crimes. This was the sect known as Christians. Their founder, one Christus, had been put to death by the procurator, Pontius Pilate in the reign of Tiberius. This checked the abominable superstition for a while, but it broke out again and spread, not merely through Judea, where it originated, but even to Rome itself, the great reservoir and collecting ground for every kind of depravity and filth. Those who confessed to being Christians were at once arrested..

Suetonius was another Roman historian. He again describes events that back up the general teachings of the Bible.

"Because the Jews at Rome caused constant disturbances at the instigation of Chrestus [Christ], he [Claudius] expelled them from the city [Rome]." Suetonius, *Life of Claudius*.

"Nero inflicted punishment on the Christians, a sect given to a new and mischievous religious belief." Suetonius, *Life of Claudius*.

These quotes show how ancient non-Christians looked at Christianity. Many more statements like these exist.

In a sense, each of the statements is interesting in its own right. Through research of ancient writings, we find independent confirmation about many of the things recorded in the New Testament. The historical support is surprising. In fact, Jeffery Sheler, for many years a respected journalist for *U.S. News and World Report*, recently wrote a book about the objective evidence for the Bible from history. The book is entitled, *Is the Bible True? How Modern Debates and Discoveries Confirm the Essence of the Scriptures*.¹⁹ He reviews not just the New Testament, but also the entire Bible to show how the evidence from the ancient world supports what the Bible teaches.

Lee Strobel, an agnostic and a prize winning, investigative reporter for the *Chicago Tribune*, decided to use his investigative abilities to see if the Bible was true. After months of research, he came to the conclusion that the Bible was accurate and he committed his life to Jesus Christ. He has recently published a book, which shows the compelling case for Christianity based on the evidence for Jesus Christ. It is called, *The Case For Christ*.²⁰ These two books are the best popular books published recently which demonstrate the historical support for the trustworthiness of the Bible.

Archaeology Supports Our Belief In Jesus and The Bible

There are numerous archaeological discoveries that support the New Testament and the Bible. Let us look at just four examples of the thousands of archaeological discoveries from recent times that support the historical accuracy of the Bible.

1. The Pontius Pilate Inscription.

According to the Bible, Pontius Pilate was the Roman government leader who was responsible for the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. Historians knew that Pontius Pilate was a real historical figure from things that were written by ancient historians. But in 1961 they found unexpected confirmation of what the Bible taught when they found the “Pilate Inscription.” This inscription is from the right place, the right time, and it describes Pilate in just the right way. By doing so, it clarifies the title that he bore as governor²¹ and confirms what the Bible says about him.²²

2. The Erastus Inscription

At the end of the book of Romans, the apostle Paul makes the following mention of a man who lived in the ancient city of Corinth: “Erastus, who is the city's director of public works, and our brother Quartus send you their greetings” (Romans 16: 23). Paul wrote the book of Romans from Corinth. His description of Erastus, as the city's “director of public works” utilizes very specific words in Greek. A few years ago, archaeologists discovered an inscription on grey limestone from the ancient city of Corinth. It refers to Erastus. The pavement, as archaeologists found out, was laid around

50 A.D., the time Erastus would have been converted. Erastus is an uncommon name, unknown from any other source in Corinth. The words on the inscription perfectly match the ones used in the Bible. As archaeologist John McCray puts it: “this Erastus was identified as none other than the city treasurer mentioned by Paul in Romans.”²³ It is an unexpected, but important confirmation of biblical truth from an otherwise obscure Bible passage.

3. A Crucified Man From Palestine.

We know from ancient writings that crucifixion was a common practice and that it generally fits what the Bible describes. Yet, at the same time, details about crucifixion were open to question. Then in 1968 archaeologists found bones of a man crucified from the time of Jesus exactly as the Bible described Jesus’ crucifixion.²⁴ This man even had his legs broken at the time of the crucifixion. This confirms what the Romans did to those who were crucified with Jesus and what the Romans intended to do to Jesus, if it wasn’t for the fact that he had already died (John 19:31-33).

4. The High Priest’s Coffin.

The Bible names and describes the Jewish leader under whom Jesus was crucified. He was the high priest, Caiaphas. The Bible describes how Jesus was beaten in front of him and then how he condemned him, by sending him to the Romans (Matt. 26: 3; John 18:13-28). In 1990 a dump truck accidentally pushed into an ancient tomb, while doing construction in Jerusalem. The tomb had been covered over for many centuries and had been lost to history. Inside, archaeologists found many ancient coffins. One coffin from the first century belonged to a high priest. Scientists examined the bones, and determined that they were those of a sixty-year-old man, believed to be those of Caiaphas, the Jewish high priest who condemned Jesus.²⁵

By these discoveries, many of the people and events described in the Bible are confirmed. And please remember, these are just four samples of the many archaeological discoveries that confirm what the Bible teaches. Entire books have been written on this topic.²⁶

Old Testament Prophecy

The earliest Christians did not see themselves as starting a new religion. Instead, they saw themselves as clarifying the real meaning of the first part of the Bible, the Old Testament.²⁷ The first Christians were simply Jews who believed that Jesus fulfilled the Old Testament. The fulfillment of prophecy is a complex subject, but the implications are astounding.²⁸

We now have manuscripts with these prophecies which pre-date Jesus Christ by hundreds of years. The prophecies are very specific and there is no way someone could manipulate them after the fact.²⁹ Because of time constraints we will focus upon one clear and stunning example.

Up to the end of World War Two, the oldest known complete manuscript of the Hebrew Old Testament was dated at 900 A.D.³⁰ This meant that there was a significant gap between the time when the Old Testament was written and the oldest Hebrew manuscripts which were available for scholarly study. None of the manuscripts could be said to undeniably pre-date Jesus. Some people suspected the texts predicting his coming might have been corrupted or changed.

No one could have anticipated the great discoveries of the Dead Sea scrolls at Qumran (near the Dead Sea in modern Israel) at the end of World War Two. A Bedouin shepherd boy stumbled onto jars of ancient manuscripts in a group of long abandoned caves.³¹ Many of the manuscripts that he found *were older than the oldest manuscripts previously known by over 1,000 years and many of them were written down hundreds of years before Jesus.*³² Scholars knew that great care was taken to ensure the preservation of the Old Testament text in as pure a form as possible. But it still came as a pleasant surprise to see the net result of the tremendous care that had been exercised over this thousand-year period.³³ Though there were some minor variations (like those discussed earlier), the major doctrines and important teachings of the Old Testament were not distorted or changed in any way.³⁴ As Old Testament scholar R.K. Harrison put it, “it is nothing short of miraculous that so few mistakes were made in the transmission of the text.”³⁵ One of the treasures found at Qumran – with numerous prophecies about Jesus – is a complete, well-preserved copy of the book of Isaiah. On scientific grounds it is dated at least 150 years before Christ.³⁶

Carefully read one of the prophecies about Jesus from this ancient book. Remember, we have a copy of this text at least one hundred and fifty years before a man

named Jesus of Nazareth was born (that makes it one hundred and eighty years before he died).³⁷ This passage explicitly predicts how the Messiah will die. It is taken from Isaiah 53:1-12.

He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him. He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering. Like one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not. Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows, yet we considered him stricken by God, smitten by him, and afflicted.

But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed. We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all.

He was oppressed and afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; he was led like a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth. By oppression and judgment he was taken away. And who can speak of his descendants? For he was cut off from the land of the living; for the transgression of my people he was stricken.

He was assigned a grave with the wicked, and with the rich in his death, though he had done no violence, nor was any deceit in his mouth. Yet it was the Lord's will to crush him and cause him to suffer, and though the LORD makes his life a guilt offering, he will see his offspring and prolong his days, and the will of the LORD will prosper in his hand.

After the suffering of his soul, he will see the light of life and be satisfied; by his knowledge my righteous servant will justify many, and he will bear their iniquities. Therefore I will give him a portion among the great, and he will divide the spoils with the strong, because he poured out his life unto death, and was numbered with the transgressors. For he bore the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors.

From the beginning, Christians knew that Jesus fulfilled this prophecy (Acts 8:36ff).

What are most amazing are the elements which were fulfilled by Jesus, but which were beyond his control or the control of his disciples. For example, it describes his arrest and trial (he committed no violence or deceit), it states that he had no descendants (childless), and exactly where he would be buried (assigned a grave with the wicked, yet ending up with the rich). And in the midst of all these details (among others), it tells us that he will take unto himself the sins of other human beings.

Even a non-Christian Jewish scholar stated, "I fully agree . . . Isaiah 53 lends itself in many startling similarities to the life, career, and death of Jesus of Nazareth."³⁸

Lee Strobel describes the conversion of Louis S. Lapidès, a man who grew up in a strong

Jewish home and felt like he had to satisfactorily explain Isaiah 53 to himself. Strobel describes his struggle:³⁹

Instantly Lapidés recognized the portrait: this was Jesus of Nazareth . . . So breath taking was this discovery that Lapidés could only come to one conclusion: it was a fraud! He believed that Christians had rewritten the Old Testament and twisted Isaiah's words to make it sound as if the prophet had been foreshadowing Jesus. Lapidés set out to expose the deception. "I asked my stepmother to send me a Jewish Bible so I could check it out myself," he told me. "She did, and guess what? I found that it said the same thing! Now I really had to deal with it."

Strobel went on to describe how the fulfillment of this prophecy and numerous other prophecies convinced Lapidés Jesus was whom the New Testament said he was. Lapidés not only became a committed Christian, but a Bible scholar as well.

Hundreds of predictions about the future appear in the Bible. For the purpose of our study, we have focused upon just one.

The Lives of Christ's First Followers

The last of our lines of evidence relates to the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The historical evidence on this point is very strong and has been presented in both scholarly and public contexts by philosopher and New Testament scholar, William Lane Craig (and others).⁴⁰ The arguments are highly technical, but persuasive.⁴¹ For the purposes of our survey, we will only touch on some of the practical aspects of the evidence.

Even the harshest critic of the New Testament cannot explain three things:

- If Jesus Christ did not rise from the dead (as critics contend), what else satisfactorily explains the start of the church?
- What else explains the early Christian religious practices?
- If Jesus Christ did not rise from the dead, why did the earliest Christians live such selfless lives as they sought to imitate him? They were willing to die for their faith.

The evidence for the truth of Christianity is strong on these three points.

When it comes to the historical evidence for the resurrection of Jesus, we must rely on the testimony of those who saw him die and later rise from the dead (people like his apostles) and evidence that strongly confirms their testimony.

The first and most difficult consequence for critics to explain is the existence of the church. The early church thrived in the city of Jerusalem, just after Jesus was crucified and rose from the dead. These people knew the evidence the best. Not only did the church start in Jerusalem, but also shortly afterward, 3,000 people joined it in one day (Acts 2). Then the number grew to 5,000 men, including many of the Jewish leaders who knew the evidence on a first hand basis (Acts 4:4). And all the while, the leaders of the church kept reminding people they should check out the evidence for the resurrection themselves because it was publicly known, it did not happen “in a corner” (Acts 26:26).

The resurrection is the singular most important belief that resulted in the church. Those who came together to form the church believed that Jesus rose from the dead and, as a consequence, all of his teachings were validated. They were so convinced of the authenticity of Jesus that history records their willingness to lose previous religious affiliations, friends, family, and even their lives to follow him.⁴²

Many people over the centuries have tried to come up with other explanations for the start of Christianity, but none of them have ever persuaded many people. It is like trying to explain the results of an explosion by taking the position that “nothing blew up.” It is hard to come up with an alternative explanation that can do justice to the evidence behind the rapid explosion of Christianity.

The resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead is also the best explanation for the following practices that were immediately adopted by the earliest believers:

1. *Sunday Meetings* - the earliest believers changed the day of meeting from Saturday to Sunday, because that was the day Christ rose from the dead. The price they paid to make this change was very high; they became heretics in the eyes of the Jewish people.

2. *Baptism* – entry into the Christian life was by baptism in the early church (Acts 2:38). Baptism was an immersion (submersion) into water, where the convert re-enacted the burial and resurrection of Christ by being buried in water, having his or her sins washed away, and then a “rising to a new life.” This practice and belief is in the earliest historical strata of Christianity and is difficult to explain unless it points to what the earliest members of the church really believed about Jesus.

3. *Communion* – a center of the earliest Christian meetings was a memorial to the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ called “the Lord’s Supper” or “communion.” The believers ate bread to represent Jesus’ body and drank wine to represent Jesus’ blood. Why did they experience so much joy in this memorial, unless it was a reminder to them that he had died for their sins and been raised from the dead?

This circumstantial evidence, interestingly enough, is considered to be very strong, even by the critics of the New Testament.⁴³

There is one more piece of strong evidence: the lives of the earliest Christians. Those closest to Jesus went on, after his death, burial, and resurrection, to live self-less, sacrificial lives. They were changed people. And they attributed the change to Jesus' life and resurrection. They earnestly pointed to Jesus and served other people, especially the poor and downtrodden (Acts 4:32; 6:1-6; Galatians 2:10). They would rather die than give up on their belief in the resurrection and commitment to follow Jesus.

The moral character of the early Christians ties in with their willingness to die for their faith. It is hard to argue with integrity, honesty, love, service, and sacrifices that characterized their lives.⁴⁴ Such selfless acts either point to something beyond what humans know in this world or they are, in a sense, delusional. There is a real sense in which every one of us wants to live as they lived, but we can't find the power within ourselves to do it. Were their changed lives based on a delusion? Or did they find a special direction and power for their lives from Jesus and his resurrection? There are Christians who believe his truth and power are still at work today.

But some may say that zealous beliefs can be very misguided, even though they are genuine. The circumstantial evidence about the lives of early Christians is not just about the sincerity of the early Christians. Unlike suicide bombers who believe in the *Koran* today without personal knowledge of Muhammad or the events described, the earliest Christians personally knew Jesus and the evidence for the resurrection. They had close knowledge of Jesus, were people of high integrity, and yet were willing to die rather than say the Resurrection did not happen. This combination provides strong circumstantial evidence. When combined with the other lines of evidence that we have been studying, it is highly persuasive. It is easy to believe that only something like the resurrection explains early Christianity.

I began this chapter with a story about a major water leak in a trucking company's office many years ago. We suddenly realized that we had to pay more attention to the condition of our building because of all the leaks that day. In a like manner, I hope that the lines of evidence presented this week have caught your attention. If the first section helped you to take God's existence seriously, then I hope that this section will cause you to take the Bible seriously.

John Wesley –a great Christian leader from the late 1700s - captured the essence of what it means for a Christian to trust the Bible. He believed that the Bible was given (by God) as the path for our salvation and the Christian life. He left us with the following words:

I am a creature of a day, passing through life as an arrow through the air. I am a spirit, coming from God, and returning to God; just hovering over the great gulf; a few months hence I am not more seen; I drop into an unchangeable eternity! I want to know one thing –the way to heaven . . . God Himself has condescended to teach the way. He hath written it down in a book. O give me that Book! At any price, give me the book of God.⁴⁵

¹ See Craig Blomberg, *The Historical Reliability of the Gospels* (Downers Grove, Ill; InterVarsity, 1987); Paul Barnett, *Jesus and the Logic of History* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997); Ben Witherington, *The Jesus Quest* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1995); Philip Jenkins, *Hidden Gospels: How The Search For Jesus Lost Its Way* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), and Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Real Jesus* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996). For excellent popular surveys, see Lee Strobel, *The Case For Christ* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1998) and .

² For the intellectual legitimacy of this approach, see William P. Alston, *Perceiving God: The Epistemology of Religious Experience* (Cornell University Press, 1993).

³ See R.C. Sproul, *The Holiness of God* (Wheaton, Illinois: Tyndale House Publishers, 1985), pp. 91-92.

⁴ Ed Stetzer, "New study shows what public believes about *The Da Vinci Code*," May 12, 2006. See <http://www.namb.net/>

⁵ "Da Vinci Code Confirms Rather Than Changes People's Religious Views," May 15, 2006 Barna Report. See www.barna.org.

⁶ Daniel Brown, *The Da Vinci Code* (New York: Double Day, 2003), p. 1.

⁷ Ben Witherington, *The Gospel Code: Novel Claims About Jesus, Mary, and Da Vinci* (Downer Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2004), p. 18.

⁸ Lee Strobel and Gary Pool, *Exploring the Da Vinci Code : Investigating the Issues Raised by the Book and Movie* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2006), Hank Hannegraaf and Paul Maier, *The Da Vinci Code: Fact or Fiction* (Tyndale House, 2004), Darryl Bock, *Breaking the Da Vinci Code : Answers to the Questions Everyone's Asking* (Nashville, Tn; Nelson Books, New Edition, 2006), Ben Witherington, *The Gospel Code: Novel Claims About Jesus, Mary, and Da Vinci* (Downer Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2004), James Garlow and Peter Jones, *Cracking Da Vinci's Code* (Colorado Springs, Colorado: Victor Books, 2004),

⁹ Walter Kaiser, *The Old Testament Documents: Are They Reliable and Relevant* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: InterVarsity Press, 2001).

¹⁰ The New Testament text which we have today (as will be shown) is a reliable representation of the original text from the late first century. A handful of radical leftist scholars (The Jesus Seminar), often presenting themselves as "mainstream scholarship," have raised questions about the historical reliability of the events referred to by the writers of the New Testament texts. These questions have been answered by other mainstream scholars. See Craig Blomberg, *The Historical Reliability of the Gospels* (Downers Grove, Ill; InterVarsity, 1987); Paul Barnett, *Jesus and the Logic of History* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997); and Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Real Jesus* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996). For an excellent popular survey, see Lee Strobel, *The Case For Christ* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1998).

¹¹ To the chagrin of the radicals, The Gnostic gospels, for example, were never accepted by the church and never will be accepted because they were written after the writings of the apostles, they never taught the apostolic faith of the apostles, and they were never widely accepted in the churches from the beginning. They have always been regarded as heretical. See the important works of Ben Witherington, *The Jesus Quest* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1995), and Philip Jenkins, *Hidden Gospels: How The Search For Jesus Lost Its Way* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001).

¹² The standard textbook on this topic is Bruce M. Metzger's, *The Text of the New Testament* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968).

¹³ See F. F. Bruce, *The Canon of Scripture* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1988), and Bruce M. Metzger, *The Canon of the New Testament* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987).

¹⁴ I am indebted for much of this material to F. F. Bruce, *The New Testament Documents: Are They Reliable*, pp. 10–20.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ See Stephen Neill, *The Interpretation of the New Testament 1861 – 1961* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1963) for more information on the reliability of the apostolic fathers.

¹⁷ Stephen Neill, *The Interpretation of the New Testament: 1861-1961*, pp 53-55.

¹⁸ Quoted in Lee Strobel, *The Case For Christ* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1998). F.F. Bruce, *The New Testament Documents: Are They Reliable*, pp. 19, 20 says something very similar to Metzger: ... "the margin of doubt left in the process of recovering the exact original wording is not so large as might be feared; it is in truth remarkably small. The variant readings about which any doubt remains among textual critics of the New Testament affect no material question of historic fact or of Christian faith and practice."

¹⁹ Jeffery Sheler, *Is the Bible True? How Modern Debates and Discoveries Confirm the Essence of the Scriptures* (2000).

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- ²⁰ Lee Strobel, *The Case For Christ* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1998).
- ²¹ Keith Schoville, "Top Ten Major Archaeological Discoveries of the Twentieth Century Relating to the Biblical World," *Stone-Campbell Journal* 4 (Spring, 2001): 22.
- ²² John McRay, *Archaeology and the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1991), p. 204.
- ²³ *Ibid.*, p. 331.
- ²⁴ McRay, *Archaeology*, p. 204.
- ²⁵ Ronny Reich, "Caiaphas' Name Inscribed on Bone Boxes," *Biblical Archaeology Review* 18.5 (Sept./Oct., 1992): 38-44.
- ²⁶ See John McRay, *Archaeology and the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1991).
- ²⁷ John Ankerberg, John Weldon, and Walter Kaiser, Jr., *The Case For Jesus The Messiah* (Eugene, Oregon: Harvest House, 1989).
- ²⁸ See Hans K. LaRondelle, *The Israel of God In Prophecy* (Berrien Springs, Michigan: Andrews University Press, 1983) for an introduction to typology, the most dominant means of understanding the fulfillment of prophecy.
- ²⁹ See Walter Kaiser, Jr. *The Messiah of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing, 1995).
- ³⁰ Harrison, *Introduction To The Old Testament*, p. 216.
- ³¹ Gleason L. Archer, Jr. *A Survey of Old Testament Introduction* (Chicago: Moody Bible Institute, 1974), has more information on the dates, composition, etc.
- ³² All the Dead Sea Scrolls have not yet been thoroughly reviewed and discussed by scholars. Some of the manuscripts of the Old Testament may date as far back as 300+ B.C. See the more recent editions of *Biblical Archaeology Review* for the latest and most up to date information on the Dead Sea Scrolls.
- ³³ In his book, *The Text of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1979; Translated from *Der Text Des Alten Testaments*, 1973), p. 19, Ernest Wurthwein states the following about the care exercised in the transmission of the Hebrew Text from the time of Qumran onward:
- From this time onward the transmission of the text was to be governed by strict regulations. No pains were spared in preventing errors from entering the sacred text, or in discovering and eliminating them if they should creep in. . . . This was the purpose of the scribe's meticulous work. They counted verses, words, and letters of the Law and other parts of the Scriptures as a procedural aid in preparing manuscripts and in checking their accuracy.*
- ³⁴ Gleason L. Archer, Jr. *A Survey of Old Testament Introduction* (Chicago: Moody Bible Institute, 1974).
- ³⁵ Harrison, *Introduction To The Old Testament*, p. 255.
- ³⁶ See Ernest Wurthwein, *The Text of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1979; Translated from *Der Text Des Alten Testaments*, 1973) and Gleason L. Archer, Jr. *A Survey of Old Testament Introduction* (Chicago: Moody Bible Institute, 1974).
- ³⁷ Like most conservative Bible students, I believe that this prophecy was written about 700 years in advance, but we can only prove that it existed 150 in advance, based upon manuscript evidence.
- ³⁸ Quoted in John Ankerberg, John Weldon, and Walter Kaiser, Jr., *The Case For Jesus The Messiah* (Eugene, Oregon: Harvest House, 1989), p. 60.
- ³⁹ Lee Strobel, *The Case For Christ* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1998), p. 241.
- ⁴⁰ See William Lane Craig, *Assessing the New Testament Evidence for the Historicity of the Resurrection of Jesus: Studies in the Bible and Early Christianity* (Edwin Millen Press, 1989), and *Jesus' Resurrection: Fact or Figment?: A Debate Between William Lane Craig and Gerd Ludemann* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: InterVarsity Press, 2001).
- ⁴¹ *Ibid.*
- ⁴² Josh McDowell describes this information in detail. See *More Than A Carpenter* (.....).
- ⁴³ Josh McDowell does a very good job presenting this evidence in his book, *The Resurrection Factor* (San Bernardino, California: Heres Life Publishers, 1981). See also I. Howard Marshall, *I Believe in the Historical Jesus* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1977).

⁴⁴ Everett Ferguson, *The Early Christians Speak* (Abilene, Texas: ACU Press, reprint 1994).

⁴⁵ Quoted in Michael Green, *Illustrations for Biblical Preaching* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1989), p. 36.