

# The Bible: Is it Reliable?

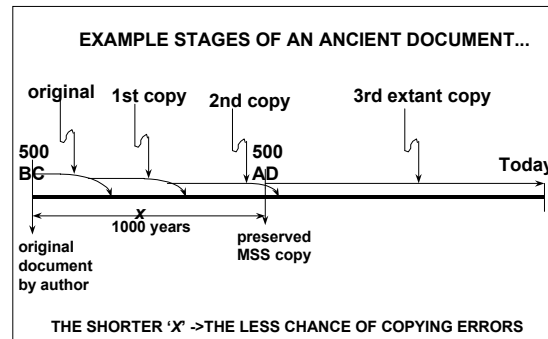


## Taking a Closer Look at the Book

“Why should I even consider the Bible? It was written so long ago, has had so many translations and revisions done to it - it is most likely that its original message has been altered and misunderstood over the course of time.” The young man who asked me this question was intent, wondering if there was any reasonable answer to his skeptical outlook about the Bible.

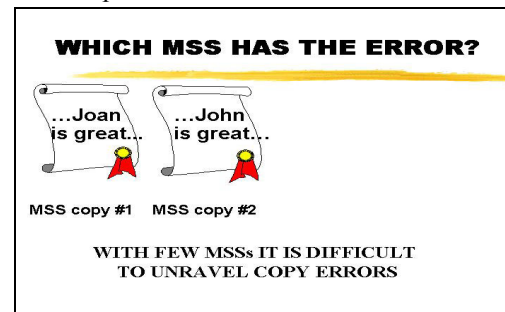
The question my inquirer was asking is fairly straightforward – many of us ask it, and rightly so! It stems from what we know about the Bible. After all, it was written two thousand plus years ago. For most of these millennia there has been no printing press, photocopy machines or publishing companies. So the original manuscripts were copied by hand, generation after generation, as languages died out and new ones arose, as empires crumbled and new powers ascended. Since the original manuscripts have long been lost, how do we know that what we read today in the Bible is what the original authors actually wrote long ago? As my resolute friend pointed out to me, many young kids often play a game called *telephone*, wherein a message is whispered into someone’s ear, and (s)he in turn whispers this message into the next person’s ear until the message has traversed all participants in the game. Then the last person says the message out loud and all participants note how it has changed so much from its start at the beginning of the human chain. Can this game be comparable to the passing of the Bible through time, so that what we read today may be substantially different from the original writings?

Naturally this question is true of any ancient writing. This figure illustrates the process by which any such writing has been preserved over time. This simplified diagram shows an example of an ancient document written at 500 BC. This original



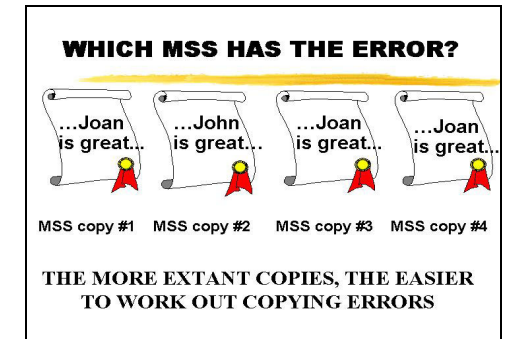
however does not last indefinitely, so before it decays, is lost, or destroyed, a manuscript (MSS) copy of it is made (*1<sup>st</sup> copy*). A professional class of people called *scribes* did the copying work. As the years advance, copies are made of the copy (*2<sup>nd</sup> copy & 3<sup>rd</sup> copy*). At some point a copy is preserved so that it is in existence (extant) today (*3<sup>rd</sup> copy*). In our example diagram this extant copy was made in 500 AD. This means that the earliest that we can know of the state of the document is only from 500 AD onwards. Consequently the period from 500 BC to 500 AD (labeled *x* in the diagram) is the period where we cannot make any copy verifications since all manuscripts from this period have disappeared. For example, if copying errors (intentional or otherwise) were made when the *2<sup>nd</sup> copy* was made from the *1<sup>st</sup> copy*, we would not be able to detect them as neither of these documents are available to compare against each other. This time period predating the origin of currently existing copies (the period *x*) is thus the interval of textual uncertainty. Consequently, a principle we can formulate to help answer our question is that the shorter this interval *x* is the more confidence we can place in the accurate preservation of the document to our modern day, since the period of uncertainty is reduced.

Of course, usually more than one manuscript copy of a document is in existence today. Suppose we have two such manuscript copies and in the same section of each of them we find the following translated phrase:



The original author had either been writing about *Joan* OR about *John*, and the other of these manuscripts contains a copy error. The question is -Which one has the error? From the available evidence it is very difficult to determine.

Now suppose we found two more manuscript copies of the same work, as shown below:



Now it is easier to deduce which manuscript probably has the error. It is more likely that the error is made once, rather than the same error repeated three times, so it is likely that MSS #2 has the copy error, and the author was writing about *Joan*, not *John*.

This simple example illustrates a second principle we can use to verify manuscript integrity - The more existing manuscripts that are available, the easier it is to detect & correct errors and to ascertain the content of the original.

So now we have two indicators that we can use to determine the textual reliability of the Bible: 1) measuring the time between original composition and earliest existing manuscript copies, and 2) counting the number of existing manuscript copies. Since these indicators pertain to any ancient writing we can proceed to apply them to both the Bible as well as other

works of antiquity, as done in the tables below (1).

Author	When Written	Earliest Copy	Time Span	#
Caesar	50 BC	900 AD	950	10
Plato	350 BC	900 AD	1250	7
Aristotle*	300 BC	1100 AD	1400	5
Thucydides	400 BC	900 AD	1300	8
Herodotus	400 BC	900 AD	1300	8
Sophocles	400 BC	1000 AD	1400	100
Tacitus	100 AD	1100 AD	1000	20
Pliny	100 AD	850 AD	750	7

\* from any one work

These writers represent the major classical writers of antiquity – the writings that have shaped the development of Western civilization. On average, they have been passed down to us by 10-100 manuscripts that are preserved starting only about 1000 years after the original was written.

The following table compares the Biblical (New Testament in particular) writings along these same points of interest (1).

MSS	When Written	Date of MSS	Time Span
John Rylan	90 AD	130 AD	40 yrs
Bodmer Papyrus	90 AD	150-200 AD	110 yrs
Chester * Beatty	60 AD	80 AD	20 yrs
Codex Vaticanus	60-90 AD	325 AD	265 yrs
Codex Sinaiticus	60-90 AD	350 AD	290 yrs

\* Traditionally dated at 200AD, new scholarship dates it at 80 AD (2)

The number of New Testament manuscripts is so vast that it would be impossible to list them all in a table. As one scholar (3) who spent years studying this issue states:

“We have more than 24000 MSS copies of portions of the New Testament in existence today... No other document of antiquity even begins to approach such numbers and attestation. In comparison, the ILIAD by Homer is second with 643 MSS that still survive”

A leading scholar at the British Museum (4) corroborates this:

“Scholars are satisfied that they possess substantially the true text of the principal Greek and Roman writers ... yet our knowledge of their writings depends on a mere handful of MSS whereas the MSS of the N.T. are counted by ... thousands”

So what can we conclude from this? Certainly at least in what we can objectively measure (number of extant MSSs and time spans between original and earliest extant MSS) the New Testament is substantiated to a much higher degree than any other classical work of antiquity. The verdict to which the evidence pushes us is best summed up by the following quote (5):

“To be skeptical of the resultant text of the N.T. is to allow all of classical antiquity to slip into obscurity, for no other documents of the ancient period are as well attested bibliographically as the New Testament”

What he is saying is that to be consistent, if we decide to doubt the reliability of the preservation of the Bible we may as well discard all that we know about classical history in general – and this no informed historian has ever done. We know that the Biblical texts have not been altered as eras,

languages and empires have come and gone since the earliest extant MSSs pre-date these events. For example, we know that no overly zealous medieval monk added in the miracles of Jesus to the Biblical account, since we have manuscripts that pre-date the medieval monks and all these pre-dated manuscripts also contain the miraculous accounts of Jesus.

But what about the errors involved in translation, and the fact that there are so many different versions of the Bible today? Does this not show that it is impossible to accurately determine what the original authors actually wrote? Due to the vast classical literature that was written in Greek (original language of the New Testament), it has become possible to precisely translate the original thoughts and words of the original authors. In fact the different modern versions attest to this. For example, read the well-known verse John 3:16 in the three most common versions, and note the slight variance in wording, but consistency in idea and meaning:

“For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life” *New International Version*

“For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life” *King James Version*

“For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish, but have eternal life” *New American Standard Version*

You can see that there is no disagreement between the translations – they say exactly the same thing with only slightly different word usage.

To summarize, neither time nor translation has kept the original ideas and thoughts as expressed in the original Biblical manuscripts hidden from us. We can know that the Bible today accurately reads what the authors actually wrote.

It is important to realize what this little study does and does not show. It does not prove that the Bible is necessarily the Word of God, nor that it is even true. It can be argued (at least from the evidence presented here) that though the original ideas of the Biblical authors have been accurately conveyed to us today that does not prove or indicate that these original ideas are correct (or even that they are from God). True enough. But understanding the textual reliability of the Bible provides a start-point from which one can start seriously investigating the Bible to see if some of these other questions can also be answered, and to see what the theme of the Bible is. I hope that this pamphlet may encourage you to take a good look at the ‘Book’. Remember the saying - Don’t judge a book by its cover. You need to read it.

Questions? Comments? E-mail me at [ragnar@website.considerthegospel.org](mailto:ragnar@website.considerthegospel.org)  
Visit website at [www.considerthegospel.org](http://www.considerthegospel.org)

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1. Taken from McDowell, J. *Evidence That Demands a Verdict*. 1979. p. 42-48
2. Comfort, P.W. *The Origin of the Bible*, 1992. p. 193
3. McDowell, J. *Evidence That Demands a Verdict*. 1979. p. 40
4. Kenyon, F.G. (former director of British Museum) *Our Bible and the Ancient Manuscripts*. 1941 p.23
5. Montgomery, *History and Christianity*. 1971. p.29

