Questions regarding the reliability of the Bible abound. Can I trust the Bible as an accurate, historical document? Is the Bible a sacred book—a revelation from God—or just the invention of humanity?

In the modern era, many view the Bible as just another book among other sacred texts that have been created by humanity over a long history of religious obsession. In fact, some not only view the Bible as just another religious book, but often attack its historic reliability.

Much of the suspicion directed toward the Bible today finds its origin in the Enlightenment, a period of intellectual resurgence in Western culture that began around the end of the seventeenth century and continued to the beginning of the nineteenth century. During this period, German philosophy came into its own and brought with it a critical approach to understanding the text of the Bible. This new approach, called biblical criticism, suggested that the biblical text be read and understood in light of what academic studies could reveal from a historical, cultural, and literary perspective as opposed to a faith-based perspective. This in turn led to viewing the Bible as more of a product of a community of faith rather than a revelation from God.

Historically, challenges to the reliability of the Bible extend much further back than the Enlightenment, to the beginning years of the church itself. The apostle Peter addressed the trustworthiness of Scripture in his second letter where he reminded his readers that he did not follow “cleverly devised tales” in what he taught but was an eyewitness of the Father’s confirmation of Jesus and His teaching. Because of the Father’s statement, “This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well-pleased” (Matthew 3:17), Peter was confident in the “prophetic word”—God’s revelation to humanity—and encouraged his readers to pay attention to it “as a lamp shining in a dark place” (2 Peter 1:19). He closes the chapter
by saying, “no prophecy of Scripture comes from someone’s own interpretation. For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit” (2 Peter 1:20–21).

Peter’s perspective of Scripture is echoed in Paul’s description of the same in 2 Timothy 3:16 where he writes, “All Scripture is inspired by God.” The term translated inspired (theópneustos) literally means “God-breathed.” Paul goes on to say that all Scripture is “profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness.”

The terms Scripture and Bible can be used interchangeably. For Peter and Paul, the Bible is God’s Word to humanity and should be treated as such. But what do we mean when we use the terms Scripture and Bible?

What Is the Bible?

The Bible is an integrated story consisting of sixty-six books, written in three languages (Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek), by approximately forty authors from different walks of life over a period of about 1,500 years. Its contents cover events since the creation of the world up to the early years of the church. Each book uniquely contributes to the ongoing theme of God’s redemptive work in history to bring humanity back into a right relationship with Himself, ultimately through Jesus and His offer of salvation and reconciliation.

The first thirty-nine books of the Bible make up the Hebrew Scriptures, or what is commonly called the Old Testament. Jesus acknowledged these Scriptures as inspired in John 5:39 when He said to the religious leaders of His day, “You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; it is these that testify about me.” Within the Jewish mindset of the first century, reference to the Scriptures included the same thirty-nine books that make up our Old Testament today. Categorized into three major sections (the Law, the Prophets, and the Writings), these books constituted God’s revelation to Israel. In addition, Jesus also confirmed the historical accuracy of several people and events recorded in the Old Testament and cited virtually every part of it authoritatively.
For example, Jesus confirmed the reality of Adam and Eve (Matthew 19:4–5), Noah (Matthew 24:37–39), Abraham (John 8:56), Isaac and Jacob (Matthew 8:11), David (Matthew 12:1–3), Solomon (Matthew 6:29), the Queen of Sheba (Matthew 12:42), Elijah (Matthew 17:11), Elisha (Luke 4:27), Isaiah (Matthew 8:16–17), Zechariah (Luke 11:49–51), and Daniel (Matthew 24:15).

Jesus also confirmed several Old Testament events such as the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah in Matthew 10:14–15 and the fate of Lot’s wife in Luke 17:32; Moses giving the rite of circumcision in John 7:22 and his receiving of the Law of God in Matthew 8:4; and the reality of Jonah, a wayward prophet swallowed by a great fish in Matthew 12:38–41.

Other Evidence

The passages mentioned above demonstrate how the Bible presents itself as a reliable message from God. In addition to the Bible’s internal testimony about itself, however, there are other factors that affirm the reliability of the Bible. These include the Bible’s textual transmission, archaeological confirmation, and prophetic accuracy.

EVIDENCE FROM TEXTUAL TRANSMISSION

While it is true that the original autographs of the Bible are not in existence today, the textual transmission of the Bible (i.e., the survival of biblical manuscripts that have been copied through history) in comparison to other historical books gives credence to the claim that the text of the Bible we read today is, for all practical purposes, the same as that which constituted the original writings.

In Evidence That Demands a Verdict, Josh McDowell confesses that while researching to prove that the Bible is not historically accurate, he came to the following decision: “I finally concluded that not accepting the Bible must result from being either biased, prejudiced, or simply unread. As a result of my research, I realized that the best word to describe the Bible is the word unique.” McDowell goes on to demonstrate the uniqueness of the biblical manuscripts in how they exceed other historical documents of the same time period in terms of manuscript survival and the time-interval between the original writings and what remains in
circulation today. As for any piece of literature, the greater the number of surviving documents and the earlier the texts one has to the original document, the easier it is to reconstruct the original words and identify errors that have been introduced into the text. Let’s consider the Old and New Testaments separately.

### The Old Testament

Before 1947, the oldest surviving Hebrew manuscripts from the Old Testament were contained in the Masoretic Text that dated to AD 826. This collection of manuscripts is so important that even today English Bibles use the Masoretic Text for translating the Old Testament. In 1947, however, history changed when a Bedouin boy encountered a system of caves in the Qumran area that contained hundreds of clay jars filled with scrolls dating back to around 250 BC. These scrolls, which became known as the Dead Sea Scrolls, were mostly written in Hebrew and contained portions of all of the books of the Old Testament except Esther and Nehemiah. The discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls extended the reliability of the text of the Old Testament documents back about a thousand years. And when compared to the manuscripts that make up the Masoretic Text, they found the content of the Dead Sea Scrolls to be almost identical. Today the total number of surviving Old Testament scrolls numbers around 42,000. Dating even further back, in 1979 several silver scrolls were found in Jerusalem on which was written the text of Numbers 6:24–26. These scrolls were written in an ancient form of Hebrew (Paleo-Hebrew) and dated to around 625 BC. In these scrolls we find the personal name of God, YHWH, and a portion of the Torah that dates back to the time before the Babylonian captivity.

### The New Testament

Due to the high number of New Testament manuscripts that have survived and the number of scriptural quotations recorded by the early church fathers, the New Testament as a whole stands head and shoulders above any other early written (Western) literature. For example, the earliest known New Testament manuscript, dating back to around AD 125, is the John Rylands Papyrus called P52, which contains John 18:31–33 and 37–38. The total number of remaining manuscripts today that contain portions of the New Testament is between fifteen and twenty thousand, not including fragments in private collections. In comparison, the number of
surviving copies of such works as Homer’s *Iliad*, Caesar’s *Gallic Wars*, and Tacitus’ *Annals* pale in comparison.

Given that historians accept the accuracy of these secular works even though the originals do not exist today, why should the New Testament, with its enormous number of surviving documents, be rejected? Overall, the texts of the New Testament have a stellar transmission history compared to other texts that are viewed as reliable replicas of past writings.

**EVIDENCE FROM ARCHAEOLOGICAL CONFIRMATION**

During the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the study of archaeology greatly exploded. Many archaeologists during this time believed the Bible to be a historical document and used the study of archaeology to show that the events, people, and places mentioned in it were historically accurate. In the late twentieth century, a new generation of archaeologists emerged who operated under a different assumption. Many of them did not view the Bible as a historical document and began to interpret their findings differently. Today archaeologists from both groups working in the Holy Land are making some amazing discoveries that continue to support the biblical record.

One example is found in a reference made in Daniel 5:1–7 where Belshazzar promises to make the person who could interpret the handwriting on the wall the *third* highest in the kingdom. Many historians have attacked the book of Daniel for even saying that Belshazzar was king of Babylon when history shows that during this period Babylon was ruled by an individual named Nabonidus. However, with the discovery of the Nabonidus Cylinders found in Ur in AD 1854, it was discovered that Nabonidus had a son named Belshazzar, whom he made second in command over the kingdom since the king spent most of his time in Arabia. Thus, the reason Belshazzar promised to make the one who could interpret the handwriting on the wall *third* highest in the kingdom and not second was because he already held that position. The discovery of the Nabonidus Cylinders affirmed the accuracy of Daniel 5:1–7 in that Belshazzar was in fact ruler over Babylon and was able to grant the honor of third-highest in the kingdom to another.
Other archaeological discoveries that support the historical reliability of the Bible and shed light on the accuracy of the biblical record include:

- The discovery of carved reliefs in Assyria that affirmed the biblical account of the siege of Judah as recorded in Isaiah 36:1–2.
- The existence of Sargon II, another Assyrian leader (mentioned in Isaiah 20:1-6), who captured the northern kingdom of Israel in 722 BC. Though his name was not found outside the biblical record, in AD 1843, a ten-ton, fifteen-foot-tall statue of a winged bull with a human head attributed to Sargon II was unearthed with an inscription describing his conquest of the northern kingdom of Israel.
- The discovery of the foundation of the bema seat in the city of Corinth used to award athletes and judge those convicted of a crime. The existence of this seat confirmed the story of Paul in Acts 18:12–17 where he was brought before the leaders of the city to answer for his faith in Christ.

The study of archaeology confirms the accuracy of the biblical texts, both Old and New Testaments. And new discoveries supporting the people, places, and events of the Bible are being made all the time.

**EVIDENCE FROM PROPHETIC FULFILLMENT**

What is prophecy? Simply put, the term *prophecy* refers to a statement that foretells an event before it happens, and the Bible is the only book in history that has accurately and consistently foretold future events. While the textual transmission of the biblical manuscripts and ongoing archaeological discoveries speak to the historical reliability of the Bible, the fulfillment of biblical prophecy speaks to its inspiration as a work of literature given by God. In addition, fulfilled prophecy affirms the narrative tapestry that overlays the Old and New Testaments, a story that begins after creation in the garden of Eden and continues to the consummation of the ages in the book of Revelation. In fact, the story of the Bible cannot be told without the many prophetic pronouncements that look forward to what God promises or warns will happen.

In Genesis 3 we read of the fall of humanity that resulted from the
actions of Adam and Eve. At the urging of the serpent, Adam and Eve both ate of the fruit from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, which God specifically told them not to do. Before removing them from the garden, God pronounced three curses: one directed at Adam, one at Eve, and one at the serpent. The one directed at the serpent entailed that he would crawl upon the ground the rest of his life and that in the future an individual would arrive who would crush his head. With this promise, or prophecy, the grand story of the Bible regarding God’s redemption of humanity commenced. This future individual, or Messiah as He is also called, is prophesied about several times more in the Old Testament and ultimately finds fulfillment in the person of Jesus who came as Israel’s king and redeemer of the world.

In Genesis 12 the story continues with Abraham and God’s promise to make his name great, to give him a land, to make his descendants a nation, and to bless all people through him. In the twelve sons of Abraham’s grandson, Jacob, we begin to see the fulfillment of a nation forming, but God’s promise to bless all people through Abraham would not be realized until Jesus came with the offer of salvation through the giving of His life as a sacrifice for sin.

In Acts 3:24–25 the apostle Peter links the arrival of Jesus and His death to God’s promise to bless all peoples when he says to the Jews of his day, “And likewise, all the prophets who have spoken, from Samuel and his successors onward, also announced these days. It is you who are the sons of the prophets and of the covenant which God made with your fathers, saying to Abraham, ‘And in your seed all the families of the earth shall be blessed.’”

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In Deuteronomy 18 Moses also spoke of a future individual who would arise and to whom Israel was to listen. Here again Peter applies the fulfillment of Moses’ words to Jesus in Acts 3:22, “Moses said, ‘The LORD GOD will raise up for you a prophet like me from your brethren; to Him you shall give heed to everything He says to you.’”

The story of God’s redemption of humanity continues to unfold in the Old Testament when we come to David. After he assumes leadership as the second king of Israel, God promises to give him a descendant who will be an everlasting king and rule over an everlasting kingdom (2 Samuel 7:12–13). In the first chapter of Matthew, Jesus is linked to David as his descendant; and in Romans 1 Paul declares that in addition to being a descendant of

Evidence from Prophetic Fulfillment

- Genesis 3 (serpent’s head to be crushed) · Exodus 2:25
- Genesis 12:3 (to bless all nations through Abraham) · Acts 3:24–26
- Deuteronomy 18 (promise of a future prophet to come) · Acts 3:22
- 2 Samuel 7:12–13 (everlasting king and kingdom) · Luke 1:32–33
David in the flesh, He was also the Son of God. It is Luke, however, that directly links the prophecy of 2 Samuel 7 to Jesus. In Luke 1:31–33 he relates the conversation between the angel Gabriel and Mary: “And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall name Him Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High; and the Lord God will give to Him the throne of His father David; and He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and His kingdom will have no end.” Jesus, at His birth, began to fulfill the promises and prophecies concerning the Messiah and will reestablish the throne of David and set up an everlasting kingdom on earth at His return.

Several of Israel’s prophets also spoke of the coming Messiah who would save the people from their sin and reign over the kingdom of David. The prophet Isaiah, in Isaiah 7:14, spoke of one who would be born of a virgin and would assume the title Immanuel, meaning “God is with us.” In Isaiah 9:6–7 this same one would be given rulership and be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, and Prince of Peace. And in Isaiah 53 the prophet speaks of a suffering servant who would bear our griefs, carry our sorrows, be pierced for our transgression, be crushed for our sins, and upon whom the iniquity of us all would be laid.

The first and third of these prophecies proclaimed by Isaiah were fulfilled in Jesus according to Matthew and Peter. In Matthew 1:18–24, Matthew records the story of the birth of Jesus and says of Mary’s pregnancy that what was conceived in her was from the Holy Spirit and that it took place to fulfill what the Lord has spoken by the prophet. Matthew then goes on to quote Isaiah 7:14 saying a virgin would conceive and call the child’s name Immanuel.

In 1 Peter 2:22–24 Peter uses the language of Isaiah 53 and applies the description of the suffering servant to Jesus’ actions for us. Peter writes, “He [Jesus] Himself bore our sins in His body on the cross, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness; for by His wounds you were healed.”

The second prophecy mentioned by Isaiah in chapter 9, that the government would rest upon His shoulders, is yet to be fulfilled in a physical and political sense, but the prophet Zechariah speaks of a day when “living waters will flow out of Jerusalem” and “the LORD will be king over all the earth.”

Other Old Testament prophecies also speak of Israel’s future and of a coming Messiah. One of the most notable is the prophecy...
given to Daniel while in exile regarding seventy prophetic weeks, or seventy sevens of years, that were determined upon the people of Israel and the city of Jerusalem. In this prophecy Daniel is told that from the call to rebuild the city of Jerusalem, which occurred in 445/444 BC, to the cutting off of the Messiah would be 69 weeks, or 483 years. This places the fulfillment of the cutting off of the Messiah to the time Jesus would have been crucified.

Micah 5:2 foretold where the Redeemer would be born. A fact that the religious leaders during the time of Jesus’ birth knew, for when asked by Herod where the Messiah would be born, they answered in Matthew 2:5, “in Bethlehem of Judea, for this is what has been written by the prophet.”

Even in His life, ministry, and death, Jesus fulfilled several prophecies. A sampling of these include Hosea 11:1 that says He would be called out of Egypt, which Matthew applied to Jesus in Matthew 2:14–15; that He would teach in parables (Psalm 78:1–2; see Gospels); that His ministry would begin in Galilee (Isaiah 9:1–2; Matthew 4:15-16 & John 2:13)

The New Testament also contains prophetic statements, some of which have already been fulfilled and some that are yet to be fulfilled. Of those already fulfilled we need only look to Jesus’ statement about the soon coming destruction of the temple itself. In Matthew 24:1–2, Jesus, pointing to the temple, said to His disciples, “ Truly I say to you, not one stone here will be left upon another, which will not be torn down.” To the hearers of His day this seemed impossible. Jesus’ prediction, however, was in line with what Daniel wrote almost five hundred years earlier. And in AD 70 Titus came to Jerusalem and utterly destroyed the temple as foretold.

Other New Testament prophecies relate to the end times that have yet to be fulfilled, such as Christ’s return to the earth, the hope of the resurrection, and the promise of a glorified body for those who follow Jesus.

Perhaps one of the greatest examples of fulfilled prophecy in our day is the reestablishment of the nation of Israel in 1948. Some see
this as the fulfillment of Ezekiel 37:24–27 where God promised to bring Israel back from the lands where He had scattered them. Never before had a nation, so targeted for destruction, returned after being dispersed across the globe for almost two thousand years.

From the above examples we see that the Bible is a prophetic book that speaks of various prophecies, some that have been fulfilled and some still yet to occur. Each of these prophecies contributes to the grand narrative of the Bible and gives evidence that the Bible is a book with a unique origin.

All of the Bible is important, and we should approach it as such. So, as you read your Bible understand that it is not the invention of humanity, but is in fact God-breathed, historically and archaeologically confirmed, and prophetically accurate. The Bible is a reliable book that can be trusted in what it says.