

BL4 Is the Bible Accurate?
Transmission, Corruption, Restoration and Inerrancy

1. The Corruption of the Bible.

1. Scribal errors: accidental and intentional:

Before the invention of the movable press (c. AD 1455), the Bible was transmitted by anonymous monks who hand-copied biblical manuscripts. This laborious process of transmission led to corruptions that had to be restored by later editors. What are corruptions? These are errors, both accidental and intentional, that changed the texts copied from, to the texts copied into.

2. Anti-Adoptionist Corruption of Scripture

3. Anti-Separationist Corruption of Scripture

4. Anti-Docetic Corruption of Scripture

5. Anti-Patristic Corruption of Scripture

6. Orthodox Corruption of Scripture

Why did corruption happen? The nature of human transmission.

AD 1375 – invention of spectacles.

AD 1455 – invention of the movable printing press.

2. The Restoration of the Bible.

The task of evaluating the variant manuscripts to determine what the original texts might be. The modern Bible has gone through a long history of recovery – thanks to the arts and science of philology, linguistics, historiography, the natural and social sciences, etc.

2.1 The Restoration of Biblical texts is an Ongoing Process

The New Testament textual critic uses three tools to determine the content and meaning of the original texts.

1. Greek manuscripts
2. Ancient versions
3. Citations by Church Fathers

2.1.1 Greek Manuscripts

There are four types of Greek manuscripts (mss) –
papyri,
uncials,
minuscules and
lectionaries.

The most famous fragments of **papyri** are

- (a) the *Chester Beatty papyri* (p45, p46 and p47) from the 3rd century
- (b) the *John Rylands fragments* at Manchester University (p52¹)
- (c) the *Bodmer Collection* from the 2nd to the 7th century (p66, p72, p73, p74, p75)

2.2 Methods of Textual Criticism

Grammatical-Historical Method, (GHM) - which focuses on understanding the text through its grammar and historical context, and the **Historical-Critical Method** (HCM) - which applies the naturalistic, analogous, and positivistic assumptions of the 19th century to analyze the Bible.

The HCM consists of two parts: *Lower Textual Criticism* (LTC) and *Higher Textual Criticism* (HTC). LTC studies the corpus of the text and its reliability in transmission and aims to establish the text of the Bible that we should use.

HTC attempts to deconstruct the text itself to uncover ‘hidden meaning’ and evaluates the text with the presupposition that it is a mere text of human origin.

LTC results in translations of the Bible into vernacular languages. It painstakingly removes human errors that have crept in over the many years of transmission.

HTC lies in the presumption that the Bible is merely the result of human enterprise and may be examined according to rules of analysis that changes from generation to generation

2.3 Rules of Textual Criticism

As scholars of the NT evaluate the variant readings, two rules are generally followed:

2.3.1. Choose the reading that best explains the origins of the others.

¹ p52 contains John 18:31-34, 37-38.

2.3.2. The reconstruction of the history of the variant reading is the prerequisite to forming a judgment about it.²

a. External Evidence

These include the date of the witness, the geographical distribution of the witnesses that agree in supporting a variant, and the genealogical relationship of texts and families of witnesses.

b. Internal Evidence

Transcriptional probabilities depend on considerations of paleographical details and the habits of the scribes.

1. More difficult reading preferred.
2. Shorter reading preferred.
3. The reading that stands in verbal dissidence with the other.
4. Scribes tend to Atticizing preferences as they replace unfamiliar words or less refined grammar.

Intrinsic probabilities depend on considerations of what the author was more likely to have written, taking into account

1. The style, vocabulary, and theology of the author throughout the book
2. The immediate context
3. Harmony with the usage of the author elsewhere
4. The Aramaic background of the teachings of Jesus
5. The priority of the Gospel according to Mark, and
6. The influence of the Christian community upon the formulation and transmission of the passage in question.

The 19th century discoveries of the 4th century codices Sinaiticus, Leningradensis and Vaticanus greatly improved the accuracy of modern Bibles. The 1947 discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls further enhanced our understanding of the OT texts.

The unusually large number of manuscripts available act as an internal check upon the accuracy. Ancient documents with few or single copies cannot be checked for accuracy. The probability of all the approximately 15,000 ancient New Testament texts (recovered from a wide area, written at different times) being falsified or forged in unison, is improbable.

² Bruce M. Metzger, and Bart D. Ehrman, *The Text of the New Testament: Its Transmission, Corruption and Restoration. Fourth Edition*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 300-301.

3. Is the Bible Inerrant?

Every Bible is imperfect.

Why do texts get corrupted with errors? Usage change over time.

How language changes over time and why the texts of the Bible needs to be revised in every generation to preserve the meaning of the Word of God. An example of how semantic changes take place in the English language in just a few hundred years of constant usage makes this point.

In the case of Shakespeare, non-English translations are better understood by their native speakers than English versions, which are not semantically translated but merely ‘updated’. Here are some examples of semantic drift from the Middle English of Shakespeare to our Modern English.

In *Romeo and Juliet*, Juliet says, “Wherefore art thou Romeo?” We are often led to suppose that she is looking for Romeo and does not know where he is. Immediately after that she says, “Deny thy father and refuse thy name; or, if thou wilt not, be but sworn my love, and I’ll no longer be a Capulet.” In Middle English, wherefore means *why* – not where. She was in fact saying, *Romeo, why can’t you be somebody else? Deny your father and name and if you agree not to be a Romeo, I will agree not to be a Capulet.*

In *Twelfth Night*, Viola says, “This fellow is wise enough to play the fool; and to do that well craves a kind of wit.” Today, when we speak of someone’s wit, we refer to a clever sense of humor. Is Shakespeare saying that playing the fool involves being funny? Not at all. In those days, wit means *knowledge*. Viola meant that *it takes a certain amount of knowledge to be a fool.*

In *Hamlet*, Polonius tells Laertes, “Take each man’s censure, but reserve thy judgment.” Does that mean, take people’s criticism of you but don’t answer back? In fact, to take someone’s censure meant to *size someone up*, to check him out. The meaning then is, *size each man up but don’t talk about it.*

What makes the Bible trustworthy is not that the Church Councils of the 4th and 5th centuries determined which books are believable but rather, they affirmed what was already in widespread use. Their goal was less to build a canon to include some books than it was to exclude some books from it.

Conclusion: While God is inerrant, the Bible is not. The twin dangers of considering the Bible as merely a human literary achievement (anthropolatry-worship of humans) or as a divine work with no human input (bibliolatry-worship of the Bible) deny the worship of God. So, how is the Bible divine? It is God’s Word in human words.

4. Can We Believe the Bible?

4.1 Issues of Accuracy

4.1.1 Meanings and Margins of Error.

The power of the Bible is not in the words but in the meanings assigned to the words. As meanings change, words must change to conform to the intended meanings. In ancient days, the margins of error were vastly more tolerable because the range of measuring accuracy was broader. Each generation will improve on the margins of error. Accuracy is a function of margins of error. As we reduce the tolerances for margins of error, we will increasingly discover ‘errors’ of corruption to restore.

4.1.2 Measuring Accuracy

What is the form of accuracy in human knowledge? The art of science is all about measuring the measurables. Yet, by definition, science is not accurate, e.g., it is impossible for us to draw a straight line and we can never measure weight accurately. But we tolerate acceptable margins of error.

4.2 The Sufficiency of Revelation

4.2.1 The Limits of Cognition.

As we know how to know more (learn), more can be known. Thus, revelation, like the progress of human understanding, evolves over time. As we understand what **inspiration and revelation** means, our expectations can be tempered with reality.

4.2.2 The Priority of Testimonial Witness

How do we believe in God? We believe not by knowledge, but by **adopting the authority of testimonial witnesses we trust**. It was the experiences of **testimonial witnesses** that gave birth to the Bible through the development of doctrines, not the Bible giving rise to experiences of testimonial witnesses. Once we understand the limits of any human transmission of information, we are better able to match our expectations with reality.

4.2.3 The Rule of Faith

The Bible derives its authority from the **Rule of Faith**, an ancient confession made by the first testimonial witnesses – that Jesus is Lord. The historical reality of Jesus is thus the authority for the Church, as recorded in the Bible - a collection of testimonial witnesses that has since been used in worship by Christians. The authority that authenticates the texts (Rule of Faith) that vie for inclusion in the scriptures predated the writings. Textual restoration is possible only because we already have testimonial witnesses that predate the earliest writings.

4.3 The Ultimacy of Testimony

Since we have no verifiable direct cognitive link with God, all our beliefs about God comes from human testimony. Testimony is irreducible. No one can make an autonomous verification of another’s testimony.³ So it is quite dangerous to transfer our faith in God who does not err to human authors who do.⁴ That is why the authority of the Bible is always subservient to the Rule of Faith.

So why do we believe another’s testimony? We believe when testimony invites **trust** - when we can justify our adoption of another’s authority. This justified trust is based on our **judgment** from some combination of perception, memory or inference. The challenge of intellectual beings is the tension that exists because we are both social and autonomous creatures. This means that we often make judgments on whether to trust another’s belief if it contradicts our own. It is this judgment we make that on trust we believe, is **prompted by the Spirit**.

³ Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 505.

⁴ Kenton L. Sparks, *God’s Word in Human Words: An Evangelical Appropriation of Critical Biblical Scholarship*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 374.