The Doctrine of the Bible

All Scriptures are from the English Standard Version unless otherwise noted

Introduction

This treatise deals with Bibliology, which is the study of the doctrine of the Bible. This includes topics related to the nature and significance of Scripture, such as the credibility, inspiration, inerrancy, canonization, preservation, and translation of the Bible. These basic concepts are essential for understanding why the Bible has a unique and authoritative place within Christianity. This treatise will explore each of these aspects in greater detail, presenting an overview of the doctrine of the Bible from a conservative evangelical perspective. Our goal is to emphasize the importance and authority of the Bible as God's message to humanity.

The Credibility of the Bible

History and archaeology have repeatedly corroborated the Bible, providing tangible evidence about the people, places, and events mentioned in Scripture. For example, in 1868, explorers found the Mesha Stele in Dibon, Jordan. This brown basalt stone contains an inscription written by King Mesha of Moab in the 9th century BC. It mentions Yahweh, the men of Gad, the Israelite king Omri, and his son. It also confirms Israel's oppression of Moab and Mesha's successful revolt, which aligns with the biblical account in 2 Kings 3.

Furthermore, the discovery of the Tel Dan Stele in northern Israel provides historical evidence for the existence of King David, a central figure in the Old Testament. This ninth-century BC inscription mentions the "House of David," showing that David was a real historical figure and not merely a literary creation. This find, along with other archaeological evidence, supports the biblical depiction of a Davidic dynasty and the historical reality of the United Monarchy of Israel.

The Bible contains moral teaching that is far superior to other religious texts. Unlike the polytheistic religions of the past, which often imitated and endorsed the flawed human tendencies of their gods, the Bible offered a superior ethical standard based on the character of a holy and righteous God. The Bible has profoundly influenced Western civilization and continues to be a source of moral clarity and positive change for millions of people worldwide.

The resurrection of Jesus Christ is another well-documented miracle that supports the credibility of the Bible. The testimony about the empty tomb, the numerous post-resurrection appearances of Jesus, and the dramatic transformation of the disciples from fearful followers into bold evangelists of the risen Christ are compelling evidence. The rapid spread of Christianity and the willingness of the early Christians to suffer martyrdom for their belief in the resurrection add additional weight to the historical reliability of this event.

We have examined multiple lines of evidence that collectively support the credibility of the Bible. History and archaeology have repeatedly corroborated the biblical narrative. The moral teaching of the Bible is far superior to other religious texts in the ancient world. The Bible is also the only book that provides solid evidence for its divine origin. It contains specific prophecies that came

to pass exactly as predicted. It has miraculously survived repeated attempts to destroy it. The continued existence of the Jewish people is a modern miracle and an ongoing fulfillment of prophecy. The resurrection of Jesus is a well-documented miracle, and the life-changing power of Scripture is an ongoing miracle in the lives of people today. This evidence supports the claim that the Bible is the inspired Word of God, offering a reliable foundation for faith and practice.

The Inspiration of the Bible

The Bible teaches the verbal, plenary inspiration of Scripture.

First, inspiration means recording the truth under the supervision of the Holy Spirit.

> Now these are the last words of David: The oracle of David, the son of Jesse, the oracle of the man who was raised on high, the anointed of the God of Jacob, the sweet psalmist of Israel: “The Spirit of the LORD speaks by me; his word is on my tongue.” (2 Samuel 23:1–2)

Second, verbal inspiration means the words themselves are inspired, not merely the general ideas.

> And the LORD said to Moses, “Write these words, for in accordance with these words I have made a covenant with you and with Israel.” (Exodus 34:27)
>
> In the fourth year of Jehoiakim the son of Josiah, king of Judah, this word came to Jeremiah from the LORD: “Take a scroll and write on it all the words that I have spoken to you against Israel and Judah and all the nations, from the day I spoke to you, from the days of Josiah until today.” (Jeremiah 36:1–2)
>
> And we impart this in words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit, interpreting spiritual truths to those who are spiritual. (1 Corinthians 2:13)

Third, plenary inspiration means all of Scripture is inspired, not just select passages.

> They made their hearts diamond-hard lest they should hear the law and the words that the LORD of hosts had sent by his Spirit through the former prophets. Therefore great anger came from the LORD of hosts. (Zechariah 7:12)
>
> For all the Prophets and the Law prophesied until John. (Matthew 11:13)
>
> All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness. (2 Timothy 3:16)

The authors of the Bible clearly regarded Scripture as inspired. They were keenly aware that they were writing under divine inspiration. The prophets often prefaced their messages with phrases like "Thus says the Lord," indicating that they spoke and wrote with divine authority. This self-awareness of inspiration is evident throughout the Bible, where the apostles and prophets recognized that their words were not merely human but divinely given.

> Now the rest of the acts of Hezekiah and his good deeds, behold, they are written in the vision of Isaiah the prophet, the son of Amoz, in the Book of the Kings of Judah and

> Israel. (2 Chronicles 32:32)
>
> In the first year of his reign, I, Daniel, understood from the Scriptures, according to the word of the LORD given to Jeremiah the prophet, that the desolation of Jerusalem would last seventy years. (Daniel 9:2)
>
> Brothers, the Scripture had to be fulfilled, which the Holy Spirit spoke beforehand by the mouth of David concerning Judas, who became a guide to those who arrested Jesus. (Acts 1:16)
>
> For you know what instructions we gave you through the Lord Jesus. (1 Thessalonians 4:2)

The apostles also recognized other New Testament writings as Scripture. For example, Paul cited the gospel of Luke as Scripture. In 1 Timothy 5:18, Paul quoted Luke 10:7 and Deuteronomy 25:4, treating both texts as equally authoritative Scripture. This shows that Paul viewed the writings of Luke as divinely inspired and authoritative.

Likewise, Peter classified Paul's letters as Scripture. In 2 Peter 3:15–16, Peter refers to Paul's letters and includes them with "the other Scriptures." Peter's recognition of Paul's writings as Scripture highlights the early Christian understanding that the teaching of the apostles carried the same divine authority as the Old Testament.

Inspiration, however, did not set aside human personality or literary style.

> And the spirits of prophets are subject to prophets. (1 Corinthians 14:32)
>
> I, Paul, write this greeting with my own hand. This is the sign of genuineness in every letter of mine; it is the way I write. (2 Thessalonians 3:17)
>
> Concerning this salvation, the prophets who prophesied about the grace that was to be yours searched and inquired carefully, inquiring what person or time the Spirit of Christ in them was indicating when he predicted the sufferings of Christ and the subsequent glories. (1 Peter 1:10–11)

Finally, it is vital to recognize that divine inspiration extends strictly to the original autographs, not to subsequent historical copies or translations.

The Inerrancy of the Bible

The doctrine of inerrancy naturally follows from divine inspiration. Inerrancy means that the original manuscripts of the Bible were free from error or omission, not the copies or translations of it. This belief comes directly from the biblical concept of inspiration. Since God inspired the Scriptures, He also preserved them from error, so we can trust what the Bible says.

When we say the Bible is inerrant, we mean that it is completely true in everything that it affirms. This applies to its teachings on faith, history, science, and every other area it discusses. Because God is perfect and can't lie, His Word is also perfect and without error. This makes the Bible a reliable guide for our faith and life.

The basic logic of the doctrine of inerrancy rests on two fundamental biblical premises:

- **Premise #1:** Scripture is the Word of God.

  All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness. (2 Timothy 3:16)

- **Premise #2:** God's Word is truth.

  Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth. (John 17:17)

- **Conclusion:** Therefore, Scripture is truth and without error..

It is important to clarify that the doctrine of inerrancy does not exclude:

1. Figurative or colloquial language.
2. Paraphrasing or loose quotations.
3. Round numbers or generalizations.
4. Minor variations in spelling or grammar.

The Canonization of the Bible

Canonization refers to the careful and deliberate process that Jewish and Christian communities used to identify which writings were inspired and authoritative. The fact that these communities considered and rejected multiple fraudulent contenders shows how serious they were in their work. The recognition of the canonical books relied upon distinct criteria for both testaments. Evidence for the canonical Old Testament includes supernatural signs, consistent doctrine, scriptural quotations by later biblical writers, and factual accuracy.

Archaeological findings have often supported the historical and cultural information described in the Old Testament. For example, skeptics in the early 19th century claimed that the Hittites mentioned in Genesis were a myth, but the discovery of the Hittite capital of Hattusa in central Turkey and the Amarna letters in Egypt silenced all the critics.

The Hebrew Bible historically comprises three major divisions:

- **The Law:** Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy.
- **The Former Prophets:** Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings.
- **The Latter Prophets:** Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and the Twelve Minor Prophets.

The intertestamental period lasted roughly 400 years between the completion of the book of Malachi and the coming of John the Baptist. During this time, no prophets arose in Israel and no new books were added to the canon. The authors of the New Testament quoted extensively from the Old Testament but not the Apocrypha, reflecting its non-canonical status. Furthermore, the Apocrypha contains historical errors. For example, First Maccabees describes the Maccabean Revolt against the Seleucid Empire and the founding of an independent Hasmonean kingdom, but there are inconsistencies in this account when compared with other historical records from the same period.

The prophetic silence of the intertestamental period ended in the late first century BC with the coming of John the Baptist. Jesus trained His disciples for three and a half years as they

traveled the length and breadth of Judea, Samaria, Galilee, and the Decapolis. After His resurrection, He told them to take the Gospel to the whole world. The apostles soon began to document the message of Jesus and the history of the fledgling church. As we have already seen, they plainly stated that their writings were Scripture. Thus, the apostles themselves settled the canon of the New Testament in the first century AD.

As a result, early Christians ultimately recognized and accepted 27 books into the canon of the New Testament. This included the four Gospels, the Book of Acts, thirteen epistles by Paul, eight general epistles, and the Book of Revelation. During the first and second centuries AD, a wide variety of alternate gospels or alleged apostolic writings also appeared. Early Christians investigated and rejected these forgeries and heretical works based on similar criteria used to evaluate the Hebrew Bible and the Apocrypha.

Evidence for the canonical New Testament rests on key historical markers:

- **Antiquity:** Originating within the apostolic age.
- **Apostolicity:** Written by an apostle or a close associate of an apostle.
- **Authenticity:** Genuine provenance and textually dependable. Early church leaders, such as Papias, Ignatius, and Polycarp, quoted from these books and affirmed their apostolic origins. The Muratorian Fragment, a list written in the late second century that includes most of the New Testament, demonstrates an early consensus.
- **Veracity:** Conformity with established apostolic doctrine and containing no discernible factual or doctrinal errors. New Testament writings align with the life of Jesus, accurately describe first-century events and cultural details, and remain entirely consistent with the Old Testament.
- **Ubiquity:** Widespread acceptance and usage across widely scattered churches. From Alexandria to Antioch to Rome, churches across the Roman Empire recognized these books as divinely inspired Scripture.

The canonization of the Bible was a careful and thoughtful process. Believers accepted only those books that God had inspired, ensuring that the Scriptures would faithfully guide the church. The criteria used for recognizing these books reflected a deep commitment to preserving the truth of God's Word.

The Preservation of the Bible

God explicitly promised that He would preserve His Word throughout history.

> The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever. (Isaiah 40:8)
>
> Your word, LORD, is eternal; it stands firm in the heavens. (Psalm 119:89 NIV)

Historical preservation is evidenced through the widespread copying of the Bible since ancient times. The similarity among thousands of ancient Hebrew, Aramaic, Greek, and Latin manuscripts verifies the accurate preservation of biblical texts.

For example, the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls in 1947 significantly bolstered the credibility

of the Old Testament. These ancient manuscripts, dating back to the third century BC, contain portions of almost every book in the Hebrew Bible, proving that the Masoretic Text that we have today has been faithfully preserved for over a thousand years.

For the New Testament, we have an abundance of ancient Christian manuscripts and papyrus fragments, such as Papyrus 75. The unity among these documents is striking. Early church writers also quoted extensively from the New Testament, providing another layer of verification for the accuracy of the text.

Furthermore, variations in ancient manuscripts are nearly always due to minor copying errors. These errors are typically easy to detect and correct. Scribes occasionally made mistakes in spelling or omitted words, but the vast number of manuscripts allows scholars to identify and correct these errors through a process known as textual criticism. Scholars compare different manuscripts and use sound principles to determine the most likely reading. This careful work ensures that the text we have today is as close as possible to the originals, ensuring that no core Christian doctrine is obscured or compromised.

The Translation of the Bible

The Bible's translation history reflects God's desire for His Word to reach all people. Over centuries, dedicated scholars and translators have worked to make the Scriptures accessible in many languages. God called Israel to be His chosen people, so they would be a light to the world and share His message of salvation with the Gentiles.

In Genesis 12:3, God promised that all the families of the earth would be blessed through Abraham, which foreshadowed the coming of the Messiah and the Gospel.

> I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed. (Genesis 12:3)
>
> God blesses us, so that all the ends of the earth may fear Him. (Psalm 67:7 NASB)
>
> All the ends of the earth shall remember and turn to the LORD, and all the families of the nations shall worship before you. (Psalm 22:27)
>
> See, darkness covers the earth and thick darkness is over the peoples, but the Lord rises upon you and his glory appears over you. Nations will come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn. (Isaiah 60:2–3 NIV)

By God’s providence, many dedicated scholars over the centuries have worked to translate the Bible to reach as many people as possible.

The first major landmark came in the 3rd century BC when Jewish scholars translated the Hebrew Scriptures into Greek. At that time, many Jews living in Alexandria, Egypt, spoke Greek as their primary language due to the Hellenistic influence of the Greco-Macedonian Empire, so Jewish leaders wanted to translate the Hebrew Scriptures into Greek. Alexandria was an important center of learning, and it had a large Jewish population that could contribute to this project.

According to tradition, Ptolemy II Philadelphus, the Greek ruler of Egypt, started the translation

for the Library of Alexandria. Work began around 250 BC and likely took decades. It started with the Torah and eventually included the entire Hebrew Bible. This translation became known as the Septuagint based on a story that 72 Jewish scholars were able to translate the Torah in just 72 days.

The Septuagint is a key achievement in the history of Bible translation. It was the first major effort to translate Scripture into another language, and it helped the Greek-speaking Jewish diaspora maintain their faith. The Septuagint also greatly impacted early Christianity. New Testament writers often quoted from the Septuagint, providing a common foundation for Jewish and Gentile Christians. It helped bridge the gap between Jewish and Greek cultures, which aided the spread of Christianity across the Roman Empire.

Between 200 and 300 AD, early Christians translated the New Testament into Latin, Coptic, and Syriac.

In the Western Roman Empire, Christians translated the New Testament into the Old Latin or Vetus Latina version. Different regions produced varied versions, reflecting local dialects and translation practices. Despite their inconsistencies, these versions allowed Latin-speaking Christians to understand the Scriptures and laid the groundwork for better Latin versions in later years.

Early Christians also translated the New Testament into Coptic, the language of the Egyptian people. This contributed to the growth of Christianity in Egypt and the development of the Coptic Orthodox Church, which flourished along the Nile River until the rise of Islam in the seventh century.

Early Christians in Syria and Mesopotamia also translated the New Testament into Syriac, which is a Semitic language related to Aramaic. The Syriac translations, known as the Peshitta, became the standard Bible for Syriac-speaking Christians. It played a vital role in the spread of Christianity in the East and remains an important text for Eastern Christian traditions.

The next major milestone was Jerome’s translation of the Latin Vulgate from Hebrew and Greek sources. In 382 AD, Pope Damasus I commissioned Jerome to create a clear and accurate Latin Bible to address the inconsistencies in the existing Old Latin texts. He began by revising the Latin Gospels using the best Greek manuscripts available. Later, he embarked on translating the Old Testament directly from Hebrew, unlike earlier translations that used the Greek Septuagint. He was meticulous in his translation and consulted with Jewish scholars to ensure accuracy, aiming to be faithful to the original text while ensuring clarity for Latin-speaking Christians.

He completed his work around 405 AD, after which, the Vulgate gradually gained acceptance, becoming the standard Bible of the Western Church for a thousand years. It unified the church around a single, reliable text and played a crucial role in the preservation and transmission of the biblical text throughout the Middle Ages. Jerome’s Vulgate set the standard for future translations, emphasizing the importance of relying on the original languages to capture the true meaning of Scripture. His work is a significant landmark in the faithful and accurate translation of God’s Word.

In 1382, English theologian John Wycliffe and his followers made history by translating the

entire Bible from Latin into English. Wycliffe was born around 1328 and became a priest in 1351. He attended Oxford University where he became a resident scholar and an influential dissident within the Catholic priesthood. He challenged the Catholic Church's authority and advocated for Scripture as the ultimate authority for Christians. He believed that every Christian should have access to the Scriptures in their native language, and his work laid the foundation for the English Reformation.

In 1382, Wycliffe and his followers, known as Lollards, completed the first full translation of the Bible into English. They translated from the Latin Vulgate since Hebrew and Greek manuscripts were not widely available. The Lollards played a crucial role in copying and distributing the English Bible. Their work spread throughout England, despite opposition from the Catholic Church. Wycliffe's English Bible made Scripture accessible to ordinary people, challenging the church's control over biblical interpretation. Although the church condemned his translation and declared him a heretic, Wycliffe's work inspired later reformers like Jan Hus and Martin Luther. His efforts contributed to the widespread availability of the Bible in the vernacular, paving the way for future translations and the English Reformation.

In 1525, English scholar and reformer William Tyndale produced the first translation of the New Testament from Greek into English. Born around 1494, Tyndale studied at Oxford and Cambridge, where he became proficient in Hebrew and Greek. Inspired by the works of Erasmus and Martin Luther, he believed that everyone should read the Bible in their native language. Tyndale's work faced strong opposition from the Catholic Church and the English authorities, who banned English translations of the Bible.

To evade persecution, Tyndale moved to Germany, where he completed his translation of the New Testament and had it printed in Worms. His supporters smuggled copies into England, reaching eager readers despite efforts to destroy them. He began work on translating the Old Testament into English and criticized the Catholic Church and King Henry VIII.

Tyndale's New Testament was the first English translation to be printed, making it widely available and affordable. His clear, vigorous English greatly influenced later translations, including the King James Version. Tyndale's work laid the foundation for the Reformation in England by empowering ordinary believers to read and understand the Scriptures themselves. In 1535, he was arrested in Antwerp and executed the following year by strangulation, after which his body was burned at the stake. His last words were, "Lord! Open the King of England's eyes."

In 1535, Miles Coverdale published the first complete printed Bible in English. Coverdale had worked with Tyndale and included much of Tyndale's earlier work. Coverdale's translation was a crucial step in making the entire Bible available to English speakers. In 1537, Tyndale's prayer was answered when King Henry VIII permitted the publication of the Matthew Bible, which was a joint effort between John Rogers and Miles Coverdale that included much of Tyndale's earlier work.

The history of Bible translation is decidedly non-linear. In AD 200, there were only seven full or partial translations of the Bible; by AD 1800, that number had risen to a mere 57 translations. This changed dramatically during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries thanks in large part to interfaith cooperation among mainline Protestant groups. For example, the British and Foreign

Bible Society was formed in 1804 as a non-denominational Christian Bible society whose purpose was to make the Bible available throughout the world.

The American Bible Society was founded in 1816 by prominent American Protestants. The International Bible Society was founded in 1809, in New York City, as the New York Bible Society, which went on to support William Carey's Bible translation work in India. In 1978, it published the very popular New International Version of the Bible.

By 1900, the number of translations had risen sharply to 537, and by 2000, it had increased to over 2,322. By 2023, the number of full or partial translations stands at 3,658, which is sufficient to reach 97% of the world's population.

This monumental achievement is a powerful fulfillment of Jesus' prophecy in Matthew 24:14, where He predicted that "this gospel of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come."

When He spoke these words almost 2000 years ago to a handful of disciples, the task would have seemed impossible to any rational human. But against all odds, the Bible has survived multiple attempts to destroy it. The gospel of Jesus Christ has been published and proclaimed throughout the whole world, despite fierce resistance from tyrants, dictators, and religious bigots. The fulfillment of this prophecy alone is a modern miracle that proves the existence of God and confirms the supernatural power of God's Word.

The history of Bible translation demonstrates the relentless effort to bring God's Word to every corner of the globe. Each translation represents a step toward fulfilling God's promise to make His Word accessible to all people. Through the dedication of translators and the guidance of the Holy Spirit, the Bible continues to reach more languages and cultures, transforming lives and spreading the gospel message.

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Published by Didactic Ministries

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