

IS THE BIBLE RELIABLE?

Article by John Piper • Adapted by Keith Lewis

John Piper, *Desiring God*, Appendix 2: “Is The Bible A Reliable Guide To Lasting Joy?”
(Sisters, OR: Multnomah Publishers, 1996), desiringgod.org/books/desiring-god.

Does God Exist?

Let’s start at the most basic level of religious faith. I believe in God. There may be social and family reasons for how I got to be this way, just as there are social and family reasons for why you are the way you are. But when I try to be reasonable and test my inherited belief in God, I cannot escape his reality.

Suppose I try to go back all the way to the beginning and imagine the nature of original reality. What was it like? What I see is the stunning fact that there is a fifty-fifty possibility that original reality was a Person rather than a gas. Every reasonable person must admit that it is a toss-up. Maybe some undefined stuff existed from eternity—or maybe it was a Person!

Admitting the reasonable possibility that ultimate reality could be personal has a way of freeing you to consider subsequent evidence more openly. My own inescapable inference from the order of the universe and the existence of human personhood and the universal sense of conscience (moral self-judgment) and the universal judicial sentiment (judgment of others who dishonor us)—my own inference from all this is that Ultimate Reality is not impersonal, but is indeed a Person. I simply find it incredible that the human drama of the centuries, with its quest for meaning and beauty and truth, has no deeper root than molecular mutations.

COMPREHENSION CHECK

The author begins by simply stating the real and reasonable possibility that what was at the very beginning was a Person, not “stuff.” He then gives five facts that cause him to infer that the “Ultimate Reality is not impersonal, but is indeed a Person.” What are those five facts? (HINT: Four are listed together; the fifth comes later.)

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Many Religions, Many Gods

So when I consider where enduring happiness is to be found, I am driven to search for it in relation to God—the personal Creator of all things. Nothing seems more reasonable to me than that lasting happiness will never be found by a person who ignores or opposes his Creator. I am constantly astonished at people who say they believe in God but live as though happiness were to be found by giving him two percent of their attention. Surely the end of the ages will reveal this to be absurd.

But once we begin to seek our happiness in relation to God, we are confronted with many different claims and religions. Why should we bank our hope on the claim that the Christian Bible is a true revelation of God? My basic answer is that Jesus Christ—the center and sum of the Bible—has won my confidence by his authenticity and love and power. I see his authenticity and love in the record of his words and deeds, and I see his power especially in his resurrection from the dead.

COMPREHENSION CHECK

What does the author consider to be “absurd”?

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When it comes to question of how we know that the Christian Bible is the true revelation of God (i.e., the Ultimate Reality), the author states that the very “center and sum of the Bible”—Jesus Christ—has convinced him. How has Christ done this (3 answers)?

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Listening to the Witnesses to Christ

You need not believe the Bible is infallible to discover that it presents a historical Person of incomparable qualities. On the contrary, the reasonable way to approach the Bible for the first time is to listen openly and honestly to its various witnesses to Christ, to see if these witnesses and this person authenticate themselves. If they do, the things they and Christ say about the Bible itself will take on new authority, and you may well end up accepting the whole Bible (as I do!) as God's inspired, infallible Word. But you don't need to start there.

COMPREHENSION CHECK

Principle: Read the Bible to see if the witnesses and the central Person authenticate _____; then, if they do, their testimony will take on new _____.

The Incomparable Christ

Let me try to illustrate what I mean by the self-authenticating message of Christ and his witnesses. The biblical accounts present Jesus as a man of incomparable love for God and man. He became angry when God was dishonored by irreligion (Mark 11:15-17) and when man was destroyed by religion (Mark 3:4-5). He taught us to be poor in spirit, meek, hungry for righteousness, pure in heart, merciful, and peaceable (Matthew 5:3-9). He urged us to honor God from the heart (Matthew 15:8) and to put away all hypocrisy (Luke 12:1). And he practiced what he preached. His life was summed up as "doing good and healing" (Acts 10:38).

He took time for little children and blessed them (Mark 10: 13-16). He crossed social barriers to help women (John 4), foreigners (Mark 7:24-30), lepers (Luke 17:11-19), harlots (Luke 7:36-50), tax collectors (Matthew 9:9-13), and beggars (Mark 10:46-52). He washed his disciples' feet like a slave and taught them to serve rather than be served (John 13:1-20). Even when he was exhausted his heart went out in compassion to the pressing crowds (Mark 6:31-34). Even when his own disciples were fickle and ready to deny him and forsake him, he wanted to be with them (Luke 22: 15) and he prayed for them (Luke 22:32). He said his life was a ransom for many (Mark 10:45), and as he

was being executed at age thirty-three, he prayed for the forgiveness of his murderers (Luke 23:34).

Not only is Jesus portrayed as full of love for God and man, he is also presented as utterly truthful and authentic. He did not act on his own authority to gain worldly praise. He directed men to his Father in heaven. “He who speaks on his own authority seeks his own glory; but he who seeks the glory of him who sent him is true and in him there is no falsehood” (John 7: 18). He does not have the spirit of an egomaniac or a charlatan. He seems utterly at peace with himself and God. He is authentic.

This is evident in the way he saw through people’s sham (Matthew 22: 18). He was so pure and so perceptive that he could not be tripped up or cornered in debate (Matthew 22: 15-22). He was amazingly unsentimental in his demands, even toward those for whom he had a special affection (Mark 10:21). He never softened the message of righteousness to increase his following or curry favor. Even his opponents were stunned by his indifference to human praise: “Teacher, we know that you are true, and care for no man; for you do not regard the position of men, but truly teach the way of God” (Mark 12: 14). He never had to back down from a claim, and could be convicted of no wrong (John 8:46). He was meek and lowly in heart (Matthew 11:29).

But what made all this so amazing was the unobtrusive yet unmistakable *authority* that rang through all he did and said. The officers of the Pharisees speak for all of us when they say, “No man ever spoke like this man” (John 7:46). There was something unmistakably different about him: “He taught them as one who had authority, and not as their scribes” (Matthew 7:29).

His claims were not the open declaration of worldly power that the Jews expected from the Messiah. But they were unmistakable nonetheless. Though no one understood it at the time, there was no doubt that he had said, “Destroy this temple and in three days I will build it up again” (John 2:19, Matthew 26:61). They thought it was an absurd claim that he would singlehandedly rebuild an edifice that had been forty-six years in the making. But he was claiming in his typically veiled way that he would rise from the dead—and by his own power.

In his last debate with the Pharisees, Jesus silenced them with this question: “What do you think of the Messiah? Whose son is he?” They answer, “David’s son.” In response, Jesus quoted David from Psalm 110:1—“The Lord said to my Lord, Sit at my right hand, till I put thine enemies under thy feet.” Then, with only slightly veiled authority, Jesus asked, “If David thus calls him Lord, how is he his son?” In other words, for those who have eyes to see, the son of David and far more than the son is here.

“The men of Nineveh will arise at the judgment with this generation and condemn it; for they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and behold, *something greater than Jonah is here*. The queen of the South will arise at the judgment with this generation and condemn it; for she came from the ends of the earth to hear the wisdom of Solomon, and behold, *something greater than Solomon is here*” (Matthew 12:41-42). This kind of veiled claim runs through all Jesus said and did.

Besides that, he commanded evil spirits and they obeyed him (Mark 1:27). He issued forgiveness for sins (Mark 2:5). He summoned people to leave all and follow him to have eternal life and treasure in heaven (Mark 10:17-22, Luke 14:26-33). And he made the astonishing claim that “everyone who acknowledges me before men, I also will acknowledge before my Father who is in heaven; but whoever denies me before men, I also will deny before my Father who is in heaven” (Matthew 10:32-33).

COMPREHENSION CHECK

In this section, the author references three characteristics of Jesus that the Gospels highlight over and over again with complete agreement. These characteristics serve to authenticate who Jesus was and what the witnesses said about Him. What are those three characteristics? (HINT: The first is found in the first two paragraphs; the second is in the next two paragraphs; the third is in the remaining paragraphs.)

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Am I Arguing in a Circle?

Perhaps someone will say I am arguing in a circle. Am I not assuming the reliability of the biblical portrait of Jesus, even as I argue for it? Not exactly. The portrait I have sketched is not isolated to one writer or tradition. No matter how far back you go through a critical study of the Gospels, you never find a Jesus of history substantially different than the one described here. In other words, you don't have to *assume* the accounts are reliable. You can assume they are not if you wish. But the more rigorously you analyze them with a fair historical procedure, the more you realize there is no point between the Jesus of history and the Jesus of the Gospels where this unequalled man was created by human artifice. In other words, I am not starting with the assumption that the Gospels are inspired or infallible. I am trying to show that a certain portrait of Jesus is common to all the witnesses, and goes back as far as historical criticism can go.

How is this agreement and this antiquity to be explained? Did some unknown creative genius take an ordinary man, Jesus, and invent his deeds of power and his words of love and authority and authenticity, then present this invented Jesus to a church with such deceptive power that many people were willing from the outset to die for this fictional Christ? Further, must we believe all the Gospel writers swallowed the invention—and in the space of several decades while many who knew the real Jesus were still living? Is that a more reasonable or well-founded guess than the plain assertion that a real man, Jesus Christ, did in fact say and do the sorts of things the biblical witnesses said he did?

You must decide for yourself. To my mind, an unknown inventor of this Jesus is more incredible than the possibility of Jesus' reality. So for me the question becomes, "How do we account for a man who leaves a legacy like this?"

I cannot morally reckon him among the poor deluded souls who suffer from pathological illusions of grandeur. Nor can I reckon him among the great con men of history, a deceiver who planned and orchestrated a worldwide movement of mission on the basis of a hoax. Instead, I am instead constrained to acknowledge his truth. Both my mind and my heart find themselves drawn to yield allegiance to this man. He has won my confidence.

COMPREHENSION CHECK

How does the author escape the accusation that he is arguing in a circle (i.e., proving the credibility of Jesus and the Gospel witnesses from the Gospels themselves)?

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C. S. Lewis stated that Jesus could not have been merely a good teacher or prophet. What he said was so bizarre, that he must have been a lunatic, liar, or Lord. As we've seen in this section, the author demonstrates that the evidence rules out the first two options.

The Evidence for Jesus' Resurrection from the Dead

Alongside this line of evidence we should put the evidence for Jesus' resurrection from the dead. If he did not rise but followed the way of all flesh, the extraordinary implications of his Word and life come to nothing. But if he overcame death, his claims and his character are vindicated. And his teaching concerning the Bible becomes our standard.

COMPREHENSION CHECK

Notice the author's logical progression—

- Stated positively:
 - If Jesus rose from the dead...
 - His claims and character are vindicated, and
 - His teaching concerning the Bible becomes our standard.
- Stated negatively:
 - If Jesus didn't rise from the dead...
 - The extraordinary implications of His Word and life come to nothing, and
 - His teaching concerning the Bible is undermined.

Without going into detail, I will mention six things that undergird my confidence in the resurrection of Jesus.

1. *Jesus bore witness to his own coming resurrection.*

Two separate witnesses testify in two very different ways Jesus' statement during his lifetime that if his enemies destroyed the temple, he would build it again in three days (John 2:19, Mark 14:58; cf. Matthew 26:61). He spoke illusively of the "sign of Jonah"—three days in the heart of the earth (Matthew 12:39, 16:4). Therefore, the credibility of Jesus points to the reality of the resurrection to come. And he hinted at it again in Matthew 21:42—"The very stone which the builders rejected has become the head of the corner."

2. *The tomb was empty on Easter.* There are four possible ways to account for this.

His foes stole the body. If they did (and they never claimed to have done so), they surely would have produced the body to stop the successful spread of the Christian faith in the very city where the crucifixion occurred. But they could not produce it.

His friends stole it. This was an early rumor (Matthew 28:11-15). Is it probable? Could they have overcome the guards at the tomb? More important, would they have begun to preach with such authority that Jesus was raised, knowing he was not? Would they have risked their lives and accepted beatings for something they knew was a fraud?

Jesus was not dead, but only unconscious when they laid him in the tomb. He awoke, removed the stone, overcame the soldiers, and vanished from history after a few meetings with his disciples in which he convinced them he was risen from the dead. Even the foes of Jesus did not try this line. He was obviously dead. The stone could not be moved by one man from within who had just been stabbed in the side by a spear and spent six hours nailed to a cross.

God raised Jesus from the dead. This is what he said would happen. It is what the disciples said did happen.

But as long as there is a remote possibility of explaining the resurrection naturalistically, modern people say we should not jump to a supernatural explanation. Is this reasonable? I don't think so. Of course, we don't want to be gullible. But neither do we want to reject the truth just because it's strange. We need to be aware that our commitments at

this point are much affected by our preferences—either for the state of affairs that would arise from the truth of the resurrection, or for the state of affairs that would arise from the falsehood of the resurrection. If the message of Jesus has opened you to the reality of God and the need of forgiveness, for example, then anti-supernatural dogma might lose its power over your mind. Could it be that this openness is not prejudice for the resurrection, but freedom from prejudice against it?

COMPREHENSION CHECK

Pick one of the four possible ways to account for the empty tomb, perhaps one that you’ve heard someone else suggest. Write below the logical response to it.

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3. *The disciples were almost immediately transformed from men who were hopeless and fearful after the crucifixion (Luke 24:21, John 20:19) into men who were confident and bold witnesses of the resurrection (Acts 2:24, 3:15, 4:2).*

Their explanation was that they had seen the risen Christ and had been authorized to be his witnesses (Acts 2:32). The most popular competing explanation is that their confidence was owing to hallucinations. There are numerous problems with such a notion:

For one, hallucinations are generally private things, but Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 15:6 that Jesus “appeared to more than five hundred brethren at one time, most of whom are still alive.” They were available to interview and question.

Furthermore, the disciples were not gullible, but level-headed skeptics both before and after the resurrection (Mark 9:32, Luke 24:11, John 20:8-9,25).

Moreover, is the deep and noble teaching of those who witnessed the risen Christ the stuff of which hallucinations are made? What about Paul's great letter to the Romans?

COMPREHENSION CHECK

Identify the problems with the "hallucinations" argument (3 were mentioned above).

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4. The sheer existence of a thriving, empire-conquering early Christian church supports the truth of the resurrection claim.

The church spread on the power of the testimony that Jesus was raised from the dead and that God had thus made him both Lord and Christ (Acts 2:36). The Lordship of Christ over all nations is based on his victory over death. This is the message that spread all over the world. Its power to cross cultures and create one new people of God was strong testimony of its truth.

5. The apostle Paul's conversion supports the truth of the resurrection.

He argues to a partially unsympathetic audience in Galatians 1:11-17 that his gospel comes from the living Jesus Christ. His argument is that before his Damascus road experience, he was utterly opposed to the Christian faith. But now, to everyone's astonishment, he is risking his life for the gospel. His explanation: the risen Jesus appeared to him and authorized him to spearhead the Gentile mission (Acts 26:15-18). Can we credit such a testimony?

This leads to my last argument for the resurrection.

6. *The New Testament witnesses do not bear the stamp of dupes or deceivers.*

How do you credit a witness? How do you decide whether to believe a person's testimony? The decision to give credence to a person's testimony is not the same as completing a mathematical equation. The certainty is of a different kind, yet can be just as firm (e.g., I trust my wife's testimony that she is faithful).

When a witness is dead, we can base our judgment of him only on the content of his writings and the testimonies of others about him. How do Peter and John and Matthew and Paul stack up?

In my judgment (and at this point we can live authentically only by our own judgment—Luke 12:57), these men's writings do not read like the works of gullible, easily deceived, or deceiving men. Their insights into human nature are profound. Their personal commitment is sober and carefully stated. Their teachings are coherent and do not look like the invention of unstable men. The moral and spiritual standard is high. And the life of these men, as it comes through their writings, is totally devoted to the truth and to the honor of God.

COMPREHENSION CHECK

What factors seems to suggest that the Gospel writers were not "gullible, easily deceived, or deceiving men"?

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Jesus is the True Revelation of God

These, then, are some (not all!) of the evidences that undergird my confidence in Jesus as the true revelation of God. Before I try to explain how this leads me to credit the whole Bible as God's Word, let me give a personal admonition.

Whenever a Christian converses with a non-Christian about the truth of the faith, every request of the non-Christian for the proof of Christianity should be met with an equally serious request for proof for the non-Christian's philosophy of life. Otherwise we get the false impression that the Christian worldview is tentative and uncertain, while the more secular worldviews are secure and sure, standing above the need to give a philosophical and historical accounting of themselves. But that is not the case.

Many people who demand that Christians produce proof of our claims do not make the same demand upon themselves. Secular skepticism is assumed to be reasonable because it is widespread, not because it is well-argued. We should simply insist that the controversy be conducted with fairness. If the Christian must produce proof, so must others.

COMPREHENSION CHECK

The previous two paragraphs are tremendously helpful for the Christian who is tempted to feel inferior by the pressure of worldly philosophy. In your own words, how should the wise Christian respond to such pressure?

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Now, if Jesus has won our confidence (i.e., established his character and authority as divine) by his active love, truthful authenticity, authoritative teaching, and his power over death, then his view of things will be our standard. What was his view of the Old Testament?

What Was Jesus' View of the Old Testament?

First of all, (Question #1) was the Old Testament he prized made up of the same books as the Old Testament that Protestants prize today? Or did it include others (like the Old Testament Apocrypha 1)? In other words, was Jesus' Bible the Hebrew Old Testament, limited to the 39

books of the Protestant Old Testament (just in a different order), or was his Bible more like the Greek Old Testament (Septuagint), which includes an extra 15 books?

Norman Anderson, in his inspiring book, *God's Word For God's World*, states my answer and the support for it so well that I would like to simply quote him:

So we must now consider the...witness that Jesus bore to the Bible—primarily, of course, to the Old Testament, [which was] the only part of the Scriptures which was then in existence. That the books He had in mind spanned the whole “Hebrew Bible” is, I think, clear from two New Testament references: first, from His allusion, in Luke 24:44, to “the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms,” since this was tantamount to referring to the threefold structure of the Jewish Scriptures as the “Law,” the “Prophets” and the “Writings” (in which the Psalms held pride of place); and, secondly, from His allusion to “all the righteous blood that has been shed on earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah son of Berachiah,” since the blood of Abel is mentioned early in Genesis (4:8), the first book in the Hebrew Bible, and that of Zechariah towards the end of 2 Chronicles (24:21), the last book in the Jewish Scriptures.

COMPREHENSION CHECK

In the paragraph above, the author is answering the question, “How do we know that Jesus prized the same Old Testament that we do today (i.e., the Hebrew, not Greek, OT)?” The author references two passages that strongly indicate that Jesus considered the Old Testament to be our Genesis through Revelation (or, in the Hebrew order, Genesis through 2 Chronicles), excluding the Greek OT addition of the Apocrypha. Explain those two passages.

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If, then, Jesus' Bible was the same Old Testament we Protestants use today, the question now becomes, (Question #2) "How did he regard it?"

1. In quoting Psalm 110:1, he said that David spoke by the Holy Spirit: "David himself, inspired by the Holy Spirit, declared..." (Mark 12:36).

2. In his controversy with the Pharisees concerning their interpretation of the Old Testament, he contrasted the tradition of the elders and the commandment of God found in Scripture. "You have a fine way of rejecting the commandment of God, in order to keep your tradition!" (Mark 7:9).

3. When he answered the Pharisees concerning the problem of divorce, he referred to Genesis 2:24 as something "said" by God, though these are words of the biblical narrator and not a direct quote of God: "He who made them from the beginning made them male and female, and said, 'For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother'" (Matthew 19:4-5).

4. He makes an explicit statement concerning infallibility in John 10:35—"The Scriptures cannot be broken."

5. An implicit claim for the inerrancy of the Old Testament is made in Matthew 22:29. "Jesus answered them, 'You err, not knowing either the Scriptures or the power of God.'" Knowing the Scriptures keeps one from erring.

6. Repeatedly Jesus treats the Old Testament as an authority that must be fulfilled. "Think not that I have come to abolish the law and the prophets; I have come not to abolish them, but to fulfill them. For truly, I say to you, till heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the law until all is accomplished" (Matthew 5:17-18; see Matthew 26:54, 56; Luke 16:17).

7. Jesus rebuked the two disciples on the Emmaus road for being "foolish men and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken" (Luke 24:25).

8. Jesus himself used the Old Testament as an authoritative weapon against the temptations of Satan: "But he answered, 'It is written...'" (Matthew 4:4, 7, 10).

COMPREHENSION CHECK

The author has just listed 8 different passages that clearly demonstrate that Jesus believed the Old Testament to be reliable and authoritative. List below two of those evidences that were particularly clear and compelling to you.

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The diversity of this witness and its spread over all the Gospel material show that the Lord Jesus regarded the Old Testament as a trustworthy, authoritative, unerring guide in our quest for enduring happiness. Therefore we who submit to the authority of Christ will also want to submit to the authority of the book he esteemed so highly.

The Authority of the New Testament

Now what about the New Testament? It would be possible to develop a long historical argument for the inspiration and infallibility of books of the New Testament, but that would expand this appendix beyond appropriate bounds. So I will give pointers that can undergird our confidence in the New Testament as being equally authoritative and reliable as the Old.

My confidence in the New Testament as God's Word rests on a group of observations.

1. Jesus chose twelve apostles to be his authoritative representatives in founding the church. At the end of his life he promised them, "The Holy Spirit...will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have said" (John 14:26; 16:13).

2. The apostle Paul, whose stunning conversion from a life of murdering Christians to making Christians, demands special explanation. He says he (and the other apostles) were commissioned by the risen Christ to preach “in words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit” (1 Corinthians 2:13). In other words, Christ’s prediction in John 14:26 was being fulfilled through this inspiration.

3. Peter confirms this in 2 Peter 3:16, putting Paul’s writings in the same category with the inspired Old Testament writings (2 Peter 1:21).

4. All the New Testament writings come from those earliest days of promised special revelation and were written by the apostles and their close associates.

5. The message of these books has the “ring of truth.” It makes sense out of so much reality. The message on the one hand of God’s holiness and our guilt, and on the other hand of Christ’s death and resurrection as our only hope—this message fits the reality we see and the hope we long for and don’t see.

6. Finally, as the Catechism says, “The Bible evidences itself to be God’s Word by the heavenliness of its doctrine, the unity of its parts, and its power to convert sinners and edify saints.”

COMPREHENSION CHECK

The author has just listed 6 different considerations that give us confidence in the New Testament’s reliability and authority. List below two of those considerations that were particularly clear and compelling to you.

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Appendix: Additional Resources

“Our Reliable Faith” by Keith Lewis, under Lesson 6 “The Problem of the Bible” in the *Answering Skeptics* series
(singlefocusindy.org/answering-skeptics)

“Is The Bible Reliable?” by John Piper, under Lesson 6 “The Problem of the Bible” in the *Answering Skeptics* series
(singlefocusindy.org/answering-skeptics)

Lesson 1 “Introduction & Christianity” by Keith Lewis, in the *World Religions* series (singlefocusindy.org/world-religions)

“How Do We Know the Bible is God's Word?” by Michael Kruger
(thegospelcoalition.org/article/how-do-you-know-the-bible-is-gods-word)

“How Scripture Reveals It’s True—Entirely True” by John Piper
(thegospelcoalition.org/article/john-piper-on-how-scripture-reveals-its-true-entirely-true)