



## Introduction

Do you know what a Catholic evangelist is? It is someone who has committed himself to proclaiming the gospel, the message of who Jesus is and what He has done for us. A Catholic evangelist probably gave you this very pamphlet! In the course of sharing the gospel message, he most likely referred to the Bible. This is to be expected, since the Bible is where Catholics find the content for any gospel proclamation.

Now, the evangelist had the boldness to proclaim this message because he held the firm conviction that what the Bible reveals in its Old and New Testaments is true. Perhaps you are not so sure. You may have heard arguments from non-Christians that attempt to discredit the truth of the Bible, or makes the text sound ridiculous. It's difficult to accept the gospel message with confidence if the source for this message is potentially filled with errors!

It is necessary then, before anyone can seriously consider the gospel, to answer this fundamental question: Is the Bible true? Catholics believe that the Bible is true for three reasons: it is *reliable*, it is *historical*, and it is *inspired*. As such, it is a trustworthy source for the gospel message.

## The Bible Is Reliable

The reliability of the Bible is backed by strong evidence. Like other ancient documents, the original works (or "autographs") by the biblical authors are no longer available, but the wealth of manuscript evidence and other source material for the Bible provide an extraordinarily clear picture of what the authors originally penned.

The manuscript evidence is indeed truly remarkable. A "manuscript" is a handwritten copy of a text, either in whole or in part. Biblical scholars count around 12,000 Old Testament manuscripts. For the New Testament, there are 5,800 Greek manuscripts, 10,000 Latin manuscripts and 9,300 manuscripts in various other ancient languages. Add to this the approximately one million quotations of Scripture in the works of the Church Fathers (150 – 1300 AD) and you have something that is quite simply unparalleled. **There is no other ancient document that has such corroborated**

Not only are there an extraordinary number of manuscripts, but the manuscript themselves are in agreement on the vast majority of their content. By comparing the various manuscripts with one another, scholars have concluded that 99% of the approximately 138,000 words in the New Testament, only about 1,400 remain in doubt. The text of the New Testament is thus about 99% established, and the remaining 1% includes words and phrases that are incidental to Christian faith or practice.

Also adding to the reliability of the Bible, or at least to the New Testament, is the fact that the originals as well as many of our manuscripts can be dated within close proximity to the events they describe. The latest works of the Bible, the three letters of John, were written in 100 AD, only around 70 years after the death of Christ. The earliest work of the New Testament, Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians, was written in 50 AD! This means that when the New Testament was written, there would have been people alive at the time who were contemporaries of Christ and who could discredit any historical inaccuracies. This made it all the more necessary that the authors get it right the first time.

Like I said, many early manuscripts and source materials are available for biblical scholars to examine. For example, P52, the "John Rylands Fragment" of Jn 18:31-33, 37-38 dates to 125 AD, only 35 years after the Gospel of John was written! P46, the "Chester Beatty Papyrus" includes the bulk of Paul's letters and dates to around 200 AD. In all, there are 90 or so manuscripts from the first four centuries after the death of Christ. In addition, many of the works of the Church Fathers of even the first and second centuries contain quotations from Scripture.

When you have a large number of manuscripts and other source material in textual agreement on the vast majority of what they contain, then you have a rather solid basis for the autographs. This reliability enables scholars analyzing the actual works of the Bible and not distorted or incomplete versions of it. The next step is establishing the truth of the Bible to determine if it is *historical* and *inspired*.

## The Bible Is Historical

The term historical means that the Bible provides an accurate account of real events. While the Old Testament provides valuable historical information, when the question of the historicity of the Bible is raised, it is most often in reference to the Gospels. The Gospels are the books by Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John that give us an account of the lives of Jesus and the apostles. Since the gospel message is very much about what Jesus came to do for us, this message really lives or dies based on the historicity of the Gospels.

While some scholars insist that the Gospel writers sat down to devise fictional stories with theological meaning, or to defend their faith by investing ordinary events with supernatural import, many of the New Testament writers themselves tell us that their intentions were different. For example:

"For we did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty" (2 Pet 1:16).

"Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile

a narrative of the things which have been accomplished among us, just as they were delivered to us by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word, it seemed good to me also, having followed all things closely for some time past, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, that you may know the truth concerning the things of which you have been informed" (Lk 1:1-4).

"This is the disciple who is bearing witness to these things, and who has written these things; and we know that his testimony is true. But there are also many other things which Jesus did; were every one of them to be written, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written" (Jn 21:24-25).

Indeed, the New Testament writers intended to record real events as they actually occurred, not cleverly-devised myths. This intention of the original authors is important in considering the historical reliability of their works.

Furthermore, scholars have established various criteria for discerning whether or not a person, place, or event in Scripture is grounded in history. Of course, there is always debate on such things, but the following list is representative of scholarship in this area:

1. Historical congruence – Does the event coincide with known facts about history at that time?
2. Independent and early attestation – Do multiple sources close to the event corroborate it?
3. Embarrassment – If an event would be embarrassing to the author, it is unlikely to be fictional.
4. Dissimilarity – If an event challenges popular belief or practice, it is also unlikely to be fictional.
5. Semitisms – Does the event coincide with popular ways of speaking in Jesus' day?
6. Coherence – Is the event consistent with already-established facts about Jesus?

This criteria can be used to demonstrate that what the Gospels report about the lives of Jesus and the apostles truly transpired as the authors indicated.

For example, take the words of Jesus at the Last Supper, with which He prophesied that Peter would deny Him three times before the cock crowed. These words have *historical congruence*, the "cockcrow" referring to what ancient Romans called the bugle call for the third watch. His words have *independent and early attestation*, appearing as they do in all four Gospels (cf. Mt 26:33-35; Mk 14:29-31; Lk 22:33-34; Jn 13:36-38). They would certainly be an *embarrassment*, especially to Mark, who was a disciple of Peter. It is very unlikely that the Gospel writers would just make up the fact that the apostle who held the place of primacy among them actually denied that he even knew Jesus, let alone was a follower of His.