



What to say to Mormons ... Ch. 2 The Bible is Reliable

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Chapter 2 The Bible is Reliable [Back to contents]

If you ask a Mormon if he believes the Bible, he will refer to a Mormon document, *The Articles of Faith*, verse 8, which says:

We believe the Bible to be the word of God as far as it is translated correctly; we also believe the Book of Mormon to be the word of God.

Mormons will tell you they believe the Bible “as far as it is translated correctly.” Most Christians will agree with that statement. What Mormons won’t tell you, unless you ask, is that they do not believe the Bible has been translated correctly, but that it has been corrupted over the years.

Do you remember when your teacher played a game in class? She whispered something in the ear of three students in the front row, who whispered the message into the ear of the fellow student behind them, who in turn whispered into the ear of the student behind them, until the final three students in the back row received the message. Of course all three had something different to repeat. Mormon thought is if a message can change to that extent in five minutes, we cannot trust a message that has been passed around for 2,000 years! Mormons also claim that the number of different translations on the market evidences this corruption. If we know what the Bible originally said, why are so many translations available?

While the arguments of Mormons to discredit the

reliability of the Bible may seem persuasive on the surface, they collapse when looked at carefully. In this chapter we will see that the Bible is a reliable document that has been accurately preserved over thousands of years. Next, we will explain why so many translations exist. Finally, we will discuss how archaeology and secular history have confirmed the historical accuracy of much of the Bible. This third section will provide a ground for us to compare the accuracy of the *Book of Mormon*, which we will examine in the next chapter.

1. The text of the Bible is pure.

A. The New Testament. Most if not all of the New Testament was originally written in Greek. How do we know that the New Testament which we have today is what was originally written? Let’s take a look at the evidence that consists of thousands of ancient manuscripts, ancient versions, and quotations of the New Testament found in the writings of the early Church Fathers.

1) **Greek Manuscripts.** Approximately 5,000 manuscripts of the New Testament have survived in the original language.[5]

2) **Ancient Versions.** By the second century, the New Testament was being translated into different languages. Syriac, Latin, Coptic and other translations provide valuable sources from which to compare.

3) **Early Church Fathers.** Within 300 years of Christ, almost 36,000 quotations of the New Testament appear in the writings of the early Church Fathers. In fact, every verse in the New Testament is quoted but eleven.[6]

What does all of this mean? Let’s go back to grade-school. Remember our game? The teacher notes that mistakes occurred while passing around her message. Suppose another teacher goes around to several of those in the middle of each of our three lines and asks them what message they received. Then suppose he interviews others in the lines as well. After a while he will probably be able to determine where the errors occurred and by comparing what several of the students say, will be able to come back to a statement, which is very close if not exact to what was originally said. Likewise, although there are variations in the New Testament manuscripts, there are literally tens of thousands of

manuscripts from which to do a comparative study. And when scholars in the field of textual criticism do it, a text of the New Testament can be produced which is better than 99.5% pure to what the originals said.[7] And none of the less than one-half of one percent of what is in question affect any doctrine.

B. The Old Testament. The Old Testament was written in Hebrew before the New Testament (between 1400-400 B.C.). One issue on which Mormons, Jehovah's Witnesses, and Christians agree is Jesus and his apostles believed that the Old Testament was the inspired, uncorrupted Word of God.

Jesus' ministry was dedicated to teaching and fulfilling the Scriptures. When tempted, Jesus appealed to the Scriptures (Matthew 4:1-11). When answering questions concerning himself, he appealed to the Scriptures: "It is written ..." (Mark 9:12). At his arrest (Matthew 26:52-56), trial (Matthew 26:64), execution (Matthew 27:46; Luke 23:26-31; 23:46), and resurrection (Luke 24:27, 44-46), Jesus appealed to the Scriptures. Jesus cites one of Moses' statements found in Genesis as if God spoke it (Matthew 19:4-5). His apostles, likewise, viewed the Old Testament Scriptures as the inspired Word of God (2 Timothy 3:16; 2 Peter 1:21).

Mormons believe that although Jesus and his apostles had God's Word in their hands (i.e., the Old Testament), much of it has since been corrupted and, therefore, is not trustworthy. Is this true? Let's look at the evidence which consists of the Hebrew text which has been passed on for over one thousand years known as the Masoretic text, the Dead Sea Scrolls, ancient versions, and Old Testament verses cited in the New Testament.

1) **Masoretic Text.** The text of the Old Testament used by translators of the Bible is referred to as the Masoretic text, named after the Masoretes who meticulously copied and edited the text between A.D. 600-1000.

2) **Dead Sea Scrolls.** In 1946, hundreds of scrolls and fragments were found in eleven caves in northern Israel. Texts from every book of the Old Testament were found, with the lone exception of Esther. Of most importance are two Isaiah scrolls, which are dated between 200-50 B.C. One of them has been wonderfully preserved and

contains the book of Isaiah in its entirety. When this text of Isaiah was compared to the book of Isaiah in the Masoretic text, there was nearly a 100% correlation between the two, which indicated that the Hebrew text has been marvellously preserved from a time before Jesus until the present.

3) **Ancient Versions.** Two ancient versions are helpful when comparing them to the Hebrew text: the Septuagint and the Samaritan Pentateuch. The Septuagint was the Greek translation of the Old Testament used in Jesus' day and is quoted many times by the New Testament writers. If you were to translate the Septuagint back into Hebrew, the similarity to the Masoretic Text is striking. The Samaritan Pentateuch is the first five books of the Bible which were used by the Samaritans, a group of Jews which permanently separated themselves from the general Jewish population around 500 B.C. Again the similarities to the Masoretic Text are striking.

4) **Old Testament verses in the New Testament.** The writers of the New Testament cite verses from the Old Testament a total of 330 times![8] Most of these citations are from the Septuagint. Others are from the Hebrew texts. Once again there is an incredible correlation to the Old Testament that we have today.

How close can we get to a pure text? Approximately 90% of the text of the Old Testament is without any variation, regardless of the textual tradition.[9] Within the remaining 10%, the variances are insignificant, none of which affect any biblical doctrine. Most can be eliminated when certain errors are detected: obvious slips of the pen, an inadequate knowledge of the Hebrew language on the part of the translator,[10] partisan thinking,[11] and different dialects.[12] Therefore, when proper textual criticism is conducted, a text with a purity exceeding 95% results. The remaining uncertainties mostly amount to a simple discrepancy in word order.

Therefore, when the evidence is considered, we can confidently assert that the Bible in our possession today, both the Old and New Testaments, is a pure and trustworthy text we can rely on. Even scholars who do not believe the Bible refuse to levy the charge that the Bible has been corrupted over the years resulting in a text which we cannot be certain of. The Bible is a text

which has been preserved with amazing accuracy, far better than any other work of antiquity.

2. What about all the translations?

We have established that the Hebrew and Greek texts used today by translators are essentially pure to what the originals said. So why are there so many English translations of the Bible? Does this indicate that we cannot be certain what those Hebrew and Greek texts said?

It has been nearly 400 years since the *King James Version (KJV)* of the Bible was produced. The English language has changed considerably over that period of time. The orthography (i.e., the way a word was written) of 1611 is not readable to most of us today as anyone picking up a *KJV* from 1611 will immediately find. Likewise some spellings and word meanings are different today than four hundred years ago. For example, Psalm 5:6 in the *King James Version* reads:

Thou shalt destroy them that speak leasing. (KJV)

To “*speak leasing*” today might refer to a consumer going to a car dealership and discussing the leasing of an automobile. However, in Elizabethan English, the term “*leasing*” meant to lie. Modern translations “*update*” the language.

Thou dost destroy those who speak falsehood. (NASB)[13]

You destroy those who tell lies. (NIV)[14]

Consider 1 Corinthians 15:9 where Paul says:

For I am the least of the apostles, that am not meet to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. (KJV)

The word “*meet*” is no longer used in the sense of being worthy or deserving. The original text and the meaning of the Greek word remains unchanged, but our English translation of the word should be “*updated*” as our language changes. Modern translations have responded.

For I am the least of the apostles, who am not fit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. (NASB)

For I am the least of the apostles and do not even

deserve to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. (NIV)

English translations were also created to serve different purposes. If you have studied another language, for example French or Spanish, you know that the grammar of one language is different from the grammar of another. Some translations were made for the purpose of being a literal translation (almost a word for word accuracy). The *New American Standard Bible* is a good example of such a translation. Other translations were made for the purpose of being accurate but easier to read. The *New International Version* attempts to maintain accuracy while putting the message of the original Greek and Hebrew in today’s English vernacular. The *Living Bible* is not a translation but a paraphrase. It attempts to restate the meaning of the verse solely for ease of reading. The *New Living Translation* seeks to be an accurate translation while promoting a simpler vocabulary. So translations are not necessarily scholars disagreeing with one another, but language updates and different objectives.

The Mormon Scriptures affirm that Mormons believe the Bible is the Word of God “*as far as it is translated correctly*” (*Doctrine and Covenants*, Article of Faith 8). Since we can now know with a great deal of certainty what the original texts of the Bible said, the linguist can translate the Hebrew and Greek into English. An understanding of the role of different translations reveals that most of them faithfully and accurately render the message of the original languages.

3. Archaeology and history have confirmed the Bible.

Is the Bible myth or are the places and events described in it a part of human history? Many findings from archaeology have confirmed the historical accuracy of the Bible. In their book, *When Skeptics Ask*, Geisler and Brooks describe a fascinating archaeological find:

The excavation of Gezer in 1969 ran across a massive layer of ash that covered most of the mound. Sifting through the ash yielded pieces of Hebrew, Egyptian, and Philistine artifacts. Apparently all three cultures had been there at the same time. This puzzled researchers greatly until they realized that the Bible told them exactly what

they had found.[15]

What does the Bible say regarding Gezer?

For Pharaoh king of Egypt had gone up and captured Gezer, and burned it with fire, and killed the Canaanites [Philistines] who lived in the city, and had given it as a dowry to his daughter, Solomon's wife. So Solomon rebuilt Gezer... (1 Kings 9:16-17).

The Egyptians killed the Canaanites (Philistines) who lived in Gezer, burned the city and gave it to Solomon's wife. Solomon rebuilt it and populated it with Jews. The biblical account explains the ashes and the Hebrew, Egyptian, and Philistine artifacts.

The Smithsonian Institution's Department of Anthropology has an official statement on "THE BIBLE AS HISTORY." In it they say:

... much of the Bible, in particular the historical books of the old testament, are as accurate historical documents as any that we have from antiquity and are in fact more accurate than many of the Egyptian, Mesopotamian, or Greek histories. These Biblical records can be and are used as are other ancient documents in archeological work. For the most part, historical events described took place and the peoples cited really existed.[16]

Outside sources have confirmed much of the New Testament as well. Suetonius was an ancient Roman Historian who wrote in the very early part of the second century. In *The Twelve Caesars*, Suetonius writes:

Because the Jews at Rome caused continuous disturbances at the instigation of Chrestus, he expelled them from the city.[17] (Claudius, Section 25)

"Chrestus" may refer to Christ. However, what is of real interest is that the pagan historian says that the Emperor Claudius expelled the Jews from Rome. Approximately sixty years earlier Luke wrote:

"And he [Paul] found a certain Jew named Aquila, a native of Pontus, having recently come from

Italy with his wife Priscilla, because Claudius had commanded all the Jews to leave Rome." (Acts 18:2)

The New Testament, especially the writings of Luke, is filled with accurate historical data. So much that archaeologists and historians alike have been impressed. The famous archaeologist and once skeptic Sir William Ramsey wrote, "Luke is a historian of the first rank . . . this author should be placed along with the very greatest of historians." [18] The classical historian A.N. Sherwin-White writes, "... for Acts the confirmation of historicity is overwhelming ... any attempt to reject its basic historicity even in matters of detail must now appear absurd. Roman historians have long taken it for granted." [19] The spade of the archaeologist, the pen of ancient non-Christian historians, and tens of thousands of ancient manuscripts provide evidence that the Bible is a volume which is historically reliable and that its text has been preserved in a pure form. In other words, it is trustworthy. Unfortunately for the Mormon Church, as we shall see, the same cannot be said for their Scriptures.

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References:

[5] Bruce M. Metzger. *The Text Of The New Testament* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), p.36.

[6] Norman L. Geisler & William E. Nix. *From God to Us* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1981), p.157.

[7] A.T. Robertson, *An Introduction to the Textual Criticism of the New Testament* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1925), p. 22, and N.L. Geisler and W.E. Nix, *General Introduction to the Bible* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1986), p. 365. Bruce M. Metzger gives no accuracy percentage but in the Introduction to *The Greek New Testament*, Third Edition (Stuttgart: United Bible Societies, 1985), he explains that textual variants have been assigned a letter of "A," "B," "C," and "D" to indicate the degree of certainty for the particular variant. On p.xiii he states, "By far the greatest proportion of the text represents what may be called an A degree of certainty."

[8] For a complete listing, see Gleason L. Archer & G.C. Chirichigno. *Old Testament Quotations in the New Testament: A Complete Survey* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1983).

[9] Bruce K. Waltke in "The Reliability Of The Old Testament Text," Willem A. Van Gemeren, ed. *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology & Exegesis*, Volume 1 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1997), p.65.

[10] This was certainly a problem with the Septuagint. For a brief article on the Septuagint, see G.W. Bromiley, ed. *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, Volume Four (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1993), pp.400- 409.

[11] Such changes are obvious within the Samaritan Pentateuch in which the Samaritans made minor changes to justify some of their differences with the Jews.

[12] As is evident in the Qumran tradition in the Dead Sea Scrolls which contains different spellings and grammatical structures than the standard Hebrew of the day.

[13] New American Standard Bible.

[14] New International Version.

[15] Geisler and Brooks. *When Skeptics Ask* (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1990), p.198.

[16] The Smithsonian's official statement may be obtained by request to: Anthropology Outreach Office, Department of Anthropology, National Museum of Natural History MRC 112, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC 20560.

[17] Suetonius, *The Twelve Caesars* (England: Penguin Books Ltd, 1989), p.202.

[18] William M. Ramsey. *The Bearing of Recent Discovery on the Trustworthiness of the New Testament* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1915), p.222.

[19] A.N. Sherwin-White. *Roman Society and Roman Law in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1963), p.189.

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