

Bible Reliability: M-A-P-S to Guide You through Bible Reliability

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Use M-A-P-S to guide you through Bible reliability:

Manuscripts, Archaeology, Prophecy, Statistics

Have you tried to show someone the historical reliability of the Scriptures, and not known where to start? A quick trip to your local well-stocked Christian bookstore likely will overwhelm you. Where among the dozens of impressive, comprehensive reference books should you start?

Fortunately, while there is a wealth of information available to support the reliability of Scripture, you don't have to burn the midnight oil to give a reasonable answer to those who ask, "How can we know the Bible is reliable?" Four basic principle chart your way to understanding basic biblical reliability.

To help you remember, I've developed the simple acronym "**MAPS.**" Remember the word **MAPS** and you will be able to chart Bible reliability.

Bible Reliability-Manuscripts

Manuscripts relates to the tests used to determine the reliability of the extant manuscript copies of the *original* documents penned by the Scripture writers (we do not possess these originals). In determining manuscript reliability, we deal with the question: How can we test to see that the text we possess in the manuscript *copies* is an accurate rendition of the *original*? There are three main manuscript tests: the **B**ibliographic, **E**yewitness, and **E**xternal (a second acronym — **BEE** — will help you remember these).

The bibliographic test considers the quantity of manuscripts and manuscript fragments, and also the time span between the original documents and our earliest copies. The more copies, the better able we are to work back to the original. The closer the time span between the copies and the original, the less likely it is that serious textual error would creep in. The Bible has stronger bibliographic support than any classical literature — including Homer, Tacitus, Pliny, and Aristotle.

We have more than 14,000 manuscripts and fragments of the Old Testament of three main types: (a) approximately 10,000 from the Cairo Geniza (storeroom) find of 1897, dating back as far as about AD. 800; (b) about 190 from the Dead Sea Scrolls find of 1947-1955, the oldest dating back to 250-200 B.C.; and (c) at least 4,314 assorted other copies. The short time between the original Old Testament manuscripts (completed around 400 B.C.) and the first extensive copies (about 250 B.C.) — coupled with the more than 14,000 copies that have been discovered — ensures the trustworthiness of the Old Testament text. The earliest quoted verses (Num. 6:24-26) date from 800-700 B.C.

The same is true of the New Testament text. The abundance of textual witnesses is amazing. We possess over 5,300 manuscripts or portions of the (Greek) New Testament — almost 800 copied before A.D. 1000. The time between the original composition and our earliest copies is an unbelievably short 60 years or so. The overwhelming *bibliographic* reliability of the Bible is clearly evident.

The eyewitness document test (“E”), sometimes referred to as the *internal test*, focuses on the eyewitness credentials of the authors. The Old and New Testament authors were eyewitnesses of — or *interviewed* eyewitnesses of — the majority of the events they described. Moses participated in and was an eyewitness of the remarkable events of the Egyptian captivity, the Exodus, the forty years in the desert, and Israel’s final encampment before entering the Promised Land. These events he chronicled in the first five books of the Old Testament.

The New Testament writers had the same eyewitness authenticity. Luke, who wrote the Books of Luke and Acts, says that he gathered eyewitness testimony and “carefully investigated everything” (Luke 1:1-3). Peter reminded his readers that the disciples “were eyewitnesses of [Jesus’] majesty” and “did not follow cleverly invented stories” (2 Pet. 1:16). Truly, the Bible affirms the *eyewitness* credibility of its writers.

The external evidence test looks *outside* the texts themselves to ascertain the historical reliability of the historical events, geographical locations, and cultural consistency of the biblical texts. Unlike writings from other world religions which make no historical references or which fabricate histories, the Bible refers to historical events and assumes its historical accuracy. The Bible is *not only* the inspired Word of God, it is also a history book — and the historical assertions it makes have been proven time and again.

Many of the events, people, places, and customs in the New Testament are confirmed by secular historians who were almost contemporaries with New Testament writers. Secular historians like the Jewish Josephus (before A.D. 100), the Roman Tacitus (around A.D. 120), the Roman Suetonius (A.D. 110), and the Roman governor Pliny Secundus (A.D. 100-110) make direct reference to Jesus or affirm one or more historical New Testament references. Early church leaders such as Irenaeus, Tertullian, Julius Africanus, and Clement of Rome — all writing before A.D. 250 — shed light on New Testament historical accuracy. Even skeptical historians agree that the New Testament is a remarkable historical document. Hence, it is clear that there is strong *external evidence* to support the Bible's manuscript reliability.

Bible Reliability-Archaeology

Returning to our **MAPS** acronym, we have established the first principle, manuscript reliability. Let us consider our second principle, archaeological evidence. Over and over again, comprehensive field work (archaeology) and careful biblical interpretation affirms the reliability of the Bible. It is telling when a secular scholar must revise his biblical criticism in light of solid archaeological evidence.

For years critics dismissed the Book of Daniel, partly because there was no evidence that a king named Belshazzar ruled in Babylon during that time period. However, later archaeological research confirmed that the reigning monarch, Nabonidus, appointed Belshazzar as his co-regent while he was away from Babylon.

One of the most well-known New Testament examples concerns the Books of Luke and Acts. A biblical skeptic, Sir William Ramsay, trained as an archaeologist and then set out to disprove the historical reliability of this portion of the New Testament. However, through his painstaking Mediterranean archaeological trips, he became converted as — one after another — of the historical statements of Luke were proved accurate. Archaeological evidence thus confirms the trustworthiness of the Bible.

Bible Reliability-Prophecy

The third principle of Bible reliability is Prophecy, or predictive ability. The Bible records predictions of events that could not be known or predicted by chance or common sense. Surprisingly, the predictive nature of many Bible passages

was once a popular argument (by liberals) *against* the reliability of the Bible. Critics argued that the prophecies actually were written after the events and that editors had merely dressed up the Bible text to look like they contained predictions made before the events. Nothing could be further from the truth, however. The many predictions of Christ's birth, life and death (see below) were indisputably rendered more than a century before they occurred as proven by the Dead Sea Scrolls of Isaiah and other prophetic books as well as by the Septuagint translation, all dating from earlier than 100 B.C.

Old Testament prophecies concerning the Phoenician city of Tyre were fulfilled in ancient times, including prophecies that the city would be opposed by many nations (Ezek. 26:3); its walls would be destroyed and towers broken down (26:4); and its stones, timbers, and debris would be thrown into the water (26:12). Similar prophecies were fulfilled concerning Sidon (Ezek. 28:23; Isa. 23; Jer. 27:3-6; 47:4) and Babylon (Jer. 50:13, 39; 51:26, 42-43, 58; Isa. 13:20-21).

Since Christ is the culminating theme of the Old Testament and the Living Word of the New Testament, it should not surprise us that prophecies regarding Him outnumber any others. Many of these prophecies would have been impossible for Jesus to deliberately conspire to fulfill — such as His descent from Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (Gen. 12:3; 17:19; Num. 24:21-24); His birth in Bethlehem (Mic. 5:2); His crucifixion with criminals (Isa. 53:12); the piercing of His hands and feet at the crucifixion (Ps. 22:16); the soldiers' gambling for His clothes (Ps. 22:18); the piercing of His side and the fact that His bones were not broken at His death (Zech. 12:10; Ps. 34:20); and His burial among the rich (Isa. 53:9). Jesus also predicted His own death and resurrection (John 2:19-22). *Predictive Prophecy* is a principle of Bible reliability that often reaches even the hard-boiled skeptic!

Bible Reliability-Statistics

Our fourth **MAPS** principle works well with predictive prophecy, because it is Statistically preposterous that any or all of the Bible's very specific, detailed prophecies could have been fulfilled through chance, good guessing, or deliberate deceit. When you look at some of the improbable prophecies of the Old and New Testaments, it seems incredible that skeptics — knowing the authenticity and historicity of the texts — could reject the statistical verdict: the Bible is the Word of God, and Jesus Christ is the Son of God, just as Scripture predicted many times and in many ways.

The Bible was written over a span of 1500 years by forty different human authors in three different languages (Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek), on hundreds of subjects. And yet there is one consistent, noncontradictory theme that runs through it all: *God's redemption of humankind*. Clearly, Statistical probability is a powerful indicator of the trustworthiness of Scripture.

The next time someone denies the reliability of Scripture, just remember the acronym **MAPS**, and you will be equipped to give an answer and a reason for the hope that lies within you (1 Pet. 3:15). *Manuscripts, Archaeology, Prophecy, and Statistics* not only chart a secure course on the turnpikes of skepticism but also demonstrate definitively that the Bible is indeed divine rather than human in origin.