



## Responding to Bible trustworthiness

18 messages

This is a series of 3 emails where a dear friend and I spoke about the trustworthiness of the Bible. That friend was struggling with trusting that they could trust the Bible and could trust they could understand what the Bible is saying. I spoke with them about it. I took out all the personal details. I also took out any holding emails that promised we'd get back to each other soon. My final email was to another friend summarizing what happened after the 3rd email.

I hope this gives you language if you need clarity on why the Bible is trustworthy and how to help your friends.

Blessings,  
Belah

**To My Friend from Me, (Email 1)**

I hope you're doing well! My goal is to say hard things without breaking our connection ♥

A) Firstly, I have a lot more to learn, and I will continue to pursue apologetics so I can gain more and more and get my understanding more and more correct.

I miss you. I miss my friends. With great sadness, I can't ignore these issues that are counter to historic Christian doctrine.

My researching, praying, and responding thoroughly is motivated by that love. I do think [redacted] is wrong, and my aim here is to plant a seed of doubt about the skepticism, and a seed toward faith. (Can two seeds be planted at the same time? Lol ;)

D) [redacted] I think it's much easier to be a skeptic; it's much harder to present something for faith to rest on.

[redacted] have traded in their faith for a high level of skepticism of historic Christianity and they pick and choose which parts of it they like to carry forward—they stand on parts of the Bible that inform morality to critique the parts they decide are immoral.

It isn't logical to stand on the Bible and knock out it's foundations at the same time or it all falls.



Skeptics are often just skeptical of others' faith but not skeptical of their own skepticism.

E)  
One thing I'd like you to consider before reading further is whether or not you would be open to being persuaded by what I have here.

Regardless of what I write, are you more committed—have stronger faith in—your own skepticism?

If not open to being persuaded, then what are the real reasons you are skeptical of the Bible? Is it what you've written or other things?

That would be my invitation to you -- to have a bit of curiosity and openness to being skeptical of your own presupposed skepticism.

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I underlined the major points you make that I take issue with and tried to encapsulate them below.

**Quote taken from a previous email my friend sent to me:**

*G) How we hold scripture. If you read the articles above about the 4 words that modern English Bibles translate simply as "hell" you will begin to scrape the surface of how very different the English translation of the Bible is from its original forms. This is just a fact. Many people have tried to translate the Bible, and with those translations, they have lost nuances, changed words, added words and in some cases just got it wrong.*

*I don't speak Greek and I didn't get a degree in Bible study.*



So if you have just 5 manuscripts and every one of them has issues because you're dealing with several copies, you'll get the real message between the 5... but we're dealing with 25,000+ (not including early church fathers' writings that referenced scripture a lot -- over 1,000,000 scriptural references in their manuscripts). But that is part of the work of textual criticism, to sort out what was the real message. But even the untrained can get it correct when they've done unofficial experiments when Dr. Wallace teaches this at churches.

### What are the variants?

Because the more manuscripts you have, the more variants you'll find, there are a lot of variants ~200k - ~400k. The vast majority, however, are misspellings, which are the most common. The next most frequent are things like "an" vs. "a", "John" vs "Johnn", but they have 0 impact on meaning. The next most popular may be an error of a similar-looking word in Greek than another, and in context, only the other similar-looking word makes sense.

Only 1% of all the variants have any meaningful differences in how it should be translated. Yet, they do not take issue with any essential Christian doctrine.

The most notorious issues:

- a) Rom 5:1 did Paul say "let us have peace" or "we have peace". The difference amounts to one letter in the Greek. Scholars are split on this, but the main point is it doesn't have any bearing on the teaching of scripture.
- b) 1 John 1:4 "thus we are writing these things that our joy may be complete" or "thus we are writing these things that your joy may be complete." So the meaning is unclear, but no foundational Christian beliefs are in jeopardy. Either way, the obvious point is that the writing of this letter brings joy.

But, [REDACTED] -- those are the *most* notorious. That's minuscule. There are a few others of note -- but there are very reasonable explanations -- I just don't want to waste the email going into.

### Did the scribes change the Bible?

Yes, the scribes sometimes changed the text. The reason was to make it more specific. Because of the early churches started reading sections of the New Testament, it was easier to be more specific -- when speaking of Jesus, so some changed "he" to "Jesus".

If there was a rogue scribe -- of 25,000+ texts and 1,000,000 quoted scriptures, to compare it to, I think we'd be able to easily see who it was and sift those out.

Some important tests they do that help discern if it's accurate to the original:

- 1 - What motive does someone have to change it (Did the early believers get rich and famous because of it? No, they suffered, tortured, died, crucified upside down for these writings even though they never saw the prophecies or many many words of Jesus come to pass in their lifetime.);
- 2 - Does the text further the agenda of the culture for which it was changed? (The writings we have representing who Jesus is, does the opposite of furthering an agenda of power in this world);
- 3 - Embarrassment (This one is my favorite. Tampering with the text would be in order to make your side look the best, so you would remove things that make you look embarrassed. So, why would apparent contradictions in eye-witness testimony be *left in*? Why would Jesus' messy emotions (very ungod-like) be left in? Why would Jesus be humiliated on the cross -- the *most humiliating* death back then, only reserved for slaves or rebels? Why include the many places Jesus says things that didn't come to pass yet? Why include things that seem to contradict each other on first pass? And *many many* more embarrassments that were left in because they were true.)

I am all for learning contextually to understand it more but to cast doubt on the vast majority of scripture because you're not 100% sure about ~.05% of scriptures that don't impact essential Christian doctrine isn't ok.

I want to invite you to have that seed of doubt: Could you be undermining faith in Jesus by not trusting that you can a) trust the accuracy of "the *closest* approximation that we have to the words of Jesus and his early followers". b) trust that *you* can understand it.

I want to invite that seed of faith:

You do have the Bible, it is accurate, and you can know it is true.

Lord, I pray for [REDACTED] I ask for her heart to be drawn towards Yourself. Lord, I trust You with her and trust that You will reveal truth to her. Thank you God that Your precious blood was spilt so we could know You, worship You, and be with You.

Love you,

Belah

Ps This email is based on several books: Case for Christ, Case for the Real Jesus, Another Gospel (highly recommend!); experts' teachings/podcasts: Lee Strobel, Daniel B. Wallace, Alisa Childers, Neil Shenvi, Becket Cook and my thoughts.

Pps would you please pray over this? God wants you to know His truth and if you're seeking, He's not going to hide it from you.



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Mon, Aug 15, 2022 at 2:18 PM

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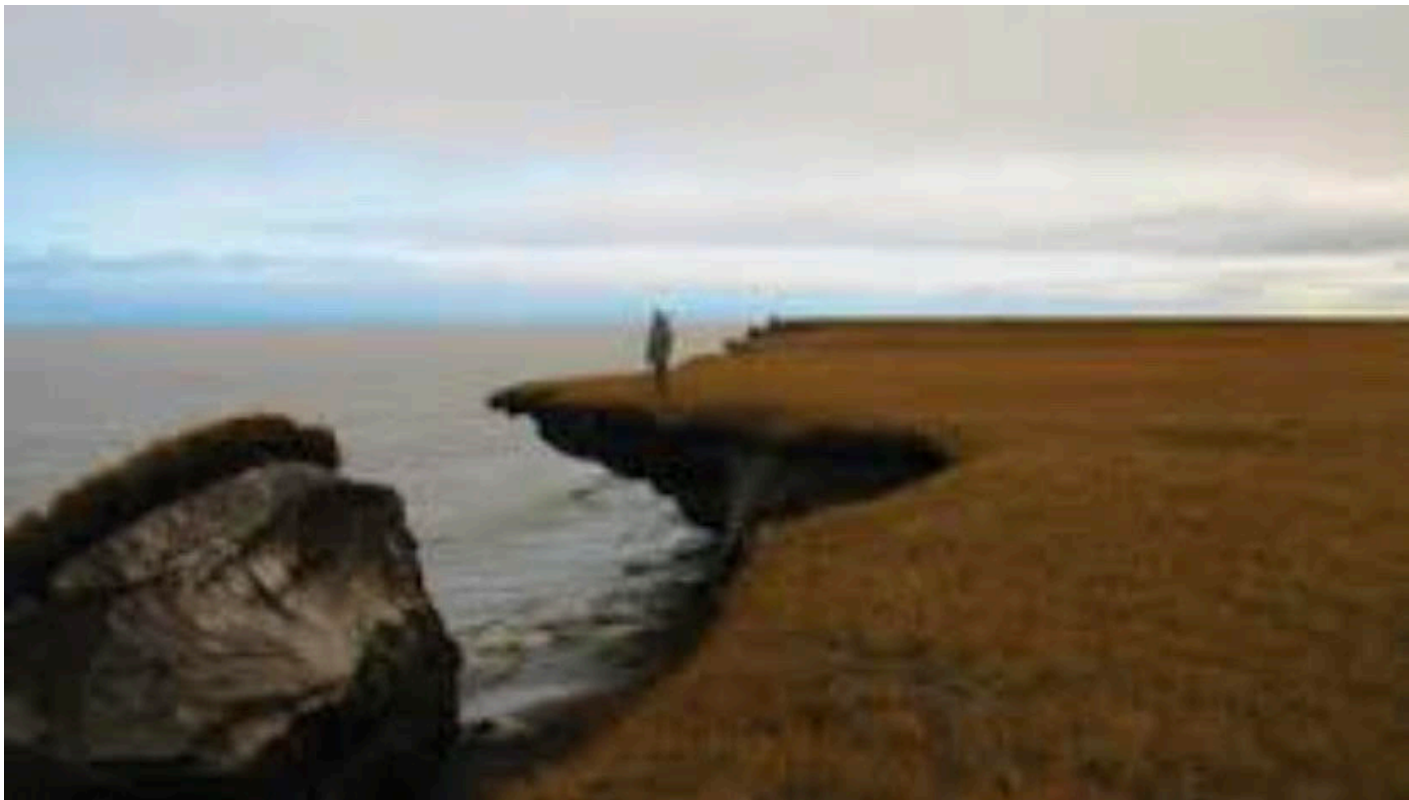
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It isn't logical to stand on the Bible and knock out it's foundations at the same time or it all falls.



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Mon, Aug 29, 2022 at 4:49 PM

Hi love,

## From My Friend to Me, (Email 2)

Thanks for this email. I've been thinking and praying about this response for some time now. I hope that you can take my response and hear it with the very best inflections, and know that I am so hopeful that any differences in our views will not stand in the way of our friendship ( or in the way of your friendships with the rest of the people [REDACTED]).

So I suppose I'll start with your assessment of my perception of the Bible. You perceive that I am 10% - 30% sure we've got the English translation right. That was jarring (and a bit hurtful) for me to read, but I recognize you are not saying this to be hurtful. I don't know what percentage I might ascribe to this. In honesty, I have never thought about it and I think it would be quite difficult for me to do, as I just don't know enough of Greek and Hebrew to do my own translation.

I believe, from my own personal study and studies that I have done [REDACTED] that there are some verses in the Bible which have been translated in ways that are not what the scribes intended. We need only look to the vast number of English translations of the Bible to see the evidence that the Greek and Hebrew the scribes recorded has been translated in many different ways. Can we agree on this? It would be impossible to look at the dozens, and dozens of English translations and come to the assessment that they are all 100% in alignment with the original Greek and Hebrew. That just can't be. They all have slightly (and in some cases, glaringly) different takes on the same words. I think this is something we can agree on.

I'm also quite familiar with the Case for Christ and the proofpoints you outlined from it in your last email. I found it a very good book and have read it and referred to it on numerous occasions. I like the arguments it lays out about why we can have faith in the Bible, and that it has recorded true events. I also agree that there are insignificant inconsistencies which are not consequential between the various scrolls that have been collected, documenting scripture. On this we agree - 100%.

The area where it seems we disagree, is that I believe there are words that were written in Hebrew and Greek, recorded by scribes, that were translated into English in ways that bring meaning to the text that the scribes did not intend.

That doesn't mean I don't believe that the Bible is trustworthy. Not at all. It means that I believe study of the English Bible, that really gets to the meaning the scribes intended, requires some investigation. It is not inaccessible to me. But it requires some effort. This is effort that I'm sure God is happy for me to make, as it brings me closer and closer to the spirit of what he inspired to be recorded in scripture. The effort I'm describing includes reading various translations of the English Bible and reflecting on their differences, doing Google searches of specific passages and words to understand what the Greek and Hebrew words of those passages meant, reading articles and books about Scripture, listening to podcasts and sermons, participating in Bible studies - all typical parts of study and Christian life.

There is an entire community of Biblical scholars who are deeply entrenched in the original translations of the Bible - particularly on words that have been translated in ways that have excluded people from the Church, or that seemed to support atrocities like Chattle slavery and even Anti-Semitism.

My assertion is something that I believe you and I agree on: that context matters.

And part of context, is the original language something is written in. I believe you and I are in agreement that the Bible does not condone the form of slavery that was inflicted on Africans who were stolen from their homes and forced to work in bondage for generations. That is not the type of servitude that was common in the time the Bible was written, when indentured servants would repay their debts and then be set free. And yet, that context is not present in the English translations. Those verses which seem to condone "slavery" (in quotes because the modern meaning is so different from the meaning of the 1st-century scribes) have throughout the centuries been used to justify the enslavement of Black people. This is an atrocity the effects of which we are still feeling and living with today.

I bring this up as I believe it is something we agree upon, an instance in the Bible where the English translation left out the critical context of the time the Bible was written in, to devastating effects.

I do not believe this is the only instance of this happening. Having this understanding doesn't make me have less faith in God, or in the Bible. I say that because my faith is in God. I believe in Jesus, and that he is who he said he was, and that he rose from the dead. And because of that faith, I can feel secure. Even though there are things in the English translation of the Bible that I think lack the meaning and context the scribes intended them to have, I don't have fear that I'm "knocking out the foundation of the Bible." These inaccuracies are SO far from the foundation of the Bible, and my faith (though many circles of Christianity have made the verses in question - ones that have been attributed to discussing homosexuality and hell, the cornerstones of their faith). The foundation of my faith is Jesus. This is also the position of the [REDACTED] team and staff.

If I were to summarize my thoughts on this I would say that I think understanding the context (e.g. cultural relevance, original language, time period, intended audience) of the Bible is very important to understanding the true, intended meaning of the words.

The English translation does not always include this context (and I think the slavery example is a very strong example of this).

Reading the English translation of the Bible alone, without going deeper into the context, can lead readers to have very different conclusions about what the scribes intended the text to say.

I recognize that it is a somewhat scary thought, to think that so many Christians are reading words that they are certain were translated correctly - but that are actually quite different from the original Greek and Hebrew. I think living in this space of tension and yet, choosing to have faith in Jesus, is even more difficult than choosing not to explore the original texts, and all the context that it provides. Living in this tension means opening ourselves up to the possibility that we have misunderstood what God was saying. And that we may have acted on those beliefs to the detriment of others (e.g. enslavement of Black people, or exclusion of same-sex couples from the loving acceptance of a faith family and all aspects of spiritual life, for instance).

I find it a bit less scary to do this investigation in community with other believers who are similarly curious, puzzled and open to learning more and more about the Bible. I think this is one reason why God wants us to follow him as part of a church, so that we learn from one another, wrestle with passages that are difficult to discern, and get support when we feel confusion and doubt.

I recognize that this way of doing church is not for everyone, but I don't think it means I am not a Christian, or that my church is not Christian. I hope that we can agree to disagree on this point, and to respect one another's way of engaging with Scripture, even if it's not the way we would choose or that we necessarily think is best. At the end of the day - we both love Jesus and are deeply committed to loving God and loving people. I hope that we can rest and dwell on what unifies us, rather than on the few points that seem to divide us.

I love you dear friend. If you'd like to discuss this more, I am here for it.



Tue, Aug 30, 2022 at 1:54 PM







Sun, Sep 4, 2022 at 11:41 AM


### To My Friend from Me (Email 3)

So... yeah I mean it's hard not to speak/email passionately about the biggest passion I have in all eternity and to someone I love so much. I hope you know that is why I write and with that conviction. And it's wonderful you're continuing to engage, really.

—  
I realize pinning a percentage on your level of faith... in your understanding the true nature of the Bible's meaning was presumptuous. But maybe that's a good thing that it jarred you.

I would encourage you to ponder. Because I pinned low, you were hurt. But you haven't offered a better number. Where are you on your faith in the Bible — the “best approximation of Jesus words”. Because if your faith is in Jesus... as you say: He is revealed “best” in the Bible. No where else is He better revealed, according to you.

Thus, your knowledge of who Jesus is comes from the Bible. If you're not sure about knowing the NT accuracy and your understanding of it, how sure are you that you are knowing Jesus?

Yes  the Bible IS the foundation of your faith. By your skepticism, your knocking out your faith.

—  
I agree context matters. Your example of slavery is a scary one, but I don't think it fits quite right.

A- There were plenty of Christians who were abolitionists based on the Bible and understood chattel slavery was wrong, even possibly without the original cultural context or masters degrees in Greek.

B- Also, it's not like there were verses that said “thou shalt enslave others”. And the slaveowners were just coming with a humble heart, trying to follow scripture and they just didn't know what type of slavery to impose (indentured servants versus chattel slavery).

C- The truth is, the slaveowners were selfish and greedy (which is against the Bible) and wanted to enslave people for their own gain. So they wriggled around some verses to justify what they wanted to do anyway.

They had an agenda before coming to the Bible that was informing how they read it. Which is why they got it wrong.

Coming to the Bible with our own agenda isn't good.



—  
I am not saying it's possible to dismantle our own agenda completely and read nothing into the text, but if our posture is “critical, questioning and probing” that's not really a “contrite and humble heart” that God esteems.

—  
The question is: when does OUR agenda stop and God start to rule?

As in, when do we say:

Ok.

It's alright.



I understand the Bible enough to say: "x is wrong and y is right".

When?

When do I have enough context, translation, training, education, cultural background, community input, wrestling, prayer...

to die to myself, pick up my (uncomfortable/humiliating/negative-feeling) cross, and FOLLOW Jesus.

Remember, you said He is "best" displayed through the Bible.

Who are we following if not His words?

When does my intuition (subjectively informed by my own current culture, experience, parental influence, mental health, language, historical context, ethnic background, etc etc etc) stop dictating what part of the Bible missed the mark and which part of the Bible is actually right?

When?

What you've described feels less like FOLLOWING Jesus, but FOLLOWING our own intuition.

—  
This is where it's really personal:

That territory doesn't work for me.

I know very well where my mind will take me if it doesn't have some — outside of myself — truth to stand on.

[Redacted]

[Redacted]

[Redacted]

[Redacted]

[Redacted]

[Redacted]

[Redacted] I need concrete — outside of myself — truth.

Where I can say: "this is what I'm thinking, does it line up with unchanging scripture? No. Ok that's garbage. Phew! That would've been bad."

—  
I mentioned in my email there are lots of translations, and reasons for them, they're helpful to see the same truth through different angles. And there is always more to learn, but my posture is seeking to be molded by scripture not the other way around.

To your point, I might miss the mark every so often because I was wrong about a piece had I done more skeptical work I might not have missed it. But based on what I mentioned in the last email — my faith in the Bible is safely founded by LOTS of backing... enough to live my life based upon it.

—  
Shifting topic a bit...

How do you unify the body of Christ — many millions if not billions of believers — around everyone following their own intuition?

Wasn't Jesus clear He wanted us unified?

Maybe you say, progressive Christians are generally unified.

So, by what standard are they unifying? What is there new belief system? What is there new articulated unifying thoughts articulated? Ie their scripture/creed

And why is THAT more correct than what we have? Maybe that's wrong too.

—

But then I wonder... maybe you don't agree Jesus said that? Was his desire for our unification mistranslated as well?

See... What verse in the Bible are you not suspect of?

Because I can't quote anything that you won't say might be a mistranslation or taken out of context.

Even if you learned Greek, maybe the Greek has changed over the years and so you really don't understand what you think you do. Maybe your teachers were (necessarily) informed by their cultural context and taught you poorly.

It's like nothing productive can get done in your extremely skeptical worldview.

—

I'd like you to take moment to look at the fruit of this intense skepticism.

Does this way of looking at the Bible draw you towards God? Does it fill you with awe for your Creator?

Reverence. Does it make you want to fall on your knees in worship? Ever?

Unworthy and desperately grateful of His tender care and love for us?

I wonder what fruit do you see in yourself and your relationship with God, from looking at the Bible this way... (The best evidence of the God you say you serve).

—

Imagine this...

That the God of everything you have ever seen or imagined, creator of all of us, every detail, loves us, stooped so low, to come to earth and TEACH us and SHOW us who He was and chose to even sacrifice Himself.

And the evidence, the record, the thing that proves to us it all happened, the thing that testifies of it all, without it we wouldn't know — as you say, the "best" evidence of it happening — that He gave us, which is a LOT, at minimum reaching literally 3.5 Empire State buildings high...

... we approach with a "critical, questioning, probing spirit".



—

☒ I'm not smart enough for that. I never will be.

I'm dumb (compared to humans, I might have my moments) in terms of this life — I need to follow.

I am humbly grateful I have Him. His word. That is faith... and as articulated in my last email, it is well-founded.

The Bible is so wise. It's just so wise. So wise.

I wasn't created to be God. Nothing happened when I said "let there be light".

I was created to worship God, to Follow God. To be in awe of God.

Jesus, as revealed in the Bible, is who I FOLLOW.

I come to the Bible to shaped. To be molded. To be transformed. To encounter the man who saved me.

I'm not interested in what I think. I know I'm messed up. I'm interested in who He is. And who He created me to be.

I put my faith there and I leave it there.

This is not a little difference, [redacted] It's a night and day posture of your heart. It's who you actually follow.

Who do you follow, [redacted]?

I invite you to repent of your pride and take up your cross and FOLLOW Jesus.



Passionately,

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Wed, Sep 21, 2022 at 12:06 PM

(My sending a summary email to someone else about what happened.)

I reread this and am so grateful I had the courage to send. And I feel God's spirit in it.

I meant to clarify something when we talked. But we haven't about this. None of the first email I sent was based on Case for Christ. I was starting to read it (1st chapter) so I listed it in my "bibliography" at the bottom but I shouldn't have. It didn't come from there. It was informed mostly by awesome books: Another Gospel? and Case for the Real Jesus and those other authors/experts. I needed to get the facts clear, so I had to dig into apologetics resources.

I also wanted to let you know that [redacted] wrote a week later and said [redacted] misses me and needs to pause this discussion because it's bad for [redacted] mental health. [redacted] hopes our friendship can weather this disagreement and we can get together soon.

I feel at peace that I did what I was supposed to. I feel I can leave it and pray [redacted] and trust God that I planted and important seed and didn't hide in fear (Paul—for one—was tortured and ultimately killed for calling people to repent). Over and over God's people called for people to repent.

This was my moment. And I won't keep pursuing it unless [redacted] brings it up. [redacted]

I don't regret this at all. I feel confident this was God's leading. These are the verses I felt coming to my attention over and over again while I was drafting that most recent email.

2 Cor 7:8

I am not sorry that I sent that severe letter to you, though I was sorry at first, for I know it was painful to you for a little while. Now I am glad I sent it, not because it hurt you, but because the pain caused you to repent and change your ways.

Prov 27:6

Wounds from a sincere friend are better than many kisses from an enemy.

Just felt it important to share...

Love you and hope we can talk soon!!

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