

“Is the Bible, as written, completely reliable or are there mistakes?”

This is a good question. If we believe that the Bible is the foundation of our faith, then knowing that it is telling us the truth is vitally important.

In short, the Bible is absolutely reliable.

As evangelicals we confess that the Bible is inerrant. This means that the Bible is without errors.

We also confess that the Bible is verbally and plenary inspired. What this means is that each word of the Bible is inspired by God. This goes back to what Jesus says, when He refers to every “jot and tittle” in Matthew 5:18. For Jesus, even the crossing of the “T” and the dotting of the “I” had God’s finger prints on it. In sum, saying that the Word of God is inspired verbally and plenary is a response to some that would say that the Bible is inspired “thought by thought” or that it is the reflection or opinion of men who experienced God and wrote about it. No, each word is inspired by God and is without error.

So in sum, the important thing is that God’s word is completely reliable because each word in it is God’s word, and therefore cannot have any error in it.

Now I will give a little more detail on how we get there, if you would like to read further.

I want to address three things you say above: 1) “as it is written”; 2) “are there mistakes”; and 3) how we know what God’s word is; that is, how do we know what the Bible is?

“As Written”

So first, let’s talk about your phrase “as written”, since that assumes a lot — though I think I know what you are saying.

If we look at our English Bibles, we can often take for granted what got us here. Many stages are covered before we can ever pick up a pew Bible or a study Bible and read.

First, there is collecting texts in their original languages; Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek. These texts have been found in many fragments and forms: animal skin called vellum, papyri which is an early form of paper, and other forms. Scripture has been collected in small collections and in large collections, meaning we might just have scriptural selections that are collected together for teaching, and we might have entire corpuses like the Minor Prophets in one scroll. And finally, we have Scriptures collected in scrolls and in books (or codices).

Once all the texts are collected (and this process is an ongoing one, since archeological digs are still giving us more with which to work — the most impressive of them would be the recent Qumran discoveries and the Cairo Ganeza finds) the hard work begins of compiling the texts and comparing the texts. Where are they the same and where are they different? When they are different, why? If the differences are not easily solved by simply understanding that a scribe got sleepy or distracted and skipped a line of copy, then we need to appeal to scriptural translations in other languages; which might include Latin, Syriac, etc; and/or consider where the differing texts originate from geographically (since that matters according to how scribes from different locations would copy texts), the age of the text, and how many texts attest to a certain reading (but a majority vote does not always win, as it were, but the cumulative evidence of all considerations from above).

It is important to note that in all the 100 thousand variants, or differences, among manuscripts that we have found in our study, there are only three clear instances where things appear to be intentionally changed, and those instances do not affect the overall meaning of the Bibles' message, or even the book in which it is found. Those three areas to which I am referring are in the New Testament at the end of Mark, verses 16:9-20; John 7:53-8:11 (which I actually believe is historical, but not by the hand of John, himself. In sum, it was likely an additional story added to the end of John's gospel as one of the examples John *could have* written, and was done so faithfully since the characters appear unexaggerated.); and finally the trinitarian saying inserted in 1 John 5:7-8. These texts are called "spurious", which means they lack authentic qualities. *This means for us* that they should not be trusted if we hold to the above noted convictions about Scripture. So you will see in your English translations that the first two texts are likely bracketed with a note about why they are bracketed, and the third probably just does not appear. In sum, there are many differences that we find when we compare all the thousands of texts we have, but almost all boil down to easily explained scribal error or disagreement on punctuation.

Next, we need to build a text that best represents the original. In the case of the Bible, this process has much to support it, since we have such a great wealth of early texts. We can have confidence that when these texts are put together we can know what the original writers said with great confidence.

Finally, we need to translate the text. There is a principle that "the first step of interpretation is translation." This is true. But we can be confident that we are reading a faithful representation of the original text when we pick up many English translations. For a close word-for-word translation, I would suggest the New American Standard or English Standard Version. For an accurate rendering that gives clear meaning to a broader audience, the NIV is also helpful.

To conclude on #1: The Chicago Statement on Inerrancy put forth the principle that the Bible is inerrant in its autograph. One problem: we don't have any of the original texts — the autograph. But we do have an embarrassment of riches when it comes to early texts that attest to the same readings of the text. Therefore, we can be confident in knowing what the "autograph" said. So, when we say "the Bible, as written", we can now see that there are many steps from St. Paul and his parchments to your ESV translation of the Epistle to the Romans, for example. But each one of those steps assures us that we are reading what God said.

“Are there mistakes?”

We briefly touched on apparent mistakes in the scriptural manuscripts above, but I want to take the question in another direction. Normally, when people ask about mistakes, they’re referring to the belief that the Bible contradicts itself and therefore cannot be inerrant and the Word of God.

We experience events in our life all the time that many people see from different angles. It might be an air show, a public speaker, or a car crash. If you asked any number of the people at any of these events what they saw they will invariably report things that seem to contradict what the others are saying. The point is, each saw what happened from a different angle, and communicate it truthfully according to their own perspective. The part that *seems* to contradict is the perspective of the individual, and not the truthfulness of their report. And when a perspective is intentionally untrue, then it can normally be sniffed out, as biblical scholars have done with such “gospels” as the Gospel of Thomas, and so on.

So often we hear around Christmas or Easter that the gospels clearly contradict each other and therefore cannot be trusted on the sensationalized *A&E* or *Discovery*. Let’s say a couple things about that.

First, the gospels are a wonderful example of perspectives. Perspectives are at work, especially regarding the “synoptic” (which means “similar” — like synonymous) gospels; Matthew, Mark and Luke. In fact, Luke is the most overt about this when he says that he asked many people about what happened in his investigation and writing of his gospel (1:1-4), and Peter told his story of Jesus when Mark wrote his gospel (that is, Peter is the perspective behind Mark), etc. So when we see that there are apparent contradictions, we might take a step back and ask if it might simply be a perspective difference. If that is true, the difference in perspective might actually add rather than subtract!

Secondly, there is historical background that we are not always privy to. For example, some scholars overemphasize the fact that Jesus gave a “sermon on the mount” in Matthew and an almost identical “sermon on the plain” in Luke.

The regrettable logic then normally follows: “Clearly one or the other gospeler got their geography wrong, which means that there is error, which means that God’s Word is untrustworthy.” Ugh.... That’s such a simple way out. The one who reasons this way is who should not be trusted! This is in part why I wanted to work harder in biblical studies. In college, I heard professors (tenured professors!!) reasoning this way and convincing people that they were right. It felt so sleazy and unethical (because it is).

Answers in the Bible, like answers in life, are not always easily come by. Some answers in the Bible are clear to all. This called “the perspicuity of Scripture”. These easily-come-by-answers are ones that make salvation clearly known to all without excuse. However, why Jesus was on a plain in one gospel and on a mount in another is not perspicuous. So we have to do a little more digging! This means we cannot believe that if there is a problem, the conclusion has been reached and our fates are sealed (as my professors might have wanted me to believe, and how each one of those quacky professors on National Geographic wants you to feel around a Christian holiday.)

In fact, a little historical inquiry into the text gives us a rather simple answer for the plain/mount quandary: Jesus preached the same things over and over, and in different settings. A German Jesus-scholar, and a man I have done some work with in the past and with whom I am currently working on a book named Rainer Riesner wrote a book in 1981 called *Jesus als Lehrer*, which is translated as *Jesus as a Teacher*. One of the conclusions Riesner reached in his book is that Jesus, like the rabbis of his age, taught his disciples with repetition. I actually think this is why Jesus would get so frustrated with them about how slow they were to understand. He had repeated his core teachings so often, there had to come a point where He might have thought He was failing! (speaking in human terms). In the end, according to Riesner (and I agree), Jesus probably gave the same sermon twice, and maybe even more times than that. Therefore, there is no contradiction on the part of God's Word, there is simply not enough work done on the end of some scholars.

In sum, we cannot come to the text and read it at face value. We have a lot of context we bring to the text; namely, we are Western (not Eastern like our biblical writers and characters), we live in a different time and culture, we speak different languages, and so on. We need to dig deeper into the text, and soberly address the text in front of us with honest textual and historical investigation before we make any rash conclusions.

“The Bible”

Finally, I want to talk about “the Bible.” Even saying “the Bible” packs in a huge amount of assumption. If you were to travel to modern day Greece, or walk a block down to St. Charles Borromeo church and said “the Bible”, each location would have a different understanding than you and I.

So how do we collect the books of the Bible into one Bible, and have confidence we have included the right ones and excluded the right ones?

There are three tests that are called the “tests of canonicity” that help us. “Canon” or “the canon of Scripture” simply means the “rule”. That is, canon asks: what is the rule for what we believe the Word of God to be? The three tests are: Orthodoxy, Apostolicity, and Catholicity.

Test #1: It must be Orthodox. Now when I say “orthodox”, I do not mean Eastern Orthodox or Russian Orthodox, ect. What I mean is that the books must have a consistent message that points to Jesus.

When we read our Bibles, each book works towards one aim: the redemption of God's people and all of creation in Jesus Christ, our Lord and Messiah. If a book does not work in this direction, then it should not be included. This is why Martin Luther, when he was wresting with the Catholic Church at the time of the Reformation, and testing all the things they put forth as true, questioned if Esther and James should be included in the canon; the former (Esther) never mentioning God and the latter (James) apparently contradicting salvation by grace through faith alone. Of course, Luther was human and could err, and he did in these cases. But this is a good examples of how one man looked to Scripture and applied these tests in order to find what books God is revealing as the canon of Scripture (though we should be HIGHLY cautioned to challenge canon as Luther had. He was a man with a particular calling and skills, and in a different time and setting that we do not at any level share).

Test #2: It must be Apostolic. What I mean by this is that each writing has to be tied to a prophet or apostle. Second Peter 1:20-21 says knowing this: “first of all, that no prophecy of Scripture comes from someone's own interpretation. For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.” And Ephesians 2:20 says that our faith is “built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets”. Scripture must be authored by or associated closely with those noted above. As an example, Mark’s gospel is written with the help of the Apostle Peter, and John was an Apostle.

Test #3: It must be catholic. When I say catholic, I do not mean the denomination. Rather, I mean that these scriptural writings are universally accepted. If there is universal acceptance, there is reason to believe that they are canonical. Importantly, we must remember that we do not choose canon, God reveals canon to us. Put it another way, “this is not a democracy, but a dictatorship”, as one man once said. This means that we are not voting on books to be included in the canon of Scripture with a majority, but instead taking a cue from an organic majority on how God has revealed canon to His people.

In sum, the canon of Scripture has come down to us in a complex process of revelation and discernment. Many church Fathers and rabbis spent their lives seeking God’s wisdom and studying the Scriptures to know how to assess what is in and what is out. So when we pick up our nicely published study Bible, or beautiful pew Bible, take a moment to realize what got it into our hands.

Conclusion

To conclude on this write-up: I hope that this has been helpful. What I have said above only begins to scratch the surface of the question that you pose. However, I think I gave some good starting points on where we can go with the questions, and where your question also contains a lot more depth than it would first appear.

For further reading, I would commend to you four books that might help. First, F.F. Bruce wrote an important book on this subject called *The New Testament Documents: Are They Reliable?* Second, Bruce Metzler wrote another classic called *The Text of the New Testament: Its Transmission, Corruption, and Restoration*. Third, this is a newer book by Nicholas Perrin called *Lost in Transmission: What Can We Know About the Words of Jesus?* And finally, K.A. Kitchen (called by The Times “the father of Egyptian historical chronology”, and an Evangelical like the other authors above) wrote a book called *On the Reliability of the Old Testament*. Each of these books add important information, but if I were to start with two, I would go with Bruce and Kitchen.

God bless you in your journey! Keep asking questions and avoid the path of least resistance.
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