

Why Trust the
Bible?

Greg Gilbert

“Now more than ever, Christians need to know how to defend the truth of God’s Word in the midst of an increasingly hostile world. In this book for Christians and non-Christians alike, Gilbert sets forth compelling arguments in support of the trustworthiness of the Bible—equipping believers with an important tool for engaging a skeptical world.”

Josh McDowell, author and speaker

“This book fills a great need in a day when people raise all kinds of legitimate questions about the Bible and its trustworthiness before they’ll even open it to take a look. Greg Gilbert’s *Why Trust the Bible?* answers that question by examining a series of issues people often raise in order to *not* take a look at this greatest of books. In everyday language, he shows why we can trust Scripture and pay attention to what it says about life.”

Darrell L. Bock, Executive Director of Cultural Engagement,
Howard G. Hendricks Center, and Senior Research Professor of
New Testament Studies, Dallas Theological Seminary

“‘Can we really trust the Bible?’ It’s an important question to consider, especially in the face of our culture’s skepticism. Greg Gilbert takes on this question directly, providing clear and convincing answers that will help the reader fully trust the Scriptures. *Why Trust the Bible?* is a great resource for equipping Christians to passionately defend the Bible, and it also challenges skeptics to rethink their position. I benefitted greatly from reading this book.”

Christian Wegert, Senior Pastor, Arche Gemeinde, Hamburg,
Germany

“This outstanding book provides a magnificent summary of the evidence in support of the Bible’s historicity. It is well argued, brief, thorough, highly readable, and compelling. I not only recommend it but will also seek to give it to many friends—both believers and skeptics.”

William Taylor, Rector, St. Helen’s Bishopsgate, London; author,
Understanding the Times and *Partnership*

“Many students I meet know that they should trust the Bible, but they don’t know why—and so they often don’t. This book tackles that question with clarity and ease. Well researched and accessibly written, this will be one of my new go-to resources for earnest seekers and new believers.”

J. D. Greear, Lead Pastor, The Summit Church, Durham,
North Carolina; author, *Jesus, Continued . . . Why the Spirit
Inside You Is Better Than Jesus Beside You*

“Greg Gilbert makes for a friendly, convincing guide along one important pathway to trusting the Bible. He lays out an amazingly simple strand of good sense that weaves its way right through the many complex arguments for Scripture’s reliability as a historical document. For those investigating the Bible—and for those who love to share it—this book lights the way, not only to clear thinking about Scripture but also to meeting the risen Christ.”

Kathleen B. Nielson, Director of Women’s Initiatives,
The Gospel Coalition

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To Mom and Dad.
You were the first to teach me that the Bible—
and the Savior it reveals—
are worthy to be trusted.

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Don't Believe Everything You Read

Don't believe everything you read. Everybody knows that.

Especially in our age of the Internet, only a misguided person takes as absolute truth everything he or she reads. From newspapers and magazines to tabloids and click-bait online “news” services, one of the most valuable skills we can learn is telling the difference between fact and fiction, truth and fabrication. We don't want to be dupes, and we're *right* not to want that.

In my own family, my wife and I are trying very hard to teach our children exactly that—the skill of reading and listening carefully, of not accepting everything they read or hear at face value but rather putting it to the test and seeing if it seems trustworthy. Even with our five-year-old daughter, we're working on trying to teach her to recognize the difference between things that are real and things that are “just a story.” She's gotten pretty good at it too:

- George Washington was the first president of the United States. “That's real, Dad.”

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- Uncle Matt got a new job and moved to a different city. “That’s real too.”
- Batman chased down the Joker and threw him in jail. “No, that’s just a story.”
- Elsa built an ice castle with her special power of freezing thin air. “Just a story.”
- Superman flew into the air? “Story.”
- A long time ago, in a galaxy far, far away . . . ? “Story!”

But then imagine I throw her a curveball. A man named Jesus was born to a virgin about two thousand years ago, claimed to be God, did miracles like walking on water and raising people from the dead, was crucified on a Roman cross, and then rose from the dead and ascended into heaven, where he now reigns as King of the universe.

How is she supposed to answer that one? “Um, real?”

If you’re a Christian, then I’m sure you’d answer it with a firm “That’s real.” But let’s be honest. Most people in our culture think it very strange for normal, seemingly well-adjusted individuals to take that story seriously. And if they had the chance, they’d probably smile politely and ask, “Okay, but wouldn’t it make more sense—wouldn’t it be slightly *less ridiculous*—for everyone to admit that those fantastical stories about Jesus are just that—stories? Isn’t it just unreasonable to think those stories are meant to be taken seriously, to be thought of as *real*?”

In my experience as a Christian and pastor, it’s encouraging to me to see how firmly Christians really do seem to trust the Bible. They believe it, they stake their lives on it, and they

try to obey it. When it says something that challenges their beliefs or behavior, they try to submit to it. In short, they allow the Bible to function as the foundation of their lives and faith. For all these hopeful signs, though, my experience also tells me that a good number of Christians can't really explain *why* they trust the Bible. They just do.

Oh, they give lots of reasons. Sometimes they'll say that the Holy Spirit has convinced them of it. Other times they'll suggest that the best evidence for the Bible's truth is its work in their lives or that it simply has "the ring of truth" about it. Some will point to data about how archaeology corroborates some of the Bible's statements. Others, when pressed, will throw up their hands and say, "Well, you just have to accept it on faith."

Now, in their own way, all these points represent legitimate reasons for Christians to trust the Bible, but whatever else we might say about these answers, none of them will likely go very far in convincing someone who *doesn't* yet trust the Bible to *start* trusting it. Quite to the contrary, when a Christian replies to challenges against the Bible with an answer like, "You just have to accept it on faith," the challenger will most likely hear that as confirming all his doubts and walk away declaring victory. *Oh, he thinks, there we are. You really don't have any reason at all for believing the Bible. You just . . . do. Because of faith.*

So if you're a Christian, let me put it to you straight: Why do you trust the Bible? How would you explain to someone who doesn't believe the Bible *why* you trust it? By the end of

this book, I hope you'll be able to give an answer to that question, not just one that will make you feel good while the other guy is quite sure he has won the argument but rather one that will at least convince him that he needs to think about it a little more. The apostle Peter wrote in 1 Peter 3:15 that we as Christians should "always [be] prepared to make a defense" for the hope that is in us. In our day, that defense has to go all the way to the first question, because long before we even get to questions like *who is Jesus?* or *what is the gospel?*, another question vexes many people around us, a question they want to ask but (if they're honest) doubt we can answer: Why do you trust the Bible in the first place?

Turtles All the Way Down

Before we go any farther, let me admit something right up front, something that probably won't surprise you in the least. I am a Christian, a sold-out, convinced, everything-your-mother-told-you-to-watch-out-for Christian. I believe the Bible is true, I believe the Red Sea split in half, I believe the walls of Jericho fell down and that Jesus walked on water and healed some people and threw demons out of others. I believe God flooded the world and saved Noah, I believe Jonah was swallowed by a gigantic fish, and I believe Jesus was born of a virgin. And above all, I believe Jesus died and then got up from the dead—not in some spiritual or metaphorical sense but bodily and historically and *for real*. I believe all that.

In fact, there's no use pretending otherwise: The main reason that I believe the Bible is true is precisely because I believe

Jesus was resurrected from the dead. Now whether or not you agree with me about the resurrection, you can probably see why believing that would quickly and strongly lead me to trust the Bible. If Jesus really was raised from the dead, then the only possible, intellectually honest conclusion one can reach is that he really is who he claimed to be. If Jesus actually got up from the grave in the way the Bible says he did, then he really is the Son of God, the King of kings and Lord of lords, the Way, the Truth, the Life, and the Wisdom of God, just like he said. And if *that's* true, then it makes sense (doesn't it?) that he probably knows what he's talking about, and therefore, we ought to listen to him.

Now, one thing that is beyond any reasonable doubt is that Jesus believed the Bible. When it comes to the Old Testament, the point is very straightforward; over and over in his teaching, Jesus authenticated and endorsed it as the Word of God. And as for the New Testament, even though it was written years after his days on earth, it too rests ultimately on Jesus's own authority, and the early Christians knew it. In fact, the two main criteria they used to recognize authoritative books were (1) that those documents had to be authorized by one of Jesus's apostles and (2) that they had to agree in every particular with Jesus's own teaching. We'll talk more about all that later, but the point is pretty clear. Once you decide that Jesus really did rise from the dead, the truth and authority of the Bible follow quickly, naturally, and powerfully.

Now that's a quick and impressive case, I know, but here's the question: How exactly do you get it started? In other words,

how do you get to the point of believing that Jesus really did rise from the dead in the first place? I mean, you can't just say you believe in the resurrection because the Bible says it happened, and you believe what the Bible says because Jesus rose from the dead, and you believe Jesus rose because you believe the Bible, and you believe the Bible because. . . . You probably get the point there, right? That whole thing would become just hopelessly and ridiculously circular. It reminds me of the little boy whose teacher asked him why the world doesn't just fall into space. "Because it's sitting on a turtle's back," the boy answered.

"And why doesn't the turtle fall?" the teacher asked.

"Because it's standing on another turtle's back," the boy insisted.

"And why doesn't that turtle fall?" the teacher pressed.

"Well," said the little boy thoughtfully, "obviously, it's turtles all the way down!"

Now before we go any farther, we should acknowledge that in one way or another, it's turtles all the way down for all of us, no matter what you take as your final authority for knowledge. So this issue affects everyone, not just Christians. If you ask a rationalist why he trusts reason, he'll say, "Because it's reasonable." If you ask a logician why she trusts logic, she'll say, "Because it's logical." If you ask a traditionalist why he trusts tradition, he'll say, "Because everyone has always trusted tradition." In all these cases, we're left crying out for more; why does one trust reason, logic, or tradition in the first place? Some may argue that reason is more reliable than spiritual

explanations because you can see and touch the evidence in support of various claims. But even that argument rests on certain presumptions about what kind of evidence is or is not legitimate—that is, reasonable. You see? One way or another, you end up with turtles, all the way down, for everyone. In fact, I think that's probably one way God reminds us that we're finite—written deep in the logic of what it means to be human is an inescapable reminder that we can't figure it all out.

Even so, that doesn't mean we should give up all hope of knowing anything. Even if it's true in some philosophical, epistemological sense that we all ultimately have to stand on circular thinking, that doesn't mean we can't come to some confident conclusions about the nature of reality. Sure, some overzealous philosophers have at times thrown up their hands and said, "Well, that's it then! I guess we can't know anything!" But that kind of thinking tends to drop you into an epistemological solitary-confinement cell (we can't know anything or anybody) that very few of us will find either inviting or necessary. So most of us simply start with a few presuppositions—for example, reason is reasonable, logic is logical, our senses are trustworthy, the world and we ourselves really exist and are not just "brains in a vat"—and then we proceed from those presuppositions to draw confident conclusions about ourselves, about history, about the world around us, about all sorts of things.

But hold on. The fact that we necessarily have to presuppose *some things* doesn't mean we can presuppose *anything* we want. For example, you can't just presuppose that you're the

president of the United States and work from there. Nor can you just presuppose that you're a god and that everything you happen to believe is therefore the case. Nor can you presuppose that the latest issue of the *National Enquirer* is the Word of God and that it therefore gives you an accurate picture of reality. These would be completely unwarranted presuppositions, and people would mock you for believing them—and perhaps lock you up as well! But here's the thing: More than a few people would say that's exactly what Christians have done with the Bible. We have, without any good reason whatsoever, simply presupposed that it is the Word of God, that everything it says is therefore true, and that Jesus therefore rose from the dead.

But what if the alleged foul is not quite that flagrant? What if there's a way to come to a good and confident conclusion that Jesus really did rise from the dead *without simply presupposing that the Bible is the Word of God*? If we could do this, then we'd be able to avoid the charge of unwarranted circularity. We'd be able to say that, *even before concluding that the Bible is the Word of God*, we came to a confident conclusion that Jesus did in fact rise from the dead, and then, on the basis of that confident conclusion, we followed him in accepting the Bible as the Word of God. This kind of belief would differ markedly from one that simply relied on a "leap of faith." Not only could it be defended against skeptics' objections; it could also challenge skeptics in their unbelief. It would be, as Peter wrote, a formidable "reason for the hope that is in [us]" (1 Pet. 3:15).

Christianity as History

The question, of course, is whether there really is a way to do that. To cut right to the chase, I think there is, and I think it is by *doing history*. In other words, let's approach the documents that make up the New Testament not *first* as the Word of God but simply as historical documents, and then on that basis, let's see if we can arrive at a confident conclusion that Jesus rose from the dead. Even someone who's not a Christian should have no objection to this. After all, to approach the New Testament simply as a collection of historical documents involves no special pleading, no special status, no special truth claims. Let's let them speak for themselves in the "court of historical opinion," as it were.

Moreover, to approach the New Testament as historical shouldn't raise any particular objections among Christians. After all, it's not as if that would be to treat it as something *other than* what it is. The New Testament documents themselves claim to be historical; their authors intended them to be historical. Take Luke, for example. He began his Gospel by saying that he aimed to give his reader "an orderly account" of the life and teachings of Jesus (Luke 1:3). However you slice that, and whatever else you think Luke was doing, he was most certainly writing history. Of course, the method of writing history in the ancient world differed from our own method of doing so, but the basic idea was still the same—the authors were writing accounts of events that they believed really happened. So given that Luke and the other authors were doing that kind of work, surely there's nothing inappropriate about

letting his books, and the others, stand and speak as what they were intended to be all along.

Even more, though, than the religions of the world, Christianity presents itself *as history*. It's not primarily just a list of ethical teachings or a body of philosophical musings or mystical "truths" or even a compendium of myths and fables. At its very heart, Christianity is a claim that something extraordinary has happened in the course of time—something concrete and real and *historical*.

A Chain of Reliability

But even if that's so, another question arises at this point, and we'll spend most of this book trying to answer it: Are the New Testament documents—and especially, for our purposes, the four Gospels—truly *reliable* as historical witnesses? That is to say, can we trust them to give us good, dependable information about the events of Jesus's life, especially concerning his resurrection, such that we can end up saying, "Yes, I'm pretty confident that actually happened"? For my part, I think we *can* trust the New Testament documents, but getting to that conclusion will take some work, precisely because, as with any historical document, we can raise many questions at many different points about their reliability.

To understand what I mean by that, think of it like this. If you're reading, say, Matthew's Gospel about any particular event in the life of Jesus, you can count at least three different people who have put their hands on the biblical account you are reading and have therefore affected it in some way. First,

and most obviously, the account originates with the author who wrote it down. Second, at least one person, and likely more, copied that original writing and thereby transmitted it, so to speak, through the centuries into our hands. Third, someone (or some committee) translated that copy from its original language into your native language so you can now read it. At each step in that process, questions arise that bear heavily on whether you can really trust the story you're reading to give a reliable account of what actually happened. So, moving backward in time from yourself to the event itself, you end up with a chain of five big questions:

1. Can we be confident that the *translation* of the Bible from its original language into our language accurately reflects the original, or is it saying things the original never did?
2. Can we be confident that copyists accurately *transmitted* the original writing to us, or did they (deliberately or not) add, subtract, or change things so much that what we have is no longer what was originally written?
3. Can we be confident that we're looking at the right set of books and that we haven't missed or lost a set of books out there that gives a different, but equally reliable and plausible, perspective on Jesus? That is, can we be confident that we're right to be looking at *these books* as opposed to those?
4. Can we be confident that the original authors were themselves *trustworthy*? That is, were they really intending to give us an accurate account of events, or did they have

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some other aim—for example, to write fiction or even to deceive?

5. And finally, if we can be confident that the authors did, in fact, intend to give an accurate account of what happened, can we be confident that what they described really took place? In a word, can we be confident that what they wrote is actually *true*? Or are there better reasons to think that they were somehow mistaken?

Do you see? If we can respond to each of these questions—translation? transmission? these books? trustworthy? true?—with a firm “Check!” then we’ll have a pretty solid chain of reliability from ourselves to the events in question. We’ll be able to say, confidently, that

1. we have good translations of the biblical manuscripts;
2. those manuscripts are accurate copies of what was originally written;
3. the books we’re looking at are indeed the right and best books to look at;
4. the authors of those documents really did intend to tell us accurately what happened; and
5. there’s *no good reason to think they were mistaken* in what they saw and recorded.¹

However you look at it, these affirmations would establish a pretty solid foundation for thinking that we really can accept the Bible as historically reliable. And if we can do that, then it

¹This particular line of thought is an expansion of an approach I first learned from Mark Dever, pastor of Capitol Hill Baptist Church in Washington, DC. Other Christian authors have also used a similar approach.

follows that we can consider the Bible's account of the resurrection of Jesus and say, "Yes, I really do believe that happened. As much as I believe that any other event in history happened, I believe Jesus rose from the dead."

A Few Important Thoughts

Now, let me say three more things before we start trying to build that kind of historical case. First, keep in mind that we're not searching for what we might call *mathematical certainty*. That kind of logical, lock-it-down certainty is possible in mathematics and sometimes in science, but it's *never* possible when you're dealing with history. With any historical event, someone somewhere will always be able to concoct an alternative to the accepted account that has at least a bare chance of being the case. "Maybe Caesar didn't in fact cross the Rubicon River," someone might say. "Maybe one of his generals *dressed* as Caesar and managed to fool everyone. Yes, yes, I know there's no good reason to think that, but it's still *barely* possible, and therefore you can't be confident that Caesar ever crossed the Rubicon." Okay, but for crying out loud, come on! If objections like that were enough to keep us from drawing firm conclusions about history, we'd never be confident in *any* knowledge about the past.

Thankfully, though, we're not looking here for mathematical certainty but rather for *historical confidence*. We want to be able to say not so much, "It is a mathematical, logical certainty that Caesar crossed the Rubicon," but rather, "Some people actually did report that Caesar crossed the Rubicon. We think

they were intending to report what actually happened (rather than to deceive or mythologize), and there's no good reason to think they were mistaken in their report. Therefore, we can be historically confident that Caesar really did cross the Rubicon." That's the kind of "certainty" we look for in history, and to demand anything more is to demand something from historical study that it can never deliver.

Second, keep in mind that *historical confidence* provides sufficient grounds for *action*. Occasionally I've run into people who assert that they're not going to act on anything without firsthand experience of it. If they didn't see it or experience it, they say, then there's just too much doubt to act on it in any way. Now, at first glance, that position seems to have a sheen of intellectual respectability; it seems careful and thoughtful. But look at it a moment longer, and you realize that nobody actually lives like that, not *really*. The fact is, we all put confidence in—and *act on*—things of which we ourselves have no direct knowledge or experience all the time.

Think about it. I wasn't present when the Constitution of the United States was ratified, but as an American, I live with the confidence that it in fact *was*, and I also act on that confidence. I don't decline to vote because I'm not *mathematically certain* that we really live under a ratified US Constitution. Here's another example, even closer to home: When you get right down to it, I have no direct knowledge that my parents really are my parents; I don't personally remember my birth, we've never had a DNA test done, and it's always *possible* some mistake was made and my birth certificate was forged!

Well, sure, that's barely possible, but on the other hand, all the evidence I have points to the fact that my parents really are my parents, and so I live *and act* all the time with confidence that they are.

That's the kind of confidence history can provide, and it's the kind of confidence I hope we can reach as we think together throughout the pages of this book—a historical confidence that would allow us, even compel us, to say, “Yes, I think the resurrection of Jesus happened. I have no better explanation for the facts. And now I'm going to act on that confidence.”

Third, please keep in mind that this is not and wasn't intended to be an academic book. It doesn't consider every possible variation on every argument, and it doesn't give every possible example or counterexample. For that reason, I hope you won't compare it to the many excellent books that Christians have written on all these topics over the years. If you set this book beside those, you'll find that it is not as thorough as those—or as thick. It aims simply to present a flyover of the arguments and considerations that have convinced me—and many others over the years—of the Bible's truth.

One more thing. In keeping the argument to that flyover level, you'll notice that I've focused particularly in this book on the New Testament—and within the New Testament, particularly on the four Gospels. That means I'm not going to treat every nuance of text, transmission, and canon that arises in discussions regarding the Old Testament or even regarding every book of the New Testament. But, you ask, isn't this book about the *whole* Bible? It is. Yet keep in mind that exploring

the evidence for the New Testament, especially the Gospels, with the five tests above will give us a good sense of the issues and historical evidence involved in discussions of all the other books, too. And even more important, remember that what we're aiming for, finally, is historical confidence that Jesus rose from the dead. If we can arrive at that, then we wind up with a very good reason for trusting in the reliability of the Old Testament as well. So how do we arrive at historical confidence that Jesus was resurrected? By determining if the Gospels, in particular, are reliable historical witnesses. That's our aim.

So again, while other books helpfully discuss all the minute details of all the issues involved with the Bible's reliability at every point, this book presents an overview of the case that has convinced me and countless others of the Bible's truth—a case that finds its capstone in the resurrection of Jesus. If this case is helpful and, to some degree, convincing to you, I'm glad for that. If not, I'd encourage you to continue reading those other bigger, better books (see appendix).

A First Step

If you're reading this book and you're not a Christian, first of all, thank you for picking it up and reading even this far. If nothing else, I hope you'll find some things in here that will challenge you to think about Christians, Christianity, the Bible, and ultimately Jesus in ways that are perhaps different than you have ever thought about them before. I hope you walk away recognizing that we Christians don't believe what we believe without reason. Sure, you may not buy the case I'm making

here, but I hope you'll at least be able to say that maybe there's more to the Christian faith than you realized. On the other hand, you may even be able to say more than that. Maybe you'll come to the conclusion that you really *can* trust the Bible. If so, then you'll be in for a truly great experience, because you'll be able to turn confidently to thinking about what the Bible is really all about—Jesus the Christ and who he claimed to be.

On the other hand, if you're already a Christian, I hope this book will help you better understand *why* you trust the Bible and then enable you to talk about it and defend it against objections from people who do not trust it. The fact is, in the end, despite what the world often accuses us of, Christianity does not require people to make an irrational "leap of faith" that leaves them believing ridiculous things without evidence. On the contrary, our *actual* "leap of faith" consists in relying on Jesus to save us from our sins, precisely because he is eminently and solidly reliable.

And how do we know that?

Well, because the Bible tells us so.

Doesn't it?



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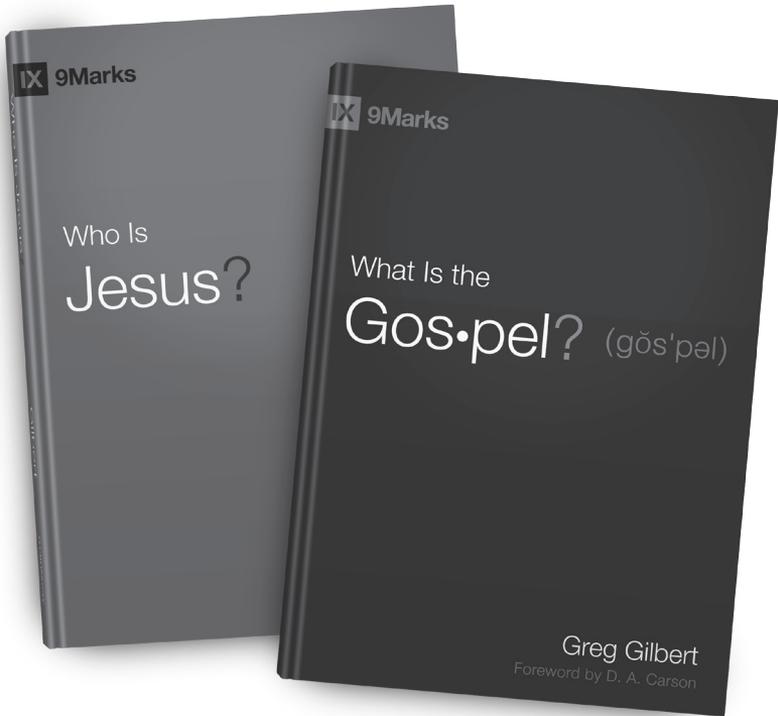
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