

What Is the Bible?

Manuscripts, Canon, Inspiration, and the Hard Passages

by Richard Whiting

© 2026 Richard Whiting. All rights reserved. May be reproduced in whole, with attribution. See full notice at the end of this document.

Contents

- I. The Question, Rightly Framed
- II. What Is Granted
- III. The Manuscripts, and How the Counting Works
- IV. Compare Like With Like
- V. The Canon, from Irenaeus to Carthage
- VI. What Inspiration Actually Claims
- VII. Genre, and Reading Each Book as What It Is
- VIII. Two Hard Cases: The Census and the Exodus
- IX. The Conquest Narratives, at the Length They Deserve
- X. The Reply in Brief
- Endnotes

I. The Question, Rightly Framed

The skeptical case against the Bible is largely made of facts, and the Catholic answer is not that the facts are false. It is that they have been fitted to the wrong picture: a picture in which the Bible is a single book dropped complete out of heaven, whose credibility fails if any part of it can be questioned. That is not the Catholic doctrine of Scripture, and it never was. The Bible is a library—seventy-three books, in a dozen genres, written across perhaps a thousand years, gathered and vouched for by a community that existed before any of its New Testament pages did. Judge the library as if it were a single dictated affidavit and it fails, as any library would. Judge it as what the Church has always said it is, and the skeptic's facts fall into a different order.

II. What Is Granted

Honesty first, because a defense that denies the field's plain findings will not survive contact with anyone who has read them. No autographs survive. The variants are real and numerous, and the longer ending of Mark and the woman taken in adultery are almost certainly later additions, which is why modern Catholic Bibles print them with a note saying so. The Gospels do not name their authors in the text. Matthew and Luke did use Mark. The resurrection accounts differ in their details. The conquest narratives are morally appalling on their face, and saying so is not a concession wrung out of a Catholic; it is where any honest reading has to start.

III. The Manuscripts, and How the Counting Works

The famous alarm—more variants in the New Testament manuscripts than words in the New Testament—needs its denominator. There are more than 5,800 Greek manuscripts, some ten thousand in Latin, and thousands more in Coptic, Syriac, Armenian, and other languages, copied across fifteen centuries; every spelling slip in every copy counts as a variant. The number measures how much evidence survives, not how corrupt the text is. A work preserved in two manuscripts has almost no variants, and we know far less about what it originally said.

Textual criticism exists precisely to sort this abundance, and its method is not guesswork. Witnesses are grouped into families by shared readings; earlier and geographically independent testimony outweighs later and derivative testimony; the reading that best explains how the others arose is preferred. Sorted so, the overwhelming majority of variants are spelling, word order, and slips no translation could even register. The small fraction that are both meaningful and viable—capable of changing the sense, with a real chance of being original—are printed in the margins of any good study Bible, which is itself the point: the discipline that produced the alarming number also produced the apparatus that lets any reader see every disputed word. And the author who made the number famous states the conclusion himself: Bart Ehrman's own appendix to *Misquoting Jesus* concedes that essential Christian beliefs are unaffected by the textual variants. The same scholar long granted the historical core on which the resurrection argument rests—the burial, the empty tomb, the appearances, the disciples' transformed conviction—while remaining an agnostic about its explanation.¹

IV. Compare Like With Like

Ancient history is not done by demanding autographs, because nobody has any. Caesar's *Gallic War* survives in perhaps ten good manuscripts, the earliest some nine hundred years after he wrote. The *Annals* of Tacitus depend on two. Nobody proposes that we

therefore know nothing of Roman Gaul or the early empire. Against that standard the New Testament is an embarrassment of riches: thousands of witnesses, fragments within a century of composition—the John Rylands papyrus of John’s Gospel is commonly dated within a generation or two of the original—and a spread of independent transmission lines that lets scholars triangulate the earliest text. The abundance settles what the authors wrote, not whether what they wrote is true; that question comes later. But demanding of this one book a textual pedigree no ancient document could show is not rigor. It is a special rule, adopted for one defendant only.²

V. The Canon, from Irenaeus to Carthage

The canon question is where the skeptic’s account and the Catholic account nearly touch, and where both differ from the account the skeptic usually thinks he is attacking. Yes: the Church decided. There is no table of contents in Scripture, no inspired list of inspired books, and no way to get the canon out of the Bible without already having the canon.

But the decision was a recognition of what the churches were already reading, not a selection among equal candidates in a smoke-filled council. The four Gospels and the Pauline letters were functioning as authoritative long before any list was drawn. The Muratorian fragment, written somewhere between about 155 and 200, already names most of the present New Testament; Irenaeus argues in the 180s that the Gospels are four, neither more nor fewer; the books still disputed in the fourth century—Hebrews, James, 2 Peter, Jude, Revelation—were the short ones at the edges, not the substance. The synods of Rome (382), Hippo (393), and Carthage (397) ratified a consensus centuries in the making. And the apocryphal gospels were not suppressed rivals of equal standing: most are second century or later, and read like it.³

What follows is uncomfortable for one side of Christianity rather than for the faith itself. If the Church was competent to identify the Scriptures, she is not a body established by them, and the appeal to the Bible against the Church saws off the branch it stands on. The Scriptures are the Church’s book, and this is the oldest fact about them.

VI. What Inspiration Actually Claims

Here the skeptic usually refutes a doctrine Catholics do not hold. The Church does not teach that the Bible is a divinely dictated encyclopedia of history and science whose every sentence is a literal report. The Second Vatican Council stated the claim with the care of a body that had debated every word: “Since all that the inspired authors or sacred writers assert should be regarded as asserted by the Holy Spirit, we must acknowledge that the books of Scripture firmly, faithfully, and without error teach the truth which God, for the sake of our salvation, wished to be confided to Sacred Scripture.”⁴

Two clarifications keep the sentence honest in both directions. Against the skeptic: inerrancy attaches to what the authors *assert*, not to every feature of their idiom, cosmology, or numerical convention—a principle Augustine already applied, and Leo XIII and Pius XII made formal in 1893 and 1943. Against the opposite temptation: the Council’s own theological commission explained that the salvation clause “should in no way imply that Scripture is not, in its totality, inspired and the word of God.” The clause describes Scripture’s purpose; it does not fence off a zone of licensed error. What the reader must therefore determine, case by case, is what a given author was actually asserting—which is the work of the next section.⁵

VII. Genre, and Reading Each Book as What It Is

Pius XII’s *Divino Afflante Spiritu* (1943) directed Catholic scholars to the literary forms of the ancient Near East as the key to what its authors meant to say. Genesis 1 is a liturgical poem about who made the world and why—its architecture of days answers Babylonian creation myths, not modern cosmology quizzes. Job is a drama; its speeches are in verse. The Psalms are songs, with a songwriter’s license. Jonah has the shape of a parable, and the book’s point survives every argument about the fish. Revelation is apocalyptic, a genre whose furniture—beasts, numbers, cosmic catastrophe—its first readers knew how to read. Treating each of these as a police report and then declaring it false is a mistake about the text, not a discovery about it. No one refutes a love song by observing that the beloved’s eyes are not literally doves.

VIII. Two Hard Cases: The Census and the Exodus

Two test cases deserve to be met at their hardest rather than their easiest, because they are the ones serious critics actually press. The first is Luke’s census. The difficulties are real and should be stated plainly: no other record attests an empire-wide census under Augustus; Quirinius is known to have governed Syria and conducted his famous census in A.D. 6, roughly a decade after Herod’s death; and a Roman census would not obviously require travel to an ancestral town. The proposed solutions—an earlier administrative role for Quirinius, a translation of Luke’s “first” as “before,” a registration conducted in the client kingdom’s own manner—are possible rather than proved. The honest verdict is that Luke, demonstrably careful elsewhere and writing within living memory of the events, records an administrative detail we can no longer fully check; that is a historical loose end, of a kind ancient history is full of, and not a hinge on which inspiration turns.⁶

The second is the exodus. The maximal skeptical claim—that the archaeology shows it simply never happened—outruns the evidence, which is largely an absence of evidence in a region and period that would be expected to preserve little trace of a pastoral migration. But the maximal traditional picture, of millions moving en masse, has genuine

archaeological difficulties, and Catholic scholarship is free to say so. What the text asserts for our salvation—that God delivered a people, bound them to Himself in covenant, and made that deliverance the pattern of every later redemption—does not stand or fall with the crowd estimates of a Bronze Age narrative, whose numbers follow ancient conventions in any case. Here as everywhere, the question is what the author asserts; the alternative is to let the census figures of Numbers carry more theological weight than the covenant.⁷

IX. The Conquest Narratives, at the Length They Deserve

The conquest narratives cannot be tidied away, and attempts to do so are worse than the problem. A God who commands the extermination of a people is the strongest moral objection the Old Testament offers, and Christians should feel its force before answering it.

Three findings bear on it. First, the genre: ancient Near Eastern war reporting was formulaically hyperbolic, and Joshua participates in the convention. Paul Copan, examining the texts, observes that the “obliteration language” in Joshua—“he left no survivor” and “utterly destroyed all who breathed”—is “clearly hyperbolic,” because the book itself assumes Canaanites still inhabiting the land immediately afterward, warning Israel against intermarrying with the very peoples just described as annihilated. The same pattern—total-destruction formulas followed by the survivors’ reappearance—marks the war records of Egypt, Moab, and Assyria. The texts, read as their first readers read them, describe decisive victory in the idiom of the age, not a divine mandate for genocide literally executed.⁸

Second, the trajectory: revelation in Scripture is progressive. God met a people in a brutal age where they were, and led them; the movement runs from limited retaliation, through the prophets’ widening mercy, toward the Sermon on the Mount, and not in the other direction. Third, the center: the Christian reads the whole collection through Christ, who takes up the ancient law with “you have heard that it was said... but I say to you”—which is not the language of a man endorsing everything that came before. None of this dissolves the difficulty, and this essay will not pretend it does. It locates it. The question is not whether a Christian may be troubled by Joshua; it is whether being troubled by Joshua is a reason to think the whole collection uninspired, and it is not, unless one first assumes the flat, dictated model of inspiration that the Church rejects.

X. The Reply in Brief

The variants are numerous because the manuscripts are numerous, and the man who made the number famous concedes in the same book that no essential belief hangs on a disputed reading. Judged by the standard applied to every other ancient text, the New

Testament is the best-attested document of the ancient world by a wide margin. The canon was indeed settled by the Church, which is an argument against the Bible standing alone rather than against the Bible. And inspiration has never meant dictation: Scripture teaches without error the truth God willed for our salvation, in the genres its authors were actually writing. Read that way, the poetry is not failed physics, the census is a loose end and not a collapse, and the ancient war reporting is not a divine endorsement. What the skeptic has usually refuted, carefully and at length, is a doctrine of Scripture the Church does not teach.

What, then, is the Bible? It is the Church's library: the collection in which the people God formed wrote, under His inspiration, what He wanted said—law and history, poetry and protest, wisdom and apocalyptic—gathered around the event that all of it either awaits or remembers. Take it out of that community and it becomes a puzzle-book, and the puzzles win. Read it inside the community that wrote, canonized, and still proclaims it, and it is what the Council called it: the word of God in the words of men, teaching firmly, faithfully, and without error the truth that saves.

Endnotes

1. Bart D. Ehrman, *Misquoting Jesus* (2005), appendix to the paperback edition, summarized; his long-standing acceptance of the burial, empty tomb, appearances, and transformed disciples is documented in the discussion of his work held in the site's reference library. The manuscript counts follow the standard handbooks.
2. The classical comparanda (Caesar, Tacitus) follow F. F. Bruce, *The New Testament Documents: Are They Reliable?*, held in the site's reference library, summarized; Rylands P52 per the standard datings.
3. The Muratorian fragment's date (c. 155–200) and character are summarized from the treatment in the site's reference library; Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 3.11.8; the synodal lists of Rome, Hippo, and Carthage as in the standard collections.
4. Second Vatican Council, *Dei Verbum* 11 (1965), quoted exactly from the translation in Fr. William Most, *Free from All Error*, held in the site's reference library.
5. The theological commission's clarification is quoted exactly from the same source. Augustine on the Spirit not teaching *the inner constitution of visible things* is cited there from *De Genesi ad litteram* 2.9; Leo XIII, *Providentissimus Deus* (1893); Pius XII, *Divino Afflante Spiritu* (1943).
6. The census difficulties are stated from Ben Witherington's survey in *New Testament History*, held in the site's reference library—a Christian scholar's honest accounting, which is why it is used here.

7. The maximal skeptical case is made in Israel Finkelstein and Neil Asher Silberman, *The Bible Unearthed* (2001), held in the library and engaged rather than ignored; the covenant-over-census-figures point follows the genre principle of Dei Verbum 12.

8. Paul Copan, *Is Yahweh a Moral Monster? The New Atheists and Old Testament Ethics*, *Philosophia Christi* 10 (2008), quoted exactly from the copy in the site's reference library, citing Joshua 10:40 with 23:12–13.

For Further Reading

Dei Verbum, Second Vatican Council—§11 on inspiration and the salvation clause. Free online at https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651118_dei-verbum_en.html.

Divino Afflante Spiritu, by Pius XII (1943)—on literary genre and the intention of the author. Free online at https://www.vatican.va/content/pius-xii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-xii_enc_30091943_divino-afflante-spiritu.html.

Misquoting Jesus, by Bart D. Ehrman—the opposing case; see also its appendix.

Jesus and the Eyewitnesses, by Richard Bauckham—on the Gospels as testimony.

The Case for Jesus, by Brant Pitre—on Gospel authorship and dating.

Catechism of the Catholic Church, §§101–141 on Scripture, inspiration and interpretation. Free online at <https://usccb.cld.bz/Catechism-of-the-Catholic-Church2>.

Does History Condemn the Church?, Where the slavery record is told whole.

The Text of the New Testament, by Bruce M. Metzger—the standard work on the text's transmission and restoration; readable at the Internet Archive. Free online at <https://archive.org/details/textofnewtestame0000metz>.

* * *

“Thy word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path.” — Psalm 119:105

Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit, as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, world without end. Amen.

Copyright and Distribution

© 2026 Richard Whiting. All rights reserved.

This essay may be reproduced and distributed freely, in printed or electronic form, provided that it is reproduced in whole and without alteration, and that the author's name is retained. Excerpts may be quoted in reviews, scholarly works, or other writings consistent with fair use, with attribution.

A Note on Authority

This essay represents the author's articulation of *the Catholic doctrine of Sacred Scripture*, drawing on Scripture, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, the Church Fathers, and the major theological tradition. It is offered as a personal defense, not as an official statement of the Church's teaching. Where this defense is fortunate enough to align with the magisterial teaching of the Church, the credit belongs to the tradition that formed it. Where it falls short, the responsibility is the author's alone.