

The Bible is a True Trinitarian Love Story.

A. Start with one of the FOUR gospels

“Many have undertaken to compile the narrative of the things Jesus fulfilled among us, that were delivered to us by those ministers of the word who were eyewitnesses from the beginning. And it seemed good to me also to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Lover-of-God, that you may have certainty concerning these things...” Luke 1:1-4

Thus Luke begins his Gospel, dedicated to a man whose name literally was ‘Lover-of-God’ – or in Greek, ‘Theophilus’. Three things are worth saying here:

- i. ‘Gospel’ is the name given to a “narrative of the things Jesus did”--so the Bible has four Gospels (‘narratives of Jesus’), all with the same unique Gospel (‘message of Jesus’)!
- ii. The Gospels are reliable historical records based on eyewitness testimonies of those “who were eyewitnesses from the beginning”.
- iii. The Gospels are an invitation to become ‘Lovers-of-God’ by understanding and believing in the God who has revealed himself in Jesus Christ (cf. John 20:31).

If all that was necessary was historical information about the ministry of Jesus, then it might have been better just to have one authoritative version of Jesus’ life. But the important thing is not just to know about Jesus but to personally encounter him, to know and love him. The four gospels were written for four different contexts, and so emphasise slightly different aspects of who Jesus was. Sometimes they even tell a particular story out of strict chronological order in order to do this.

So if you’ve never read the Bible before, you should start with a Gospel—& there’s one just for you!

Mark is for *‘doers’*. Mark is the shortest Gospel, and in it everything seems to happen “immediately... immediately... immediately...” (1:18,20,21,23). Mark, the first Gospel to be written, is based on the eyewitness experience of the apostle Peter, a family friend of Mark (Acts 12:12). Both Mark and Peter were all-or-nothing men who wanted to follow Jesus completely—but had messed up in significant ways: Peter had denied Jesus after promising he would die for him; Mark had gotten homesick and given up halfway through his first missionary trip (Acts 15:38). Mark’s Gospel is an action-packed account of the ‘Suffering Servant’ who “came not to call the righteous—but sinners”.

Luke is for *‘feelers’*. Luke was a doctor (Col. 4:18), and one of the first significant followers of Jesus who wasn’t Jewish. Being a doctor, his Gospel naturally reflects a heart of compassion for the sick and—being a Gentile—for the stranger; for the unwell and the unwelcome. But Luke isn’t interested in superficial nice feelings, but rather in the supernatural power of the Holy Spirit working through Jesus and his followers to bring enduring transformation.

Matthew is for *‘thinkers’*. Matthew was a tax accountant, the sort of person who could be relied upon to make sure that every penny was tallied up and all the financial records were in order. Thus it’s no surprise to find that Matthew has the most extensive record of Jesus’ teaching, and is also the most fastidious in noting the various ways that Jesus fulfilled Scriptural prophecy.

John is for *‘dreamers’*. John was the last to finish writing his gospel. He always refers to himself as ‘the disciple Jesus loved’. John isn’t just interested in the miraculous wonders that Jesus did, but wants to know what these *signs* mean. Nor is he interested so much in Jesus’ teaching to the crowds—he prefers to tell us the details of Jesus’ conversations with individuals, thus inviting each individual reader to personally give up their small dreams for a vision of Jesus.

B. Is the Bible TRUE? -- FOUR vital questions

Are the Scriptures reliable in their TRANSLATION, TRANSMISSION, TESTIMONY, and TOTALITY?

1. The linguistic question: Are the Scriptures reliable in their TRANSLATION?

The Scriptures were originally written in Greek (New Testament), Hebrew (TaNaKh/'Old Testament'), and Aramaic (most of Daniel). Since most of us don't speak these languages, most of us read the Bible in translation. The reason translations of the Bible differ is that there are 3 types of translation:

'Word-for-word'	Literal	Eg. Authorised/King James Version
'Thought-for-thought'	'Dynamic'	Eg. New International Version
'Idea-for-idea (?!)'	Paraphrase	Eg. The Message

Discuss: What translation do you use? _____ What type of translation is it? _____

Tip: For Doctrine—use a word-for-word translation. For Devotion—use whatever is most helpful.

2. The textual question: Are the Scriptures reliable in their TRANSMISSION?

Since the original Scriptural manuscripts no longer exist, there are three issues we must consider:

- i. the length of time between the original manuscript and the earliest we have preserved;
- ii. the number of available manuscripts;
- iii. the variation between the manuscripts.

For the New Testament, we have *more than four thousand* Greek manuscripts (many viewable online: <http://www.csntm.org/manuscript>), with some dating from perhaps only a few decades after the original (cf. Young Kyu Kim's argument¹ that the collection of the Pauline epistles P^{46} should be dated before AD80). The earliest complete copy is the 'Codex Sinaiticus' (owned by the British Library, and viewable online: <http://codexsinaiticus.org>) which dates from the mid-4th century—within three centuries of the original writings. As for variation, textual scholarship demonstrates that "substantial variation [i.e. not just trivial differences in word order or spelling]...can hardly form more than a thousandth part of the entire text"². To appreciate just how well-attested the New Testament text is, it is worth comparing other ancient manuscripts.

For the Hebrew Scriptures ('Old Testament'), we don't have a complete Hebrew version until the Leningrad Codex (http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Category:Codex_Leningradensis) of the Masoretic Text in AD1008, but it has been shown to be very reliable by comparing it with the more recently discovered (20th Century) Dead Sea Scrolls (<http://dss.collections.imj.org.il/isaiah>) from 200 BC, and can also be checked against the early Greek translations ('Septuagint'—a substantial version of which is included in the Codex Sinaiticus).

3. The historical question: Are the Scriptures reliable in their TESTIMONY?

In answering this question, scholars use various historical criteria such as the following:

- 1a. Contextual Coherence :** Does the event make sense in its historical context?
- 1b. Distinctive Dissimilarity :** Did the event have any consequences that are sufficiently distinctive and dissimilar from the context that it is hard to explain them without conceding the event's truth?
- 2a. Multiple Attestation :** Is the event testified to by multiple witnesses?
- 2b. Extrabiblical Confirmation :** Is it confirmed or contradicted by non-Biblical writers of the time?

¹ *Biblica* Magazine, Vol. 69, No. 2, 1988 (available online: <http://www.friktech.com/rel/p46.htm>)

² *Handbook to the Textual Criticism of the NT*, F.G. Kenyon, available at openlibrary.org.

- 3a. Apostolic Embarrassment :** Does the event reflect badly on the reputation of the witness?
3b. Apostolic Suffering : Did the witness endure suffering for the sake of their testimony?
4a. Unnecessary Detail : This can point to authentic eyewitness testimony of the events.
4b. Unresolved Difficulties : This can point to authentic reporting of the eyewitness testimony.
5. Alternative Explanations: If the event described still seems implausible, then to complete the historical task it is still necessary to suggest an alternative that is **plausible** and **preferable**.

Without assuming anything about the supernatural inspiration of the Scriptures, one could apply these criteria to consider the historicity of, for example, the resurrection of Jesus.

4. The theological question: Are the Scriptures reliable in their TOTALITY?

Within the Scriptures, we find the claim that “*All Scripture is inspired by God...*” (2 Timothy 3.16), and since God “never lies” (Titus 1:2), it seems simple to conclude that all Scripture must be entirely reliable. But unless we have other grounds on which to accept the claim that Scripture is inspired, we are in danger of basing our trust in Scripture on nothing more than a circular argument.

But if we have been persuaded on historical grounds that Jesus of Nazareth truly was risen from the dead, and if we agree with his followers that He was thus “declared to be the Son of God” (Rom. 1:4), then it is logical to accept and align ourselves with the historical conviction of Jesus – which, as with devout Jews of his day, was clearly that “*The Scriptures cannot be broken*” (John 10:35).

Alternatively, we might base our confidence in Scripture on the internal testimony of the Holy Spirit. This will have more or less weight depending on our personal experience of God’s power.

Finally, we could simply choose to (at least initially) trust the testimony of the church, remembering that the Scriptures don’t call us to unquestioning silent submission, but rather to sincerely questioning curiosity and thoughtful engagement—as was modelled by Jesus (Luke 2:46).

C. 4 Rules of Interpretation: Context, Context, Context, Context

Interpretation is an integral part of being human. To interpret Scripture well you need to consider:

- i. The original Historical Context: ‘What did this mean when it was written?’
- ii. The book’s Narrative Context: ‘Why has the author written it like that?’
- iii. The unchanging Theological Context: ‘What does this tell me about God?’
- iv. Your own Personal Context: ‘What does this mean for me today?’

D. The Key to Interpretation: ‘It’s a Love-story not a Rule-book’

The mistake most commonly made by people when they come to the Bible is to see it primarily as a rule-book, when actually it is a love-story. Though the Bible undeniably contains a lot of rules—the Jewish rabbis count 613!—when we look closely at these rules (that is, ‘the Law [of Moses]’), we find that, in its content, its context, and its consummation, even the Law is in fact a Law of Love.

First, consider the content of the Law: Jesus taught that **the most important (Mark 12:29) rules are simply ‘to love’**: first, to “*Love YHWH your God with all your heart and soul and strength*” (Deut. 6:4) and second, to “*Love your neighbour as yourself*” (Lev. 19:18). **These two commands in fact summarise and include all the others** (cf. Rom. 13:8-10, Matt. 7:12). So the Law which God gave Moses is first (in ‘the 10 Commandments’) an expansion in general terms of what it means to “love YHWH your God” (the first tablet) and to “love your neighbour” (the second tablet); and then a specific contextual application for the people of Israel at that time of what it would look like in the

nitty-gritty legal realities of everyday life to love people (Ex. 21-23) and to love God (Ex. 25-30; Lev. 1-27)—we can call these the civic and the ceremonial laws, or the political and the priestly laws.

Second, the context of the Law: The Law of Moses was given to people who had just been rescued from cruel and oppressive slavery by the awesome power of their God—**because he loved them**. Moses emphasises this in his final message: *“YHWH your God has chosen you to be a people for his treasured possession, out of all the peoples on the face of the earth. It is not because you were more in number than any other people that YHWH set his love on you and chose you... but it is because YHWH loves you and is keeping the oath that he swore to your fathers”* (Deuteronomy 7:6-8). The 10 Commandments likewise begin by establishing the context of a loving God: *“I am YHWH YOUR God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery”*.

Third, the consummation of the Law: After laying out the conditional blessings and curses of the covenant, the Law of Moses then records YHWH’s promise that even in the case of complete disobedience on the part of God’s people, *“I will not spurn them, neither will I abhor them so as to destroy them utterly and break my covenant with them, for I am YHWH their God. But I will for their sake remember the covenant with their forefathers, whom I brought out of the land of Egypt in the sight of the nations, that I might be their God: I am YHWH”* (Lev. 26:44-45).

We have the privilege of having already seen how God has fulfilled this promise and *“has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do. By sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled...”* (Romans 8:3). As Paul says, *“Christ redeemed us from the curse of the Law by becoming a curse for us—as it is written, ‘Cursed is he who is hanged on a tree’ “* (Gal. 3:13). We know then that the Law of Moses is a Law of Love because *“Christ is the goal of the law”* (Rom. 10:4), the Christ who *“died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures”* (1 Cor. 15:3). And *“Greater love has no man than this, than to lay down his life for his friends”* (John 15:13).

E. Our Response: Conforming Our Stories To God’s Love-Story

James 1:22 *“But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves.”*

F. Commitment: Read FOUR chapters each day

“Blessed is the man whose delight is in the law of the Lord, who meditates on it day and night” Ps.1:2
The Bible is a long book – more than a thousand pages – but even if you don’t enjoy reading, **you can complete the whole Bible in less than a year by just reading four chapters each day. This will only take about twenty minutes**, and is easily done first thing in the morning or last thing before bed.

G. A Biblical Prayer About The Bible (Psalm 19:7-11)

⁷ **The law of the LORD is perfect, converting the soul;**
The testimony of the LORD is sure, making wise the simple;
⁸ **The statutes of the LORD are right, rejoicing the heart;**
The commandment of the LORD is pure, enlightening the eyes;
⁹ **The fear of the LORD is clean, enduring forever;**
The judgments of the LORD are true and righteous altogether.
¹⁰ **More to be desired are they than gold—Yea! than much fine gold;**
Sweeter also than honey and the honeycomb.
¹¹ **Moreover by them Your servant is warned,**
And in keeping them there is great reward.