How Can I trust the Bible if it Isn't error free?

This is a common question people often ask and it may appear forceful upon first hearing it but it doesn't amount to very much once its unraveled. The mere presence of errors does not render the Bible useless for faith or make it untrustworthy. A few points to consider.

[1] Behind this question usually lies an *all or nothing* view of Scripture that is not well thought out. Does the presence of a grammatical error in one of my physics textbooks render it all suspect or useless? Of course not. Now if a general physics textbook makes a significant number of errors when it came to actual physics content, then we would have cause for alarm, since teaching such information to underclassmen is its central purpose,

[2] Where in life do we have inerrant sources? What book, magazine, historical document, doctor, mechanic, schoolteacher, pastor or church is inerrant? We use imperfect sources all the time and are quite adept at doing so. **A work does not need to be inerrant to be useful. It just needs to be reliable for its intended purpose.**

We can look at eyewitness testimony as an example. It is painfully obvious to experts today that eyewitnesses make all sorts of mistakes. The Innocence Project has freed hundreds of people using DNA evidence, reporting that "More than 60% of our clients were wrongfully convicted based on eyewitness misidentification." This does not render all eyewitness testimony useless. It simply has to be used judiciously. Paul J. Achtemeier wrote:

> ". . . people do not operate in other areas of life on the principle that one mistake or error renders all other statements or acts coming from that source totally untrustworthy. One's trust in a friend is not irrevocably shattered if one finds that in some matter of historical information that friend should prove to be in error. Life has a way of continuing to function, even in the absence of absolute certainty, and whatever else the Bible may concern, it is surely about life." [*The Inspiration of Scripture*, pp. 36-67]

[3] We should ask the objector the following question: trust the Bible for what? What is the purpose of scripture? 2 Timothy 3:15-17 reads: "and how from childhood you have known the sacred writings **that are able to instruct you for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus.** 16 All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, 17 so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work." NRSV

The Bible was not written to be a scientific text nor is it a strict historical biography in the modern sense. Its purpose is to preach the good news so that we might be saved by it. Its purpose is mediating the sacred, instructing us about salvation through Jesus, training us in righteousness and equipping us to do good works. In order for the Bible to be considered useful and trustworthy, it must only serve the purpose for which God intends it. The purpose of the Bible is not to teach us exactly how Judas died or how long it took God to

fashion the earth or whether or not Abiathar or Ahimelech was high priest when David ate the showbread. The purpose is to mediate the sacred and bring people to God through the redemptive work of Jesus. God and the Holy Spirit can work through a text with errors. To suggest otherwise is to subscribe to the doctrine of *divine impotence* instead of *divine omnipotence*.

[4] Scripture consistently portrays God as employing imperfect humans to do His bidding. Over and over again these humans screw up, sometimes in spectacular fashion. But in the end, God's will is accomplished *despite their shortcomings*. Some familiar names include Abraham, Moses, Jacob, David, Jonah and the disciples. None of these Biblical figures—even the righteous ones with faith--were perfect but they were sufficient to serve the purpose for which God intended them. If God could use such imperfect humans to accomplish his will, to establish a lasting covenant, to deliver His Laws, to build the nation of Israel and to finally build His Church, why on earth could He not use imperfect scripture? This doesn't prove scripture has material imperfections, but it certainly calls into question approaching it with an all or nothing mentality.

[5] Finally, the Bible is not a magical talisman or secret book that *we* simply need to decode. God uses scripture to lead people to salvation and the Holy Spirit. Without illumination by the Holy Spirit, an argument can be made that the Bible will look like any other human work. Jesus's quip about "pearls before swine" is apt here. We need to rely on the Holy Spirit as we read the Bible in faith. Dale Martin wrote:

> "We may trust scripture to provide what we need for our salvation. We may trust that we can read scripture in prayerful hope that God will speak to us through our reading that text. But ultimately this belief-or, perhaps better put, this stance, attitude, or habitus-is actually an expression of our faith not in a text but in God and the holy spirit. We "leave it up to the holy spirit" to protect us from damnable error in our readings of scripture. We depend on God to keep us with God in our readings of scripture. Properly understood, the doctrine of the infallibility of scripture is a statement less about a text and more about God." [The Meaning of Scripture in the Twenty-first Century]

Conclusion: One analogy I find helpful is viewing the Bible as a window to God. God uses this window (the Bible) to allows us to learn about Him and start a relationship. But the mirror has smudges, a slight tint and even a few cracks. The view is not perfect due to the mirror, but this does not impede us from figuring things out nor from seeing the big picture. The Cross is in full display when we peer through that window. It dominates our field of view. Whether or not the Bible is inerrant, its salvific track-record delineates its general trustworthiness in fulfilling God's intended purposes. We can trust the Bible because we trust God. No greater comfort or assurance can be given nor should it be requested.