

DOUBTING GOD: SPRING 2011 SERIES
WEEK 3—DID GOD REALLY SAY? THE PROBLEM WITH THE BIBLE
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I. DEFINING THE DOUBT— Why should we trust the Bible at all?

- A. The Bible can't be trusted.** In the short, the rationale is as follows: Christianity is based on the life and teachings of Jesus as recorded in the New Testament. If this New Testament is, however, found to be untrustworthy, then Christianity should be approached cautiously (minimally) or totally abandoned (maximally).
- B. The grounds for the claim.** While there are various specific reason why an individual or group of people may not trust the Bible, the general doubts/objections fall into these 3 areas: History, Content, & Meaning. We'll look at each one of these below
- C. A brief caveat.** The rationale behind this objection is *actually* dead on. Scripture itself testifies to such logic. When speaking about the Resurrection in 1 Cor. 15: 14-15, Paul notes as much. If the Resurrection didn't happen, says Paul, then following Christ is without purpose and pitiable. So, in general, the question we need to address is, "Can one, with reasonable confidence, accept what the NT documents assert as veracious?"

II. OBJECTIONS WITH RESPECT TO HISTORY – These doubts center on historical events and the transmission of these events through time. What follows below are only a few of the most prominent.

- A. How can we trust the Bible if we don't have the original documents (and the ones we do have happened well after the events themselves)?** It is true that no museum (or known person) holds any of the *autographa* (the original letters by Paul, John, etc.). How can we really know what they said? These doubts are rooted in the source themselves.

Polybius was a Greek historian (c.205-c.123 BC) that documented the history of Rome from 220-146 BC in *The Histories*. Much of what we know about ancient Roman culture comes from this source. But, we don't have his original manuscripts and we continue to 'base our life' on these. Moreover, the oldest copy we have of *Histories* is from the 10th century (some 1000+ years after the events). But most scholars today are convinced that the latest of the NT books was written around 95 AD (at most, a mere 60 years between the event and its recording).

- B. Weren't the authors/eyewitnesses biased?** The doubt is one that is rooted in skepticism toward the authors/eyewitnesses themselves.

Richard Bauckham "The ancient historians – such as Thucydides, Polybius, Josephus, and Tacitus – were convinced that true history could be written only while events were still within living memory, and they valued as their sources the oral reports of direct experience of the events by involved participants in them...The ancient historians knew that firsthand insider testimony gave access to truth that could not be had otherwise."¹ This didn't mean that what was received was done so uncritically either. The point is that eyewitness testimony—the testimony of individuals with an investment in the event—was absolutely essential in the transmission of history.

- C. The ancient writers often blended history and legend?** At its best, this doubt is a question to the nature of genre. The rationale is that the ancients, when they wrote, melded history and legend. Therefore, it is hard to know what is true and what is made up.

C.S. Lewis: "I have been reading poems, romances, vision literature, legends any myths all my life. I know what they are like. I know none of them like this. Of this [gospel] text there are only two possible views. Either this is

¹ R. Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006) 8-11.

reportage...or else, some unknown [ancient] writer...without known predecessor or successors, suddenly anticipated the whole technique of modern novelistic, realistic narrative.”²

III. OBJECTIONS WITH RESPECT TO CULTURE – These doubts focus on the content of the Bible itself as it relates to cultural institutions and sensibilities.

A. The Bible speaks of and condones slavery. This is an oppressive enterprise and I can’t believe the Bible because of it.

Murray J. Harris: “[I]n many parts of the English-speaking world slavery is part of our history, in the Mediterranean lands of the first century, slavery was part of their life. This difference is a ground, I submit, not for the purging of the language of slavery from the New Testament, but for its preservation. That is, if the language of slavery is offensive, the offence would have been considerably greater for those who lived in societies where slavery was intrinsic than for us for whom slavery is simply an unpleasant and embarrassing memory.”³

B. The Bible speaks of miracles as though they are common events. Since miracles don’t happen, the Bible can’t be trusted.

This doubt is, at its root, a metaphysical one. It is a question about the *nature* of the universe, namely that the physical world is a closed system. There is nothing but the physical. The challenge is as follows. If nothing but the physical remains, even the thoughts we have are merely a random collocation of atoms. But there certainly isn’t any meaning behind them. In the end they can’t be trusted either. But if there is a God who made the world and continues to govern it, it follows that He could intervene without means. And this intervention is always for nothing less than the salvation of the individual.

IV. OBJECTIONS WITH RESPECT TO MEANING – These doubts present deny the trustworthiness of the Bible on the ground that meaning from the text is hard (or impossible) to find. These doubt may or may not have a problem with the historical or cultural issues at all. Rather, a fundamental question of this sort of doubt is, “How can we know what is meant by what is said in the text?”

A. It’s hard to know why these authors wrote. Therefore, their intent (what they wanted to communicate) is can have little bearing on us.

Mark Thompson: “Appeal to the ‘death of the author’ is in fact the ultimate power play: it dethrones God, privileges the present, and recasts these words as dim echoes of past experiences. Yet the divine author has not relinquished this text. The apostles and prophets may be long dead, but the word of God that comes to expression in and as their words remains the sword of the Spirit (Eph 6:17). To speak of the vulnerability of the written word, adrift on a sea of interpretations, is a strangely romantic notion when the word concerned is the word of God.”⁴

B. It is arrogant to say that one should bend or submit to a text? Doesn’t the reader have priority to (1) determine what it means for them and (2) respond how they see fit?

Tim Keller: “If you don’t trust the Bible enough to let it challenge and correct your thinking, how could you ever have a *personal* relationship with God? In any truly personal relationship, the other person has to be able to contradict you...Only if your God can say things that outrage you and make you struggle (as in real friendship or marriage!) will you know that you have gotten hold of a real God and not a figment of your imagination.”⁵

² C. Lewis, *Christian Reflections* (San Francisco: Harper, 1967) 155.

³ M. Harris, *Slave of Christ* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1999) 45.

⁴ M. Thompson *A Clear and Present Word* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2006) 133.

⁵ T. Keller *Reason for God* (New York: Dutton, 2008) 113-14.