

Is the Bible Reliable?

Psalms 119:105; **2 Timothy 3:14-17**; 2 Peter 1:19-21

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When I was a senior in high school, one evening I went to a neighboring town to a revival meeting. The evangelist was a man named Jack Gray. His wife was dean of women at ORU, where I was getting ready to go to college. Jack had preached at my brother's church, so I'd heard of him. That evening I introduced myself to him and told him I was going to ORU that fall to study theology and that I was planning to go into ministry. He got almost nose-to-nose with me, looked me in the eye and said, "Are you gonna preach the Biiible?" I said, "Yes sir!"

In *Explore God*, we've been trying to deal with big questions people have about Christian faith. My attempts to answer these questions are based on the Bible. I do preach the Bible. The Bible is our guide and main source for thinking about God, the world, humanity, faith and so on. I love the Bible. I love to read and study and preach and teach the Bible.

But we need to recognize that the Bible *is* the problem for some people. Skeptics and others question the Bible. Is it true? Does it truly represent what Jesus and his earliest followers said and did? Is the Bible a reliable guide for knowing God and living in this world?

People have struggled with the Bible, or with aspects of it, for centuries. The Jewish party of the Sadducees in Jesus' day apparently didn't believe in angels and spirits or in an afterlife. Jesus told them that they knew neither the scriptures nor the power of God.

Skeptics and non-Christians throughout history have questioned or challenged the Bible. Big challenges and questions have come during the Modern Era, or since the Enlightenment (roughly the late 1600's/early 1700's). During this time, leading thinkers have exalted human reason and intellect. Certainly, much good has come from modern thinking and research and such. But, modernism also tended to reject the supernatural and anything miraculous. Because of that, modernism has rejected much of what the Bible affirms—or has completely discounted the Bible. One example of the modern view is Thomas Jefferson's *New Testament*. He

removed all references to miracles and kept just the moral teachings of Jesus and the early church.

It's not only skeptics and unbelievers who question the Bible's truthfulness and reliability. Christian scholars, threatened by the challenges of modernism, have sometimes given in and abandoned the miraculous. Then they reinterpreted the Bible to fit the modern worldview. Rudolf Bultmann, one of the most prominent and influential New Testament scholars in the 20th Century, basically said, "Modern people, who use electricity and wireless radio, can't believe in miracles." He believed that dead people don't rise from the dead, so the NT must have been talking about something else when it described Jesus rising from the dead. Bultmann said that the NT stories of Jesus' resurrection meant something like the rise of faith in the apostles' hearts. Those stories were more about what the first Christians believed and felt than they were about something that actually happened.

People struggle with the contradictions they see in the Bible. There are some stories in the Bible that are told from different perspectives and have differences in their details. This is really only a problem if we see God as the only author who kind of dictated the Bible to people. That's really the view in Islam or Mormonism. Muhammad saw the Quran as a book existing in heaven and an angel relayed its contents to him. Joseph Smith reported finding golden plates or tablets with writing on them that he was given special ability to read and translate. The Bible's inspiration is more dynamic and involves human authors more fully than in those views. God gave ideas, insights, and even words to people who wrote in their own languages and within their historical and cultural contexts.

The word "bible" literally means "book." So it is *the book* for Christians. But it's more accurate to see the Bible as a library of sixty-six books. It includes various kinds of literature, written by numerous people over a period of many hundreds of years. The nature of the Bible is that it is *the word of God in human words*. We'll talk more about what that means.

Let's focus on the writing of the New Testament. Most scholars see the NT books as being written before the end of the First Century. The stories about Jesus were told by his followers and passed around from the

time of his ascension on. What the NT says about Jesus is what the earliest followers of Jesus believed and taught. The earliest writings in the NT are the letters of the Apostle Paul, which he wrote from around A.D. 50 to 65. Some say Galatians is the earliest, others put it a little later and see 1 and 2 Thessalonians as Paul's earliest letters included in the NT. In his letters, Paul refers to what he had been taught about Jesus, the tradition that was already established. That goes way back to within just a few years of Jesus' death and resurrection.

The Gospels themselves were written between the late 60s and around 90 A.D. Most scholars believe that Mark was written first and that Matthew and Luke used Mark and another source along with their own unique information to tell the story of Jesus. Luke says at the beginning of his gospel,

Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed down to us by those who were eyewitnesses and servants of the word. Therefore, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, it seemed good also to me to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus [this name means "lover of God"], so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught (1:1-4).

The gist of all this is that in the NT we have eyewitness accounts about Jesus' life and ministry as well as a core of beliefs about Jesus. It's simply wrong to say, as some do, that Christians didn't believe Jesus is divine until the fourth century. It's really something that the church believed from the very beginning.

We could say a lot more about the writing of the NT, but let's go on to look at how these writings were compiled to form the NT. By the end of the First Century, all the books we have in the NT were written and being read in various places. There are other Christian writings from the end of the First and beginning of the Second Centuries that were popular with Christians in various locations. These include the Letter of Clement to the

Corinthians, The Shepherd of Hermas and The Didache. Some of these could have been included in the NT.

Every so often, we'll hear about other writings from that era that were kept out of the Bible. These so-called Gnostic gospels were never seriously considered for inclusion. Most of them were not written until much later and they just don't have the character of the gospels that the church did hold to. The four gospels we know were held together and accepted as authoritative as early as the last half of the Second Century—possibly even earlier. At some point the letters Paul wrote to various churches were compiled into a group. The other writings were also in circulation among the churches. There was dispute over some of the books like Hebrews, James, 2 Peter, 2 and 3 John, and Revelation. But overall, most early Christians saw these as authoritative apostolic works.

During the second century there was a heretic named Marcion who believed that the God who created this physical world, the God of the OT, was not the God and Father of Jesus. Marcion held that only spirit is good and that matter is evil. But he accepted Paul's writings. What makes Marcion significant is that he compiled a list of writings that should be read in the churches. He included most of Paul's letters—with the OT references deleted—and the Gospel of Luke (who was associated with Paul, again with references to the OT and to Jesus' physical birth deleted). In answer to Marcion, the church developed its own list of authoritative books. There is a list from about 180 A.D. that includes the four gospels, Acts, Paul's thirteen letters and several of the other NT writings, though some are omitted. The point is that at an early stage, the bulk of what became the NT was already read and seen as authoritative by most Christians.

Finally, in 387, a church council finalized the canon, or list, of NT books. There were three qualifications for a writing to be included. It needed to be apostolic, written either by an apostle or someone closely associated with an apostle. It needed to be in general use by Christians everywhere. And the content needed to be consistent with what was called the Rule of Faith, the basic core of belief about Jesus.

The claim that the emperor Constantine compiled the NT is simply wrong. And the Gnostic gospels some people see as suppressed by an early church conspiracy were never considered for inclusion in the NT.

Another question about or challenge to the Bible is whether the Bible as we have it now is the Bible as it was written or whether it has been hopelessly corrupted by mistakes and intentional changes. We need to recognize that we don't have any of the original biblical writings. None of the actual scrolls that Paul and others wrote on are available to us. What we have are copies and copies of copies. These are called manuscripts. There are more manuscripts for the NT than for any other ancient writing. Secular historians rely on copies of ancient texts that were made many centuries after the original writing. The best available manuscripts of the NT are from around 350 A.D., not even four centuries after the original. There is a fragment of the Gospel of John that was discovered in Egypt that dates to the first half of the second century—or within 50-75 years of the original. There are also many ancient translations of the NT and quotations from the NT in the writings of early Christians from the Second Century on. There are scholars who devote their entire careers to studying these ancient manuscripts and to compiling the best text of the NT. We can say with confidence that the Bibles we read today faithfully represent what was originally written.

The Bible has been translated into numerous languages from its original Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek. The history of the English Bible is fascinating. There were numerous translations into English before the popular Authorized Version of 1611, also known as the King James Version. It was a revision of some of those earlier English versions. There have been many more translations into English since then. Since the last half of the Twentieth Century we have seen new translations multiply. They are nearly all attempts to express the Bible in language that people can understand.

Much of what I have been saying is a matter of historical record. A serious student of ancient manuscripts and archeology can come to similar conclusions about the composition and canon and text of the Bible without any kind of faith commitment. But there is more to the Bible. It's more than just an ancient book. I said earlier that the Bible is the word of God in

human words. That's a faith statement. This doesn't mean that faith is uninformed, but faith goes beyond physical or historical evidence.

You need to be a believer to experience God's word the way the psalm writers did. Psalm 119 is a lengthy devotional about God's word. A famous verse from it says, "Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path." The writer found that God's word was a reliable guide in the right way to live.

Paul, writing to his associate Timothy, reminds him of how he has known the scriptures since he was a little child. This leads Paul to reflect on how the scriptures came about and how useful they are. He says that all scripture is inspired or God-breathed and that it is useful for teaching the truth, rebuking error, correcting behavior, and training in righteousness. The result is that the person who belongs to God is thoroughly equipped for every good work.

Listen to Peter's testimony about Scripture. This is what he says after giving his eyewitness account of Jesus' transfiguration:

We also have the prophetic message as something completely reliable, and you will do well to pay attention to it, as to a light shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts. Above all, you must understand that no prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet's own interpretation of things. For prophecy never had its origin in the human will, but prophets, though human, spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit. (2 Peter 1:19-21)

That's not the kind of stuff you know from the outside of faith. You have to get into the word and believe it. Despite struggles and questions, as you experience God's living word, Jesus Christ, and get to know God's written word in the Bible for yourself, you'll discover how reliable it is. You find that it really does make you "wise for salvation through Christ Jesus."

Robert McAfee Brown, *The Bible Speaks Today*

The Bible isn't "just another book" with a lot of interesting information about God. It is a book in which people find God "coming alive," making his way into their hearts and demanding that they do something about him. He is not a "safe" or a "tame" God, securely lodged behind the bars of a distant heaven; he has the most annoying manner of showing up when we least want him; of confronting us in the strangest ways. And he usually turns out to be very different from the sort of God we would have invented for ourselves. We have to be prepared for surprises and unexpected news (p. 9).

The Bible not only tells how God sought his people in the past; it is also a means by which he seeks us out today (p. 16).

Preface to Sermons, *The Works of John Wesley, Vol 5, pp. 2-4*

To candid, reasonable men, I am not afraid to lay open what have been the inmost thoughts of my heart. I have thought, I am a creature of a day, passing through life as an arrow through the air. I am a spirit come from God, and returning to God. Just hovering over the great gulf; till, a few moments hence, I am no more seen; I drop into an unchangeable eternity! I want to know one thing,--the way to heaven; how to land safe on that happy shore. God himself has condescended to teach the way: For this very end he came from heaven. He hath written it down in a book. O give me that book! At any price, give me the book of God! I have it: Here is knowledge enough for me. Let me be [a man of one book]. Here then I am, far from the busy ways of men. I sit down alone: Only God is here. In his presence I open, I read his book; for this end, to find the way to heaven. Is there a doubt concerning the meaning of what I read? Does anything appear dark or intricate? I lift up my heart to the Father of lights...I then search after and compare parallel passages of Scripture, "comparing spiritual things with spiritual." I meditate thereon with all the attention and earnestness of which my mind is capable. If any doubt still remains, I consult those who are experienced in the things of God; and then the writings whereby, being dead, they yet speak. And what I thus learn, that I teach.

The “Big Ideas” of the Bible (Arden C. Autry)

Creation

- monotheism (one will as Source of all)
- spiritual significance of material world; God’s will to bless creation
- humanity in God’s image, with capacity for relationships of love and will
- orderly, “lawful” world (for example, sowing and reaping) [purposeful narrative]

Calamity

- The Fall; brokenness, corruption
- created wills choosing against the Creator’s will [narrative of loss]

Call

- redemption, atonement, reclaiming, healing of broken relationships
- remnant saved to reach the rest (evangelistic imperative)
- promise of Creator’s purpose being realized [narrative of promise] (God’s promise elicits faith, hope, and love)

Covenant

- ordered relationship between sovereign God and responsible humanity
- God’s initiative in election; human response of faith and obedience
- redeeming relationships, provided by grace, dependent on faithfulness
- revealed and lived out in history of Israel and the church
- life of purpose; Creator/Redeemer’s intention revealed (revelation)
- context of promise/fulfillment
- context of love/grace and commitment/faithfulness [journey narrative]

Christ

- God’s Word made flesh, ultimate, definitive revelation, covenant embodied
- fully God, fully human (Emmanuel, God and humanity reconciled)
- He make our story his story, so that he can make his story our story
- fulfillment of creation/redemption narrative assured—What Adam was *created* to be, what Abraham/Israel was *called* to be, that’s what *Christ incarnate* is. That’s what we are *in Christ* (the body of Christ) (N. T. Wright)

Communion Community

- It takes the whole covenant people of God to inherit and exhibit the promises and fulfillment of God focused in Christ [His narrative becomes ours]
- love within the church
- love for the world (from God)
- belonging to God and one another in the Holy Spirit, who makes Jesus known (The one, true Holy Spirit is known 1. by whom he makes known and 2. by the connections he creates)

Consummation

- Kingdom of God (God’s purposes by God’s power), already and not yet
- hope energizing the present faith/fulness (future shaping the present)
- resurrection life now and future
- judgment, ultimate resolution of justice
- glory of God manifested

- creation healed
- One will realized and glorified by all [creation/redemption narrative complete]