

IS THE BIBLE RELIABLE?

The Bible is a book beyond all books as a river is above a stream. The Bible is a book beyond all books as the sun is above and beyond a candle in brightness. The Bible is a book beyond all books as the wings of an eagle is above and beyond the wings of a sparrow. It is supernatural in origin, eternal in duration, inexpressible in value, immeasurable in influence, infinite in scope, divine in authorship, human in penmanship, regenerative in power, infallible in authority, universal in interest, personal in application, and inspired in totality. This is the Book that has walked more paths, travelled more highways, knocked at more doors and spoken to more people in their mother tongue than in other book this world has ever known or will know -- Dr. R. G. Lee

Today we are continuing in our series on Tough Questions. Last week we talked about the existence of God by looking at General Revelation. Today we want to take that discussion one step further and look at Special Revelation. Assuming that God exists, what is God like? There are many different faiths around the world that believe in God. How can we know which one if any are correct?

One of the questions I have been asked many times in my life is the simple question “why are you a Christian? Why are you a follower of Jesus Christ?” How do you answer that question? For me it is a very simple answer. I am a Christian because I believe the Bible to be true. The Christian faith is based upon a single fact; that God has revealed himself to mankind and that His Special Revelation (the Bible) is accurate. We have all learned this truth from an early age:

Jesus loves me this I know, for the BIBLE tells me so...

Suppose that you were on an internet chat site and met someone online. The only thing that you could know about that person, assuming they do not lie, is what they revealed to you about themselves. Likewise, we can know some things about God by looking at the world around us (General Revelation), but the best way to know who God is and what He is like is to read His Special Revelation to us in the Bible. We know that God does not lie, so what He says to us about himself is the truth.

Psa 19:7 The law of the LORD is perfect, reviving the soul. The statutes of the LORD are trustworthy, making wise the simple. 8 The precepts of the LORD are right, giving joy to the heart. The commands of the LORD are radiant, giving light to the eyes. 9 The fear of the LORD is pure, enduring forever. The ordinances of the LORD are sure and altogether righteous. 10 They are more precious than gold, than much pure gold; they are sweeter than honey, than honey from the comb.

I am a Christian because I believe that the Bible is an accurate revelation of God. The question I want to answer today is whether or not that belief is sensible. There are many today that believe that the Bible cannot be trusted. There are usually 3 common objections that come up regarding the accuracy of the Bible, especially when you are talking about the New Testament and the life of Jesus:

1. The CROWDS made it all up –

Most historical scholars believe that Jesus actually existed. There is non-biblical non-Christian authors like Josephus who acknowledge this.

There was recently a television mini-series on the History channel called ‘Mankind – The Story Of All Of Us’. It was a secular look at our history. The story included the life of Jesus as it should. There is no other single person in history that has affected the world more than the person of Jesus Christ.

The basic assumption they give for the rise of Christianity is that Jesus (who they believe was just another prophet and a good moral teacher) never claimed to be God but that the people who saw Him simply misunderstood his message and attributed divinity to him. This was not an uncommon thing in the surrounding Gentile world. Remember this story:

Act 14:8 In Lystra there sat a man crippled in his feet, who was lame from birth and had never walked. 9 He listened to Paul as he was speaking. Paul looked directly at him, saw that he had faith to be healed 10 and called out, "Stand up on your feet!" At that, the man jumped up and began to walk. 11 When the crowd saw what Paul had done, they shouted in the Lycaonian language, "The gods have come down to us in human form!" 12 Barnabas they called Zeus, and Paul they called Hermes because he was the chief speaker. 13 The priest of Zeus, whose temple was just outside the city, brought bulls and wreaths to the city gates because he and the crowd wanted to offer sacrifices to them.

There are a problems with this view. Jesus, like Paul, was Jewish. That means they believed in only one God. Jesus would have taken great care to have cleared up any misconceptions about His nature. However, the Bible is very clear that not only did Jesus accept the belief that He was God He Himself claimed to be God incarnate and not just another prophet. His claims to divinity are very clear:

John 8:58 "I tell you the truth," Jesus answered, "before Abraham was born, I am!" 59 At this, they picked up stones to stone him, but Jesus hid himself, slipping away from the temple grounds.

John 10:27 My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me. 28 I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one can snatch them out of my hand. 29 My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all; no one can snatch them out of my Father's hand. 30 I and the Father are one ." 31 Again the Jews picked up stones to stone him 32 but Jesus said to them, "I have shown you many great miracles from the Father . For which of these do you stone me?" 33 "We are not stoning you for any of these," replied the Jews, "but for blasphemy, because you, a mere man, claim to be God."

It was because Jesus claimed to be God that he was crucified. The charge of blasphemy was the only thing that, if Jesus had only been a man, he would have been guilty of.

John 19:6 As soon as the chief priests and their officials saw him, they shouted, "Crucify! Crucify!" But Pilate answered, "You take him and crucify him. As for me, I find no basis for a charge against him." 7 The Jews insisted, "We have a law, and according to that law he must die, because he claimed to be the Son of God."

To avoid the cross He simply had to renounce His claim to being divine. He did not. After His resurrection Jesus appears to the disciples and accepts Thomas' worship:

John 20:28 Thomas said to him, " My Lord and my God !" 29 Then Jesus told him, "Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed."

According to the eyewitnesses of Jesus life, He never claimed to be just another man. He claimed to be God incarnate. Either He was lying or He was insane or He was who He claimed to be. There was no case of mistaken identity. The crowds did not simply misunderstand.

I think we all this quote from CS Lewis:

I am trying here to prevent anyone saying the really foolish thing that people often say about Him: "I'm ready to accept Jesus as a great moral teacher, but I don't accept his claim to be God." That is the one thing we must not say. A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic — on the level with the man who says he is a poached egg — or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God, or else a madman or something worse. You can shut him up for a fool, you can spit at him and kill him as a demon or you can fall at his feet and call him Lord and God, but let us not come with any patronizing nonsense about his being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to.

2. The DISCIPLES made it all up -

Clearly the record of Jesus' life shows that He claimed to be God. The next argument then is whether or not this record is accurate. Perhaps Jesus never really did and said the things the Bible records. Perhaps the disciple's (who wrote the Bible) just made it all up. Perhaps Jesus never claimed to be God but the disciples simply said that He did. Jesus was just a nice guy who did good things and after His death the disciples got together and created the myth of Jesus' divinity.

Those who wrote the New Testament were very clear that they were not just writing fiction. They were not seeking to invent a new religion around a historic figure. They were reporting the truth and they were very concerned to make sure that absolutely everything they wrote had actually occurred.

1Jn 1:1 That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched--this we proclaim concerning the Word of life. 2 The life appeared; we have seen it and testify to it, and we proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and has appeared to us. 3 We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ.

Some will argue that their claims are not trustworthy. Just because someone CLAIMS to be writing the truth doesn't mean that they actually ARE writing the truth. There are other religious books that claim to be the truth. What is the difference? How do you know that what the disciples wrote what actually happened?

The difference lies in the fact that the ministry of Jesus was PUBLIC. If the disciples had lied and wrote things that were not true then their testimony would have been rejected because the words and events they wrote about were heard and seen by the people who were eyewitnesses to the life of Jesus. Peter was able to say to the crowds on Pentecost that they themselves knew what had happened because they had all seen it and were eyewitnesses to the facts.

Act 2:22 Men of Israel, listen to this: Jesus of Nazareth was a man accredited by God to you by miracles, wonders and signs, which God did among you through him, *as you yourselves know*.

There is no way that the New Testament, which was written while those who had witnessed the life of Jesus were still living, could have gotten away with error. If events or statements had been included that were false then the living witnesses, who were hostile to the cause of Christ, would have pointed out these mistakes. To claim that Jesus had raised Lazarus from the dead would be pointless if there were people living who knew that Lazarus had never died or been risen.

Suppose someone was to write a book inaccurately claiming that someone famous had done great miracles involving many thousands of people. Would it sell? No, because the people who knew the truth would be able to say that it never happened and that the book was a hoax. It would be like writing a book claiming that John F Kennedy had never been president. We see this reaction with people today who claim that the Holocaust never happened. There are those who can step forward to say “I was there in Auschwitz! Here are the numbers on my arm. I know that it happened.”

One of the greatest arguments for the reliability of the bible is that those who wrote it were willing to die for their faith. They suffered and died cruel deaths for what they believed in. You might argue that there are many people today who are willing to die for a cause that they believe in. People have burned themselves alive and blown themselves up for what they believed in. Is this really so different?

The difference is that the disciples KNEW the truth. People are willing to die for something that they believe in but who wants to suffer and die for something that you KNOW is a lie. When Jesus died on the cross their hopes and dreams died with Him. They were completely defeated. Only the resurrection of Jesus could have transformed this defeated bunch of misfits into a group that would change the entire Roman World in a single generation. If Jesus did not rise from the dead, they had nothing to gain and everything to lose.

3. The EARLY CHURCH made it all up –

The last argument is that neither Jesus nor His disciples were at fault. They believe that Jesus was a good person and that those who followed him during his life were sincere but that those who came years after changed what had been written. Perhaps it was the early church that made it all up. Maybe they took the true historical account of a man named Jesus who died in Jerusalem and, over hundreds of years, changed that truth into the myth and legend that we now call the New Testament.

This cannot be the case because the timeline from when the events occurred to when we have the earliest actual documents is too small.

| WORK | WHEN WRITTEN | EARLIEST COPY | TIME LAPSE | NUMBER OF COPIES |
|----------------------|--------------|---|--------------|--|
| Herodotus | 488–428 BC | AD 900 | 1,300 years | 8 |
| Thucydides | c.460–400 BC | AD 900 | 1,300 years | 8 |
| Tacitus | AD 100 | AD 1,100 | 1,000 years | 20 |
| Caesar’s Gallic War | 58–50 BC | AD 900 | 950 years | 9–10 |
| Livy’s Roman History | 59 BC– AD 17 | AD 900 | 900 years | 20 |
| New Testament | AD 40–100 | AD 130 full manuscripts from AD 350 | 30–250 years | 5,000+ Greek 10,000 Latin 9,300 others |

The Greek New Testament, upon which all modern translations of the bible are based, contains word for word what the ancient documents recorded. Any and all grammatical discrepancies between them are noted and taken into account. There are more than 5000 Greek copies of parts of the whole of the New Testament in existence today.

F.J.A. Haught, one of the greatest textual critics who ever lived, said this: 'In the variety and fullness of the evidence on which it rests, the text of the New Testament stands absolutely and unapproachably alone amongst ancient prose writings' - and no secular historian would disagree with that conclusion.

The first century Christians would meet on a fixed day to read the manuscripts so many different copies were produced. Later these manuscripts were translated into Latin (for Gaul, Spain and Italy), Coptic and Syriac.

The time between the events and the time that they were recorded is extremely close. Jesus died in about 33 AD. 1 Thessalonians was written from Corinth in AD 50. We know this because of the Jews being expelled from Rome in AD 49 and the fact that Gallio became proconsul in Achaia in AD 51 (1 Thess 3:6). As Paul was executed by Nero (according to early church historian Eusebius) then 2 Timothy must have been written between AD 63-68. Mark was the first of the Gospels written through Peter in the early 50's. John must have been written by the Apostle John before AD 70 because he says "there 'is' a gate in Jerusalem..."

The fact that the gospels contain the same material yet are composed differently shows that the content of the gospels were already being circulated immediately after Christ's death. The disciples had kept notes as good Jewish students would with a Rabbi. Some wonder why the gospels, while they have the same stories, place the stories in different order. This in itself shows that there was not collaboration between the authors in putting the Gospels together.

If you call together 4 eyewitnesses of a crime into a court of law their stories are different perspectives of the same event. There is often slight variation. If they all say exactly the same thing using the same words then you have to question their testimony because they may have gotten together before the trial to collaborate and make sure they all say the same thing.

By the year 100 AD, early church fathers such as Polycarp, Clement and Ignatius were quoting extensively from the New Testament. Almost the whole of the New Testament can be pieced together from their writings. If the Bible had been changed by the early church, then it would have had to have been during the lifetime of the first disciples when eyewitnesses to the life of Jesus were still living.

Other religious books claim to be true but are impossible to prove historically because they speak of "heavenly" encounters that occurred in private. They say they are true but there is no eyewitness testimony. In the New Testament God walked amongst us and spoke in a way that was public and documented from many sources. This sets it apart.

Suppose I claimed to be God. There are lots of people today who claim to be all kinds of wild things. If I claimed to be God then you would think I was crazy. Suppose I did great miracles. Then you might be more willing to believe but you would probably still doubt somewhat. But suppose I claimed that I was going to die and that my death would be public and verified by experts. Then I claimed that after 3 days I would rise from the dead of my own accord and then reveal myself to hundreds of people to verify I was living again. That would validate my words and claims. This is what Jesus did.

Sherlock Holmes said this, "When you have eliminated the impossible, whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth."

Once again, we have this quote from CS Lewis;

“We are faced, then, with a frightening alternative. The man we are talking about was and is just what he said or else insane or something worse. Now, it seems to me obvious that he was neither insane nor a fiend; and consequently, however strange or terrifying or unlikely it may seem, I have to accept the view that he was and is God.”

I believe the Bible is true not only for these reasons, but because I have seen the power of it's message to transform lives. A few years ago there was a movie called the Book of Eli. It was set in a post-apocalyptic world after nuclear attack in which all government had broken down. Before the destruction, all the Bibles had been burned. The story centers on two men who both understand the power of the Bible. One wants to use the Bible to control and imprison others. The other (Eli) understands that the Bible sets people free. What I like about the story is that both men understood that the Bible was powerful.

Hebrews 4:12 For the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart.

This has been my experience as well. The Bible works. It is the Gospel of life and I have seen how it's message through God's Spirit can transform people's lives.

Isaiah 55:9-11 As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts. 10 As the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return to it without watering the earth and making it bud and flourish, so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater, 11 so is my word that goes out from my mouth: It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it.

The English ship Bounty, commanded by Lt. William Bligh, journeyed to the South Pacific in 1787. Bligh appointed a young friend, Fletcher Christian, to the post of second in command. The Bounty stayed in Tahiti for 6 months and led by the happy go lucky Fletcher Christian enjoyed paradise to the fullest. On April 28, 1789, Fletcher Christian staged the most famous mutiny in history. He and his mutineers set Bligh and his supporters adrift in an overloaded lifeboat.

The mutineers aboard the Bounty immediately began quarreling about what to do next. Christian returned to Tahiti, where he left some of the mutineers, kidnapped some women, took some slaves, and traveled with the remaining crew a thousand miles to uninhabited Pitcairn Island. There the little group unraveled. They distilled whiskey from a native plant. Drunkenness, disease, and murder took the lives of all men except for one. Alexander Smith, found himself as the only man on the island surrounded by an assortment of women and children.

Then an amazing change occurred. Smith found the Bounty's neglected Bible. As he read it, he took its message to heart, and began instructing the little community. He taught the colonists the scriptures and helped them obey its instructions. The message of Christ so transformed their lives that twenty years later, in 1808, when the ship Topaz landed on the island, it found a happy society of Christians living in prosperity and peace, free from crime, disease, murder --- and mutiny. Years later the Bible fell into the hands of a visiting whaler who brought it to America, but in 1950 it was returned to the island. It now resides on display in the church in Pitcairn as a monument to its transforming message.