The Bible: Intentionally Misunderstood

Dissecting the Bible by Focusing on Nits

Recently, New Testament scholar and expert on ancient New Testament documents, Dr. Daniel Wallace, spoke on the work being done to ensure we have the most accurate version of the Greek New Testament. He also mentioned several documents presenting a false view of this level of accuracy. One of these documents, *The Bible: So Misunderstood It's a Sin* by Kurt Eichenwald, appeared in *Newsweek* in December 2014.{1} His article presents arguments intended to undermine the New Testament. Let's evaluate some of these arguments to be better equipped in sharing the truth.

The article contains at least 125 errors and/or half-truths in 14 pages. Of course, I am not the first to respond to this article. Dr. Wallace and Dr. Darrel Bock both wrote responses shortly after the document was published addressing specific areas of interest to them. I commend their posts to you as excellent resources.{2}. I will address some areas that are not addressed or only partially addressed by these seminary professors.

Using Survey Data Without Understanding It

Eichenwald begins his article by parroting the negative stereotypes put forth by those who cannot be bothered with trying to understand the vast majority of evangelicals. Attempting to add some rigor to his rant, he refers to two surveys on religious beliefs. Unfortunately for Eichenwald, rather than adding rigor, his comments showed that he did not take the time to examine the survey results he was spouting.

He first states, "[Evangelicals'] lack of knowledge about the

Bible is well established. A Pew Research poll in 2010{3} found that evangelicals ranked only a smidgen higher than atheists in familiarity with the New Testament and Jesus's teachings."{4} He referred to a table showing the average number of questions out of twelve that each faith group answered correctly. However, only two of the twelve questions had anything to do with the New Testament and none of them related to Jesus's teachings. The remaining questions were divided equally between the Old Testament and on latter day religious figures/beliefs. {5} Two questions are not enough to evaluate someone's knowledge of the New Testament. But, for the record, the questions were "Name the four gospels" and "Where, according to the Bible, was Jesus born?" Fifty three percent of those
professing to be born again answered these correctly versus twenty percent of atheists. Apparently to Eichenwald, a "smidgen higher" must mean almost three times as many. Perhaps, *Newsweek* cannot afford a fact checker?

The second poll he referenced was a 2012 effort by the Barna Group{6}. He said, "[It found] that evangelicals accepted the attitudes and beliefs of the Pharisees . . . more than they accepted the teachings of Jesus." The study actually showed that 63% of evangelicals accepted the attitudes and actions of Jesus at least as much, if not more, than the attitudes and actions the Barna Group associated with the Pharisees.

Accuracy of English Translations Not Effectively Addressed

Eichenwald spends two pages bemoaning the translation problems in the New Testament. But as pointed out by Wallace and Bock, his critique really serves to highlight the excellence of today's translations. The areas he points out as having questionable additions in the text are clearly marked in all of today's popular translations and if removed make no difference in the overall message of the New Testament (i.e. the woman caught in adultery in John and snake handling at the end of Mark).

He goes on to say, “The same is true for other critical portions of the Bible, such as . . .”{7} and then lists three short passages which he claims did not appear in earlier Greek copies. One passage is 1 John 5:7 which was expanded in the original King James Version but (as Eichenwald is apparently unaware of) was removed in modern translations, e.g. NASU, NET, ESV, NIV. Another passage is Luke 22:20 which does appear in almost all modern translations as well as the KJV. As Metzger{8} points out, the longer version with Luke 22:20 appears in “all Greek manuscripts except for D and in most of the ancient versions and Fathers.” So this passage does appear in most earlier Greek copies, contrary to what Eichenwald claims. He finally refers to Luke 24:51 as a passage not found in the earlier Greek versions. Once again, he is wrong. This passage appears in many older manuscripts{9} including the Bodmer Papyrii written in about 200 AD.

When Eichenwald attempts to strengthen his argument, he draws from limited sources that contain questionable data. Even if they were correct, they and all the other areas where ancient manuscripts vary do not change the message of the New Testament in any significant way. As Wallace points out, “The reality is that we are getting closer and closer to the text of the original New Testament as more and more manuscripts are being discovered and catalogued. . . . The New Testament has more manuscripts that are within a century or two of the original than anything else from the Greco-Roman world too. If we must be skeptical about what the original New Testament said, that skepticism, on average, should be multiplied one thousand times for other Greco-Roman literature.”{10}

Supposed Biblical Contradictions

After attacking the accuracy of the New Testaments available to most American Christians, Eichenwald attacks the consistency of the biblical record to undermine our confidence in what we read and the message we take from it. He presents

nine different topics where he sees obvious contradictions in the text. We will examine four of them here, two from the Old Testament and two from the New Testament.

Number One: Creation

First, he claims there are three different creation models in the Bible, one in Genesis chapter 1, one in Genesis chapter 2, and "one referenced in the Books of Isaiah, Psalms and Job"{11} in which "the world is created in the aftermath of a great battle between God and . . . a dragon . . . called Rahab."{12}

Liberal theologians claim that chapters 1 and 2 of Genesis describe different accounts. If they were describing the same events in the same way, that might be so. However, whether Exodus was written by Moses or whether it was put together later, a human author would not contradict himself on the same page. A clear-headed look at the two passages shows that chapter 1 describes the overall creation as observed from earth while chapter 2 talks about what God did on the sixth day in creating Adam and Eve. As pointed out in the NET Bible, "for what follows (verse 2:4) is not another account of creation but a tracing of events from creation through the fall and judgment (the
section extends from 2:4 through 4:26."{13}

Eichenwald adds in the so-called third creation story of God and Rahab stating, "In fact, the Bible has three creation models"{14} as if this were a clear and well-known fact. If you read all the verses in Isaiah, Psalms and Job that reference Rahab, you will scratch your head and wonder how could anyone relate those few verses to a creation story. Rahab is a Hebrew word meaning "strong one and it is not necessarily a name. It is clear in Isaiah and Psalms that Rahab is a reference to Egypt, not some mythical dragon. In Job, it could be referring to the forces of chaos. He probably gets his idea from some articles that suggest that since Job

9:13 says “God does not restrain His anger; under Him the helpers of Rahab lie crushed” that the helpers of Rahab could refer to the helpers of Tiamat from the Babylonian Creation Epic. Even if this were true, rather than a third creation story one would say this verse tells us

1. God destroys all idols and false gods raised up by others, and
2. This is what Job said and Job was forced to retract what he said when he was confronted by Yahweh as seen in Job 42:1-6.

Eichenwald’s claim of three different creation models is an illusion.

Number Two: The Flood

Eichenwald reports another set of clear contradictions in the Genesis story of Noah and the flood. He points to three areas of supposed contradiction.

The first one has to do with how many animals are on the ark. In Genesis 6:19, God tells Noah that he shall “bring two of every kind into the ark, to keep them alive with you.” Years later after Noah has completed the ark, God tells him in Genesis 7:2 to take seven pairs of every clean animal and two of every unclean animal. Eichenwald claims this is a contradiction that the author/editor was so incompetent as to include only five verses apart. He does not consider the option that after completing the ark, God gave Noah more complete instructions because more
clean animals would be needed to provide for the sacrifices to the Lord in Genesis 8:20. Noah did not need this detail before starting to build the ark.

The second contradiction is that the Bible has Noah and his family boarding the ark and the flood
beginning in two different sections. What Eichenwald sees as a contradiction, most readers take as a common literary

technique, i.e. summarize the situation and then describe it again with more details. This was a seminal event in human history and deserved repeating.

The third contradiction according to Eichenwald is, "The water flooded the earth for 40 days (Genesis 7:17), or 150 days (Genesis 7:24). But Noah and his family stayed on the ark for a year (Genesis 8:13)." Upon reading the account, it is clear that Noah was on the ark for 12 months and 11 days during which it rained for forty days, the earth was totally inundated for 150 days as the waters slowly receded, but Noah waited to leave the ark until the land had become dry. You may choose not to believe in a universal flood, but to say the Bible has contractions in its description is ludicrous.

Number Three: The Trial and Crucifixion

In this claim, he states that John was written "at a time when gentiles in Rome were gaining dramatically more influence over Christianity; that explains why the Romans are largely absolved from responsibility for Jesus's death and blame instead is pointed toward the Jews."{15} Thus, he implies that the other gospels put much of the blame on the Romans. Let us see if this is true.

Luke is very clear that the instigators of the death of Jesus were the Jewish leaders and those who followed them. In Luke 22:2 we read, "The chief priests and the experts in the law were trying to find some way to execute Jesus." When Pilate is brought in to the process, Luke records that Pilate did not find Jesus guilty of anything worthy of death and stated so three different times{16}. At least five times in the book of Acts, Luke records Paul as squarely placing the responsibility for Jesus' death onto the Jewish leaders and nation.{17} We find similar verses in Matthew{18} and Mark.{19}

All of the gospels squarely place the blame on the Jewish leaders and those that followed them. Either Eichenwald has

never read the gospels and just assumed the other gospels blamed the Romans, or he assumes his readers have never read the gospels.

Number Four: Ascension of Jesus

The fourth supposed contradiction deals with the ascension of Jesus. Eichenwald writes, "As told in Matthew, the disciples go to Galilee after the Crucifixion and see Jesus ascend to heaven; in Acts, written by Luke, the disciples stay in Jerusalem and see Jesus ascend from there."{20}

As most of you know, the gospel of Matthew ends with Jesus meeting his disciples in Galilee and giving them the Great Commission. Matthew says **nothing** about Jesus ascending to heaven in Galilee or anywhere else. Because the Gospel of Luke does not discuss the time intervals, one might interpret it as saying that Jesus ascended into heaven on the day He was resurrected. But in Acts, Luke tells us that the resurrected Lord was with His disciples over a 40-day period. During which time, it would have been easy to travel to Galilee, as recorded in Matthew and John, and then travel back to Jerusalem.

Not surprisingly, his other five so-called "contradictions" all fail to hold up when one examines the Scriptures.

Faulty Interpretation of Scripture Passages Passages on Homosexuality

Eichenwald wants to convince us that what we think the Bible teaches about homosexuality is not what God intended.

He begins by pointing out, "The word homosexual didn't even exist until more than 1,800 years after the New Testament was written. . . . The editors of these modern Bibles just made it up."{21} But this could be said of many English words we use today. The ancient Greek word used in the text is a compound

word clearly meaning male-with-male sexual activity. A respected dictionary of New Testament words defines it this way, “a male engaging in same-gender sexual activity, a sodomite.”{22}

He then tells us, “Most biblical scholars agree that Paul did not write 1 Timothy”{23} and, presumably, should not be trusted when addressing behaviors we should avoid, such as homosexuality. The early church fathers from the second century on and many contemporary scholars{24} do not agree it is a forgery. Regardless, the same prohibition appears in other epistles and not just in Timothy.

Eichenwald points out Romans, Corinthians and Timothy discuss other sins in more detail than homosexual behavior. He writes, “So yes, there is one verse in Romans about homosexuality . . . and there are eight verses condemning those who criticize the government.”{25}

Most people understand that explaining our relationship to the government is more complex than forbidding homosexuality which is clearly understood. Romans talks about not resisting government authority. It says nothing about criticizing people in the government. In fact, that expression is protected by the laws of our land. In other words, to obey those laws you should feel free to criticize the government.

He then claims that people engage in other sins such as adultery, greed, drunkenness and lying and are not banished for those behaviors. But if you proclaimed you practice those actions regularly and teach them as truth, your church is going to remove you from any leadership position. They should still encourage you to attend worship services out of a desire to see God change your heart.{26} Mr. Eichenwald would be surprised to learn that most evangelical churches handle issues with homosexuality in the same way.

Then he declares, “Plenty of fundamentalist Christians who

have no idea where references to homosexuality are in the New Testament . . . always fall back on Leviticus."{27} Personally, I have never run into another church member who was unfamiliar with the New Testament, but knew "by memory" the details of Leviticus.

Christianity and the Law

Eichenwald claims homosexuality is not a sin or if it is, it is the same as all the other sins that he believes we ignore so that we can throw all our venom at homosexuals. To strengthen his position, he brings out "a fundamental conflict in the New Testament—arguably the most important one in the Bible."{28} This conflict is whether as Christians we are to obey the Mosaic Law or whether we are to ignore it.

He claims, "The author of Matthew made it clear that Christians must keep Mosaic Law like the most religious Jews, in order to achieve salvation."{29}

Wow, what a mistaken understanding of the message. In Matthew, Jesus explains if we want to enter the kingdom of heaven "our righteousness must surpass that of the scribes and Pharisees (the most religious Jews)."{30} We must not get angry, call people names, or lust after others in our minds. He caps it off by saying, "You are to be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect."{31} He is clearly not teaching them to be like Orthodox Jews and they will be okay. He is teaching they cannot be good enough. It is only through Hissacrifice that we can be made righteous.

In Acts 15, we see that some believers who were Pharisees by background brought this question up to the apostles and elders. Peter responded by telling them, "Now therefore why do you put God to the test by placing upon the neck of the disciples a yoke which neither our father nor we have been able to bear? But we believe that we are saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, in the same way as they (the

Gentiles) also are."{32} And the apostles, the elders, and the whole church agreed to send directions to the Gentiles that they were not required to follow the Mosaic Law.

So as Gentiles, we are not required to follow the Law of Moses as laid out in Leviticus. But the New Testament is very careful to identify those actions and attitudes which are sin so that we Gentiles know to avoid them. Which is why sexual sins are specifically mentioned in the New Testament.{33} Even in Acts 15 where the church is Jerusalem is deciding what to tell Gentile Christians about the Law, they decide to tell them to abstain from fornication, a term generally covering all sexual activity outside of marriage.{34}

In summary, Eichenwald believes we should declare homosexuality is not a sin and those who practice it should be honored as leaders within the church. He does not suggest that we treat any other sins that way. He does not present a cogent argument that the New Testament agrees with his position. He is saying that we should ignore biblical teaching. But, we really do love those struggling with homosexual behavior and we want to help them gain freedom from those lusts just as much as someone struggling with opposite sex issues.

Obeying the Law vs. Criticizing the Government

Eichenwald also castigates us for disobeying the New Testament teaching about government. He says Romans has "eight verses condemning those who criticize the government. . . . In other words, all fundamentalist Christians who decry Obama have sinned as much as they believe gay people have."{35} He points to Pat Robertson as sinning when Pat stated, "We need to do something, to pray to be delivered from this president." Does Romans condemn those who criticize the government?

Actually, Romans says, "Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. . . . the person who resists such authority resists the ordinance of God."{36} It doesn't say

that we are required to say good things about the government, but rather that we should obey the laws of our government. Our Bill
of Rights states that "Congress shall make no law . . . abridging the freedom of speech."{37} So, if we do not voice our opinions about those running our government, we are in fact, not availing ourselves of the law established by our governing authorities.

Judging Our Motives for Prayer

Eichenwald casts aspersion on people of faith for gathering together to pray. He begins by castigating a prayer rally in Houston in 2011. He says, "[Then-governor Rick] Perry stepped to a podium, his face projected on a giant screen . . . and boomed out a long prayer asking God to make America a better place . . . babbling on . . . about faith and country and the blessings of America." He further claimed that Perry "heaped up empty phrases as the Gentiles do."

In reality, during the daylong event, Rick Perry spoke about 12 minutes and prayed for slightly more than **two minutes**. In his short prayer, Perry prayed in a cogent manner, praying for among others our president and his family.

Eichenwald explains that Perry is just an example of our misguided ways. The problem is that most Christians in American are disobeying the teaching of Jesus by praying in front of people and praying words other than the Lord's Prayer. As Jesus told us, "Whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to stand and pray . . . so that they may be seen by others."

Yes, Jesus is very clear that we are not to be hypocrites, but it is possible for someone to speak a prayer
in the presence of others without being a hypocrite. Jesus does tell us to make our prayers a personal conversation with our heavenly Father. But Jesus prayed often before synagogue

attenders, in front of his disciples, and before over 5,000 people. But clearly those times, although numerous, were much less than the time He spent communing with His Father alone. That ratio should be true of our lives as well.

Even stranger is Eichenwald's belief that we should only pray the Lord's Prayer just as Jesus stated it. But, the passage in Matthew 6 tells us that Jesus was giving us a model, an example, of how to pray, not giving us a set of words to repeat in a meaningless fashion. In the gospels and the other New Testaments books, we are privy to many of the prayers offered by the apostles. None of them use the words from the Lord's prayer. If only Eichenwald had been there to instruct them, they would not have sinned so grievously.

Eichenwald claims the only reason anyone could be praying in front of a large crowd, or on television, or
by extension in a small congregation is "to be seen." This claim does not make sense. The people he is judging can build themselves up without having to resort to prayer.

Conclusion

In this article, we have seen that critics use an incomplete, shallow examination of Scripture to claim it is not accurate and our application is faulty. In every case, we have seen that these claims leak like a sieve.

Dan Wallace sums up Eichenwald's arguments this way:

"*Time and time again the author presents his arguments as though they were facts. Any serious disagreements with his reasoning are quietly ignored as though they did not exist. The most charitable thing I can say is that Eichenwald is in need of a healthy dose of epistemic humility as well as a good research assistant who can do some fact-checking before the author embarrasses himself further in print. . .. But his numerous factual errors and misleading statements, his lack of*

concern for any semblance of objectivity, his apparent disdain for and lack of interaction with genuine evangelical scholarship, and his uber-confidence about more than a few suspect viewpoints, make me wonder. . . . Eichenwald's grasp of conservative Christianity in America as well as his grasp of genuine biblical scholarship are, at best, subpar. And this article is an embarrassment to Newsweek—or should be!"{38}

If Eichenwald's article represents the best scholarship discrediting the Bible, one rejoices in our firm foundation. On the other hand, realizing how many readers of such pieces don't know their flimsy nature, one is saddened by the potential impact on a society inclined to ignore the Bible.

Notes

1. Eichenwald, Kurt, "The Bible: So Misunderstood It's a Sin," *Newsweek Magazine*, December 2014.
2. Daniel B. Wallace, "Predictable Christmas Fare: *Newsweek*'s Tirade against the Bible," blogpost December 2014 and Bock, Darrell, "Darrell Bock Responds to Kurt Eichenwald's *Newsweek* Article on the Bible," blogpost December 2014.
3. The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, U.S. Religious Knowledge Survey, September 2010, pages 17-23.
4. Eichenwald, paragraph 4.
5. The 12 questions are as follows:

    1. What is the first book of the Bible? (Open-ended)
    2. What are the names of the first four books of the New Testament, that is, the four Gospels?
    3. Where, according to the Bible, was Jesus born? Bethlehem, Jerusalem, Nazareth or Jericho?
    4. Which of these is NOT in the Ten Commandments? Do unto others . . ., no adultery, no stealing, keep Sabbath?
    5. Which figure is associated with remaining obedient to God despite suffering? Job, Elijah, Moses or Abraham?
    6. Which figure is associated with leading the exodus from Egypt? Moses, Job, Elijah or Abraham?

7. Which figure is associated with willingness to sacrifice his son for God? Abraham, Job, Moses or Elijah?
8. What is Catholic teaching about bread and wine in Communion? They become body and blood, or are symbols?
9. Which group traditionally teaches that salvation is through faith alone? Protestants, Catholics, both or neither?
10. Was Mother Teresa Catholic, Jewish, Buddhist, Hindu or Mormon?
11. What is the name of the person whose writings and actions inspired the Reformation? Luther, Aquinas or Wesley?
12. Who was a preacher during the First Great Awakening? Jonathan Edwards, Charles Finney or Billy Graham?

6. The Barna Group, *Christians: More Like Jesus or Pharisees?*, 2012.
7. Eichenwald, paragraph 19.
8. Metzger, Bruce, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament*, Second Edition, German Bible Society, Stuttgart, pages 148-150.
9. Ibid, pages 162-163.
10. Wallace.
11. Eichenwald, paragraph 66.
12. Ibid, paragraph 66.
13. New English Translation, Genesis Chapter 2 Notes 9 and 11.
14. Eichenwald, paragraph 66.
15. Eichenwald, paragraph 51.
16. See Luke 23:4,14,22.
17. See Acts 2:23,23,3:14-15,4:10,5:30.
18. Matthew 26:4,27:23-24.
19. Mark 14:1, 15:14-15.
20. Eichenwald, paragraph 52.
21. Ibid, paragraph 68.
22. William Mounce, *Complete Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words*, Zondervan, 2006.
23. Eichenwald, paragraph 70.

24. Among those disagreeing with Eichenwald's assertion are Daniel Wallace, John MacArthur, Charles Swindoll, John Stott, and Craig Keener.
25. Eichenwald, paragraph 77.
26. See the Watermark Community Church story: www.watermark.org/statement
27. Eichenwald, paragraph 80.
28. Eichenwald, paragraph 81.
29. Eichenwald, paragraph 82.
30. Matthew 5:20.
31. Matthew 5:48.
32. Acts 15:10-11.
33. For example in Mt 5:27-28, Romans 13:13-14, 1 Corinthians 6:9-20, Ephesians 4:19, Col 3:5, 1 Peter 4:3.
34. Acts 15:20,29.
35. Eichenwald, paragraph 77.
36. Romans 13:1,2.
37. Amendment 1 to the Constitution of the United States of America.
38. Wallace.

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Who Wrote the New Testament?

David Graieg explores Bart Ehrman's contention that we can't trust the Bible's supposed authors. Yes we can.

Bart Ehrman



What if eighteen of the twenty-seven books of the New Testament were not written by the people who have traditionally been credited with their authorship?{1} Just such a claim is made by Bart Ehrman's book *Forged: Writing in the Name of God* in which he argues that the Bible's authors are not who we think they are.

Dr. Ehrman is a professor of Religious Studies at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill. His work has been featured in *Time*, and he has appeared on NBC's *Dateline, The History Channel, National Geographic*, and other top media outlets.{2} Ehrman has authored over twenty books, including three *New York Times* bestsellers: *Jesus Interrupted, God's Problem*, and *Misquoting Jesus*, which argues that the New Testament manuscripts are unreliable and, hence, the text of the Bible is inaccurate. Ehrman's works are having a huge impact on the way that people perceive Christianity both here in the U.S. and abroad. Believers need to be ready to give an answer to Dr. Ehrman's claims.

Ehrman grew up in a liberal Episcopal church, but says that in high school a Youth for Christ leader took advantage of the loneliness that every teen experiences and led Ehrman to be born again.{3} Ehrman attended Moody Bible Institute and Wheaton College where his studies in New Testament textual criticism began to fuel doubt concerning the importance of variants in the manuscripts. Ehrman went on to pursue doctoral work at Princeton University, and, partly due to an issue concerning who the high priest was in the second chapter of Mark, Ehrman went down the path of agnosticism.

Ehrman's new book, *Forged,* contains eight chapters that include considerable overlap, and much of the space is devoted to forgeries outside the Bible. This makes the book's subtitle, "*Why the Bible's Authors Are Not Who We Think They Are,*" a little misleading. Also, there's not much new here. These concerns are covered in most recent textbooks on the New

Testament.{4} Ehrman sees himself as making the public aware of what scholars have known for years.

As for the claim of *Forged,* Ehrman argues that Ephesians, Colossians, 2 Thessalonians, 1–2 Timothy, Titus, James, Jude, and 1–2 Peter are not written by those whose names are traditionally attached to them. It follows that if these books are written by liars and are deceptive in nature, and God Himself does not lie, the Church must have been mistaken in thinking these books were inspired by God. It would also follow that these books should be
removed from the canon of the Bible. However, as we shall see, there's good reason to think that these books are not forgeries.

Determining Authorship

To begin, we will look into the important question of how scholars determine the author of a book written thousands of years ago.

There are two main lines of evidence that scholars use to determine the likely author of a book. The first is internal evidence, the most obvious being a claim to authorship in the document itself. There might also be hints in the document about when and where it was written, which may or may not match what we know of the life of the author, or might just seem out of place. For instance, if someone wrote that he visited Dallas, Texas in July and adds that it froze overnight, this scenario is not impossible but is very unlikely. Thus, we would have good reason to question other claims in the text.

If we have two letters that are supposed to have been written by the same author, we can compare their styles for confirmation. Do the documents share a similar vocabulary? Do they use the same figures of speech and cultural expressions? Do they both use specific words or ideas in the same way or

are they fairly distinct? If one of the documents uses a large number of unique words that are not used in the other, it may put in question mutual authorship.

Another important variable is the intended audience of a document since that can have a significant impact on its style and vocabulary. For instance, a medical doctor might write a work-related letter to a fellow oncologist and on the same day send a personal email to her husband. Ten years later, that same doctor writes a letter to her friend about a personal hobby. In all three cases, it's the same person writing, but there would be three distinct styles and vocabularies in each letter. Determining authorship can be a very complicated matter when considering both objective and subjective elements.

There's also external evidence to consider, information gathered from outside the letter itself. Eyewitness accounts can affirm a document's authorship. For instance, Grandma might have a letter that says, "Happy Valentine's Day, from your secret admirer." Grandma insists that she received this letter from Grandpa fifty years ago when they were still dating. Although there is nothing in the letter that identifies Grandpa as its author, we have the external testimony of a reliable witness. Such evidence is not certain, as Grandma might be a bit of a romantic who after all these years forgot who it was really from, but it is more probable than not that she is correct.

What Is at Stake?

What if Ehrman's main contention is right, that seven of Paul's books, as well as James, Jude, and 1–2 Peter, are not written by who we traditionally have attributed them to? Not that I think Ehrman is right, but let us grant that he is. Is Christianity now false? Not at all. Ehrman concedes that Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Philippians, 1 Thessalonians, and Philemon were written by Paul and that

Revelation was written by someone named John. Even with these few books, the heart of the Christian faith is maintained. Ehrman even includes the earliest account of the death and resurrection of Jesus in 1 Corinthians chapter 15. So while I do not think Ehrman is right in even one accusation of New Testament forgery, it is worth keeping all of this in proper perspective: Christ still saves and we still need to trust him.

So what evidence does Dr. Ehrman use to establish his claim of forgery? Let's consider his strongest case, that of 1 and 2 Peter. Ehrman's main argument is that Peter could not have written either of these books because he was a simple fisherman from Galilee and would surely have been illiterate.{5} He points to Acts 4:13 which says that when Peter and John were brought before the Jewish high priest, it was realized that they "were unschooled, ordinary men." From this Ehrman assumes that they were illiterate.

There is one major problem with this line of argument. Ehrman considers the book of Acts to be a forgery. So by Ehrman's own standard, Acts is unlikely to be reliable. That aside, it's more likely that Acts 4:13 is not indicating that Peter and John are illiterate, but that the Jewish leaders were comparing their training in the best schools of the day to the two men who lacked a rabbinic education.

Luke describes Peter's family's fishing business as having several boats along with the necessary nets and men to operate them. The business was located in Capernaum, only a few miles from the large Greek cities of Tiberias and Sepphoris. As a successful merchant, Peter likely had some knowledge of the Greek language as well as basic literacy. Even if we allow the shaky assumption that Peter might have been illiterate, it doesn't necessarily follow that 1 and 2 Peter are forgeries. It's likely that Peter may have used a secretary to write down his words, a common practice in the first century.

Dr. Ehrman has failed to make his case that 1 and 2 Peter are forgeries. We still have good reason to trust these books as they guide us in defense of the faith and encourage us to endure sufferings for righteousness sake.

Paul's Letters

Ehrman argues that Paul could not be the author of Ephesians because the letter contains some unusually long sentences, and the book "has an inordinate number of words that don't otherwise occur in Paul's writings."{6} Ehrman notes that Ephesians has fifty percent more unique words than found in Philippians which he says is about the same length.

It's true that Ephesians does have long sentences, but this is a bit subjective. There are long sentences in Romans, 1 Corinthians, Colossians and Titus, which Ehrman accepts as Pauline. His comparison with Philippians is also a bit unfair. Ephesians is thirty-three percent longer than Philippians and should be expected to have a greater number of unique words. In fact, Galatians has even more unique words than Ephesians but again is accepted
as Pauline by Ehrman. Further, Ephesians is a circular letter that was meant for a broader audience. It's reasonable to expect that it would address different topics from Paul's other letters and have more unique words.

Another point made by Dr. Ehrman is that Ephesians uses the words "saved" and "raised" mostly in the present tense while other Pauline letters refer to them as future events.{7} But is this really the case? In Romans, Paul talks of the believer as already saved being dead to sin and alive to Christ, and in Galatians Paul declares that "I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me." Ehrman's case against Ephesians is less than conclusive.

According to Ehrman, 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus should be removed because the letters contain unique expressions not

found in Paul's other works. Phrases such as "promise of life" and "with a pure conscience" are unique to these books.{8} Ehrman also argues that these pastoral letters replace an emphasis on the imminent return of Christ with nformation on the organizational structure of the church.

Paul does use unique vocabulary in his books to Timothy and Titus, but these letters are to individual friends and most of Paul's other letters are to community groups. Stylistic variation would be expected because of the different audiences. Other scholars point out that Ehrman exaggerates his case regarding the information about church structure. He seems to ignore the fact that there is information on church leadership and organization in Romans, Galatians, and especially in 1 Corinthians, letters accepted as Pauline by Ehrman.

In summary, it can be said that Dr. Ehrman often overstates his case and is somewhat selective in his examples.

Presuppositions

To wrap up this article, I will look at some general problems in the way that Dr. Ehrman builds his case that many of the NT books are forgeries.

As with everyone, Dr. Ehrman interprets the world through a set of presuppositions. For instance, he has come to the conclusion that Jesus was merely an apocalyptic prophet.{9} Ehrman's Jesus proclaims that God is going to reveal himself in history and overthrow evil as represented by the Roman Empire. Ehrman discounts the role that the resurrection played in both confirming Jesus' claims to divinity and establishing Christianity itself. The result of constructing Jesus in this untraditional manner causes him to view passages that speak of the resurrection as inauthentic and probably later fabrications.

Another weakness in *Forged* is that Ehrman doesn't seriously consider the role that secretaries (or an *amanuensis*) could have played in the writing of the New Testament.{10} Ehrman himself admits that "Virtually all of the problems with what I've been calling forgeries can be solved if secretaries were heavily involved in the composition of the early Christian writings."{11} Other scholars have argued that secretaries did play a significant role in the formation of the NT.{12} Ehrman assumes either no secretaries were involved, or if they were, they had no impact on the wording of the texts. Such a conclusion is at odds with modern scholarship on the subject. Dr. Ehrman either needs to interact more with this scholarship, or at worst he should take an agnostic position on the authorship of the NT books.

This is important because we know that secretaries were involved in helping Paul write his letters. Tertius inserts a greeting in Romans 16:22 as the one who "wrote down this letter." In 1 Corinthians, Galatians, and Philemon, Paul makes a point of telling his readers that he had written the letters with his own hand, acknowledging that other letters were written down for him. It is also recognized that others may have contributed to Paul's writings or at least had an impact on the style of some sections of his letters. For instance, Sosthenes, Silas, and Timothy are recognized contributors in the introductions of Paul's letters to the churches at Corinth, Philippi, Colossae, and Thessalonica.

Dr. Ehrman raises important questions regarding the text of the New Testament, but his accusations of forgery seem somewhat subjective. He has not given us good enough reason to abandon the authenticity of the New Testament writings nor their message of eternal life through faith in Jesus Christ.

Notes

1. This article is a slightly adapted version of the program that aired on the Probe radio program.

2. Bart D. Ehrman. www.bartdehrman.com (accessed November 6, 2011).

3. Gary M. Burge, "The Lapsed Evangelical Critic," *Christianity Today*, June 1, 2006, vol. 50, no. 6. (accessed November 6, 2011).

4. D. A. Carson and Douglas Moo, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2005); Donald Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction*. 4th ed. (Downers Grove, Illinois: Intervarsity Press, 1990).

5. Bart D. Ehrman, *Forged: Writing in the Name of God—Why the Bible's Authors Are Not Who We Think They Are* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers. 2011), 70-77.

6. Ibid.

7. Ibid.

8. Ibid., 97.

9. Ehrman lays out his view on this in: Bart D. Ehrman, *Jesus: Apocalyptic Prophets of the New Millennium* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999). For an evaluation of the different views on Jesus see: James K. Beilby, and Paul R. Eddy, *The Historical Jesus: Five Views* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2009).

10. Ehrman, *Forged*, 133-139.

11. Ibid., 134.

12. E. Randolph Richards, *The Secretary in the Letters of Paul* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1991).

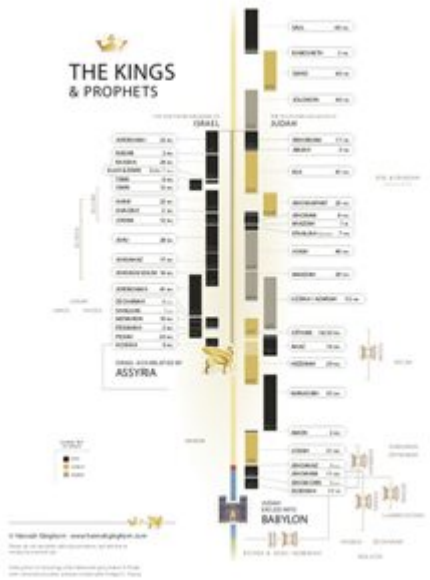
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The Reliability of Kings and Chronicles

Dr. Michael Gleghorn shows how the apparent contradictions of two Old Testament historical books can be explained.



Over the past year and a half my wife has been working on what might be called a "visual Bible." By training and profession my wife, Hannah, is a graphic designer. She tends to understand things best when she can visualize them in some way. Hence, when she began team-teaching a women's Bible study that covers the entire Bible in just two years, she felt the need to create visuals of what she was studying in order to help her grasp some of the key points in a single glance. Thus, week-by-week, as she readied herself for class, she also prepared a wide array of graphically-designed visuals of the written contents of Scripture.



Everything was going fairly well until she came to the Old Testament books of Kings and Chronicles. Since these books give us a great deal of information about the kings of Israel and Judah, including the order in which they reigned, the lengths of their reigns, and so on, she decided to create some charts that would present all of this information visually. She had no idea that she was about to enter one of the most baffling and perplexing issues of biblical chronology!

To put it bluntly, the chronology of Kings and Chronicles initially appears to be a hopelessly muddled, and even downright contradictory, mess! Examining this material as an intelligent layperson, Hannah could make no sense of it at all. It also meant that she could not represent the material in a visually coherent way.

Feeling increasingly frustrated, she asked if I knew of any books that dealt with these problems. Although this is an area I know little about, I remembered a book which (I had heard) handled these issues quite well. That book, *The Mysterious Numbers of the Hebrew Kings*, by Edwin Thiele, offered her some much-needed help in making sense of the apparently confused and contradictory information in the books of Kings and Chronicles.{2} Although this book did not solve *all* the difficulties she was facing, it did bring a great deal of

order to the apparent chaos of this section of Scripture.

In the remainder of this article we'll first consider the problems posed by "the mysterious numbers of the Hebrew kings." Afterward, we'll briefly look at how all these problems have been solved by contemporary scholars, so that what was previously thought of as a hopeless muddle is instead a testimony to the accuracy of the historical parts of the Old Testament.

Some Difficulties with Old Testament Chronology

In the original preface to *The Mysterious Numbers of the Hebrew Kings*, Edwin Thiele began his discussion with these words:

> *For more than two thousand years Hebrew chronology has been a serious problem for Old Testament scholars. Every effort to weave the chronological data of the kings of Israel and Judah into some sort of harmonious scheme seemed doomed to failure. The numbers for the one kingdom could not, it seemed, be made to agree with the numbers of the other.{3}*

Indeed, the difficulties with Old Testament chronology at this point were so great that many scholars simply assumed that the biblical records were unreliable. But why? What was it about these numbers that made so many scholars think they were in error?

Since we'll later be discussing the two different kingdoms of Israel and Judah, let's begin by considering two *imaginary* kingdoms, both of which celebrate a new king coming to the throne on March 1 of the same year. In other words, both kings begin their reigns on exactly the same day. Now one would probably think that, as the ensuing years go by, court historians from both kingdoms would agree about how many years

each of these kings have ruled their kingdoms. But in fact, this is not necessarily true.

Suppose that one of these kingdoms counts the first year of their new king's reign from his first day on the throne. If he began his reign on March 1 of the year 2000, then this is considered the first year of his reign.{4} On January 1, 2001, he thus begins the *second* year of his reign. But suppose that in the *other* kingdom, the year 2000 is regarded as the *last* year of the *prior* king's reign. In this kingdom, then, even though a new king began to reign in the year 2000, the official first year of his reign is counted from the beginning of the new year, January 1, 2001.{5}

Hence, although both kings began to rule on precisely the same day, the years of their reigns are counted differently. The first king begins his *second* year of rule on January 1, 2001, while the second king only begins his *first* official year at that time. This is just one of *many* issues that complicate the dating of the kings of Israel and Judah as they're recorded for us in the Bible. Once these issues are taken into account, however, a completely harmonious chronology of these kings becomes possible. Let's now consider a biblical example.

A Biblical Case Study

We've been looking at some of the chronological puzzles in the biblical books of Kings and Chronicles. With apologies for the unavoidable names and numbers which follow, let's consider an example.

After the ten tribes split from Judah and Benjamin to form the northern kingdom of Israel, their first ruler was Jeroboam. Jeroboam was followed by his son Nadab. With Nadab we have a series of synchronisms with the long reign of Asa of the southern kingdom, Judah. The first synchronism is that Nadab began to reign in year 2 of Asa.{6} The Bible then says that

Nadab reigned two years and died in year 3 of Asa.{7} But it is only one year from Asa's second year to his third year, so how could Nadab begin in year 2 of Asa, reign two years, and die in Asa's 3rd year? Next, Baasha, who killed Nadab, is said to reign 24 years starting in year 3 of Asa;{8} this should surely put his end, 24 years later, in Asa's year 27. But the Bible says that Baasha died in year 26 of Asa, not year 27.{9} Baasha's son, Elah, reigned two years, and his death was not in year 28 of Asa (that is, 26 plus 2), but in year 27.{10}

At this point we have a decision to make. We could decide that all of this shows that the Bible is not to be trusted in its numerical and historical statements. This is the path taken by critics who say that these parts of the Bible were invented many years later than the happenings they describe. Or, we could give the authors of these texts the benefit of the doubt and consider that these texts show a consistent pattern. The pattern is that the northern kingdom was counting the years of reign for their kings in the fashion mentioned previously, where a king could count the year in which he came to the throne as his first year of reign, so that even if he only reigned exactly one year, he would be given credit for the calendar year in which he became king and also for the calendar year in which he died. This is a method that was used by other Near Eastern kingdoms. With this second approach, success has been achieved in reconstructing the history and exact chronology of the Hebrew kingdom period. We will now consider other factors necessary in understanding these so-called "mysterious numbers" of the Bible.

Co-regencies and Rival Reigns

We've seen a pattern in the chronological numbers that the Bible gives for the first years of the divided kingdom. We saw that, in these early years at least, the northern kingdom was counting the year that a king died twice; once for him, and once for his successor, so that one year must be subtracted

from a reign length when counting elapsed time. By carefully considering the facts as given in the Bible itself, we can determine when the two kingdoms were using this method of counting, and when they were using the other method in which a king's first year was not counted until he reigned a full calendar year.

The Bible also gives us sufficient information to determine when there was a co-regency. The word "co-regency" is not a Biblical word, but the principle is there. A co-regency begins when the reigning king appoints one of his sons as his successor. This was always a smart thing to do. We have an example in our own time. When Kim Jong Il, the dictator of North Korea, became ill he appointed his son, Kim Jong Un, as his successor so there wouldn't be any trouble when he died. In the Bible, after two of David's sons, Absalom and then Adonijah, tried to usurp the kingdom from their father, the prophet Nathan told David to make it known who was to be his successor. David then had Nathan perform a public anointing of Solomon.{11} Another example of a co-regency is when Uzziah was struck with leprosy and had to live in a separate house, so that his son Jotham became the real ruler of the land.{12}

Other co-regencies are not quite so obvious, but the books of Kings and Chronicles always give us enough information so that we can determine when the years of a king's reign are being measured from the start of a sole reign or from the start of a co-regency. For the northern kingdom, Israel, there are also two cases of a rival reign, similar to the rival reigns of Egyptian pharaohs that Egyptologists take into account when reconstructing the chronology of Egypt. As an example, Omri, the father of Ahab, is said to have reigned for twelve years,{13} but this only makes sense if the twelve years includes the five years in which he had a rival, Tibni, reigning in a different capital.{14} Co-regencies and rival reigns are the second major key to understanding the chronology of the Hebrew kingdom period.

The Accuracy of Kings and Chronicles

In previous sections we considered two factors to take into account when interpreting the rich chronological data of Kings and Chronicles. The first is that there were two ways of counting the first year of a king's reign; whether it was to be counted twice, once for him and once for the king who died in that year, or just once so that the king's first year was his first full year of reign. The second factor was that occasionally a king's reign was measured from the start of a co-regency or rival reign rather than from the start of his sole reign. Both principles were applied, although not consistently, by some earlier interpreters.{15} A third principle, discovered by Edwin Thiele, however, was not used by these interpreters. This principle showed that the southern kingdom, Judah, started counting the years of a king's reign in the fall month of Tishri, while the northern kingdom, Israel, started six months earlier in the spring month of Nisan. Many earlier interpreters thought that both kingdoms started their year in Nisan, but this produced several small errors that they were unable to reconcile. Unknown to Thiele, all three of these principles had been previously found back in the 1920s by a Belgian scholar.{16} But Thiele worked out things in a more satisfactory way, and so his *Mysterious Numbers of the Hebrew Kings* should be the starting place for understanding the chronology of the kingdom period.

Regrettably, however, Thiele did not recognize that a problem he had with the texts of 2 Kings 18 is explained by a co-regency between Ahaz and Hezekiah.{17} His chronology also needed slight adjustments for the reign of Solomon and for the end of the kingdom period.{18} In our own studies we have followed the corrections to Thiele published in several articles by Rodger Young.{19} Young responds to the specious claim that the harmony now evident in the chronology of the kingdom period might be the result of a clever manipulation of the data by those who follow the principles outlined by

Thiele. Young answers, “The complexities of 124 exact synchronisms, reign lengths, and dates in 1 and 2 Kings, 1 and 2 Chronicles, Jeremiah and Ezekiel negate that possibility unless the data were historically authentic.”{20} With the proper understanding of the methods used by the ancient authors, the chronological data of Kings and Chronicles offer a remarkable testimony to the strict accuracy of the Bible’s 400-year history of the two Hebrew kingdoms.

Notes

1. This article was written by Michael Gleghorn and Rodger Young. Gleghorn’s initial inspiration for writing this program resulted from conversations with his wife, who struggled with the “mysterious numbers” in Kings and Chronicles for quite some time before encountering the help provided in the book by Edwin Thiele and, more particularly, the articles of Rodger Young. Mr. Young received a B.A. degree from Reed College, B.A. and M.A. degrees in mathematics from Oxford University, and has done graduate work in theology and biblical languages at the Nazarene Theological Seminary in Kansas City. He retired from IBM in 2003 and began writing about OT chronology.He and his wife attend the West Overland Bible Church in the St. Louis area.
2. Edwin R. Thiele, *The Mysterious Numbers of the Hebrew Kings,* New rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1994).
3. Ibid., 15.
4. Thiele describes this as “nonaccession-year dating” or “antedating”. See Thiele, *Mysterious Numbers*, 231.
5. Thiele terms this “accession-year dating” or “postdating.” See Ibid.
6. 1 Kings 15:25.
7. 1 Kings 15:25, 28.
8. 1 Kings 15:27, 33.
9. 1 Kings 16:8.
10. 1 Kings 16:8, 15.
11. 1 Kings 1; 1 Chronicles 23:1.

12. 1 Kings 15:5.
13. 1 Kings 16:23.
14. 1 Kings 16:21-23.
15. For example, James Ussher.
16. Valerius Coucke, “Chronologie des rois de Juda et d’Israël,” *Revue Bénedictine* 37 (1925): 325-64; idem, “Chronologie biblique” in *Supplément au Dictionnaire de la Bible*, ed. Louis Pirot, vol. 1 (Paris: Librairie Letouzey et Ané, 1928), cols. 1245-79.
17. According to Rodger Young, “Several authors put forth this rather obvious solution, among whom were Kenneth Kitchen and T. C. Mitchell, Siegfried Horn, Harold Stigers, R. K. Harrison, Leslie McFall, and Eugene Merrill.” Of course, we could also add Rodger Young’s name to this list as well. For details see Young, “When Was Samaria Captured? The Need for Precision in Biblical Chronologies,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 47, no. 4 (2004): 580.
18. For a one-year correction to Thiele’s dates for Solomon through Athaliah, see Rodger C. Young, “When Did Solomon Die?” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 46, no. 4 (2003): 589-603. By showing that the dates of Solomon through Athaliah must be moved one year earlier than in Thiele’s chronology, Young has resolved a problem that Thiele addressed by revisions in the third and final edition of *Mysterious Numbers*, but Thiele’s revisions merely moved his problem with the reign of Jehoshaphat to the reign of Athaliah. Among those accepting Young’s solution of the problem are Leslie McFall, “The Chronology of Saul and David,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 53, no. 4 (2010): 533 (chart), and Andrew E. Steinmann, *From Abraham to Paul: A Biblical Chronology* (St. Louis: Concordia, 2011), 133-34, 138. Young has also written extensively on why 587 BC, not Thiele’s 586 BC, is the correct date for the fall of Jerusalem to the Babylonians. See “When Did Jerusalem Fall?” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 47, no. 1 (2004): 21-38; “Ezekiel 40:1 as a Corrective for Seven Wrong Ideas in Biblical Interpretation,” A*ndrews University Seminary Studies* 44, no. 2 (2006):267-70.

19. For those who are interested in pursuing these matters further, please see “Rodger Young’s Papers on Chronology” here: www.rcyoung.org/papers.html
20. Rodger C. Young, “Inductive and Deductive Methods as Applied to OT Chronology,” *The Master’s Seminary Journal* 18, no. 2 (2007): 116.

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Paul and the Mystery Religions – Christianity Defended

Was early Christian teaching influenced by the mystery religions of the day? Don Closson presents a solid look at this question; concluding that Christian doctrine as taught by Paul and others was grounded in truth and was not influenced by these other religious concepts.

Introduction



A common criticism of Christianity found on college campuses today is that its core ideas or teachings were dependent upon Greek philosophy and religious ideas. It is not unusual for a student to hear from a professor that Christianity is nothing more than a strange combination of the Hebrew cult of Yahweh, notions adopted from the popular Greek mystery religions of the day, and a sprinkling of ideas from Greek philosophic thought. This criticism of traditional Christianity is not new. In fact, its heyday was in the late 1800s to the 1940s and coincides with what is now called the History of Religions movement. This

group of theologians and historians accused Paul of adding Greek ideas to his Hebrew upbringing, and in the process, creating a new religion: one that neither Jesus nor His first disciples would recognize.

Was the origin of Christianity dependent on existing Greek philosophical and religious ideas? That question hinges upon how one is using the word "dependent." Philosopher Ron Nash argues that dependency can be weak or strong and that the difference is a vital one. A strong dependency would mean that the idea of Jesus as a dying and rising savior-god would never have occurred to early believers if they had not become aware of them first in pagan thought. It would be admitting that Paul and the other new Christians came to believe that Christ was a resurrected God-man who made an atoning sacrifice for the sins of the world because of pagan ideas. Proving a strong dependency of Christianity on Greek thought would be very damaging to those who hold a high view of Scripture.

A weak dependency means that the followers of Jesus used common religious terminology of the day in order to be understood by the Hebrew and Greek culture surrounding them. This poses no problem for a high view of Scripture. As Nash states, " . . . the mere presence of parallels in thought and language does not prove any dependence in the strong sense."{1} Nash and others argue that only a weak dependency can be shown to have existed between Greek religious thought and the Gospel of Christ.

In this article we will consider arguments against the strong dependency claims of the History of Religions movement and modern critics. Specifically, we will compare the theology of the apostle Paul with ideas found in the popular Greek mystery religions present during the early church period.

Although these ideas rarely surface in everyday discussions, Christians entering the academic world of our college campuses would benefit from time spent understanding this issue. In the

hands of a professor hostile to Christianity, partial truths and exaggerated similarities between Christianity and the mystery religions can overwhelm an unaware teen. Being conscious of these arguments against Christian thought prepares us to give an answer to everyone who questions the hope that we have in Christ.

Arguments Against a Strong Dependency on Mystery Religions Viewpoint

Previously we noted that the History of Religions movement claimed that Christian thought had a direct and strong dependency on the mystery religions. Although some scholars agreed with this view, many did not. A good example is the famous German historian Adolf von Harnack, who wrote:

> *We must reject the comparative mythology which finds a causal connection between everything and everything else. . . . By such methods one can turn Christ into a sun god in the twinkling of an eye, or one can bring up the legends attending the birth of every conceivable god, or one can catch all sorts of mythological doves to keep company with the baptismal dove . . . the wand of 'comparative religion' triumphantly eliminate(s) every spontaneous trait in any religion.{2}*

What were the basic traits of the mystery religions? The annual vegetation cycle was often at the center of these cults. Deep significance was given to the concepts of growth, death, decay and rebirth. The cult of Eleusis and its central deity, Demeter, goddess of the soil and farming, is one example. The mystery religions also had secret ceremonies and rites of initiation that separated its members from the outside world. Every mystery religion claimed to impart secret knowledge of the deity. This knowledge would be communicated in clandestine ceremonies often connected to an initiation

rite. The focus of this knowledge was not on a set of revealed truths to be shared with the world, but on hidden higher knowledge to be kept within the circle of believers.

At the core of each religion was a myth in which the deity returned to life after death, or else triumphed over his enemies. As one scholar explains, the myth "appealed primarily to the emotions and aimed at producing psychic and mystic effects by which the neophyte might experience the exaltation of a new life."{3} On the other hand, the mysteries were not concerned as much with correct doctrine or belief, but with the emotional state of the followers. The goal of the believers was a mystical experience that led them to believe that they had achieved union with their god.

The various religious movements found throughout the Roman Empire were not united in doctrine or practice, and they changed dramatically over time. Any impact that they may have had on Christianity must be evaluated by the time frame in which the religions encountered one another. When comparing religious systems, Philosopher Ronald Nash warns that caution is advised against using careless language. He states, "One frequently encounters scholars who first use Christian terminology to describe pagan beliefs and practices and then marvel at the awesome parallels they think they have discovered."{4}

What if someone told you that the root of Paul's New Testament theology was in obscure Greek mystery religions, rather than his Jewish training and his encounter with Jesus Christ? That's exactly what the History of Religions movement argued at the end of the 19th century. Many scholars still teach that Paul's portrayal of Jesus as a dying and rising savior would never have occurred without the presence of the mystery religions. Next, we will continue to consider arguments against what might be called "the strong dependency view."

Weaknesses in the Strong Dependency View

The first argument against this view is the logical fallacy of *false cause*. This fallacy occurs when someone argues that just because two things exist side by side, that one must be the cause of the other. As one theologian has written, the History of Religions School had the tendency "to convert parallels into influences and influences into sources."{5} Causal connection is much harder to prove than proximity. The mere fact that other religions may have had a god who died and then came back to life in some manner does not mean that this was the source of Christian ideas, even if it can be shown that the apostles knew of this other set of beliefs.

Some scholars, hostile to Christianity, tend to exaggerate, or invent, similarities between Christianity and the mystery religions. British scholar Edwyn Bevan writes:

> *Of course if one writes an imaginary description of the Orphic mysteries . . . filling in the large gaps in the picture left by our data from the Christian Eucharist, one produces something very impressive. On this plan, you first put in the Christian elements, and then are staggered to find them there.{6}*

An example might be the practice of the taurobolium in the cult of Cybele or Great Mother. This initiation rite, in which the blood of a sacrificed bull is allowed to pour over a neophyte, is claimed by some to be the source of baptism in Christianity. Arguments have been made that the language "blood of the lamb" (Rev. 7:14), and "blood of Jesus" (1 Peter 1:2) was borrowed from the language of the taurobolium and criobolium in which a ram was slaughtered. In fact, a better argument can be made that the cult borrowed its language from the Christian tradition.

The cult of Cybele did not use the taurobolium until the

second century A.D.; the best available evidence for dating the practice places its origin about one hundred years after Paul wrote his epistles.{7} German scholar Gunter Wagner points out that there was no notion of death and resurrection in the cultic practice.

After noting the change in meaning that the taurobolium experienced over time, scholar Robert Duthoy writes:

> *It is obvious that this alteration in the taurobolium must have been due to Christianity, when we consider that by A.D. 300 it had become the great competitor of the heathen religions and was known to everyone.{8}*

More Weaknesses in the Strong Dependency View

A simple but powerful argument against the likelihood that Paul would have turned to pagan thought for his theology was his strict Jewish training. In Philippians 3:5 Paul boasts of being a Hebrew of Hebrews. He had studied under Gamaliel, the most celebrated teacher of the most orthodox of the Jewish parties, the Pharisees. And in Colossians he warns against the very syncretism he is being accused of proposing. According to Bruce Metzger:

> *[W]ith regard to Paul himself, scholars are coming once again to acknowledge that the Apostle's prevailing set of mind was rabbinically oriented, and that his newly found Christian faith ran in molds previously formed at the feet of Gamaliel.{9}*

We find no accusations in the New Testament of Paul incorporating pagan thought into his theology, nor does he defend himself against such claims.

The very nature of the mystery cults, with the conflicting pantheon of deities and mythical beings, makes it highly unlikely that the strict monotheism and the body of doctrines found in the New Testament would be their source. Although the mystery religions did move towards advancing a solar god above all the others, this change began after 100 A.D., too late to impact the theology of the New Testament.

It should also be noted that early Christianity was an exclusivistic religion while the mystery cults were not. One could be initiated into the cult of Isis or Mithras without giving up his or her former beliefs. However, to be baptized into the church one had to forsake all other gods and saviors. This was a new development in the ancient world. Machen writes, "Amid the prevailing syncretism of the Greco-Roman world, the religion of Paul, with the religion of Israel, stands absolutely alone."{10}

Paul's religion was grounded in real events. The mystery religions were not. They were based upon dramas written to capture men's hearts and passions. Reformed scholar Herman Ridderbos writes:

> *Whereas Paul speaks of the death and resurrection of Christ and places it in the middle of history, as an event which took place before many witnesses . . . the myths of the cults in contrast cannot be dated; they appear in all sorts of variations, and do not give any clear conceptions. In short they display the timeless vagueness characteristic of real myths. Thus the myths of the cults . . . are nothing but depictions of annual events of nature in which nothing is to be found of the moral voluntary, redemptive substitutionary meaning, which for Paul is the content of Christ's death and resurrection.{11}*

Next we will conclude with further arguments against Paul's use of the mystery religions.

Conclusion

Muslim author Yousuf Saleem Chishti writes that the doctrines of the deity of Christ and the atonement are pagan teachings that come from the apostle Paul, not from Christ Himself.{12} He states that, "The Christian doctrine of atonement was greatly coloured by the influence of the mystery religions, especially Mithraism, which had its own son of God and virgin Mother, and crucifixion and resurrection after expiating for the sins of mankind and finally his ascension to the seventh heaven."{13} Were these doctrines something Paul made up or borrowed? What did Jesus teach regarding the atonement?

First, both Jesus and Paul taught that Christianity was the fulfillment of Judaism. In Matthew 5:17 Jesus said that He came to fulfill the law and the teaching of the Prophets, not to abolish them. In Colossians (2:16-17), Paul writes that the religious codes of the Old Testament were merely a foreshadowing of the things that were to come, and that the new reality is found in Christ. Both Christ and Paul taught the necessity of the blood atonement for sin. Jesus stated that, "For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life as a ransom for many" (Mark 10:45). At the Last Supper He added, "This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins" (Matthew 26:28). Paul affirmed Christ's teachings when he wrote, "In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace" (Ephesians 1:7). Tying the doctrine back to the Old Testament, Paul wrote, "Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed" (1 Corinthians 5:7).

The idea that Jesus was the Son of God, born of a virgin, dying on the cross, and being resurrected are hardly Paul's ideas alone. They are found in the earliest Christian writings and held consistently wherever the faith spread. The parallels between Christianity and Mithraism claimed by Chishti are hard

to evaluate or confirm. He gives us no references as evidence for the similarities.{14} Other scholars who have looked at the issue find that most of the similarities disappear on close inspection. Where they do occur, it can be argued that Mithraism borrowed ideas from Christianity rather than vice versa. Bruce Metzger writes, "It must not be uncritically assumed that the Mysteries always influenced Christianity, for it is not only possible but probable that in certain cases, the influence moved in the opposite direction."{15}

Those who find Christianity hard to accept have offered many reasons for not doing so. The claim that the doctrines of Christianity had a strong dependency on the mystery religions stands on shaky ground and should be investigated thoroughly before one rejects the good news of the New Testament writers.

Notes

1. Ronald Nash, *The Gospel And The Greeks*, (Probe Books: Dallas, TX, 1992), 18.

2. Ibid, 118.

3. Ibid, 124.

4. Ibid, 126.

5. Ibid, 193.

6. Ibid.

7. Ibid, 154.

8. Ibid, 155.

9. Ibid, 196.

10. Ibid, 197.

11. Ibid. 198.

12. Normal Geisler, *Baker Encyclopedia of Christian Apologetics*, (Baker Books, 1999), 490.

13. Ibid.

14. Ibid. 492.

15. Nash, 198.

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Are the Biblical Documents Reliable?

We can trust that the Bible we hold in our hands today is the same as when the various documents were written. Probe founder Jimmy Williams provides evidence for the trustworthiness of the biblical documents.

How do we know that the Bible we have today is even close to the original? Haven't copiers down through the centuries inserted and deleted and embellished the documents so that the original message of the Bible has been obscured? These questions are frequently asked to discredit the sources of information from which the Christian faith has come to us.

Three Errors To Avoid

1. Do not assume inspiration or infallibility of the documents, with the intent of attempting to prove the inspiration or infallibility of the documents. Do not say the bible is inspired or infallible simply because it claims to be. This is circular reasoning.

2. When considering the original documents, forget about the present form of your Bible and regard them as the collection of ancient source documents that they are.

3. Do not start with modern "authorities" and then move to the documents to see if the authorities were right. Begin with the documents themselves.

Procedure for Testing a Document's Validity

In his book, *Introduction in Research in English Literary History*, C. Sanders sets forth three tests of reliability employed in general historiography and literary criticism.{1} These tests are:

- Bibliographical (i.e., the textual tradition from the original document to the copies and manuscripts of that document we possess today)
- Internal evidence (what the document claims for itself)
- External evidence (how the document squares or aligns itself with facts, dates, persons from its own contemporary world).

It might be noteworthy to mention that Sanders is a professor of military history, not a theologian. He uses these three tests of reliability in his own study of historical military events.

We will look now at the bibliographical, or textual evidence for the Bible's reliability.

The Old Testament

For both Old and New Testaments, the crucial question is: "Not having any original copies or scraps of the Bible, can we reconstruct them well enough from the oldest manuscript evidence we *do* have so they give us a true, undistorted view of actual people, places and events?"

The Scribe

The scribe was considered a professional person in antiquity. No printing presses existed, so people were trained to copy documents. The task was usually undertaken by a devout Jew. The Scribes believed they were dealing with the very Word of God and were therefore extremely careful in copying. They did not just hastily write things down. The earliest complete copy of the Hebrew Old Testament dates from c. 900 A.D.

The Masoretic Text

During the early part of the tenth century (916 A.D.), there was a group of Jews called the Masoretes. These Jews were meticulous in their copying. The texts they had were all in capital letters, and there was no punctuation or paragraphs. The Masoretes would copy Isaiah, for example, and when they were through, they would total up the number of letters. Then they would find the middle letter of the book. If it was not the same, they made a new copy. All of the present copies of the Hebrew text which come from this period are in remarkable agreement. Comparisons of the Massretic text with earlier Latin and Greek versions have also revealed careful copying and little deviation during the thousand years from 100 B.C. to 900 A.D. But until this century, there was scant material written in Hebrew from antiquity which could be compared to the Masoretic texts of the tenth century A.D.

The Dead Sea Scrolls

In 1947, a young Bedouin goat herdsman found some strange clay jars in caves near the valley of the Dead Sea. Inside the jars were some leather scrolls. The discovery of these “Dead Sea Scrolls” at Qumran has been hailed as the outstanding archeological discovery of the twentieth century. The scrolls have revealed that a commune of monastic farmers flourished in the valley from 150 B.C. to 70 A.D. It is believed that when they saw the Romans invade the land they put their cherished leather scrolls in the jars and hid them in the caves on the

cliffs northwest of the Dead Sea.

The Dead Sea Scrolls include a complete copy of the Book of Isaiah, a fragmented copy of Isaiah, containing much of Isaiah 38-6, and fragments of almost every book in the Old Testament. The majority of the fragments are from Isaiah and the Pentateuch (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy). The books of Samuel, in a tattered copy, were also found and also two complete chapters of the book of Habakkuk. In addition, there were a number of nonbiblical scrolls related to the commune found.

These materials are dated around 100 B.C. The significance of the find, and particularly the copy of Isaiah, was recognized by Merrill F. Unger when he said, "This complete document of Isaiah quite understandably created a sensation since it was the first major Biblical manuscript of great antiquity ever to be recovered. Interest in it was especially keen since it antedates by more than a thousand years the oldest Hebrew texts preserved in the Masoretic tradition."{2}

The supreme value of these Qumran documents lies in the ability of biblical scholars to compare them with the Masoretic Hebrew texts of the tenth century A.D. If, upon examination, there were little or no textual changes in those Masoretic texts where comparisons were possible, an assumption could then be made that the Masoretic Scribes had probably been just as faithful in their copying of the other biblical texts which could not be compared with the Qumran material.

What was learned? A comparison of the Qumran manuscript of Isaiah with the Masoretic text revealed them to be extremely close in accuracy to each other: "A comparison of Isaiah 53 shows that only 17 letters differ from the Masoretic text. Ten of these are mere differences in spelling (like our "honor" and the British "honour") and produce no change in the meaning at all. Four more are very minor differences, such as the presence of a conjunction (and) which are stylistic rather

than substantive. The other three letters are the Hebrew word for “light.” This word was added to the text by someone after “they shall see” in verse 11. Out of 166 words in this chapter, only this one word is really in question, and it does not at all change the meaning of the passage. We are told by biblical scholars that this is typical of the whole manuscript of Isaiah.”{3}

The Septuagint

The Greek translation of the Old Testament, called the Septuagint, also confirms the accuracy of the copyists who ultimately gave us the Masoretic text. The Septuagint is often referred to as the LXX because it was reputedly done by seventy (for which LXX is the Roman numeral) Jewish scholars in Alexandria around 200 B.C. The LXX appears to be a rather literal translation from the Hebrew, and the manuscripts we have are pretty good copies of the original translation.

Conclusion

In his book, *Can I Trust My Bible*, R. Laird Harris concluded, “We can now be sure that copyists worked with great care and accuracy on the Old Testament, even back to 225 B.C. . . . indeed, it would be rash skepticism that would now deny that we have our Old Testament in a form very close to that used by Ezra when he taught the word of the Lord to those who had returned from the Babylonian captivity.”{4}

The New Testament

The Greek Manuscript Evidence

There are more than 4,000 different ancient Greek manuscripts containing all or portions of the New Testament that have survived to our time. These are written on different materials.

Papyrus and Parchment

During the early Christian era, the writing material most commonly used was *papyrus*. This highly durable reed from the Nile Valley was glued together much like plywood and then allowed to dry in the sun. In the twentieth century many remains of documents (both biblical and non-biblical) on papyrus have been discovered, especially in the dry, arid lands of North Africa and the Middle East.

Another material used was *parchment*. This was made from the skin of sheep or goats, and was in wide use until the late Middle Ages when paper began to replace it. It was scarce and more expensive; hence, it was used almost exclusively for important documents.

Examples

1. Codex Vaticanus and Codex Siniaticus

These are two excellent parchment copies of the entire New Testament which date from the 4th century (325-450 A.D.).{5}

2. Older Papyrii

Earlier still, fragments and papyrus copies of portions of the New Testament date from 100 to 200 years (180-225 A.D.) before Vaticanus and Sinaticus. The outstanding ones are the Chester Beatty Papyrus (P45, P46, P47) and the Bodmer Papyrus II, XIV, XV (P46, P75).

From these five manuscripts alone, we can construct all of Luke, John, Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, 1 and 2 Thessalonians, Hebrews, and portions of Matthew, Mark, Acts, and Revelation. Only the Pastoral Epistles (Titus, 1 and 2 Timothy) and the General Epistles (James, 1 and 2 Peter, and 1, 2, and 3 John) and Philemon are excluded.{6}

3. Oldest Fragment

Perhaps the earliest piece of Scripture surviving is a

fragment of a papyrus codex containing John 18:31-33 and 37. It is called the Rylands Papyrus (P52) and dates from 130 A.D., having been found in Egypt. The Rylands Papyrus has forced the critics to place the fourth gospel back into the first century, abandoning their earlier assertion that it could not have been written then by the Apostle John.{7}

4. This manuscript evidence creates a bridge of extant papyrus and parchment fragments and copies of the New Testament stretching back to almost the end of the first century.

Versions (Translations)

In addition to the actual Greek manuscripts, there are more than 1,000 copies and fragments of the New Testament in Syria, Coptic, Armenian, Gothic, and Ethiopic, as well as 8,000 copies of the Latin Vulgate, some of which date back almost to Jerome's original translation in 384 400 A.D.

Church Fathers

A further witness to the New Testament text is sourced in the thousands of quotations found throughout the writings of the Church Fathers (the early Christian clergy [100-450 A.D.] who followed the Apostles and gave leadership to the fledgling church, beginning with Clement of Rome (96 A.D.).

It has been observed that if all of the New Testament manuscripts and Versions mentioned above were to disappear overnight, it would still be possible to reconstruct the entire New Testament with quotes from the Church Fathers, with the exception of fifteen to twenty verses!

A Comparison

The evidence for the early existence of the New Testament writings is clear. The wealth of materials for the New Testament becomes even more significant when we compare it with other ancient documents which have been accepted without question.

Author and Work	Author's Lifespan	Date of Events	Date of Writing*	Earliest Extant MS**	Lapse: Event to Writing	Lapse: Event to MS
Matthew, *Gospel*	ca. 0-70?	4 BC – AD 30	50 – 65/75	ca. 200	<50 years	<200 years
Mark, *Gospel*	ca. 15-90?	27 – 30	65/70	ca. 225	<50 years	<200 years
Luke, *Gospel*	ca. 10-80?	5 BC – AD 30	60/75	ca. 200	<50 years	<200 years
John, *Gospel*	ca. 10-100	27-30	90-110	ca. 130	<80 years	<100 years
Paul, *Letters*	ca. 0-65	30	50-65	ca. 200	20-30 years	<200 years
Josephus, *War*	ca. 37-100	200 BC – AD 70	ca. 80	ca. 950	10-300 years	900-1200 years
Josephus, *Antiquities*	ca. 37-100	200 BC – AD 65	ca. 95	ca. 1050	30-300 years	1000-1300 years
Tacitus, *Annals*	ca. 56-120	AD 14-68	100-120	ca. 850	30-100 years	800-850 years
Seutonius, *Lives*	ca. 69-130	50 BC – AD 95	ca. 120	ca. 850	25-170 years	750-900 years
Pliny, *Letters*	ca. 60-115	97-112	110-112	ca. 850	0-3 years	725-750 years
Plutarch, *Lives*	ca. 50-120	500 BC – AD 70	ca. 100	ca. 950	30-600 years	850-1500 years
Herodotus, *History*	ca. 485-425 BC	546-478 BC	430-425 BC	ca. 900	50-125 years	1400-1450 years
Thucydides, *History*	ca. 460-400 BC	431-411 BC	410-400 BC	ca. 900	0-30 years	1300-1350 years

Xenophon, *Anabasis*	ca. 430-355 BC	401-399 BC	385-375 BC	ca. 1350	15-25 years	1750 years
Polybius, *History*	ca. 200-120 BC	220-168 BC	ca. 150 BC	ca. 950	20-70 years	1100-1150 years

*Where a slash occurs, the first date is conservative, and the second is liberal.
**New Testament manuscripts are fragmentary. Earliest complete manuscript is from ca. 350; lapse of event to complete manuscript is about 325 years.

Conclusion

In his book, *The Bible and Archaeology*, Sir Frederic G. Kenyon, former director and principal librarian of the British Museum, stated about the New Testament, "The interval, then, between the dates of original composition and the earliest extant evidence becomes so small as to be in fact negligible, and the last foundation for any doubt that the Scriptures have come down to us substantially as they were written has now been removed. Both the authenticity and the general integrity of the books of the New Testament may be regarded as finally established."{8}

To be skeptical of the twenty-seven documents in the New Testament, and to say they are unreliable is to allow all of classical antiquity to slip into obscurity, for no documents of the ancient period are as well attested bibliographically as these in the New Testament.

B. F. Westcott and F.J.A. Hort, the creators of *The New Testament in Original Greek*, also commented: "If comparative trivialities such as changes of order, the insertion or

omission of the article with proper names, and the like are set aside, the works in our opinion still subject to doubt can hardly mount to more than a thousandth part of the whole New Testament."{9} In other words, the small changes and variations in manuscripts change no major doctrine: they do not affect Christianity in the least. The message is the same with or without the variations. We have the Word of God.

The Anvil? God's Word.

Last eve I passed beside a blacksmith's door
And heard the anvil ring the vesper chime:
Then looking in, I saw upon the floor
Old hammers, worn with beating years of time.

"How many anvils have you had," said I,
"To wear and batter all these hammers so?"
"Just one," said he, and then, with twinkling eye,
"The anvil wears the hammers out, you know."

And so, thought I, the anvil of God's word,
For ages skeptic blows have beat upon;
Yet though the noise of falling blows was heard,
The anvil is unharmed . . . the hammer's gone.

Author unknown

Notes

1. C.Sanders, *Introduction in Research in English Literacy* (New York: MacMillan, 1952), 143.

2. Merrill F. Unger, *Famous Archaeological Discoveries* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1957), 72.

3. R. Laird Harris, *Can I Trust My Bible?* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1963), 124.

4. Ibid., 129-30.

5. Merrill F. Unger, *Unger's Bible Handbook* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1967), 892.

6. Ibid.

7. Ibid.

8. Sir Fredric Kenyon, *The Bible and Archaeology* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1940), 288ff.

9. B.F. Westcott, and F.J.A. Hort, eds., *New Testament in Original Greek*, 1881, vol. II, 2.

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Biblical Interpretation

Earlier this month at the meeting of the International Society of Christian Apologetics there was a robust discussion of inerrancy and hermeneutics. Those are scholarly words for the belief that the Bible is without error and needs to be interpreted according to sound practices of biblical interpretation.

There is a practical aspect of this debate that affects you and the way you read and interpret the Bible. If you have been a Christian for any length of time, you have probably had someone ask: Do you take the Bible literally? Before you answer, I would recommend you ask that person what they mean by literally.

Here is a helpful sentence: "When the literal sense makes good

sense, seek no other sense lest it result in nonsense." Obviously the context helps in understanding how to interpret a passage.

After all, the Bible uses various figures of speech. Jesus told parables. Jesus used metaphors and proclaimed that He is the vine, the door, and the light of the world. There are types and symbols and allegories. If you are reading a section in the Bible that describes historical events, you expect the historical record to be accurate. If you are reading poetic literature like the Psalms, you should not be surprised that God is described as a shepherd, a sun and a shield.

Here is another helpful sentence: "When the literal sense does not make good sense, we should seek some other sense lest it lead to nonsense." We should reject a literal sense when it contradicts the moral law, physical law, or supernatural law.

When Jesus says in Matthew 5:30 to cut off your hand, that is not to be taken literally because if violates moral law. When Jesus talks about those who swallow a camel in Matthew 23:24, that violates a physical law. When we read in Jonah 3:10 that God repented or changed His mind, we know that violates a supernatural law, because God does not change His mind (Numbers 23:19).

But in most cases, we are to read the Bible in the literal sense because seeking some other sense will result in nonsense. That's just common sense.

April 23, 2015

Myths About the Bible

Newsweek began 2015 with a cover story on the Bible. In the lead article, we get a heavy dose of liberal theory and secular skepticism about the Bible. But the author is correct in arguing that very few Americans are biblically literate. Many Christian ministries have documented this through various surveys as well as lots of anecdotal stories.

Two writers with *The Federalist* decided to follow the lead of *Newsweek* and write about "The Eight Biggest Myths About the Bible." Here are just a few of the cultural myths so many have accepted.

Many people believe the Bible teaches: "money is the root of all evil." That is not what Paul taught (in 1 Timothy 6:10) which says: "For the love of money is a root all kinds of evil." The Bible does not condemn money or wealth, but does admonish us to be generous and not to make money an idol.

Another myth is the pervasive belief that Christians are never to make moral judgments. One of the most quoted verses these days is Matthew 7:1. Jesus says, "Judge not, that you be not judged." He is not telling us not to make moral judgments. In the following verses, he explains that we are not to be hypocritical. We may only see the speck in another person's eye and not notice the log in our own eye.

One of the current myths being spread by many atheists is that the Bible condones slavery. This is hard to accept if you just look at history. Most abolitionists in this country or Great Britain were Bible-believing Christians. Paul Copan has chapters in many of his books addressing the misunderstanding of the concept of debt-servanthood or indentured servitude that is nothing like slavery. He also addresses another one of the myths listed: that the God of the Old Testament is an Angry Tribal Deity.

Newsweek is correct that much of America is biblically illiterate. And the writers in *The Federalist* are right that many have accepted these cultural myths about the Bible. That is why we need to study God's Word and take the time to read some good books that destroy these myths.

January 23, 2015

Archaeology and the Old Testament

Dr. Patrick Zukeran surveys the importance of archaeology with regard to its confirmation of biblical history.

 This article is also available in Spanish.

Understanding Archaeology

Christianity is a historical faith based on actual events recorded in the Bible. Archaeology has therefore played a key role in biblical studies and Christian apologetics in several ways.

First, archaeology has confirmed the historical accuracy of the Bible. It has verified many ancient sites, civilizations, and biblical characters whose existence was questioned by the academic world and often dismissed as myths. Biblical archaeology has silenced many critics as new discoveries supported the facts of the Bible.

Second, archaeology helps us improve our understanding of the Bible. Although we do not have the original writings of the authors, thousands of ancient manuscripts affirm that we have

an accurate transmission of the original texts.{1} Archaeology can also help us to understand more accurately the nuances and uses of biblical words as they were used in their day.

Third, archaeology helps illustrate and explain Bible passages. The events of the Bible occurred at a certain time, in a particular culture, influenced by a particular social and political structure. Archaeology gives us insights into these areas. Archaeology also helps to supplement topics not covered in the Bible. Much of what we know of the pagan religions and the intertestamental period comes from archaeological research.

As we approach this study we must keep in mind the limits of archaeology. First, it does not prove the divine inspiration of the Bible. It can only confirm the accuracy of the events. Second, unlike other fields of science, archaeology cannot re-create the process under study. Archaeologists must study and interpret the evidence left behind. All conclusions must allow for revision and reinterpretation based on new discoveries. Third, how archaeological evidence is understood depends on the interpreter's presuppositions and worldview. It is important to understand that many researchers are skeptics of the Bible and hostile to its world view.

Fourth, thousands of archives have been discovered, but an enormous amount of material has been lost. For example, the library in Alexandria held over one million volumes, but all were lost in a seventh century fire.

Fifth, only a fraction of available archaeological sites have been surveyed, and only a fraction of surveyed sites have been excavated. In fact, it is estimated that less than two percent of surveyed sites have been worked on. Once work begins, only a fraction of an excavation site is actually examined, and only a small part of what is examined is published. For example, the photographs of the Dead Sea Scrolls were withheld from the public for forty years after they were uncovered.

It is important to understand that the Scriptures remain the primary source of authority. We must not elevate archaeology to the point that it becomes the judge for the validity of Scripture. Randall Price states, "There are indeed instances where the information needed to resolve a historical or chronological question is lacking from both archaeology and the Bible, but it is unwarranted to assume the material evidence taken from the more limited content of archaeological excavations can be used to dispute the literary evidence from the more complete content of the canonical scriptures."{2} The Bible has proven to be an accurate and trustworthy source of history.

Noted archaeologist Nelson Glueck writes, "As a matter of fact, however, it may be clearly stated categorically that no archeological discovery has ever controverted a single biblical reference. Scores of archeological findings have been made which confirm in clear outline or exact detail historical statements in the Bible."{3}

The Discovery of the Hittites

The Hittites played a prominent role in Old Testament history. They interacted with biblical figures as early as Abraham and as late as Solomon. They are mentioned in Genesis 15:20 as people who inhabited the land of Canaan. 1 Kings 10:29 records that they purchased chariots and horses from King Solomon. The most prominent Hittite is Uriah the husband of Bathsheba. The Hittites were a powerful force in the Middle East from 1750 B.C. until 1200 B.C. Prior to the late 19th century, nothing was known of the Hittites outside the Bible, and many critics alleged that they were an invention of the biblical authors.

In 1876 a dramatic discovery changed this perception. A British scholar named A. H. Sayce found inscriptions carved on rocks in Turkey. He suspected that they might be evidence of the Hittite nation. Ten years later, more clay tablets were

found in Turkey at a place called Boghaz-koy. German cuneiform expert Hugo Winckler investigated the tablets and began his own expedition at the site in 1906.

Winckler's excavations uncovered five temples, a fortified citadel and several massive sculptures. In one storeroom he found over ten thousand clay tablets. One of the documents proved to be a record of a treaty between Ramesses II and the Hittite king. Other tablets showed that Boghaz-koy was the capital of the Hittite kingdom. Its original name was Hattusha and the city covered an area of 300 acres. The Hittite nation had been discovered!

Less than a decade after Winckler's find, Czech scholar Bedrich Hronzny proved the Hittite language is an early relative of the Indo-European languages of Greek, Latin, French, German, and English. The Hittite language now has a central place in the study of the history of the Indo-European languages.

The discovery also confirmed other biblical facts. Five temples were found containing many tablets with details of the rites and ceremonies that priests performed. These ceremonies described rites for purification from sin and purification of a new temple. The instructions proved to be very elaborate and lengthy. Critics once criticized the laws and instructions found in the books of Leviticus and Deuteronomy as too complicated for the time it was written (1400 B.C.). The Boghaz-koy texts along with others from Egyptian sites and a site along the Euphrates called Emar have proven that the ceremonies described in the Jewish Pentateuch are consistent with the ceremonies of the cultures of this time period.

The Hittite Empire made treaties with civilizations they conquered. Two dozen of these have been translated and provide a better understanding of treaties in the Old Testament. The discovery of the Hittite Empire at Boghaz-koy has significantly advanced our understanding of the patriarchal

period. Dr. Fred Wright summarizes the importance of this find in regard to biblical historicity:

> Now the Bible picture of this people fits in perfectly with what we know of the Hittite nation from the monuments. As an empire they never conquered the land of Canaan itself, although the Hittite local tribes did settle there at an early date. Nothing discovered by the excavators has in any way discredited the Biblical account. Scripture accuracy has once more been proved by the archaeologist.{4}

The discovery of the Hittites has proven to be one of the great archaeological finds of all time. It has helped to confirm the biblical narrative and had a great impact on Middle East archaeological study. Because of it, we have come to a greater understanding of the history of our language, as well as the religious, social, and political practices of the ancient Middle East.

Sodom and Gomorrah

The story of Sodom and Gomorrah has long been viewed as a legend. Critics assume that it was created to communicate moral principles. However, throughout the Bible this story is treated as a historical event. The Old Testament prophets refer to the destruction of Sodom on several occasions (Deut. 29:23, Isa. 13:19, Jer. 49:18), and these cities play a key role in the teachings of Jesus and the Apostles (Matt. 10:15, 2 Pet. 2:6 and Jude 1:7). What has archaeology found to establish the existence of these cities?

Archaeologists have searched the Dead Sea region for many years in search of Sodom and Gomorrah. Genesis 14:3 gives their location as the Valley of Siddim known as the Salt Sea, another name for the Dead Sea. On the east side six wadies, or river valleys, flow into the Dead Sea. Along five of these wadies, ancient cities were discovered. The northern most is named Bab edh-Drha. In 1924, renowned archaeologist Dr.

William Albright excavated at this site, searching for Sodom and Gomorrah. He discovered it to be a heavily fortified city. Although he connected this city with one of the biblical "Cities of the Plains," he could not find conclusive evidence to justify this assumption.

More digging was done in 1965, 1967, and 1973. The archaeologists discovered a 23-inch thick wall around the city, along with numerous houses and a large temple. Outside the city were huge grave sites where thousands of skeletons were unearthed. This revealed that the city had been well populated during the early Bronze Age, about the time Abraham would have lived.

Most intriguing was evidence that a massive fire had destroyed the city. It lay buried under a coating of ash several feet thick. A cemetery one kilometer outside the city contained charred remains of roofs, posts, and bricks turned red from heat.

Dr. Bryant Wood, in describing these charnel houses, stated that a fire began on the roofs of these buildings. Eventually the burning roof collapsed into the interior and spread inside the building. This was the case in every house they excavated. Such a massive fiery destruction would match the biblical account that the city was destroyed by fire that rained down from heaven. Wood states, "The evidence would suggest that this site of Bab edh-Drha is the biblical city of Sodom."{5}

Five cities of the plain are mentioned in Genesis 14: Sodom, Gomorrah, Admah, Zoar, and Zeboiim. Remnants of these other four cities are also found along the Dead Sea. Following a southward path from Bab edh-Drha there is the city called Numeria. Continuing south is the city called es-Safi. Further south are the ancient cities of Feifa and Khanazir. Studies at these cities revealed that they had been abandoned at the same time about 24502350 B.C. Many archaeologists believe if Bab ed-Drha is Sodom, Numeria is Gomorrah, and es-Safi is Zoar.

What fascinated the archaeologists is that these cities were covered in the same ash as Bab ed-Drha. Numeria, believed to be Gomorrah, had seven feet of ash in some places. In every one of the destroyed cities ash deposits made the soil a spongy charcoal, making it impossible to rebuild. According to the Bible, four of the five cities were destroyed, leaving Lot to flee to Zoar. Zoar was not destroyed by fire, but was abandoned during this period.

Although archaeologists are still disputing these findings, this is one discovery we will be hearing more about in years to come.

The Walls of Jericho

According to the Bible, the conquest of Jericho occurred in approximately 1440 B.C. The miraculous nature of the conquest has caused some scholars to dismiss the story as folklore. Does archaeology support the biblical account? Over the past century four prominent archaeologists have excavated the site: Carl Watzinger from 1907-1909, John Garstang in the 1930's, Kathleen Kenyon from 1952-1958, and currently Bryant Wood. The result of their work has been remarkable.

First, they discovered that Jericho had an impressive system of fortifications. Surrounding the city was a retaining wall fifteen feet high. At its top was an eight-foot brick wall strengthened from behind by an earthen rampart. Domestic structures were found behind this first wall. Another brick wall enclosed the rest of the city. The domestic structures found between the two walls is consistent with Joshua's description of Rahab's quarters (Josh. 2:15). Archeologists also found that in one part of the city, large piles of bricks were found at the base of both the inner and outer walls, indicating a sudden collapse of the fortifications. Scholars feel that an earthquake, which may also explain the damming of the Jordan in the biblical account, caused this collapse. The collapsed bricks formed a ramp by which an invader might

easily enter the city (Josh. 6:20).

Of this amazing discovery Garstang states, “As to the main fact, then, there remains no doubt: the walls fell outwards so completely, the attackers would be able to clamber up and over the ruins of the city.”{6} This is remarkable because when attacked city walls fall inward, not outward.

A thick layer of soot indicates that the city was destroyed by fire as described in Joshua 6:24. Kenyon describes it this way. “The destruction was complete. Walls and floors were blackened or reddened by fire and every room was filled with fallen bricks.”{7} Archaeologists also discovered large amounts of grain at the site. This is again consistent with the biblical account that the city was captured quickly. If it had fallen as a result of a siege, the grain would have been used up. According to Joshua 6:17, the Israelites were forbidden to plunder the city, but had to destroy it totally.

Although the archaeologists agreed Jericho was violently destroyed, they disagreed on the date of the conquest. Garstang held to the biblical date of 1400 B.C. while Watzinger and Kenyon believed the destruction occurred in 1550 B.C. In other words, if the later date is accurate, Joshua arrived at a previously destroyed Jericho. This earlier date would pose a serious challenge to the historicity of the Old Testament.

Dr. Bryant Wood, who is currently excavating the site, found that Kenyon’s early date was based on faulty assumptions about pottery found at the site. His later date is also based on the discovery of Egyptian amulets in the tombs northwest of Jericho. Inscribed under these amulets were the names of Egyptian Pharaohs dating from 1500-1386 B.C., showing that the cemetery was in use up to the end of the late Bronze Age (1550-1400 B.C.). Finally, a piece of charcoal found in the debris was carbon-14 dated to be 1410 B.C. The evidence leads Wood to this conclusion. “The pottery, stratigraphic

considerations, scarab data and a carbon-14 date all point to a destruction of the city around the end of the Late Bronze Age, about 1400 BCE."{8}

Thus, current archeological evidence supports the Bible's account of when and how Jericho fell.

House of David

One of the most beloved characters in the Bible is King David. Scripture says that he was a man after God's own heart. He is revered as the greatest of all Israelite kings and the messianic covenant is established through his lineage. Despite his key role in Israel's history, until recently no evidence outside the Bible attested to his existence. For this reason critics questioned the existence of a King David.

In the summer of 1993, an archaeologist made what has been labeled as a phenomenal and stunning discovery. Dr. Avraham Biran and his team were excavating a site labeled Tell Dan, located in northern Galilee at the foot of Mt. Hermon. Evidence indicates that this is the site of the Old Testament land of Dan.

The team had discovered an impressive royal plaza. As they were clearing the debris, they discovered in the ruins the remains of a black basalt stele, or stone slab, containing Aramaic inscriptions. The stele contained thirteen lines of writing but none of the sentences were complete. Some of the lines contained only three letters while the widest contained fourteen. The letters that remained were clearly engraved and easy to read. Two of the lines included the phrases "The King of Israel" and "House of David."

This is the first reference to King David found outside of the Bible. This discovery has caused many critics to reconsider their view of the historicity of the Davidic kingdom. Pottery found in the vicinity, along with the construction and style

of writing, lead Dr. Biran to argue that the stele was erected in the first quarter of the ninth century B.C., about a century after the death of King David.

The translation team discovered that the inscription told of warfare between the Israelites and the Arameans, which the Bible refers to during this period. In this find, a ruler of the Arameans probably Hazael is victorious over Israel and Judah. The stele was erected to celebrate the defeat of the two kings. In 1994 two more pieces were found with inscriptions which refer to Jehoram, the son of Ahab, ruler over Israel, and Ahaziah, who was the ruler over the "House of David" or Judah. These names and facts correspond to the account given in chapters 8 and 9 of 2 Kings. Dr. Hershel Shanks of *Biblical Archaeological Review* states, "The stele brings to life the biblical text in a very dramatic way. It also gives us more confidence in the historical reality of the biblical text."{9}

The find has confirmed a number of facts. First, the use of the term "House of David" implies that there was a Davidic dynasty that ruled Israel. We can conclude, then, that a historic King David existed. Second, the kingdoms of Judah and Israel were prominent political entities as the Bible describes. Critics long viewed the two nations as simply insignificant states.

Dr. Bryant Wood summarizes the importance of this find this way. "In our day, most scholars, archaeologist and biblical scholars would take a very critical view of the historical accuracy of many of the accounts in the Bible. . . . Many scholars have said there never was a David or a Solomon, and now we have a stele that actually mentions David."{10}

Although many archeologists remain skeptical of the biblical record, the evidence for the historical accuracy of the Bible continues to build.

Notes

1. See Are the Biblical Documents Reliable? available on the Web at www.probe.org/are-the-biblical-documents-reliable/

2. Randall Price, *The Stones Cry Out* (Eugene, OR.: Harvest House Publishers, 1997), 46. e, 173.

3. Nelson Glueck, *Rivers in the Desert*, (New York: Farrar, Strous and Cudahy, 1959), 136. e, 173.

4.Fred Wright, *Highlights of Archaeology in the Bible Lands*, (Chicago: Moody Press, 1955), 94-95.

5. Price, 118.

6. John Garstang, *The Foundations of Bible History; Joshua, Judges* (London: Constable, 1931), 146.

7. Kathleen Kenyon and Thomas Holland, *Excavations at Jericho Vol. 3: The Architecture and Stratigraphy of the Tell*, (London: BSA), 370.

8. Bryant Wood, "Did the Israelites Conquer Jericho?" *Biblical Archaeological Review,* March/April, 1990, 57.

9. John Wilford, "Areologists say Evidence of House of David Found." *Dallas Morning News*, 6 August 1993, 1A

10. Price, 173.

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20. Wright, Fred. *Highlights of Archaeology in the Bible Lands*. Chicago: Moody Press, 1955.

21. Yamauchi, Edwin, *The Stones and the Scriptures*. Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott Company, 1972.

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Authority of the Bible – A Strong Argument for Christianity

Dr. Pat Zukeran examines some of the compelling evidence for the reliability and the authority of the Bible. The uniqueness and astounding accuracy of this ancient text is an important apologetic for Christianity.

 *This article is also available in Spanish.*

There are many books today that claim to be the Word of God. The Koran, the *Bhagavad Gita*, The Book of Mormon, and other religious works all claim to be divinely inspired. The Bible claims to be the only book that is divinely inspired and that all other claims of inspiration from other works should be ruled out. Does the Bible confirm its exclusive claim to be the Word of God? The totality of evidences presents a strong case for the divine inspiration of the Bible.



The strongest argument for the divine inspiration of the Bible is the testimony of Jesus. Jesus claimed to be the divine Son of God and confirmed His claims through His sinless, miraculous life and resurrection. The events of His life have been recorded in the four Gospels, which have proven to be historically accurate and written by first century eyewitnesses.{1} Since Jesus is God incarnate, whatever He taught is true, and anything opposed to His teaching is false.

Jesus directly affirmed the authority of the Old Testament and indirectly affirmed the New Testament. In Luke 11:51, Jesus identified the prophets and the canon of the Old Testament. He

names Abel as the first prophet from Genesis, and Zechariah the last prophet mentioned in 2 Chronicles, the last book in the Jewish Old Testament (which contains the same books we have today although placed in a different order). In Mark 7:8-9, Jesus refers to the Old Testament as the commands of God. In Matthew 5:17, Jesus states that the Law and the Prophets referring to the Old Testament is authoritative and imperishable. Throughout His ministry, Jesus made clear His teachings, corrections, and actions were consistent with the Old Testament. He also judged others teachings and traditions by the Old Testament. He thus demonstrated His affirmation of the Old Testament to be the Word of God.

Jesus even specifically affirmed as historical several disputed stories of the Old Testament. He affirms as true the accounts of Adam and Eve (Matthew 19:4-5), Noah and the flood (Matthew 24:39), Jonah and the whale (Matthew 12:40), Sodom and Gomorrah (Matthew 10:15), and more.

Jesus confirmed the Old Testament and promised that the Holy Spirit would inspire the apostles in the continuation of His teaching and in the writing of what would become the New Testament (John 14:25-26 and John 16:12-13). The apostles demonstrated that they came with the authority of God through the miracles they performed as Jesus and the Prophets did before them. The book of Acts, which records the miracles of the apostles, has also proven to be a historically accurate record written by a first century eyewitness.

Prophecy

Many religious books claim to be divinely inspired, but only the Bible has evidence of supernatural confirmation. We have seen that Jesus, being God incarnate, affirms the inspiration of the Bible. Another evidence of supernatural confirmation is the testimony of prophecy. The biblical authors made hundreds of specific prophecies of future events that have come to pass in the manner they were predicted. No book in history can

compare to the Bible when it comes to the fulfillment of prophecy.

Here are some examples. Ezekiel 26, which was written in 587 B.C., predicted the destruction of Tyre, a city made up of two parts: a mainland port city, and an island city half a mile off shore. Ezekiel prophesied that Nebuchadnezzar would destroy the city, many nations would fight against her, the debris of the city would be thrown into the ocean, the city would never be found again, and fishermen would come there to lay their nets.

In 573 B.C., Nebuchadnezzar destroyed the mainland city of Tyre. Many of the refugees of the city sailed to the island, and the island city of Tyre remained a powerful city. In 333 B.C., however, Alexander the Great laid siege to Tyre. Using the rubble of mainland Tyre, he built a causeway to the island city of Tyre. He then captured and completely destroyed the city.

Today, Tyre is a small fishing town where fishing boats come to rest and fisherman spread their nets. The great ancient city of Tyre to this day lies buried in ruins exactly as prophesied. If we were to calculate the odds of this event happening by chance, the figures would be astronomical. No, it was not by coincidence.{2}

Here's another example. There are nearly one hundred prophecies made about Jesus in the Old Testament, prophecies such as His place of birth, how he would die, His rejection by the nation of Israel, and so on. All these prophecies were made hundreds of years before Jesus ever came to earth. Because of the accuracy of the prophecies, many skeptics have believed that they must have been written after A.D. 70—after the birth and death of Jesus and the destruction of Jerusalem. They have thereby tried to deny that they are even prophecies.

However, in 1947 the Dead Sea Scrolls were discovered. These

scrolls contained the book of Isaiah and other prophetic books. When dated, they were found to be written from 120 to 100 B.C.,{3} well before Jesus was born. It would have been an incredible accomplishment for Jesus to have fulfilled the numerous prophecies. Some say these prophecies were fulfilled by chance, but the odds against this would be exceptionally large. It would take more a greater leap of faith to believe in that chance happening than in the fact that Jesus is God and these prophecies are divinely inspired.

The record of prophecy is thus evidence for the unique and supernatural origin of the Bible.

Unity

The Bible is the only book with supernatural confirmation to support its claim of divine inspiration. The testimony of Christ and the legacy of prophecy are two proofs for inspiration. A third line of evidence is the unity of the Bible.

The Bible covers hundreds of topics, yet it does not contradict itself. It remains united in its theme. Well, what's so amazing about that? you may ask. Consider these facts. First, the Bible was written over a span of fifteen hundred years. Second, it was written by more than forty men from every walk of life. For example, Moses was educated in Egypt, Peter was a fisherman, Solomon was a king, Luke was a doctor, Amos was a shepherd, and Matthew was a tax collector. All the writers were of vastly different occupations and backgrounds.

Third, it was written in many different places. The Bible was written on three different continents: Asia, Africa, and Europe. Moses wrote in the desert of Sinai, Paul wrote in a prison in Rome, Daniel wrote in exile in Babylon, and Ezra wrote in the ruined city of Jerusalem.

Fourth, it was written under many different circumstances. David wrote during a time of war, Jeremiah wrote at the sorrowful time of Israel's downfall, Peter wrote while Israel was under Roman domination, and Joshua wrote while invading the land of Canaan.

Fifth, the writers had different purposes for writing. Isaiah wrote to warn Israel of God's coming judgment on their sin; Matthew wrote to prove to the Jews that Jesus is the Messiah; Zechariah wrote to encourage a disheartened Israel who had returned from Babylonian exile; and Paul wrote addressing problems in different Asian and European churches.

If we put all these factors together—the Bible was written over fifteen hundred years by forty different authors at different places, under various circumstances, and addressing a multitude of issues—how amazing that with such diversity, the Bible proclaims a unified message! That unity is organized around one theme: God's redemption of man and all of creation. The writers address numerous controversial subjects yet contradictions never appear. The Bible is an incredible document.

Let me offer you a good illustration. Suppose ten medical students graduating in the same year from medical school wrote position papers on four controversial subjects. Would they all agree on each point? No, we would have disagreements from one author to another. Now look at the authorship of the Bible. All these authors, from a span of fifteen hundred years, wrote on many controversial subjects, yet they do not contradict one another.

It seems one author guided these writers through the whole process: the Holy Spirit. 2 Peter 1:21 states, "No prophecy was ever made by an act of human will, but men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God." The unity of the Bible is just one more amazing proof of the divine inspiration and authority of the Bible.

Archaeology

We've studied the testimony of Jesus, prophecy, and the unity of the Bible as providing supernatural confirmation of the divine inspiration of the Bible. Another line of evidence is archaeology. Archaeology does not directly prove the Bibles inspiration, but it does prove its historical reliability.

Middle Eastern archaeological investigations have proven the Bible to be true and unerringly accurate in its historical descriptions. Nelson Glueck, a renowned Jewish archaeologist, states, No archaeological discovery has ever controverted a biblical reference.{4} Dr. William Albright, who was probably the foremost authority in Middle East archaeology in his time, said this about the Bible: There can be no doubt that archaeology has confirmed the substantial historicity of the Old Testament.{5} At this time, the number of archaeological discoveries that relate to the Bible number in the hundreds of thousands.{6}

Archaeology has verified numerous ancient sites, civilizations, and biblical characters whose existence was questioned by the academic world and often dismissed as myths. Biblical archaeology has silenced many critics as new discoveries supported the facts of the Bible.

Here are a few examples of the historical accuracy of the Bible. The Bible records that the Hittites were a powerful force in the Middle East from 1750 B.C. until 1200 B.C. (Genesis 15:20, 2 Samuel 11, and 1 Kings 10:29). Prior to the late nineteenth century, nothing was known of the Hittites outside the Bible, and many critics alleged that they were an invention of the biblical authors.

However, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, archaeologists in Turkey discovered a city which proved to be the capital of the Hittite empire. In the city they discovered a massive library of thousands of tablets. These tablets

showed that the Hittite language was an early relative of the Indo-European languages.

Another example is the story of Jericho recorded in the book of Joshua. For years, skeptics thought the story of the falling walls of Jericho was a myth. However, recent archaeological discoveries have led several prominent scholars to conclude that the biblical description of the fall of Jericho is consistent with the discoveries they have made. One of the leading archaeologists on Jericho presently is Dr. Bryant Wood. His research has shown that the archaeological evidence matches perfectly with the biblical record.{7}

Archaeology has also demonstrated the accuracy of the New Testament. One of the most well attested to New Testament authors is Luke. Scholars have found him to be a very accurate historian, even in many of his details. In the Gospel of Luke and Acts, Luke names thirty-two countries, fifty-four cities, and nine islands without error.{8} A. N. Sherwin-White states, For Acts the confirmation of historicity is overwhelming. . . . Any attempt to reject its basic historicity must now appear absurd. Roman historians have long taken it for granted.{9}

There is no other ancient book that has so much archaeological evidence to support its accounts. Since God is a God of truth, we should expect His revelation to present what is historically true. Archaeology presents tangible proof of the historical accuracy of the Bible.

The Bible Alone Is God's Word

We have given several proofs for the divine inspiration of the Bible. These include the testimony of Jesus the divine Son of God, prophecy, unity, and archaeology. Accepting the divine inspiration of the Bible leads to the conclusion that all other works cannot be divinely inspired. This does not mean other works do not contain truth. All people are created in the image of God and can articulate principles that are true.

However, only the Bible proves to be divinely inspired by God and therefore, other claims of divine inspiration should be ruled out for several reasons.

The Bible is the only book that gives supernatural confirmation to support its claim of divine inspiration. Other scriptures which contradict it cannot, therefore, be true.

The law of non-contradiction states that two contradictory statements cannot be true at the same time. If one proposition is known to be true, its opposite must be false. If it is true that I am presently alive, it cannot also be true to say that I am presently not alive. This is a universal law which is practiced daily in every part of the world. Even if you claim, the law of non-contradiction is false, you are asserting this statement is true and its opposite is false. In other words you end up appealing to the law you are trying to deny thus making a self-defeating argument.

Since we have good reason to believe the Bible is the inspired word of God, any teaching that contradicts the Bible must be false. The Bible makes exclusive claims regarding God, truth and salvation that would exclude other scriptures. The Bible teaches that any deity other than the God of the Bible is a false deity (Exodus 20). Jesus declared that he is the divine Son of God, the source of truth, and the only way to eternal life (John 1 & 14:6).

A look at a few works from other religions illustrates this point. The Hindu scriptures include the Vedas and the Upanishads. These books present views of God that are contrary to the Bible. The Vedas are polytheistic, and the Upanishads present a pantheistic worldview of an impersonal divine essence called Brahma, not a personal God.

The Koran, the holy book of Islam, denies the deity of Christ, the triune nature of God, and the atoning work of Christ on the cross (Sura 4:116, 168). These are foundational truths

taught in the Bible. The Pali Canon, the holy scriptures of Southern Buddhism, teach a naturalistic worldview (or pantheistic, as some schools interpret it). It also teaches salvation by works and the doctrine of reincarnation. The worldview of the Pali Canon and its view of salvation contradict biblical teachings. Since these works contradict biblical teaching, we reject their claim to divine inspiration.

The Bible alone proves to be divinely inspired and its exclusive claims rule out the claims of other books.

Notes

1. For more information refer to the articles "The Historical Reliability of the Gospels" (probe.org/historical-reliability-of-the-gospels/) and "The Uniqueness of Jesus" (www.probe.org/uniqueness-of-jesus).
2. Ralph H. Alexander, "Ezekiel," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary,* ed. Frank E. Gaebelein (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986), 869.
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4. Nelson Glueck, *Rivers in the Desert: A History of the Negev* (New York: Farrar, Strauss, and Cudahy, 1959), 31.
5. William F. Albright, *Archaeology and the Religion of Israel* (Baltimore: John Hopkins, 1953), 176.
6. Randall Price, *The Stones Cry Out* (Eugene, OR.: Harvest House Publishers, 1997), 25.
7. Ibid., 152-53.
8. Norman Geisler, *Baker Encyclopedia of Christian Apologetics* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999), s.v., Archaeology, New Testament.
9. Josh McDowell, *Evidence That Demands a Verdict* (San Bernardino: Here's Life Publishers,1999), 66.

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The Historical Reliability of the Gospels – An Important Apologetic for Christianity

Dr. Pat Zukeran provides a succinct argument for the reliability of our current copies of the four gospels. This data is an important part of any apologetic argument, i.e. defense of the veracity of the Christian faith.

This article is also available in Spanish. 

Differences Between the Four Gospels

Skeptics have criticized the Gospels, the first four books of the New Testament, as being legendary in nature rather than historical. They point to alleged contradictions between Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. They also maintain the Gospels were written centuries after the lifetimes of the eyewitnesses. The late date of the writings allowed legends and exaggerations to proliferate, they say.

Are the Gospels historical or mythological?

The first challenge to address is how to account for the differences among the four Gospels. They are each different in nature, content, and the facts they include or exclude. The reason for the variations is that each author wrote to a different audience and from his own unique perspective. Matthew wrote to a Jewish audience to prove to them that Jesus is indeed their Messiah. That's why Matthew includes many of the teachings of Christ and makes numerous references to Old Testament prophecies. Mark wrote to a Greek or Gentile audience to prove that Jesus is the Son of God. Therefore, he

makes his case by focusing on the events of Christ's life. His gospel moves very quickly from one event to another, demonstrating Christ's lordship over all creation. Luke wrote to give an accurate historical account of Jesus' life. John wrote after reflecting on his encounter with Christ for many years. With that insight, near the end of his life John sat down and wrote the most theological of all the Gospels.

We should expect some differences between four independent accounts. If they were identical, we would suspect the writers of collaboration with one another. Because of their differences, the four Gospels actually give us a fuller and richer picture of Jesus.

Let me give you an example. Imagine if four people wrote a biography on your life: your son, your father, a co-worker, and a good friend. They would each focus on different aspects of your life and write from a unique perspective. One would be writing about you as a parent, another as a child growing up, one as a professional, and one as a peer. Each may include different stories or see the same event from a different angle, but their differences would not mean they are in error. When we put all four accounts together, we would get a richer picture of your life and character. That is what is taking place in the Gospels.

So we acknowledge that differences do not necessarily mean errors. Skeptics have made allegations of errors for centuries, yet the vast majority of charges have been answered. New Testament scholar, Dr. Craig Blomberg, writes, "Despite two centuries of skeptical onslaught, it is fair to say that all the alleged inconsistencies among the Gospels have received at least plausible resolutions."{1} Another scholar, Murray Harris, emphasizes, "Even then the presence of discrepancies in circumstantial detail is no proof that the central fact is unhistorical."{2} The four Gospels give us a complementary, not a contradictory, account.

The Date of the New Testament Writings: Internal Evidence

Critics claim that the Gospels were written centuries after the lifetimes of the eyewitnesses. This would allow for myths about Jesus' life to proliferate. Were the Gospels written by eyewitnesses as they claim, or were they written centuries later? The historical facts appear to make a strong case for a first century date.

Jesus' ministry was from A.D. 27-30. Noted New Testament scholar, F.F. Bruce, gives strong evidence that the New Testament was completed by A.D. 100.{3} Most writings of the New Testament works were completed twenty to forty years before this. The Gospels are dated traditionally as follows: Mark is believed to be the first gospel written around A.D. 60. Matthew and Luke follow and are written between A.D. 60-70; John is the final gospel, written between A.D. 90-100.

The internal evidence supports these early dates for several reasons. The first three Gospels prophesied the fall of the Jerusalem Temple which occurred in A.D. 70. However, the fulfillment is not mentioned. It is strange that these three Gospels predict this major event but do not record it happening. Why do they not mention such an important prophetic milestone? The most plausible explanation is that it had not yet occurred at the time Matthew, Mark, and Luke were written.

In the book of Acts, the Temple plays a central role in the nation of Israel. Luke writes as if the Temple is an important part of Jewish life. He also ends Acts on a strange note: Paul living under house arrest. It is strange that Luke does not record the death of his two chief characters, Peter and Paul. The most plausible reason for this is that Luke finished writing Acts before Peter and Paul's martyrdom in A.D. 64. A significant point to highlight is that the Gospel of Luke precedes Acts, further supporting the traditional dating of

A.D. 60. Furthermore, most scholars agree Mark precedes Luke, making Mark's Gospel even earlier.

Finally, the majority of New Testament scholars believe that Paul's epistles are written from A.D. 48-60. Paul's outline of the life of Jesus matches that of the Gospels. 1 Corinthians is one of the least disputed books regarding its dating and Pauline authorship. In chapter 15, Paul summarizes the gospel and reinforces the premise that this is the same gospel preached by the apostles. Even more compelling is that Paul quotes from Luke's Gospel in 1 Timothy 5:18, showing us that Luke's Gospel was indeed completed in Paul's lifetime. This would move up the time of the completion of Luke's Gospel along with Mark and Matthew.

The internal evidence presents a strong case for the early dating of the Gospels.

The Date of the Gospels: External Evidence

Were the Gospels written by eyewitnesses of the events, or were they not recorded until centuries later? As with the internal evidence, the external evidence also supports a first century date.

Fortunately, New Testament scholars have an enormous amount of ancient manuscript evidence. The documentary evidence for the New Testament far surpasses any other work of its time. We have over 5000 manuscripts, and many are dated within a few years of their authors' lives.

Here are some key documents. An important manuscript is the Chester Beatty Papyri. It contains most of the N.T. writings, and is dated around A.D. 250.

The Bodmer Papyri contains most of John, and dates to A.D. 200. Another is the Rylands Papyri that was found in Egypt

that contains a fragment of John, and dates to A.D. 130. From this fragment we can conclude that John was completed well before A.D. 130 because, not only did the gospel have to be written, it had to be hand copied and make its way down from Greece to Egypt. Since the vast majority of scholars agree that John is the last gospel written, we can affirm its first century date along with the other three with greater assurance.

A final piece of evidence comes from the Dead Sea Scrolls Cave 7. Jose Callahan discovered a fragment of the Gospel of Mark and dated it to have been written in A.D. 50. He also discovered fragments of Acts and other epistles and dated them to have been written slightly after A.D. 50.{4}

Another line of evidence is the writings of the church fathers. Clement of Rome sent a letter to the Corinthian church in A.D. 95. in which he quoted from the Gospels and other portions of the N.T. Ignatius, Bishop of Antioch, wrote a letter before his martyrdom in Rome in A.D. 115, quoting all the Gospels and other N.T. letters. Polycarp wrote to the Philippians in A.D. 120 and quoted from the Gospels and N.T. letters. Justin Martyr (A.D. 150) quotes John 3. Church fathers of the early second century were familiar with the apostle's writings and quoted them as inspired Scripture.

Early dating is important for two reasons. The closer a historical record is to the date of the event, the more likely the record is accurate. Early dating allows for eyewitnesses to still be alive when the Gospels were circulating to attest to their accuracy. The apostles often appeal to the witness of the hostile crowd, pointing to their knowledge of the facts as well (Acts 2:22, 26:26). Also, the time is too short for legends to develop. Historians agree it takes about two generations, or eighty years, for legendary accounts to establish themselves.

From the evidence, we can conclude the Gospels were indeed

written by the authors they are attributed to.

How Reliable was the Oral Tradition?

Previously, I defended the early dating of the Gospels. Despite this early dating, there is a time gap of several years between the ascension of Jesus and the writing of the Gospels. There is a period during which the gospel accounts were committed to memory by the disciples and transmitted orally. The question we must answer is, Was the oral tradition memorized and passed on accurately? Skeptics assert that memory and oral tradition cannot accurately preserve accounts from person to person for many years.

The evidence shows that in oral cultures where memory has been trained for generations, oral memory can accurately preserve and pass on large amounts of information. Deuteronomy 6:4-9 reveals to us how important oral instruction and memory of divine teaching was stressed in Jewish culture. It is a well-known fact that the rabbis had the O.T. and much of the oral law committed to memory. The Jews placed a high value on memorizing whatever wri ting reflected inspired Scripture and the wisdom of God. I studied under a Greek professor who had the Gospels memorized word perfect. In a culture where this was practiced, memorization skills were far advanced compared to ours today. New Testament scholar Darrell Bock states that the Jewish culture was "a culture of memory."{5}

Rainer Reisner presents six key reasons why oral tradition accurately preserved Jesus' teachings.{6} First, Jesus used the Old Testament prophets' practice of proclaiming the word of God which demanded accurate preservation of inspired teaching. Second, Jesus' presentations of Himself as Messiah would reinforce among His followers the need to preserve His words accurately. Third, ninety percent of Jesus' teachings and sayings use mnemonic methods similar to those used in Hebrew poetry. Fourth, Jesus trained His disciples to teach His lessons even while He was on earth. Fifth, Jewish boys

were educated until they were twelve, so the disciples likely knew how to read and write. Finally, just as Jewish and Greek teachers gathered disciples, Jesus gathered and trained His to carry on after His death.

When one studies the teachings of Jesus, one realizes that His teachings and illustrations are easy to memorize. People throughout the world recognize immediately the story of the Good Samaritan, the Prodigal Son, and the Lord's Prayer.

We also know that the church preserved the teachings of Christ in the form of hymns which were likewise easy to memorize. Paul's summary of the gospel in 1 Corinthians 15 is a good example of this.

We can have confidence then that the oral tradition accurately preserved the teachings and the events of Jesus' life till they were written down just a few years later.

The Transmission of the Gospel Texts

When I am speaking with Muslims or Mormons, we often come to a point in the discussion where it is clear the Bible contradicts their position. It is then they claim, as many skeptics, do that the Bible has not been accurately transmitted and has been corrupted by the church. In regards to the Gospels, do we have an accurate copy of the original texts or have they been corrupted?

Previously, we showed that the Gospels were written in the first century, within the lifetime of the eyewitnesses. These eyewitnesses, both friendly and hostile, scrutinized the accounts for accuracy.

So the original writings were accurate. However, we do not have the original manuscripts. What we have are copies of copies of copies. Are these accurate, or have they been tampered with? As shown earlier, we have 5000 Greek manuscripts of the New Testament. When you include the quotes

from the church fathers, manuscripts from other early translations like the Latin Vulgate, the Ethiopic text, and others, the total comes out to over 24,000 ancient texts. With so many ancient texts, significant alterations should be easy to spot. However, those who accuse the New Testament of being corrupted have not produced such evidence. This is significant because it should be easy to do with so many manuscripts available. The truth is, the large number of manuscripts confirm the accurate preservation and transmission of the New Testament writings.

Although we can be confident in an accurate copy, we do have textual discrepancies. There are some passages with variant readings that we are not sure of. However, the differences are minor and do not affect any major theological doctrine. Most have to do with sentence structure, vocabulary, and grammar. These in no way affect any major doctrine.

Here is one example. In our Bibles, Mark 16:9-20 is debated as to whether it was part of the original writings. Although I personally do not believe this passage was part of the original text, its inclusion does not affect any major teaching of Christianity. It states that Christ was resurrected, appeared to the disciples, and commissioned them to preach the gospel. This is taught elsewhere.

The other discrepancies are similar in nature. Greek scholars agree we have a copy very accurate to the original. Westcott and Hort state that we have a copy 98.33% accurate to the original.{7} A.T. Robertson gave a figure of 99% accuracy to the original.{8} As historian Sir Fredric Kenyon assures us, "…the last foundation for any doubt that the Scriptures have come down to us substantially as they were written has now been removed. Both the authenticity and general integrity of the books of the New Testament may be regarded as finally established."{9}

Do Miracles Discredit the Gospels?

Skeptics question the accuracy of the Gospels because of the miracles. However, this is an issue of worldviews. Those who hold to a naturalistic worldview do not believe an omnipotent creator exists. All that exists is energy and matter. Therefore, miracles are impossible. Their conclusion, then, is that the miracle accounts in the Gospels are exaggerations or myths.

Those who hold to a theistic worldview can accept miracles in light of our understanding of God and Christ. God can intervene in time and space and alter the natural regularities of nature much like finite humans can in smaller limited ways. If Jesus is the Son of God, we can expect Him to perform miracles to affirm His claims to be divine. But worldviews are not where this ends. We also need to take a good look at the historical facts.

As shown previously, the Gospels were written by eyewitnesses to the events of the life of Christ. Early dating shows eyewitnesses were alive when Gospels were circulating and could attest to their accuracy. Apostles often appeal to the witness of the hostile crowd, pointing out their knowledge of the facts as well (Acts 2:22, Acts 26:26). Therefore, if there were any exaggerations or stories being told about Christ that were not true, the eyewitnesses could have easily discredited the apostles accounts. Remember, they began preaching in Israel in the very cities and during the lifetimes of the eyewitnesses. The Jews were careful to record accurate historical accounts. Many enemies of the early church were looking for ways to discredit the apostles' teaching. If what the apostles were saying was not true, the enemies would have cried foul, and the Gospels would not have earned much credibility.

There are also non-Christian sources that attest to the miracles of Christ. Josephus writes, "Now there was about that

time Jesus, a wise man, if it be lawful to call him a man, for he was a doer of wonderful works, a teacher of such men as receive the truth with pleasure. He drew to him both many of the Jews and many of the gentiles." The Jewish Talmud, written in the fifth century A.D., attributes Jesus' miracles to sorcery. Opponents of the Gospels do not deny He did miracles, they just present alternative explanations for them.

Finally, Christ's power over creation is supremely revealed in the resurrection. The resurrection is one of the best attested to events in history. For a full treatment, look up the article *Resurrection: Fact or Fiction* here at Probe.org.

Notes

1. Craig Blomberg, The *Historical Reliability of the Gospels,* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1987), 10.

2. Ibid., 9.

3. F.F. Bruce, *The New Testament Documents: Are They Reliable?* 5th ed. (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1983), 14.

4. Norman Geisler, *Baker Encyclopedia of Christian Apologetics,* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Books, 2002), 530.
5. Michael Wilkins and J.P. Moreland, *Jesus Under Fire,* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan Publishing, 1995), 80.

6. Blomberg, *The Historical Reliability of the Gospels,* 27-28.

7. Geisler, 474.

8. Ibid.

9. Quoted by Norman Geisler, *General Introduction to the Bible,* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1986), 405.

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