The Tablet of Nabu: Another Confirmation of the Bible

This is a fantastic discovery, a world-class find.
Dr. Irving Finkel, British Museum

The Discovery

A significant discovery related to Biblical history was made in the British Museum's great Arched Room which holds nearly 130,000 Assyrian cuneiform tablets. Among the tablets, some of which date back nearly 5000 years, one tablet in particular, measuring only 2.13 inches wide or about the size of a small cigarette pack, was recently translated by Assyriologist and Professor from the University of Vienna, Dr. Michael Jursa. This cuneiform tablet was dated to 595 BC, or the 10th year of the reign of Nebuchadnezzar.

When deciphered it named a high ranking official of Babylonian King Nebuchadnezzar named Nebo-Sarsekim. Nebo-Sarsekim is also named in the Book of Jeremiah 39:1-3. The passage reads:

This is how Jerusalem was taken: In the ninth year of Zedekiah king of Judah, in the tenth month, Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon marched against Jerusalem with his whole army and laid siege to it. And on the ninth day of the fourth month of Zedekiah's eleventh year, the city wall was broken through. Then all the officials of the king of Babylon came and took seats in the Middle Gate: Nergal-Sharezer of Samgar, Nebo-Sarsekim a chief officer, Nergal-Sharezer a high official and all the other officials of the king of Babylon.

Jeremiah identifies Nebo-Sarsekim as a chief officer of Nebuchadnezzar who was with the King at the siege of Jerusalem in 587 B.C. Jeremiah records that several of Nebuchadnezzars top officials took seats in the Middle Gate once they broke through the walls of Jerusalem.

The Assyrian tablet identifies Nebo-Sarsekim as the chief eunuch of Nebuchadnezzar, thus confirming Jeremiahs reference. The full translation of the tablet reads:

(Regarding) 1.5 minas (0.75 kg or 1.65 pounds) of gold, the property of Nabu-sharrussu-ukin, the chief eunuch, which he sent via Arad-Banitu the eunuch to [the temple] Esangila: Arad-Banitu has delivered [it] to Esangila. In the presence of Bel-usat, son of Alpaya, the royal bodyguard, [and of] Nadin, son of Marduk-zer-ibni. Month XI, day 18, year 10 [of] Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon.

The tablet is the financial record of Nebo-Sarsekims gift of gold given to the Temple of Esangila, which was located in the fabled Hanging Gardens of Babylon. This financial transaction took place in the 10th year of the reign of Nebuchadnezzar while Nabu-Sarsekim was serving as the chief officer to Nebuchadnezzar. This was nine years before the siege of Jerusalem. Dr. Jursa states, “It’s very exciting and very surprising. Finding something like this tablet, where we see a person mentioned in the Bible making an everyday payment to the temple in Babylon and quoting the exact date, is quite extraordinary.”
The Significance of the Discovery

The significance of this discovery is that the Tablet of Nabu is a text outside of the Bible that confirms Jeremiahs record of Nebo-Sarsekim as a historical figure. Nebo-Sarsekim is not a prominent figure, but the fact that Jeremiah was accurate on details such as these adds considerable credibility to the Book of Jeremiah. If a writer is accurate on minor details like this, we can be confident that other recorded events which may not have archaeological confirmation are also true. Dr Irving Finkel, assistant keeper in the Department of the Middle East stated, “This is a fantastic discovery, a world-class find. If Nebo-Sarsekim existed, which other lesser figures in the Old Testament existed? A throwaway detail in the Old Testament turns out to be accurate and true. I think that it means that the whole of the narrative [of Jeremiah] takes on a new kind of power.”{5}

This discovery of the Tablet of Nabu is yet another among thousands of archaeological findings that confirm characters, places, and events mentioned in the Bible. Not only are major historical figures confirmed, but so have many minor characters such as Nebo-Sarsekim and others also been confirmed. Dr. Geza Vermes, the eminent emeritus professor of Jewish studies at the University of Oxford, said that such a discovery revealed that “the Biblical story is not altogether invented.” He added, “This will be interesting for religious people as much as historians.”{6} When a work has so much historical and archaeological confirmation, particularly when it comes to minor details, we can be confident that it is indeed a very accurate historical document. Discoveries such as this tablet continue to confirm the Bibles historical accuracy. Therefore, we can have greater confidence in the historical nature of the events where we may not have extra-biblical corroboration.

Notes

2. Ibid.
4. Ibid.
6. Dalya Alberge, “Museum’s tablet.”

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The Gospel of Thomas - A Christian Evaluation

Don Closson looks at the Gospel of Thomas, considering its relationship to the four gospels included in the New Testament. His Christian evaluation of this text demonstrates that it is a later work written in the fourth century after Christ and inconsistent with the original first century writings. Some of the ideas presented in this document were rejected by the early church of the first century.
What Is It, and Why Is It Important?

Anyone who has visited the Wikipedia web site, the online encyclopedia with almost two million entries, knows that while the information is usually presented in a scholarly style, it can be a bit slanted at times. So when I recently read its entry for the “Gospel of Thomas,” I was not surprised to find it leaning towards the view that this letter is probably an early document, earlier than the other four Gospels of the New Testament, and an authentic product of the apostle known as Didymus or Thomas. The two Wikipedia sources most mentioned in support of this position are Elaine Pagels, professor of religion at Princeton, and the group of scholars known as the Jesus Seminar. Both are known for their distaste for evangelical theology and traditional views on the canon in general.

What I found more interesting, though, is the background discussion on the article. Wikipedia includes a running dialogue of the debates that determine what actually gets posted into the article, as well as what gets removed, and here the discussion can be a bit more emotional. One contributor argues that no Christian should be allowed to contribute because of their bias and commitment to the canon of the New Testament. He adds that only atheists and Jews should be allowed to participate (no bias here). The discussion also reflects the idea that as early as the beginning of the second century, the Catholic Church was conducting a massive conspiracy to keep certain texts and ideas out of the public’s hands and minds.

For those who have never heard of the Gospel of Thomas, let me provide some background. A copy of the Gospel of Thomas was found among thirteen leather-bound books in Egypt in 1945 near a town called Nag Hammadi. The books themselves are dated to be about A.D. 350 to 380 and are written in the Coptic language. The Gospel of Thomas contains one hundred fourteen sayings that are mostly attributed to Jesus. Parts of Thomas had been uncovered in the 1890s in the form of three Greek papyrus fragments. The book opens with a prologue that reads, “These are the secret words that the living Jesus spoke and Judas, even Thomas, wrote,” which is followed by the words “the Gospel according to Thomas.”

Why should Christians take the time to think about this book called by some “the fifth gospel”? Mainly, because the Gospel of Thomas is one of the oldest texts found at Nag Hammadi, and because it is being offered by some scholars as an authentic form of early Christianity that competed with the traditional Gospels but was unfairly suppressed.

Dating and Canonicity

Elaine Pagels of Princeton University argues that there was an early competition between the Gospel of John and the Gospel of Thomas, and that it was mishandled by the early Church Fathers. As a result, Christianity may have adopted an incorrect view of who Jesus was and what his message actually taught.

A key component in this debate is the question of when the Gospel of Thomas was written. Pagels defends a date earlier than the Gospel of John, which would put it before A.D. 90. She and others support this idea by arguing that Thomas is different in both form and content than the other gospels and that it has material in common with an early source referred to as Q. Many New Testament scholars argue that there existed an early written text they call Q and that Matthew and
Luke both drew from it. Since Q predated Matthew and Luke, it follows that it is earlier than John’s Gospel as well.

However, most scholars believe that Thomas is a second century work and that it was written in Syria. Thomas may contain sayings going back to Jesus that are independent of the Gospels, but most of the material is rearranged and restated ideas from Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John.

An argument against an early Thomas is called the criterion of multiple attestations. It goes something like this. The many early testimonies that we have regarding the teachings of Jesus contain material on the end times and a final judgment. These early testimonies include Mark, what is common to Matthew and Luke (i.e., what is in Q), what is unique to Matthew, and what is unique to Luke. All include end times teaching by Jesus. Thomas does not. Instead, Thomas seems to teach that the kingdom has already arrived in full and that no future event need occur. The Gospel of Thomas shows the development of later ideas that rejected Jewish beliefs and show the inclusion of pagan Greek thought.

Craig Evans argues that the Gospel of Thomas was not written prior to A.D. 175 or 180. He believes that Thomas shows knowledge of the New Testament writings and that it contains Gospel material that is seen as late. Evans adds that the structure of Thomas shows a striking similarity to Tatian’s Diatessaron which was a harmonization of the four New Testament Gospels and was written after A.D. 170. This late date would exclude Thomas from consideration for the canon because it would be too late to have a direct connection to one of the apostles.

**Gospel Competition**

Was there a marketplace of widespread and equally viable religious ideas in the early church, or was there a clear tradition handed down by the apostles and defended by the Church Fathers that accurately and exclusively communicated the teachings of Jesus Christ?

A group of Scholars sometimes known as the “New School” believe that the Gospel of Thomas is an alternative source for understanding who the real Jesus is and what he taught. As noted earlier, Elaine Pagels and the Jesus Seminar are two of the better known sources that defend the authenticity and early date of the Thomas letter. They believe that orthodoxy was up for grabs within the early Christian community, and that John’s Gospel, written around A.D. 90, was unfairly used by Irenaeus in the late second century to exclude and suppress the Thomas material.

Pagels writes that Irenaeus, in his attempt to “stabilize” Christianity, imposed a “canon, creed, and hierarchy” on the church in response to “devastating persecution” from the pagan and Jewish population, and in the process he suppressed other legitimate forms of spirituality. Pagels admits that by A.D. 200 “Christianity had become an institution headed by a three-rank hierarchy of bishops, priests, and deacons, who understood themselves to be the guardians of the one ‘true faith’.” But it is not entirely clear to Pagels that the right people and ideas won the day; we could be missing an important aspect of what Jesus taught.

Because of this she believes that we need to rethink what orthodoxy and heterodoxy mean. Just because Irenaeus labeled a set of ideas as heretical or placed a group of writings outside of the inspired canon of the New Testament doesn’t necessarily mean that he was right. Pagels adds that Christianity would be a richer faith if it allowed the traditions and ideas that Irenaeus fought against back into church.

Evangelicals have no problem with the idea that there were competing beliefs in the early church
environment. The biblical account mentions several: Simon the magician in Acts, Hymenaeus and Philetus in 1 Timothy, and the docetists, who believed that Jesus only “appeared to be in the flesh,” are referred to in John’s epistles. However, they do not agree with Pagels’ conclusions.

The various religious ideas competing with the traditional view were rejected by the earliest and most attested to sources handed down to us from the early church. They were systematically rejected even before Irenaeus or the emergence of the canon in the third and fourth centuries.

Contents

Attempts to classify the contents of the Gospel of Thomas have been almost as controversial as dating it. Those who support it being an early and authentic witness to the life and ministry of Jesus argue that it offers a form of Christianity more compelling than the traditional view. For instance, in her book Beyond Belief, Elaine Pagels explains how she discovered an unexpected spiritual power in the Gospel of Thomas. She writes, ‘It doesn’t tell you what to believe but challenges us to discover what lies hidden within ourselves; and, with a shock of recognition, I realized that this perspective seemed to me self-evidently true.” {7} This statement comes after a time in her life when she had consciously rejected the teachings of evangelical Christianity. It also coincides with the height of the self-actualization movement of psychologists Carl Rogers and Abraham Maslow which would have made the Jesus of the Gospel of Thomas seem very modern. Pagels argues that just because Thomas sounds different to us, it is not necessarily wrong, heretical, or Gnostic.

So what does Thomas teach? On a spectrum between the traditional gospel on one end and full blown Gnosticism of the late second century on the other, Thomas is closer to the four traditional Gospels of Matthew Mark, Luke, and John. It includes comments about the kingdom of God, prophetic sayings, and beatitudes, and doesn’t contain Gnostic elements regarding the creation of the world and multiple layers of deity. However, its one hundred fourteen sayings portray Jesus as more Buddhist than Jewish.

According to Darrell Bock, professor of New Testament at Dallas Theological Seminary, “the bulk of the gospel seems to reflect recastings of the synoptic material, that is, a reworking of material from Matthew, Mark, and Luke.” In doing so, Jesus comes across more as a wise sage turning his followers inward for salvation rather than towards himself as a unique atonement for sin. For instance, Saying Three includes the words, ‘When you come to know yourselves, then you will become known, and you will realize that you are sons of the living father. But if you do not know yourselves, you dwell in poverty and it is you who are that poverty.” Bock concludes that ‘In Thomas, the key to God’s kingdom is self-knowledge and self-understanding. Spiritual awakening produces life.” {8}

Even if the Gospel of Thomas is a first century document, it is offering a different gospel. Early church leaders compared the teachings of Thomas with the oral tradition handed down from the apostles and with the traditional gospels and rejected Thomas.

Summary

Although the focus here has been the Gospel of Thomas, our discussion is part of a larger debate. This larger question asks which ideas and texts present in the first and second century should be considered Christian and included in what we call the canon of Scripture. In other words, are there ideas and texts that were unfairly suppressed by individuals or the organized church in the early days of Christianity?
In his book *The Missing Gospels*, Darrell Bock lists three major problems with the view held by those who think that we should include the Gospel of Thomas and other so called “missing gospels” into the sphere of orthodox Christianity.

First, this group undervalues the evidence that the traditional sources are still “our best connection to the Christian faith’s earliest years.”{9} Elaine Pagels and others work hard to show that all religious ideas during this time period are human products and have equal merit. They also claim that we know little about who wrote the four Gospels of the NT, often implying that they too could be forgeries.

While there is a healthy debate surrounding the evidence supporting the traditional works, Bock asserts that, “the case that the Gospels are rooted in apostolic connections either directly by authorship or by apostolic association is far greater for the four Gospels than for any of the other alternative gospels,” including Thomas.{10} He adds that “the Gospels we have in the fourfold collection have a line of connection to the earliest days and figures of the Christian faith that the alternatives texts do not possess. For example, the Church Father Clement, writing in A.D. 95 states, ‘The apostles received the gospel for us from the Lord Jesus Christ; Jesus the Christ was sent forth from God. So Christ is from God, and the apostles are from Christ. . . . Having therefore received their orders and being fully assured by the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ and full of faith in the Word of God, they went forth.”{11}

Secondly, supporters of these alternative texts fail to admit that the ideas taught by the “missing gospels” about the nature of God, the work and person of Christ, and the nature of salvation were immediately rejected from the mid-first century on.{12}

Finally, those who support Thomas are wrong when they claim that “there simply was variety in the first two centuries, with neither side possessing an implicit right to claim authority.”{13} Instead, there was a core belief system built upon the foundation of the Old Testament Scriptures and the life of Jesus Christ.

As Bock argues, Irenaeus and others who rejected the ideas found in the Gospel of Thomas were not the creators of orthodoxy, they were created by it.

**Notes**

3. Ibid., 62.
10. Ibid.
11. Ibid., 204.
12. Ibid., 207.
13. Ibid., 211.

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The Doctrine of Revelation: How God Reveals His Nature and His Will

Rick Wade considers how God reveals his nature and his will to mankind. He finds that God clearly speaks to us through His creation and through His thoughts communicated in special revelation (includes His spoken word, His written word, and His Son).

Revelation and the God Who Speaks

Some years ago the pastor of the church I attended was on a nationally syndicated radio program with another pastor of a more liberal bent. They were discussing differences of understanding about Christianity, one of which was the nature of the Bible. My pastor asserted that Scripture is the inspired, revealed Word of God. The other pastor disagreed, saying that the Bible is a collection of the religious reflections of a particular group of people. Since it was a call-in program, I phoned at that point and asked the question, “If the Bible is just the religious ideas of a group of people and isn’t from God, how can we know whether what we think is true Christianity is what God thinks it is?” The pastor said something about how we have other ways of knowing truth, and the program ended. Not a very satisfying answer.

The issue being dealt with was the nature of Scripture. Is it the religious reflection of sincere people expressing truth about God the best they can? Or is it the revealed word of God?

In another article I dealt with the matter of the inspiration of Scripture. In this article I want to look at the doctrine of revelation. Not the book, Revelation, at the end of the New Testament, but the doctrine of revelation.

Revelation: What makes the Bible more than just religious writings

What is revelation? New Testament scholar Leon Morris quotes The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary. Revelation, it says, is “‘The disclosure of knowledge to man by a divine or supernatural agency’, and secondly, ‘Something disclosed or made known by divine or supernatural means.’” Says Morris:

Theologians might hesitate over this concentration on knowledge, for some of them
would certainly prefer to define revelation in terms of the disclosure of a person. But the point on which we fasten our attention is the word ‘disclosure’. Revelation is not concerned with knowledge we once had but have forgotten for the time being. Nor does it refer to the kind of knowledge that we might attain by diligent research. It is knowledge that comes to us from outside ourselves and beyond our own ability to discover.¹

Thus, revelation is knowledge we can have no other way than by being told.

Here one might ask the question, Does it make sense to think God might reveal Himself? What we see in Scripture is a God Who speaks. God walked and talked with Adam in the “cool of the day” (Gen. 2:8ff). Later, He spoke to Abraham and then to the prophets of Israel. In the Incarnation of Christ He spoke directly, as man to man, face to face. Along the way He inspired His prophets and apostles to write His words to man.

This makes perfect sense. First, we know things in keeping with their nature. So, for example, we know the color of something by looking at it. We know distances by measuring. We know love by the good it produces. Along the same lines, we know persons by what they reveal about themselves. God is a Person, and there are things we can only know about Him if He tells us Himself. Second, God is transcendent, high above us. We cannot know Him unless He condescends to speak to us. Third, since God created rational, communicative beings, the idea that He would communicate with them in a rational way is not unreasonable.

Today, people look here and there for answers to the big questions of life–some consciously looking for God, some just looking for any truth on which they can depend. The doctrine of revelation teaches us that rather than wait for us to find God, God has found us. And He has revealed Himself to us in words we can understand.

**General Revelation**

Revelation comes to us in two basic forms: general or natural revelation, and special revelation. Let’s look at the first of these.

**Through what has been made**

General revelation is God’s Word given through the created order. Everyone is exposed to general revelation just by virtue of living in and being part of creation. In Psalm 19 we read, “The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands. Day after day they pour forth speech; night after night they display knowledge. There is no speech or language where their voice is not heard. Their voice goes out into all the earth, their words to the ends of the world” (vv. 1–4). This idea is reiterated in Romans 1 where Paul writes, “For since the creation of the world God’s invisible qualities–his eternal power and divine nature– have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse” (v. 20). Says Leon Morris, “A reverent contemplation of the physical universe with its order and design and beauty tells us not only that God is but also that God is a certain kind of God.”²

If God can be known through creation in general, then it’s reasonable to think He can be known through man himself in particular as part of the created order. God has left His imprint on those made in His image. Theologian Bruce Demarest follows John Calvin in his belief that we all have an immediate knowledge of God based on our being made in His image and on common grace.³ Our own characteristics of personality, rationality and morality say something about God.
What can be known through general revelation

What do we know about God through general revelation? Demarest says that through nature we know that God is uncreated (Acts 17:24), the Creator (Acts 14:15), the Sustainer (Acts 14:16; 17:25), the universal Lord (Acts 17:24), self-sufficient (Acts 17:25), transcendent (Acts 17:24), immanent (Acts 17:26–27), eternal (Ps. 93:2), great (Ps. 8:3–4), majestic (Ps. 29:4), powerful (Ps. 29:4; Rom. 1:20), wise (Ps. 104:24), good (Acts 14:17), and righteous (Rom. 1:32); He has a sovereign will (Acts 17:26), has standards of right and wrong (Rom. 2:15), and should be worshiped (Acts 14:15; 17:23). Furthermore, we all have some knowledge of God’s morality through nature (Rom. 2:15).

Other religions

It is because of general revelation that other religions often contain some truth about God. Remember that Paul said everyone knows God exists through what He has made, but that this knowledge is suppressed by our unrighteousness. They “exchanged the truth of God for a lie,” he said, “and worshiped and served created things rather than the Creator” (Rom. 1: 25). Nonetheless, snippets of truth can be detected in non-Christian religions. “For example,” writes Bruce Demarest, “the Yoruba people of Nigeria have a name for God, ‘Osanobwa,’ that means ‘he who blesses and sustains the world.’ The Taro people, also of Nigeria, after a time of barrenness often call a baby girl ‘Nyambien,’ meaning ‘God is good.’ The Ibo people of Nigeria denote God as ‘Eze-elu,’ or ‘the King above.’ And the Mende people of Liberia designate God as the Chief, the King of all Kings. The Gogo people of West Africa believe that Mulungu governs ‘the destiny of man sending rain and storm, well-being and famine, health or disease, peace or war. He is the Healer.’ The Yoruba people say that in the afterlife the person-soul, the Oli, will give account of itself before Olodumare the supreme God. Since, as anthropologists testify, these convictions appear to have been arrived at apart from Christian or Muslim teaching, they must derive from God’s universal general revelation in nature, providence, and the implanted moral law.”

What can’t be known

If all this can be known through nature, is there anything that can’t? Yes there is. Although through nature we can know some things about God, we cannot know how to get to know God personally, how to find redemption and reconciliation. This is why there had to be special revelation.

Special Revelation

As I have noted, God has revealed Himself through nature, but through nature we cannot know how to be reconciled to God. God had to speak in a special way to tell us how we may be redeemed. “Special revelation is redemptive revelation,” says Carl Henry. “It publishes the good tidings that the holy and merciful God promises salvation as a divine gift to man who cannot save himself (OT) and that he has now fulfilled that promise in the gift of his Son in whom all men are called to believe (NT). The gospel is news that the incarnate Logos has borne the sins of doomed men, has died in their stead, and has risen for their justification. This is the fixed center of special redemptive revelation.”

Personal

What is the nature of special revelation? First we should note that it is the communication of one Person to other persons. It isn’t simply a series of propositions setting forth a theological system. This is why special revelation finds its culmination in Jesus, for in Him we are confronted with the Person of God. We’ll talk more about this later.
Verbal and Propositional

It has been the understanding of the church historically that God has spoken verbally to His creatures. Words have been exchanged; rational ideas have been put forward in understandable sentences. Not all revelation is easy to understand, of course. Meaning is sometimes shrouded in mystery. But important truths are made clear.

That God would reveal Himself through verbal revelation isn’t surprising. First, He is a Person, and persons communicate with other persons with a desire to extend and receive information. Second, His clear desire is to make friends with us. He wants to restore us to a proper relationship with Him. It’s hard to imagine a friendship between two people who don’t communicate clearly with one another.

Implicit in this understanding of revelation is the belief that it contains propositional truths; that is, statements that are informative and have truth value.

This isn’t to say the Bible is only propositions. Douglas Groothuis notes that it also contains questions, imperatives, requests, and exclamations. However, in the words of Carl Henry: “Regardless of the parables, allegories, emotive phrases and rhetorical questions used by these [biblical] writers, their literary devices have a logical point which can be propositionally formulated and is objectively true or false.” {9} So when Jeremiah says that God “has made the heavens and the earth by your great power and by your outstretched arm!” (32:17), we know that the image of God’s “arm” speaks of His power active in His creation. The truth “God acts with power in His creation” is behind the imagery.

Modern ideas

In recent centuries, however, as confidence in man’s reason overshadowed confidence in God’s ability to communicate, the understanding of revelation has undergone change. Some hold that revelation is to be understood in terms of personal encounter, of God encountering people so as to leave them with a “liberating assurance. . . .This assurance — ‘openness to the future’, Bultmann called it — was equated with faith.” {10} Such an encounter can come as a result of reading Scripture, but Scripture itself isn’t the verbal revelation of God. Even in evangelical churches where the Bible is preached as God’s Word written, people sometimes put more faith in their “relationship” with God than in what God has said. “Don’t worry me with doctrine,” is the attitude. “I just want to have a relationship with Jesus.” It’s fine to have a relationship with Jesus. But try to imagine a relationship between two people here on earth in which no information is exchanged.

Those who hold this view draw a line between the personal and the propositional as if they cannot mix. In his evaluation, J.I. Packer says that this is an absurd idea.

“Revelation is certainly more than the giving of theological information, but it is not and cannot be less. Personal friendship between God and man grows just as human friendships do — namely, through talking; and talking means making informative statements, and informative statements are propositions. . . . To say that revelation is non-propositional is actually to depersonalize it. . . . To maintain that we may know God without God actually speaking to us in words is really to deny that God is personal, or at any rate that knowing Him is a truly personal relationship.” {11}

Another idea about the Bible in particular which has become commonplace in liberal theology is that the Bible is the product of the inspired ideas of men (a “quickening of conscience”{12}) rather than
truths inspired by God. If this were the case, however, one might expect the Bible to give hints that it is just the religious reflections of men. But the witness of Scripture throughout is that it is the message of God from God. Here we don’t see men simply reflecting on life and the world and drawing conclusions about God. Rather, we’re confronted by a God who steps into people’s lives, speaking words of instruction or promise or condemnation.

**Modes of Special Revelation**

Special revelation has taken different forms: the spoken Word, the written Word, and the Word made flesh.

**Spoken Word**

In the Garden of Eden, God spoke to Adam directly. (Gen. 3:8ff) He spoke to Abraham (e.g. Gen. 12:1–3), to Moses (Ex. 3:4ff), and to many prophets of the nation of Israel following that. Amos said that God did nothing “without revealing his plan to his servants the prophets. . . . The Lord has spoken,” he said. “Who can but prophesy?” (3:7–8) Prophets were primarily forth-tellers, relaying God’s Word to those for whom it was intended.

**Written Word**

God also had His prophets write down what He said. The writings of Moses were kept in the Tabernacle (Dt. 31:24–26), read in the hearing of the Israelites (Dt. 31:11), and kept as references by future kings of Israel (Dt. 17:18ff). They are quoted throughout the OT (Josh. 1:7; 1 Kings 2:3; Mal.4:4). Joshua put his teachings of God’s ordinances with “the book of the law of God” (Josh. 24:26), and Samuel did the same (1 Sam. 10:25). The writer of Chronicles spoke of those earlier writings (1 Chron. 29:29), and later, Daniel referred to these books (Dan. 9:2,6,11). Solomon’s proverbs and songs are mentioned in 1 Kings 4:32. The writing of the New Testament took a much shorter time than the Old Testament, so we don’t see generations down the line referring back to the writings of their fathers. But we do see Peter speaking of the writings of Paul (2 Pe. 3:15–16), and Paul referring (it appears) to Luke’s writings in 1 Tim. 5:18.

**Word made flesh**

So God has spoken, and His words have been written down. The third mode is the Word made flesh. The writer of Hebrews says that, “In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son . . . .” (1:1-2a) All God’s will wasn’t given at once; it came in portions at various times. J.I. Packer says, “Then, in New Testament times, just as all roads were said to lead to Rome, so all the diverse and seemingly divergent strands of Old Testament revelation were found to lead to Jesus Christ.”{14}

Jesus has been the mediator of revelation since the beginning. “No one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal him. (Matt. 11:27) Peter says it was the Spirit of Christ who spoke through the Old Testament prophets. (1 Pe. 1:11) But these were God’s words given through men. In the Incarnation we received the fullest expression of His word directly. Jesus was and is the Word made flesh. (John 1:1,14)

Jesus is the supreme revelation because He is one with the Father: He is God speaking. He spoke the words the Father taught Him. (John 12:49; 14:10), and He summed up his ministry with the phrase “I have given them your word.” (John 17:14) Abraham Kuyper summed it up beautifully: “Christ does not argue, he declares; he does not demonstrate, he shows and illustrates; he does not analyze, but
with enrapturing symbolism unveils the truth.”{15}

But Jesus doesn’t reveal God just in His words but also in His person — in His character and the way He lived. Says the late Bernard Ramm: “The attitudes, action, and dispositions of Christ so mirrored the divine nature that to have seen such in Christ is to have seen the reflection of the divine nature.” He continues:

Christ’s attitudes mirror the Father’s attitudes; Christ’s affections mirror the Father’s affections; Christ’s love mirrors the Father’s love. Christ’s impatience with unbelief is the divine impatience with unbelief. Christ’s wrath upon hypocrisy is the divine wrath upon hypocrisy. Christ’s tears over Jerusalem is the divine compassion over Jerusalem. Christ’s judgment upon Jerusalem or upon the Pharisees is the divine judgment upon such hardness of heart and spiritual wickedness.{16}

As the Son spoke the Word of the Father so clearly because He knows perfectly the mind of the Father, so He also reflected the character of the Father being of the same nature.

In Christ, also, we see revelation as event. He carried out the will of the Father, thus revealing things about the Father. The cross not only accomplished our redemption; it also demonstrated the love of God. Jesus revealed God’s glory in changing the water to wine in Cana (John 2:11) and in His resurrection (Rom. 6:4).

The total redeeming work of Christ, therefore, revealed the Father in word, in character, and in deed.

**Modern Hurdles**

There are a couple of ways modern thought has served to undermine our confidence in the Bible as the written revelation of God. One way has to do with the knowability of historical events; another with the final authority for truth.

First, the matter of history and knowledge. In the Enlightenment era, philosophers such as Ren Descartes taught that only those ideas that could be held without doubt could count as knowledge. This created a problem for Scripture, for its major doctrines were revealed through historical events, and the knowledge of history is open to doubt logically speaking. History is constantly changing. Because of such change, the different contexts of those living long ago and of the historian negatively affects the historian’s ability to truly comprehend the past. At best, historical knowledge can only be probable. Religious ideas, on the other hand, seemed to be eternal; they are fixed and unchanging. It was believed that they could be known through reason better than through historical accounts. The classic statement of this position was made by the eighteenth century German, Gotthold Lessing, when he said, “The accidental truths of history can never become the proof of necessary truths of reason.”{17} (“Accidental” means just the opposite of necessary; such things didn’t logically have to happen as they did.)

Thus, biblical teachings were put on the side of probability, of opinion, rather than on the side of knowledge. Since it was thought that religious truths ought to be on the side of logical certainty and knowledge, people began to wonder whether the Bible could truly be the revelation of God.

The fact is, however, that we can know truth through historical texts; we find it there all the time. I know I was born in December of 1955 and that George Washington was our first president — even though these truths aren’t what we call logically necessary, such as with mathematical equations.
Although historical knowledge as such doesn’t give the rational certainty our Enlightenment forebears might have wanted, it doesn’t have to in order to be counted as knowledge.\textsuperscript{18} Knowledge doesn’t \textit{have} to be logically \textit{necessary} in order to be \textit{trustworthy}.\textsuperscript{19} There is no reason God cannot make Himself known through the lives of people and nations, or that the historical records of that revelation cannot convey objective truth to subsequent generations.

Nonetheless, confidence in Scripture was weakened. Wherein shall our confidence lie, then, with respect to religious matters? If we can’t know truth through historical accounts, but must rely on our own reason, our reason becomes supreme over Scripture. The authority for truth lies within us, not in the Bible.

This subjectivity is the second outgrowth of the Enlightenment that affects our understanding of revelation and the Bible. Now it is \textit{I} who have final authority for what is true. For some people it is our \textit{reason} that is supreme. The philosopher, Immanuel Kant, taught that God speaks through our reason, and our worship of Him consists in our proper moral behavior. For others it is our \textit{feelings} that are supreme. Friedrich Schleiermacher, for example, put the emphasis on our feelings of dependence and of oneness with God. For him, to make Scripture authoritative was to elevate reason above faith, and that was unacceptable. Thus, one camp elevated \textit{reason} and said that historical accounts (such as those in Scripture) cannot provide the certainty we require, while the other camp elevated \textit{feeling} and rejected final confidence in Scripture as too much in keeping with reason. Both ways the Bible lost out.

The turn inward was accentuated by the philosophy of existentialism. This philosophy had an influence on Christian theology. Theologian Rudolph Bultmann was “the outstanding exponent of the amalgamation of theology and existentialism,” according to Philip Edgcumbe Hughes. The Bible was stripped of the supernatural, leaving little at all to go by with respect to the person of Jesus. But this didn’t matter since Bultmann’s existentialism turned the focus inward on our individual experience of the encounter with God.

The influence of this shift is still felt today. For too many of us, our confidence rests in our \textit{own} understanding of things with little regard for establishing a theological foundation by which to measure our experience. On the one hand we get confused by disagreements over doctrines, and on the other our society is telling us to find truth within ourselves. How often do we find Christians making their bottom line in any disagreement over Christian teaching or activity, “I just feel this is true (or right)”? Now, it’s true we can focus so much on the propositional, doctrinal content of Christianity that it becomes lifeless. It does indeed engage us on the level of personal experience. But as one scholar notes, “What is at stake is the actual \textit{truth} of the biblical witness; not in the first place its truth for \textit{me} . . . but its truth as coming from \textit{God}. . . . The objective character of Scripture as truth given by God comes before and validates my subjective experience of its truth.”\textsuperscript{20} If we make our individual selves and our experiences normative for our faith, Christianity will have as many different faces as there are Christians! Our personal predilections and interests will become the substance of our faith. Any unity among us will be unity of \textit{experience} rather than unity of the \textit{faith}.

In response to the subjective turn of thinking, we hold that \textit{reason} is insufficient as the source of knowledge of God. We could not know of such doctrines as the Incarnation and the Trinity unless God told us. Likewise, making \textit{feelings} the final authority is death for theology, for there is no way to judge between personal experiences unless there is an objective authority. We have the needed authority in the revealed Word of God. Because we \textit{can} know objective truth about God, we needn’t look within ourselves to discover truth.

One final point. God has revealed Himself for a reason, that we might know Him and His desires and
ways. We can have confidence that the Holy Spirit, Who inspired the writing of Scripture, has also been able to preserve it through the centuries so as to provide us with the same truth He provided those in ancient times.

God has spoken, through general revelation and special. We can know Him and His truth.

Notes

7. Demarest, 243.
12. Packer, 86.
13. Other modes of special revelation which can be categorized as the word spoken were dreams, visions, and theophanies. Cf. Bernard Ramm, *Special Revelation and the Word of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1961), 44-48.
19. See the above article.
20. Hughes, 183.

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**Did Moses Write the Pentateuch?**

**Introduction**

Most Christians have been taught in Sunday school that Moses wrote the first five books of the Bible. These books: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy, are often referred to as
the Pentateuch or Torah. However, outside of the more conservative seminaries and churches, it is commonly held that Moses did not write these books, that they are a compilation of works by numerous writers over an extended period of time.

Religious studies courses at most universities teach that the Pentateuch is a composite work consisting of four literary strands. The four strands have been assigned the letters J, E, D, and P; each representing a different document or source that was woven into the fabric of the Bible. This set of assumptions has gone by a number of names including the documentary theory and the Graf-Wellhausen theory. According to this view, the letter “J” stands for the Yahwist (“J” from the German Jahweh) narrative, coming from the period of the early Jewish monarchy, about 950 B.C. “E” stands for the Elohist narrative from the region of the Northern Kingdom dating from about 750 B.C. “D” is best represented by the book of Deuteronomy and is said to have originated in the Southern Kingdom about 650 B.C. or later. And finally, “P” is the priestly document that comes from the period after the fall of Israel in 587 B.C. According to the theory, the Pentateuch reached its current form around the time of Ezra or about 400 B.C.

Why is the issue of Mosaic authority an important one? Those who accept the documentary or Graf-Wellhausen theory argue that the content of these books should be seen as a mixture of credible historical events and religious poetry sparked by man’s religious imagination. For example, regarding Moses and God on Mount Sinai, one author of an Old Testament survey writes that, “It would be foolish, for instance, to rationalize the burning bush, as though this vision were something that could have been seen with the objective eye of a camera.” Holders of this view reject the notion of supernatural revelation and regard much of the Pentateuch as folklore and Hebrew storytelling.

On the other hand, the conservative view holds to Mosaic authorship and treats the books as a literary unit. This does not mean that Moses didn’t use other documents to write his books. He obviously did. But since other Old Testament authors affirm Mosaic authorship, as do numerous New Testament writers and the early church fathers, the veracity of the Bible as a whole begins to crumble if Moses is not the author of the Pentateuch.

In this article we will take a closer look at the source of the documentary theory regarding Mosaic authorship and offer a response that argues for the integrity of the Bible.

**Origins Of The Documentary Hypothesis**

For almost two thousand years Christians accepted Mosaic authorship of the first five books of the Bible. That’s not to say that some didn’t acknowledge problems with the text. Many had noted what seemed to be two separate creation stories in Genesis, as well as the problem of Moses recording his own death in Deuteronomy 34.

In 1753, a French physician named Jean Astruc began the modern study of source or literary analysis by writing a commentary on the book of Genesis. He noted that the first chapter of Genesis refers to God as Elohim, while the second chapter uses mostly Jehovah or Yahweh. Astruc believed that Moses must have used two different sources in writing Genesis, each having different names for God, and that the Elohim source was the older. This established the first principle of what would become known as the documentary hypothesis, the assumption that different divine names must mean different authors or sources. In 1780 Johann Eichhorn took this theory and ran with it. He applied the idea of two sources to the rest of Genesis, Exodus, and finally to most of the Pentateuch. He eventually gave up on the view of Mosaic authorship as well.

The next step came in 1805, when Wilhem De Wette argued that none of the Pentateuch was written
before David. He established the “D” document standing for Deuteronomy, which he believed was written as propaganda to support political and religious unification in Jerusalem during the reign of king Josiah around 621 B.C. We now have three source documents: J, E, and D. Although others in the late 1700’s and early 1800’s found as many as thirty-nine fragments in Genesis alone, the final, “P” or Priestly document of the current theory was added by Hermann Hupfeld in 1853. He believed that the E source should be split in two, the later becoming the new P document.

The name most associated with the documentary hypothesis is Julius Wellhausen. His publications in the late 1870’s didn’t add much new information to the theory, but rather argued for it from a Darwinistic perspective. Wellhausen claimed that the J, E, D, P sequence followed the development from primitive animism towards the more sophisticated monotheism that would be expected as the Jewish culture and religion evolved. The impact of this connection was immediate and powerful.

Even though both liberal and conservative scholars removed much of the foundation of the documentary hypothesis in the twentieth century, the idea remains entrenched. As Gleason Archer states, “For want of a better theory . . . most non-conservative institutions continue to teach the Wellhausian theory, at least in its general outlines, as if nothing had happened in Old Testament scholarship since the year 1880.”

Problems With The Documentary Hypothesis

Let’s now look at the problems with this theory.

First, it should be mentioned that conservative experts did not sit idly by as this theory developed and spread. In the late 1800’s Princeton Seminary scholars Joseph Alexander and William Green “subjected the documentarian school to devastating criticism which has never been successfully rebutted by those of liberal persuasion,” according to Gleason Archer. In Germany, Ernst Wilhem Hengstenberg ably defended the Mosaic authorship of all five books of the Pentateuch. His 1847 book The Genuineness of the Pentateuch did much to encourage conservative thinking.

It should also be noted that the Wellhausen theory found what it was looking for. The theory grew out of a movement to find rationalistic, natural explanations for the biblical text. Once one assumes that supernatural revelation cannot occur any other explanation must take precedent. The late dates and various authors assigned to the books allow for purely naturalistic sources. This is a textbook case of question begging. The underlying premise, that there can be no such thing as supernatural revelation, resulted in the conclusion that the Bible is not a supernaturally revealed document.

Another problem with the theory is that it assumes that “Hebrew authors differ from any other writers known in the history of literature in that they alone were incapable of using more than one name for God,” or for that matter, more than one style of writing. It is interesting that the Qur’an (Koran) uses multiple names for God, but few question that Muhammad was its sole author. Regarding the various writing styles, it would be like arguing that C. S. Lewis could not possibly have written children’s stories, literary critiques, science fiction, and allegorical satire; and insisting that numerous sources must have been involved. Educated as an Egyptian prince, Moses would have been exposed to many writing styles that were available during that period.

Another bias is evident in how critics regard the biblical data as unreliable and suspect, despite its old age even by their own dating methods. The tendency is to disregard the biblical content immediately when a non-biblical source disagrees with it, even when the biblical document is older. In the words of one conservative Old Testament scholar:
It makes no difference how many biblical notices, rejected as unhistorical by nineteenth-century pundits, have been confirmed by later archaeological evidence (such as the historicity of Belshazzar, the Hittites, and the Horites), the same attitude of skeptical prejudice toward the Bible has persisted, without any justification.\footnote{7}

In the next section we will continue to offer arguments against the documentary hypothesis and for the Mosaic authorship of the first five books of the Bible.

**A Conservative Approach**

Despite what Gleason Archer calls “The overwhelming contrary evidence from Genesis to Malachi,” advocates of the Wellhausen theory cling to its most fundamental principle: that the religion of the Jews evolved from primitive animism to a more sophisticated monotheism.\footnote{8}

But their unsupported assumptions don’t stop there. Modern scholars assume that Hebrew writers never used the repetition of ideas or occurrences even though authors in other ancient Semitic languages did so. They also assume that they can scientifically date the texts, even though they have no other ancient Hebrew writings to compare them with. Documentary scholars have felt free to amend the text by substituting more common words for rare or unusual words that they do not understand or do not expect to see in a given context.\footnote{9} Although it claims to be scientific, the documentary hypothesis is anything but neutral.

What are the arguments for Mosaic authorship? First, there are numerous passages in Exodus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy that point to Moses as author. For instance, Exodus 34:27 says, “Then the LORD said to Moses, ‘Write down these words, for in accordance with these words I have made a covenant with you and with Israel.’” In fact, there are references throughout the Old Testament (Joshua, 1 & 2 Kings, Ezra, Nehemiah, Daniel, and Malachi) that claim that Moses wrote the Pentateuch.

New Testament writers assumed that Moses wrote the first five books of the Bible as well. In Matthew 19:8 Jesus refers to laws regarding marriage in Deuteronomy and credits Moses with writing them. In John 5:46 Jesus says, “If you believed Moses, you would believe me, for he wrote about me.” (See 7:19 also.) In Romans 10:5 Paul states that Moses wrote the law. It would be hard not to attribute either deception or error to Christ and the apostles if Moses did not write the Pentateuch.

There are many other internal evidences that point to Mosaic authorship. The writer of Exodus gives eyewitness details of the event that only a participant would know about. The author of Genesis and Exodus also portrays remarkable knowledge of Egyptian names and places. This knowledge is evident even in the style of writing used. One scholar has noted that the writer used “a large number of idioms and terms of speech, which are characteristically Egyptian in origin, even though translated into Hebrew.”\footnote{10}

Having received training in the most advanced literate culture of the day as well as having access to the Jewish oral tradition make Moses a remarkably able and likely candidate for God to use in documenting the founding of the Jewish nation.

**Summary**

Now let’s consider the current state of Old Testament studies.
Since 1670, when the Jewish philosopher Baruch Spinoza (1631-1677) suggested that Ezra might have authored the Pentateuch, source criticism has grown to such an extent that it has successfully removed serious consideration of Mosaic authorship for many scholars. However, the twentieth century has seen the pillars supporting the Wellhausen theory, also known as the documentary hypothesis, weakened or removed. The result has been the uncomfortable reliance by many scholars on a system of literary criticism that no longer has a firm foundation. As one Old Testament scholar has written:

Wellhausen’s arguments complemented each other nicely, and offered what seemed to be a solid foundation upon which to build the house of biblical criticism. Since then, however, both the evidence and the arguments supporting the structure have been called into question and, to some extent, even rejected. Yet biblical scholarship, while admitting that the grounds have crumbled away, nevertheless continues to adhere to the conclusions.\[11\]

Beginning at the turn of the century, scholars have challenged the divine-names criterion for determining authorship. W. F. Albright, who remained within the documentary camp, called the minute analysis of the Pentateuch after Wellhausen “absurd” and “irrational.”\[12\] Hermann Gunkel, who introduced a new type of criticism called form criticism, came to the conclusion that “we really know nothing for certain about these hypothetical documents of the Graf-Wellhausen hypothesis.”\[13\] In other words, he refused to accept the numerous authors for the Pentateuch, particularly the J, E, and P sources, that had been speculated about by scholars for decades. There are too many critics to mention by name, but the cumulative effect has been substantial.

Where does this leave us today? In one sense it has left the scholarly community in search for new foundations. But even for those who reject the possibility of supernatural revelation, the evidence from archeology, the Dead Sea scrolls found at Qumran, and information about the languages of the ancient orient are making dependence on the Wellhausen theory inexcusable.

There is a trend among scholars to view the Pentateuch as a literary unit again. Scholars are admitting that the way the books use common words, phrases and motifs, parallel narrative structure, and deliberate theological arrangement of literary units for teaching and memorization support viewing the five books as a literary whole.\[14\] If this becomes the accepted view, Mosaic authorship can again be entertained.

Notes


3. Ibid., 88.

4. Ibid., 85.

5. Ibid., 105.

6. Ibid., 106.
There is an ongoing debate among scholars regarding the historical accuracy of the Bible. Some feel that the Bible is a fictitious work and should be read as a work of literary fiction. Others feel it is an accurate historical work divinely inspired by God. Archaeology has played a major role in determining the trustworthiness of the Bible. In a previous article, we discussed archaeological confirmations of the Old Testament. In this one, we will look at the archaeological discoveries that have confirmed the historical accuracy of the New Testament. There is a great deal of evidence outside of the Bible that confirms the account of Jesus as written in the Gospels.

It is important to realize, however, that it is unrealistic to expect archaeology to back up every event and place in the New Testament. Our perspective is to look for what evidence exists and see whether or not it corresponds with the New Testament.

**Historical Confirmation of Jesus**

The first evidence comes from the four Gospels which, themselves, are proven to be accurate.{1} Outside the biblical text are several witnesses as well. Jewish historian Josephus (37 A.D.100 A.D.) recorded the history of the Jewish people in Palestine from 70 A.D. to 100 A.D. In his work *Antiquities*, he states:

Now there was about this 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 over to him both many of the Jews and many of the gentiles. He was the Christ and when Pilate, at the suggestion of the principal men amongst us, had condemned him
to the cross, those that loved him at the first did not forsake him. For he appeared alive again the third day, as the divine prophets had foretold these and ten thousand other wonderful things concerning him; and the tribe of Christians, so named from him, are not extinct to this day.\(^2\)

Although he mentions Jesus in a sarcastic way, Josephus confirms the facts that Jesus did do many great miracles, drew a following, was crucified, and was proclaimed alive on the third day.

Pliny the Younger, Emperor of Bythynia in northwestern Turkey, writing to Emperor Trajan in 112 A.D. writes:

They were in the habit of meeting on a certain fixed day before it was light, when they sang an anthem to Christ as God, and bound themselves by a solemn oath not to commit any wicked deed, but to abstain from all fraud, theft and adultery, never to break their word, or deny a trust when called upon to honor it; after which it was their custom to separate, and then meet again to partake of food, but ordinary and innocent kind.

One of the most important Romans historians isTacitus. In 115 A.D. he recorded Nero’s persecution of the Christians, in the process of which he wrote the following:

Christus, from whom the name had its origin, suffered the extreme penalty during the reign of Tiberius at the hands of one of our procurators, Pontius Pilatus, and a most mischievous superstition, thus checked for the moment, again broke out not only in Judea, . . . but even in Rome.\(^3\)

There are over 39 extra-biblical sources that attest to over one hundred facts regarding the life and teachings of Jesus.

**Accuracy of the Gospels**

The accuracy of the Gospels has been supported by archaeology. The names of many of the Israelite cities, events, and people described in them have now been located. Here are a few examples.

The Gospels mention four neighboring and well-populated coastal cities along the Sea of Galilee: Capernaum, Bethsaida, Chorazin, and Tiberias. Jesus performed many miracles in the first three cities. Despite this testimony, these cities rejected Jesus and therefore were cursed by Him (Matt. 11:20-24; Luke 10:12-16). These cities eventually disappeared from history and their locations remained missing for centuries. Their demise fulfills the prophetic condemnation of Jesus.

Only recently has archaeology recovered their possible locations. Tell Hum is believed to be Capernaum. (A “tell” is a mound or elevated land that has arisen by repeated and long-term rebuilding of the same site. Layers of civilizations can be found at different strata). The locations of Bethsaida and Chorazin still remain unconfirmed, but the present site at a tell 1.5 miles north of the Galilean shoreline is believed to be Bethsaida, while Tell Khirbet Kerezhah, 2.5 miles northwest of Capernaum, is thought to be Chorazin.

Matthew 2 states that Jesus was born during the reign of Herod. Upon hearing that a king had been born, the frightened Herod ordered all children under the age of two to be killed. His slaughter of
innocents is consistent with the historical facts that describe his character. Herod was suspicious of anyone whom he thought may take his throne. His list of victims included one of his ten wives, who was his favorite, three of his own sons, a high priest, an ex-king, and two of his sister’s husbands. Thus, his brutality portrayed in Matthew is consistent with his description in ancient history.

John’s accuracy has also been attested to by recent discoveries. In John 5:1-15 Jesus heals a man at the Pool of Bethesda. John describes the pool as having five porticoes. This site had long been in dispute until recently. Forty feet underground, archaeologists discovered a pool with five porticoes, and the description of the surrounding area matches John’s description. In 9:7 John mentions another long disputed site, the Pool of Siloam. However, this pool was also discovered in 1897, upholding the accuracy of John.

Evidence for Pontius Pilate, the governor who presided over the trial of Jesus, was discovered in Caesarea Maritama. In 1961, an Italian archaeologist named Antonio Frova uncovered a fragment of a plaque that was used as a section of steps leading to the Caesarea Theater. The inscription, written in Latin, contained the phrase, “Pontius Pilatus, Prefect of Judea has dedicated to the people of Caesarea a temple in honor of Tiberius.” This temple is dedicated to the Emperor Tiberius who reigned from 1437 A.D. This fits well chronologically with the New Testament which records that Pilot ruled as procurator from 2636 A.D. Tacitus, a Roman historian of the first century, also confirms the New Testament designation of Pilate. He writes, “Christus, from whom the name had its origin, suffered the extreme penalty during the reign of Tiberius at the hands of one of our procurators, Pontius Pilatus. . . .”

Confirmation Regarding the Crucifixion

All four Gospels give details of the crucifixion of Christ. Their accurate portrayal of this Roman practice has been confirmed by archaeology. In 1968, a gravesite in the city of Jerusalem was uncovered containing thirty-five bodies. Each of the men had died a brutal death which historians believe was the result of their involvement in the Jewish revolt against Rome in 70 A.D.

The inscription identified one individual as Yohan Ben Ha’galgol. Studies of the bones performed by osteologists and doctors from the Hadassah Medical School determined the man was twenty-eight years old, stood five feet six inches, and had some slight facial defects due to a cleft right palate.

What intrigued archaeologists were the evidences that this man had been crucified in a manner resembling the crucifixion of Christ. A seven-inch nail had been driven through both feet, which were turned outward so the nail could be hammered inside the Achilles tendon.

Archaeologists also discovered that nails had been driven through his lower forearms. A victim of a crucifixion would have to raise and lower his body in order to breathe. To do this, he needed to push up on his pierced feet and pull up with his arms. Yohan’s upper arms were smoothly worn, indicating this movement.

John records that in order to expedite the death of a prisoner, executioners broke the legs of the victim so that he could not lift himself up by pushing with his feet (19:31-33). Yohan’s legs were found crushed by a blow, breaking them below the knee. The Dead Sea Scrolls tell that both Jews and Romans abhorred crucifixion due to its cruelty and humiliation. The scrolls also state it was a punishment reserved for slaves and any who challenged the ruling powers of Rome. This explains why Pilate chose crucifixion as the penalty for Jesus.

Relating to the crucifixion, in 1878 a stone slab was found in Nazareth with a decree from Emperor Claudius who reigned from 4154 A.D. It stated that graves must not be disturbed nor bodies to be
removed. The punishment on other decrees is a fine but this one threatens death and comes very close to the time of the resurrection. This was probably due to Claudius investigating the riots of 49 A.D. He had certainly heard of the resurrection and did not want any similar incidents. This decree was probably made in connection with the Apostles’ preaching of Jesus’ resurrection and the Jewish argument that the body had been stolen.

Historian Thallus wrote in 52 A.D. Although none of his texts remain, his work is cited by Julius Africanus’ work, *Chronography*. Quoting Thallus on the crucifixion of Christ, Africanus states, “On the whole world, there pressed a most fearful darkness, and the rocks were rent by an earthquake, and many places in Judea and other districts were thrown down.”{4} Thallus calls this darkness, “as appears to me without reason, an eclipse of the sun.”{5}

All the discoveries made are consistent with the details in the crucifixion account given by the writers of the Gospels. These facts lend indirect support for the biblical accounts of Jesus’ crucifixion and that the tomb was empty.

**Historical Accuracy of Luke**

At one time, scholars did not view Luke’s historical accounts in his Gospel and Acts as accurate. There appeared to be no evidence for several cities, persons, and locations that he named in his works. However, archaeological advances have revealed that Luke was a very accurate historian and the two books he has authored remain accurate documents of history.

One of the greatest archaeologists is the late Sir William Ramsay. He studied under the famous liberal German historical schools in the mid-nineteenth century. Known for its scholarship, this school taught that the New Testament was not a historical document. With this premise, Ramsay investigated biblical claims as he searched through Asia Minor. What he discovered caused him to reverse his initial view. He wrote:

> I began with a mind unfavorable to it [Acts], for the ingenuity and apparent completeness of the Tubingen theory had at one time quite convinced me. It did not then in my line of life to investigate the subject minutely; but more recently I found myself often brought into contact with the Book of Acts as an authority for the topography, antiquities, and society of Asia Minor. It was gradually borne in upon me that in various details the narrative showed marvelous truth.{6}

Luke’s accuracy is demonstrated by the fact that he names key historical figures in the correct time sequence as well as correct titles to government officials in various areas: Thessalonica, politarchs; Ephesus, temple wardens; Cyprus, proconsul; and Malta, the first man of the island.

In Luke’s announcement of Jesus’ public ministry (Luke 3:1), he mentions, “Lysanius tetrarch of Abilene.” Scholars questioned Luke’s credibility since the only Lysanius known for centuries was a ruler of Chalcis who ruled from 4036 B.C. However an inscription dating to be in the time of Tiberius, who ruled from 1437 A.D., was found recording a temple dedication which names Lysanius as the “tetrarch of Abila” near Damascus. This matches well with Luke’s account.

In Acts 18:12-17, Paul was brought before Gallio, the proconsul of Achaea. Once again archaeology confirms this account. At Delphi an inscription of a letter from Emperor Claudius was discovered. In it he states, “Lucius Junios Gallio, my friend, and the proconsul of Achaia . . .”{7} Historians date the inscription to 52 A.D. which corresponds to the time of the apostle’s stay in 51.
In Acts 19:22 and Romans 16:23, Erastus, a coworker of Paul, is named the Corinthian city treasurer. Archaeologists excavating a Corinthian theatre in 1928 discovered an inscription. It reads, “Erastus in return for his aedilship laid the pavement at his own expense.” The pavement was laid in 50 A.D. The designation of treasurer describes the work of a Corinthian aedile.

In Acts 28:7, Luke gives Publius, the chief man on the island of Malta, the title, “first man of the island.” Scholars questioned this strange title and deemed it unhistorical. Inscriptions have recently been discovered on the island that indeed gives Publius the title of “first man.”

“In all, Luke names thirty-two countries, fifty-four cities, and nine islands without error.” 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.”

The Shroud of Turin

The Gospels record that after His crucifixion Jesus was wrapped in a long linen cloth and placed in the tomb (Matt. 27:59). John records that when Peter investigated the empty tomb, he found the burial cloth folded neatly next to where Christ once laid (20:6-7).

A linen shroud called the Shroud of Turin, on display at the Vatican, has been claimed to be that burial cloth. It is 14.25 feet long and 3.5 feet wide. On it is an image with pierced wrists and ankles believed to be that of Christ.

The shroud first appeared for public display sometime after 1357 in Lirey, France. A knight named Geoffrey de Charny brought the shroud to France. In 1453 de Charny’s granddaughter gave the shroud to the Duke of Savoy who then in 1578 brought it to Turin, Italy. In 1983, it was willed to the Vatican.

In 1898, Secondo Pia photographed the shroud and believed the image was a negative image like that of a photograph. This added to the mystery of the shroud since photography had not been invented during medieval times. In 1973 a group of experts confirmed the fact that no pigment of paint was found even under magnification. For many, this was proof of the shroud’s authenticity.

The most extensive study was undertaken in 1977. An international team of Swiss, American, and Italian scientist studied the shroud for five days at the Savoy Royal Palace at Turin. They used six tons of equipment and 2.5 million dollars for their research. It has been one of the most intensely studied artifacts of all time.

The study could not determine the authenticity of the fabric. Experiments that followed proved the image contained blood as well as aragonite, a particular calcium carbonate that is found in Jerusalem’s first century tombs. Swiss criminologist Max Frei found forty-eight samples of pollen, of which seven could have come from plants in Palestine. The weave of the cloth was herringbone twill, a style that existed in ancient times.

Although these findings supported the authenticity of the shroud, other findings testified otherwise. In 1987, the shroud was carbon 14 tested to verify its date. Laboratories in Oxford, Zurich, and the University of Arizona tested the cloth. The result indicated a fourteenth century date for the shroud. This conclusion continues to be challenged and future tests are sure to follow. Another problem is that coins minted by Pontius Pilate were placed over the eyes of the figure. This was not a Jewish custom, nor does it seem likely that Joseph of Arimathea or Nicodemus would have placed on Jesus’ eyes a coin with the image of the leader who condemned him.
Despite the fourteenth century date, scientists are still unable to explain how the negative image was created. The shroud remains a mystery as well as a lesson for us as believers that we should not put our faith in mysterious articles.

Notes

1. See “Authority of the Bible”.
2. Josephus, Book 18, Chapter 3:3
3. Tacitus, Annals, 15.44
5. Ibid.

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The Old Testament Apocrypha Controversy - The Canon of Scripture

Don Closson analyzes the controversial issue of the Apocrypha, weighing the evidence on the canonicity of these books, affirming their value, but agreeing with the Protestant tradition which does not regard them as inspired Scripture.

The Source of the Controversy

A fundamental issue that separates Roman Catholic and Protestant traditions is the question of the Old Testament Apocrypha. Catholics argue that the Apocrypha was an integral part of the early church and should be included in the list of inspired Old Testament books. Protestants believe that the books of the Apocrypha are valuable for understanding the events and culture of the inter-testamental period and for devotional reading, but are not inspired nor should they be included in the canon, the list of books included in the Bible. This disagreement about which books belong in the Bible points to other differences in Roman Catholic and Protestant beliefs about canonicity itself and the interplay between the authority of the Bible and the authority of tradition as expressed in the institutional church. Catholics contend that God established the church and that the Church, the Roman Catholic Church, both gave us the Bible and verified its authenticity. Protestants believe that the Scriptures, the writings of the prophets and apostles, are the foundation upon which the church is built and are authenticated by the Holy Spirit, who has been and is active in church congregations and councils.

The books of the Apocrypha considered to be canonical by the Roman Catholic Church are first
found in Christian era copies of the Greek Septuagint, a translation of the Hebrew Old Testament. According to Old Testament authority F. F. Bruce, Hebrew scholars in Alexandria, Egypt, began translating the Hebrew Old Testament into Greek around 250 B.C. because the Jews in that region had given up the Hebrew language for Greek.\(^1\) The resulting translation is called the Septuagint (or LXX) because of legend that claims that seventy Hebrew scholars finished their work in seventy days, indicating its divine origins.

The books or writings from the Apocrypha that the Roman Catholic Church claims are inspired are Tobit, Judith, Wisdom of Solomon, Ecclesiasticus, Baruch, 1 & 2 Maccabees, Letter of Jeremiah, additions to Esther, Prayer of Azariah, Susanna (Daniel 13), and Bel and the Dragon (Daniel 14). Three other Apocryphal books in the Septuagint, the Prayer of Manasseh, and 1 & 2 Esdras, are not considered to be inspired or canonical by the Roman Catholic Church.

This disagreement over the canonicity of the Apocryphal books is significant if only for the size of the material being debated. By including it with the Old Testament one adds 152,185 words to the King James Bible. Considering that the King James New Testament has 181,253 words, one can see how including the books would greatly increase the influence of pre-Christian Jewish life and thought.

This issue is important for two other reasons as well. First, there are specific doctrines that are held by the Roman Catholic Church which are supported by the Apocryphal books. The selling of indulgences for forgiveness of sins and purgatory are two examples. Secondly, the issue of canonicity itself is reflected in the debate. Does the church, through the power of the Holy Spirit, recognize what is already canonical, or does the church make a text canonical by its declarations?

As believers who have called upon the saving work of Jesus Christ as our only hope for salvation, we all want to know what is from God and what is from man. The remainder of this article will defend the traditional Protestant position against the inclusion of the Apocrypha as inspired canon.

**The Jewish Canon**

As we are considering the debate over the canonicity of the Old Testament Apocrypha or what has been called the “Septuagint plus,” we will first look at evidence that Alexandrian Jews accepted what has been called a wider canon.

As mentioned previously, Jews in Alexandria, Egypt, began translating the Hebrew Old Testament into Greek (the Septuagint) hundreds of years before Christ. Because the earliest complete manuscripts we have of this version of the OT includes extra books called the Apocrypha, many believe that these books should be considered part of the OT canon even though they are not found in the Hebrew OT. In effect, some argue that we have two OT canons, the Hebrew canon of twenty-two books, often called the Palestinian canon, and the larger Greek or Alexandrian canon that includes the Apocrypha.

F. F. Bruce states there is no evidence that the Jews (neither Hebrew nor Greek speaking) ever accepted a wider canon than the twenty-two books of the Hebrew OT. He argues that when the Christian community took over the Greek OT they added the Apocrypha to it and “gave some measure of scriptural status to them also.”\(^2\)

Gleason Archer makes the point that other Jewish translations of the OT did not include the Apocryphal books. The Targums, the Aramaic translation of the OT, did not include them; neither did the earliest versions of the Syriac translation called the Peshitta. Only one Jewish translation, the Greek (Septuagint), and those translations later derived from it (the Italia, the Coptic, Ethiopic, and
Even the respected Greek Jewish scholar Philo of Alexandria never quotes from the Apocrypha. One would think that if the Greek Jews had accepted the additional books, they would have used them as part of the canon. Josephus, who used the Septuagint and made references to 1 Esdras and 1 Maccabees writing about 90 A.D. states that the canon was closed in the time of Artaxerxes I whose reign ended in 423 B.C. It is also important to note that Aquila’s Greek version of the OT made about 128 A.D., which was adopted by the Alexandrian Jews, did not include the Apocrypha.

Advocates of the Apocrypha argue that it does not matter if the Jews ever accepted the extra books since they rejected Jesus as well. They contend that the only important opinion is that of the early church. However, even the Christian era copies of the Greek Septuagint differ in their selection of included books. The three oldest complete copies we have of the Greek OT include different additional books. Codex Vaticanus (4th century) omits 1 and 2 Maccabees, which is canonical according to the Roman Catholic Church, and includes 1 Esdras, which they reject. Codex Sinaiticus (4th century) leaves out Baruch, which is supposed to be canonical, but includes 4 Maccabees, which they reject. Codex Alexandrinus (5th century) includes three non-canonical Apocryphal books, 1 Esdras and 3 and 4 Maccabees.

All of this points to the fact that although these books were included in these early Bibles, this alone does not guarantee their status as canon.

Although some may find it unimportant that the Jews rejected the inspiration and canonicity of the Apocrypha, Paul argues in Romans that the Jews have been entrusted with the “very words of God.” And as we will see, the early church was not unanimous regarding the appropriate use of the Apocrypha. But first, let’s consider how Jesus and the apostles viewed the Apocrypha.

**Jesus and the Apostles**

Those who support the canonicity of the Apocrypha argue that both Jesus and his followers were familiar with the Greek OT called the Septuagint. They also argue that when the New Testament writers quote Old Testament passages, they are quoting from the Greek OT. Since the Septuagint included the additional books of the Apocrypha, Jesus and the apostles must have accepted the Apocrypha as inspired scripture. In other words, the acceptance of the Septuagint indicates acceptance of the Apocrypha as well. Finally, they contend that the New Testament is full of references to material found in the Apocrypha, further establishing its canonicity. A number of objections have been raised to these arguments.

First, the claim that the Septuagint of apostolic times included the Apocrypha is not certain. As we noted previously, the earliest manuscripts we have of the entire Septuagint are from the 4th century. If Jesus used the Septuagint, it may or may not have included the extra books. Also remember that although the 4th century copies do include the Apocryphal books, none include the same list of books. Second, F. F. Bruce argues that instead of using the Septuagint, which was probably available at the time, Jesus and his disciples actually used the Hebrew text during His ministry. Bruce writes, “When Jesus was about to read the second lesson in the Nazareth synagogue . . . it was most probably a Hebrew scroll that he received.” It was later, as the early church formed and the gospel was carried to the Greek-speaking world, that the Septuagint became the text often used by the growing church.

Bruce agrees that all the writers of the New Testament made use of the Septuagint. However, none of them gives us an exact list of what the canonical books are. While it is possible that New Testament writers like Paul allude to works in the Apocrypha, that alone does not give those works scriptural status. The problem for those advocating a wider canon is that the New Testament writers allude to, or even quote many works that no one claims to be inspired. For instance, Paul may be
thinking of the book of Wisdom when he wrote the first few chapters of Romans. But what of the much clearer reference in Jude 14 to 1 Enoch 1:9, which no one claims to be inspired? How about the possible use of a work called the Assumption of Moses that appears to be referenced in Jude 9? Should this work also be part of the canon? Then there is Paul’s occasional use of Greek authors to make a point. In Acts 17 Paul quotes line five from Aratus’ Phaenomena, and in 1 Corinthians he quotes from Menander’s comedy, Thais. No one claims that these works are inspired.

Recognizing the fact that the Septuagint was probably available to both Jesus and his disciples, it becomes even more remarkable that there are no direct quotes from any of the Apocryphal books being championed for canonicity. Jesus makes clear reference to all but four Old Testament books from the Hebrew canon, but he never directly refers to the apocryphal books.

**The Church Fathers**

Those who support the canonicity of the Apocrypha argue that the early church Fathers accepted the books as Scripture. In reality, their support is anything but unanimous. Although many of the church Fathers held the books in high esteem, they often refused to include them in their list of inspired books.

In the Eastern Church, the home of the Septuagint, one would expect to find unanimous support for the canonicity of the “Septuagint plus,” the Greek OT and the Apocrypha among the early Fathers. However, such is not the case. Although the well-known Justin Martyr rejected the Hebrew OT, accusing it of attempting to hide references to Christ, many others in the East accepted the Hebrew canon’s shorter list of authoritative books. Melito of Sardis, the Bishop of Sardis in 170 A.D., listed the OT books in a letter to a friend. His list was identical to the Hebrew canon except for Esther. Another manuscript, written about the same time as Melito’s by the Greek patriarchate in Jerusalem, listed the twenty-four (see footnote on how the books were counted) books of the Hebrew OT as the canon.

Origen, who is considered to be the greatest Bible scholar among the Greek Fathers, limited the accepted OT scriptures to the twenty-four books of the Hebrew canon. Although he defends the use of such books as the History of Susanna, he rejects their canonicity. Both Athanasius and Gregory of Nazianzus limited the OT canon to the books of the Hebrew tradition. Athanasius, the defender of the Trinitarian view at the Council of Nicaea, wrote in his thirty-ninth festal letter (which announced the date of Easter in 367) of his concern about the introduction of “apocryphal” works into the list of holy scripture. Although he agreed that there are other books “to be read to those who are recent converts to our company and wish to be instructed in the word of true religion,” his list of OT agrees with the Hebrew canon except for Esther. Gregory of Nazianzus is known for arranging the books of the Bible in verse form for memorization. He did not include the “Septuagint plus” books in his list. Eventually, in the 1600’s, the Eastern Church did officially accept the Septuagint with its extra books as canon, along with its claim that the Septuagint is the divinely inspired version of the OT.

In the Latin West, Tertullian was typical of church leaders up until Jerome. Tertullian accepted the entire “Septuagint plus” as canon and was willing to open the list even wider. He wanted to include 1 Enoch because of its mention in Jude. He also argued for the divine nature of the Sibylline Oracles as a parallel revelation to the Bible.

However, Jerome is a pivotal person for understanding the relationship between the early church and the OT canon. Having mastered both Greek and eventually Hebrew, Jerome realized that the only satisfactory way to translate the OT is to abandon the Septuagint and work from the original Hebrew. Eventually, he separated the Apocryphal books from the rest of the Hebrew OT saying that “Whatever falls outside these (Hebrew texts) . . . are not in the canon.” He added that the books
may be read for edification, but not for ecclesiastical dogmas.

Although Augustine included the “Septuagint plus” books in his list of the canon, he didn’t know Hebrew. Jerome later convinced him of the inspired nature of the Hebrew OT, but Augustine never dropped his support for the Apocrypha. The early church Fathers were anything but unanimous in their support for the inspiration of the Apocrypha.

**The Question of Canonicity**

The relationship between the church and the Bible is a complex one. The question of canonicity is often framed in an either/or setting. Either the infallible Roman Catholic Church, having absolute authority, decides the issue, or we have absolute chaos with no possible guidance whatsoever regarding the limits of what is inspired and what isn’t.

In a recent meeting of Catholics, Protestants, and Eastern Orthodox theologians called the Rose Hill conference, evangelical theologian Harold O. J. Brown asks that we hold a dynamic view of this relationship between the church and the Bible. He notes that Catholics have argued “that the church—the Catholic Church—gave us the Bible and that church authority authenticates it.”{11} Protestants have responded with the view that “Scripture creates the church, which is built on the foundation of the prophets and apostles.”{12} However, he admits that there is no way to make the New Testament older than the church. Does this leave us then bowing to church authority only? Brown doesn’t think so. He writes, “[I]t is the work of the Spirit that makes the Scripture divinely authoritative and preserves them from error. In addition the Holy Spirit was active in the early congregations and councils, enabling them to recognize the right Scriptures as God’s Word.” He adds that even though the completed canon is younger than the church, it is not in captivity to the church. Instead, “it is the ‘norm that norms’ the church’s teaching and life.”{13}

Many Catholics argue that the additional books found in the Apocrypha (Septuagint plus) which they call the deuterocanon, were universally held by the early church to be canonical. This is a considerable overstatement. However, Protestants have acted as if these books never existed or played any role whatsoever in the early church. This too is an extreme position. Although many of the early church fathers recognized a distinction between the Apocryphal books and inspired Scripture, they universally held them in high regard. Protestants who are serious students of their faith cannot ignore this material if they hope to understand the early church or the thinking of its earliest theologians.

On the issue of canonicity, of the Old Testament or the New, Norman Geisler lists the principles that outline the Protestant perspective. Put in the form of a series of questions he asks, “Was the book written by a spokesperson for God, who was confirmed by an act of God, who told the truth in the power of God, and was accepted by the people of God?”{14} If these can be answered in the affirmative, especially the first question, the book was usually immediately recognized as inspired and included in the canon. The Old Testament Apocrypha lacks many of these characteristics. None of the books claim to be written by a prophet and Maccabees specifically denies being prophetic.{15} Others contain extensive factual errors.{16} Most importantly, many in the early church including Melito of Sardis, Origen, Athanasius, Gregory of Nazianzus, and Jerome rejected the canonicity of the Apocrypha, although retaining high regards for its devotional and inspirational value.

A final irony in this matter is the fact that even Cardinal Cajetan, who opposed Luther at Augsburg in 1518, published a *Commentary on All the Authentic Historical Books of the Old Testament* (1532) in which he did not include the Apocrypha.{17}
Notes

2. Ibid., 45.
5. Archer, 73.
6. Romans 3:2 (NIV)
7. Bruce, 49.
8. Ibid., 72. Ezra and Nehemiah were often combined into one book, as were Lamentations and Jeremiah and the twelve minor prophets.
9. Ibid., 87.
10. Ibid., 90.
12. Ibid.
13. Ibid.
15. Ibid., 32.
17. Geisler, 31

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The Debate Over the King James Version - Which Is the Best Translation for My Personal Use

Written by Rick Wade

Which version of the Bible is the most reliable and authoritative providing me with understanding of God’s revelation? Rick Wade provides a balanced comparison of the King James Bible with other more recent translations to help you answer this question for yourself.

**Introduction: What the Debate is About**

Have you ever been in a Bible study where everyone in the group reads a verse . . . and there are two or three Bible versions being used? Following the train of thought can be difficult when a verse in one version clashes with the next verse in another version.

Since the 1940s, many new Bible versions have appeared on the market: the Revised Standard Version, the New English Bible, the New American Standard Bible, the New International Version, the Living Bible, the Contemporary English Version, The Message, and many more. When I was
growing up in the 1950s and 1960s, the King James was still the dominant version. Today the New International Version leads sales followed by the KJV. (1)

For some people, the multiplicity of versions is a nuisance, but they accept it, believing that it is all a matter of personal preference. For others, however, this is a serious issue; not because of the inconvenience of multiple versions, but because they believe the King James Version is the only correct version for the church.

These new versions came about because of the publication of a new Greek New Testament about a century ago. Defenders of the primacy of the KJV were very vocal in their opposition to the new Greek text and the new English versions which followed its publication. This issue is not as big today, but it remains problematic for some Christians. Thus, a discussion of the King James/modern version debate is useful with a focus on the New Testament, for that is where the main concerns lie.

This debate is argued on two levels. On one level, the focus is on the King James itself (remember that our English versions are translated from Greek texts). Some simply believe that this particular translation is the best one. They see a certain majesty in its language, and they appreciate its important role in the history of the church. It has served the church well, so there is no need to begin confusing things by bringing in all those other versions, they believe.

There are some Christians, however, who go further than that. They believe that the KJV is not only the best version; they insist that it is the only valid English version. Newer translations of Scripture do not reliably convey God’s truth. Some arguments for this side are little more than angry diatribes which are often circular. For example, some say that since the new versions differ from the King James, they are bad versions. The supremacy of the KJV is simply assumed. (2)

Although arguments from tradition and style can be powerful, there might be other considerations which outweigh them. A significant problem with the KJV, of course, is the language. People who did not grow up using the KJV have a hard time understanding it. Some of its words are no longer in use, and the antiquated forms of many words impede the understanding of the text. Over time they can learn to understand it, but without any more compelling reasons than tradition and style, it is hard to see why they should bother.

On another level, this debate focuses on the Greek manuscripts from which the English versions are translated. Some “King James only” proponents believe that the Greek text underlying most of the newer versions is corrupt. As we will see, they present some good arguments for their position.

Because the Greek text is the critical issue in this debate, it will be the focus of our examination of the debate (we will not get too technical!). To set the stage, we will begin with a brief history of the King James Version.

A Brief History of the King James Version

Many of us have heard the joke about the King James Version: “If it was good enough for the apostle Paul, it is good enough for me!” Paul, of course, was fifteen and a half centuries too early for the KJV. The New Testament writers wrote in Koine Greek, the language of the common man in the first century A.D. The first complete English Bible was not produced until John Wycliffe produced his in the fourteenth century. He translated from the Latin Vulgate which was the most widely used version at that time.

The next major step in the development of the English Bible was Tyndale’s translation of the New Testament published in 1526 and portions of the Old Testament published later. Tyndale’s version
was significant because it was translated from a newly published Greek New Testament rather than from the Vulgate.

After Tyndale’s, a number of other versions were produced. Among them were the Coverdale Bible, the Matthews Bible, the Great Bible, the Geneva Bible, and the Bishops’ Bible. In 1611 the King James Version was published to provide a Bible which could be used by both Anglicans and Puritans. Marginal notes reflecting any particular theological bias were removed, and the language used was that of the people.

I noted earlier that Tyndale used a Greek text for his translation. The first published Greek New Testament appeared in the year 1516. It was edited by Erasmus, a Dutch scholar. Erasmus had at his disposal no more than six Greek manuscripts (we have thousands at our disposal today). These manuscripts were part of what is called the Byzantine text family.

Although Erasmus’ edition provided a great boost to the study of the New Testament, it had a number of problems. For one thing, none of his sources had the last six verses of the book of Revelation, so Erasmus translated from the Latin Vulgate back into Greek! Thus, in his text “several words and phrases may be found that are attested in no Greek manuscript whatsoever.”(3) In the first two editions of his New Testament, Erasmus left out I John 5:7 because it did not appear in any of his Greek manuscripts. That verse reads: “For there are three that bear record in heaven, the Father, the Word, and the Holy Ghost: and these three are one.” This omission created a furor, so he promised to include the verse in a later edition if it could be found in any Greek manuscript. One was brought forward, and, although Erasmus did not think the text was genuine, he kept his promise and included the verse. It is now believed to have been a very late and unreliable manuscript, and some think it was forged to include the verse.(4)

Erasmus’ Greek text was reworked and reprinted by others including Robert Estienne who divided the text into verses. Theodore Beza then built upon Estienne’s work, and his Greek text provided one of the major foundations for the King James Bible. The term Textus Receptus, or Received Text, came from a blurb in another Greek text produced in the early seventeenth century by the Elzevir brothers. This title is still used in connection with the King James, and it is one you will see again in this article.

Westcott and Hort

I noted earlier that the more substantial arguments for the “King James only” position focus on the Greek texts underlying the different versions. There are four significant issues in the debate involving these texts which I will develop: the science of textual criticism, the number of Greek manuscripts available, the history of the Greek texts, and the dates of the manuscripts.

Before getting into the debate itself, it will be helpful to mention the historical event which brought the debate to a head, and to introduce a central element in New Testament textual studies.

Between the thousands of Greek manuscripts available there are differences of one kind or another (although there are not any which effect doctrinal matters). Certain Greek manuscripts share enough similarities that they are believed to have come from the same source. Each of these groups is called a text family or a text-type. There are four text families which are generally agreed upon by scholars. The manuscripts which were used to produce the Textus Receptus (and later the King James Version) were of the Byzantine family. The other three text families generally agreed upon by scholars are the Alexandrian, the Caesarean, and the Western.(5)

The fundamental debate between scholars in the King James/modern version controversy is over the
question of the most accurate Greek text family or families. Which of the four families, if any, most accurately represents what the New Testament authors wrote? The Byzantine text was the dominant Greek text from about the eighth century until the end of the nineteenth century. In 1881, however, two scholars named Westcott and Hort published a new Greek New Testament which relied more on other text families than on the Byzantine family. Their Greek text became the basis of the New Testament portion of modern Bible translations.

Westcott and Hort evaluated the Greek manuscripts of the New Testament according to the principles of textual criticism. This is the science of the study of ancient texts, the originals of which are lost. Based upon their studies, they argued that the Byzantine text was not the closest to the original writings as the King James advocates claimed. It seemed to have combined readings from other text families, and some readings appeared to have been modified for greater clarity and understanding. Thus, they believed it was at least two steps removed from the original writings. Also, they found no clear evidence of its existence in the writings of the early church fathers, and there are no copies older than the fourth century. Those who agree with Westcott and Hort believe that the Byzantine text was produced in the fourth century probably in an attempt to give the church one New Testament (there were a number of different Greek texts being used at the time). Other text families, on the other hand, appear to have more original readings and are quoted by the early church fathers, and are thus closer to the originals. So, the conclusions drawn from the application of textual criticism along with the ages of the manuscripts led them to believe that the most accurate Greek text is to be found by drawing from all the Greek text families, especially the Alexandrian family.

Supporters of the Byzantine or Received Text responded that it was inappropriate to use naturalistic methods of study such as textual criticism on Scripture. They said that this amounts to elevating man over God in determining what the Bible says. They also argued that the vast numbers of Byzantine manuscripts along with the centuries of history behind this text family should not be set aside on the basis of a few manuscripts discovered relatively recently. They insisted that the Spirit of God would not allow His true word to lie dormant so long while the church was being guided by inferior texts.

**Textual Criticism**

As I noted above, those who argue for the Byzantine or Received Text say that it is improper to subject the Bible to the scrutiny of textual criticism. The Bible, being the inspired Word of God, is unique. One begins with it as inspired and then accepts what it says.

But those in the Westcott-Hort tradition note that we cannot simply shut our eyes to the fact that there are differences between the various Greek manuscripts, even those in the Byzantine family. Even those who believe in the inerrancy of Scripture recognize that the original writings of the New Testament were inerrant, not the copies. It is our responsibility to apply the most sound principles we know of to determine what the original manuscripts said. This is the aim of textual criticism.

So, how does textual criticism work? Differences between Greek manuscripts are called variants. There are several causes of variants. Some are accidental, such as misspelled words or repeated or reversed words. Some resulted from a scribe not hearing a dictation correctly. Also, deliberate changes seem to have been made to bring passages in different Gospels into harmony or to make a doctrinal point clearer.

What are some examples of differences between the Greek texts which show up in our English Bibles? One example is the Lord’s Prayer as it is recorded in Matthew and in Luke. In the KJV the two versions are almost identical, while in the NIV the prayer in Luke 11 is significantly shorter than
that in Matthew 6. Most scholars believe that, at some point in history, a scribe added to the text in Luke to make it agree more with Matthew.

The last half of Mark 16 is a lengthy section which is disputed. The KJV retains verses 9 through 20 while the NIV includes the passage with a note saying it is not found in the most reliable early manuscripts. Scholars who believe it should be excluded also note that the style and vocabulary are very different from the rest of Mark.(9)

To add one more, in the KJV, three verses in Mark 9 (44, 46, and 48) are identical: “Where their worm does not die and the fire is not quenched.” The NIV puts verses 44 and 46 in footnotes and notes that some manuscripts include the phrase. Since each verse follows a reference to hell, it is very possible that a scribe simply repeated the warning to strengthen the message.

If all this makes you nervous about the accuracy of your Bible, it is important to note that textual criticism is used on all documents for which the originals no longer exist. New Testament scholar J. Harold Greenlee noted that, with respect to the Bible, “No Christian doctrine . . . hangs upon a debatable text.”(10) This conflict provides no fodder for critics of Christianity who might ask how we can know what the Bible really says. We can be confident that we have a highly accurate text, especially given the number of New Testament manuscripts available and the antiquity of some of them.(11) As one writer has said, “It is well to remember that the main body of the text and its general sense are left untouched . . . textual criticism engages in turning a magnifying glass upon some of the details.”(12)

**Other Issues in the Debate**

In addition to the question of textual criticism, questions regarding the number of manuscripts, the historical dominance of the Byzantine text, and the dates of the manuscripts still need to be considered.

First is the matter of the number of manuscripts. Between eighty and ninety percent of existing manuscripts are of the Byzantine family and are in remarkable agreement. This fact is not in dispute. King James supporters say that the few manuscripts to which Westcott and Hort gave preference cannot override the witness of the vast majority of manuscripts in existence which are of the Byzantine tradition. It is normal to expect that the oldest manuscript will have the most copies.(13) In response, those who follow Westcott and Hort point out that hundreds of copies could have been made from one defective text while a better text was not copied as often. The copying of New Testament texts was not as carefully monitored as the copying of the Old Testament text by Jewish scholars. As we have seen, errors were made and changes were deliberately introduced. Simply finding a lot of manuscripts which are in agreement is not enough. To illustrate their point, they ask whether one would rather have one real $100 bill or five counterfeits.

A second issue is the preservation of the text through history. Supporters of the Received Text ask why God’s Spirit would allow the church to be under the authority of a defective text for almost 1500 years. Textual critics respond that this argument exaggerates the issue. They do not consider the Byzantine text to be a “‘bad’ or heretical text; it presents the same Christian message as the critical [or Westcott-Hort] text.”(14) Again, there are no doctrinal differences between the Greek texts. Members of the Byzantine family are used along with members of other text families to determine what the true reading of a passage should be. The major text families are neither absolutely corrupt nor absolutely perfect. Text critics must use all the available resources to determine what the original documents said.

Finally, the dates of the manuscripts are important in this debate. Textual critics point out that
church fathers before the fourth century “unambiguously cited every text-type except the Byzantine.”(15) If the Byzantine text-type comes directly from the original writings, one would expect unambiguous quotations of it from the beginning. They also point out that there are no Byzantine manuscripts older than the fourth century, whereas there are copies of other text families older than that.

In response to this, King James supporters note that the New Testament manuscripts began to be altered very soon after they were written. Eusebius, the ancient church historian, reported that heresies sprang up early after the turn of the second century, and proponents of these heresies sometimes altered Scripture to accord with their beliefs.(16) Thus, antiquity is not the crucial test. That there are no copies older than the fourth century can be explained by the fact that the material manuscripts were written on was fragile; it’s reasonable to conclude that the early copies probably wore out through frequent handling.

Summary and Concluding Thoughts

To summarize, those who support the King James/Received Text tradition emphasize the number of manuscripts, the church’s history with the Byzantine text, and God’s interest in preserving His Word, whereas those following Westcott and Hort say that the variants in the manuscripts – even between those in the Byzantine family – prove the need for the textual criticism of the New Testament. The results of their analysis along with the ages of the manuscripts leads them to believe that the Byzantine family is just one text family that can lead us back to the originals – or close to it – but it is not the one best text family.

So, which way should you go on this debate? If you are concerned about the issue, I suggest that you study it more. The texts cited in the notes will give you a place to start. If not, I would recommend using a version that is as close to the Greek text as possible while being understandable to you. But whichever version you choose, be very sure of your arguments before insisting that others use it, too. It seems to me that, with all the difficulties we face in our often hostile culture, we should not erect walls between Christians on the basis of Bible versions. We are not taking God’s Word lightly here. We are simply calling for a more well-reasoned discussion and for the rule of love to govern the debate.

Notes


2. An example is the pamphlet by J. J. Ray, The Eye Opener (Junction City, Oregon, 1953).


4. Ibid., 35.


7. To be more precise, while Westcott and Hort gave the greater weight to the Alexandrian text over the Byzantine, they gave even greater weight to the manuscripts Vaticanus and Sinaiticus which they considered to be “neutral texts.” Later, sympathetic scholars grouped these two with the Alexandrian family. See Carson, 41.


9. Greenlee, 133.

10. Ibid., 68.
The Bible Code

Written by Richard Milne

How should thinking Christians respond to purported information embedded in the Bible’s original language? There is more to “The Bible Code” than meets the eye.

What Is a Bible Code?

There is no way to ignore the clear fact that a computerized code in the Bible . . . accurately predicted the Gulf War, the collision of a comet with Jupiter, and the assassination of [Israeli Prime Minister] Rabin, also seems to state that the Apocalypse starts now, that within a decade, we may face the real Armageddon, a nuclear World War.(1)

So ends Michael Drosnin’s best-seller The Bible Code. On the New York Times bestseller list for months, the book has created a small industry of people selling books about secret codes, and a huge audience of people reading about and discussing codes. And what are these “codes” that are so fascinating and how does the Bible fit into all of this? Those are just a few of the questions we will address in this essay as we try to reach some balanced conclusions about a very controversial topic.

People have written codes since at least 400 B.C., and Jewish scholars have looked for codes in the text of the Old Testament for approximately a thousand years. Gematria, the discipline of changing portions of text into numbers to look for a deeper meaning, has been part of Jewish Cabalistic tradition since at least the 13th century. But it is only in the last twenty years that computers have extended the range of text searches to almost unimaginable lengths.

At the heart of the current controversy is a scientific paper by three Israeli mathematicians with the helpful title of: “Equidistant Letter Sequences in the Book of Genesis.” A quite technical paper, it was published in Statistical Science in 1994.(2) As is typical in scientific publications, it was peer reviewed. In fact, three other qualified statisticians read the paper, and while confounded by the results, each agreed that the mathematics and data used seemed legitimate. So what did Doron Witztum, Eliyahu Rips, and Yoav Rosenberg write that has caused so much excitement?

In the 1980s Eliyahu Rips, an Orthodox Jew and well-known Israeli mathematician, came across the
writings of Rabbi Michael Weismandel. The book is so rare that Rips found only one copy, at the National Library in Israel. Rabbi Weismandel discovered that by starting with the first Hebrew letter “T” in the book of Genesis and counting forward 49 letters to find an “O” as the 50th letter, and then another 49 letters to an “R,” another 49 letters to an “A,” and finally another 49 letters to an “H,” the word TORAH was spelled out. “Torah” is the Hebrew name for the books Moses wrote. This same pattern happens in the book of Exodus. But in Numbers and Deuteronomy one must count backwards beginning at either the first or fifth verse. But why 50.(3)

In Jewish rabbinic tradition, most numbers are symbolic. For example, 50 is the year of Jubilee, the year that all land goes back to its original owner, when all debts are canceled, when the land rests for the whole year. It is also said that there are fifty gates of wisdom in the Torah.

Rabbi Weismandel is reputed to have found many patterns like this in the Torah as he laboriously counted by hand again and again in the most holy of all Jewish books. Rips was fascinated by these patterns and wondered what a computer could do to find more patterns.

Now, let’s see what Eli Rips discovered as he looked at the text with a computer.

**Bible Codes Are Demonstrated by Mathematics and Computers**

Michael Drosnin’s book, *The Bible Code*, describes the discovery by Eli Rips and others, of messages they claim are coded into the text of the Hebrew Old Testament, and only discoverable in our own time by using computers. These codes warn of dire events in the near future that could affect the whole world. But how are these messages hidden in a book that has been read for more than 2,000 years?

What Rips uncovered was that if he used Rabbi Weismandel’s idea of counting off equal intervals between letters, he could find many words in the Hebrew text. The technical name for this method is quite a mouthful: Equidistant Letter Sequences, or ELS. A computer program finds the first letter of a word, and then begins counting until it finds the next letter of the word. This becomes the “skip code.” Then, using that skip code, it counts to see if the third letter of the word is found at that same interval. So it would start by skipping every other letter, then every two letters, then every three letters until it finds a “skip” that spells out the word. Thus, as mentioned earlier, the Hebrew word for the first five books of the Bible, “Torah,” is spelled out with an ELS of 50 in the book of Genesis.

This might be the answer to an interesting trivia question, but why is *The Bible Code* selling thousands of copies? That’s because Michael Drosnin has made some astounding claims about the ELS codes: that one code anticipated, weeks in advance, the exact day the Gulf War would start; that another code predicted Yitzhak Rabin’s assassination by a man named Amir: that a code anticipated, withing two years of the actual events, earthquakes in Japan; and that in the year 2000 or 2006 an atomic holocaust, beginning in Israel, is likely. This is great millennial material!

Drosnin’s book is based on a paper published in *Statistical Science* in 1994 by Witztum, Rips, and Rosenberg. With great statistical rigor, the authors show that the 78,064 Hebrew letters of the Book of Genesis, when set out with no spaces or punctuation, can be searched by a computer for specific words spelled out by ELS codes. Specifically, they set out to see if they could find the names of 32 famous rabbis in Genesis. Not only did they find ELS codes that spelled out all 32 rabbis, but near their names were coded their birth dates or death dates, or sometimes both. How could any author have known these details 2000 years before these men lived?

This is amazing enough. The odds are said to be one in ten million! But in his book, Drosnin claims the same kind of codes revealed that Prime Minister Rabin would be assassinated a year before it
happened. Drosnin even got a letter delivered through a friend to Rabin, but it was ignored. He also shows dozens of other historic events and how details about them are encoded all around where an ELS code finds the main name or event.

As you might guess, the response to the book has been mixed—to say the least. Most people say, “How could a three-thousand-year-old book possibly say anything about the future?” Others see this as proof that the Bible is the divinely inspired word of God. And some are just interested but very skeptical.

Next, we’ll look at the reaction to *The Bible Code* and why some are so critical.

**Critical Reactions to the Bible Codes**

A book making claims to “foretell” the future is almost certain to become a target for both eager followers and cynical scholars. In particular, a rift has developed between the original writers of the mathematical paper, and how Drosnin has used their work.

Witztum, Rips, and Rosenberg, while maintaining the accuracy of their original paper, say that Drosnin’s attempts to state what may happen in the future are “futile,” and that Drosnin’s book “employs no scientific methodology.”(4) Witztum categorically states “predicting the future is impossible.” Seems like a strange statement from a man who claims in his own paper that the ELS codes found the names, birth dates, death dates, and cities of residence of 32 rabbis thousands of years before any of them had been born. What the original authors of the *Statistical Science* paper claim is that the ELS codes they have discovered can only give information about what one has a place or name for already. In this view, codes can tell us about death camps in Germany because we know what to look for. Witztum uses this to demonstrate ELS codes at work.

What can we find out about Auschwitz? First, we must have mathematical tools to measure whether a specific ELS and the words found near it are statistically significant. This is provided by the calculations laid out in the 1994 paper, *Statistical Science*. Then one must have a prepared list of words one is looking for.

So, Witztum begins with the words “of Auschwitz” and a list of all of the subcamps of this World War II death camp. Once an ELS for Auschwitz is found, Witztum claims, “We find something very unexpected that [the names of all the subcamps] consistently appear in the area of the words ‘of Auschwitz.’” This, he says, is all that Bible codes can do. Codes cannot predict the future.(5)

But when Genesis was written, all 32 rabbis found in Genesis were still far in the future. The earliest rabbi found lived in the eighth century A.D. This is nearly 2,000 years after Moses. Isn’t that predicting the future, at least from the author’s point of view?

Michael Drosnin himself has been ambivalent about what the codes tell us. His book says, “I found the Bible code’s prediction of [Rabin’s] assassination myself. . . . When he was killed, as predicted, my first thought was, ‘Oh my God, it’s real’”(6) (emphasis mine). But in a CNN interview he said, “I don’t think the code makes predictions. I think it might tell us about possible futures.”(7) Either Drosnin has changed his mind, or he is disingenuous in his book.

Harold Gans, a retired senior mathematician for the U.S. Department of Defense, and an expert at making and breaking codes, was one of the first mathematicians to look at the Bible codes. Highly skeptical at first, he duplicated their experiment, finding the same information. Still suspicious, Gans made up his own test: find the rabbis’ cities of birth and death. Again the information appeared in close connection with their ELS codes. His conclusion: “The information was deliberately placed in
the Bible by its author. . . . Logic would dictate that the author could not be human, could not be bound by the limits of time. It would be natural to conclude that the author is a divine being.” (8)

Is there finally “proof” that the Bible was written by a divine being? That is our next subject.

**Do the Bible Codes Prove Divine Inspiration?**

Have codes hidden in the Bible finally proved it to be written by God? As we stated earlier, mathematician and code expert Harold Gans thinks so. What about *The Bible Code’s*, Michael Drosnin? His own response is quite remarkable: “Everyone I met with seemed to assume that if the code was real, it must be from God. I did not. I could easily believe that it was from someone good, who wanted to save us, but was not our Creator. Clearly it was not someone omnipotent, or he would simply prevent the danger, instead of encoding a warning.” (9)

On the other hand, a Jewish group called Aish HeTorah has developed a Discovery Seminar that has been given to nearly 70,000 people in the last ten years. To help attendees develop an “appreciation of the relevance and value of Torah and Judaism in their lives,” roughly 20% of the Discovery Seminar features the work of Witztum, Rips, and Rosenberg. Harold Gans, the Defense Department code specialist mentioned earlier, is an advisor for this group, so compelling has this evidence become for him. (10)

Christians, too, have started looking for ELS codes, claiming to find the Hebrew for Jesus in all sorts of interesting passages about the coming Messiah. Two books by Christians are already out, and surely more will follow. So is this finally “the most important evidence that proves to this generation that the Bible is truly inspired by God” as one Christian writer says? (11)

Brendan McKay is a man with a sense of humor. He also has a mission: to show that even the mathematical uses of ELS codes prove nothing. McKay is an Australian mathematician who has published the first statistical critique of the WRR paper. But at his Web site he has accumulated a most interesting series of what he calls “pictures,” much like the diagrams Drosnin published in *The Bible Code*. In these “pictures” he does exactly what Drosnin does: he looks for a word by ELS codes, and then sees what other words occur nearby. He has also taken up Drosnin’s challenge in *Newsweek* magazine: “When my critics find a message about the assassination of a prime minister encrypted in *Moby Dick*, I’ll believe them.” (12)

Undoubtedly Drosnin felt he had nothing to fear: hadn’t Rips and his colleagues tried to find information in the Hebrew version of *War and Peace* and found nothing? But published on McKay’s web page are the diagrams from *Moby Dick* of predictions of the death of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi of India, Lebanese President Moawad, Marxist Leon Trotsky, Abraham Lincoln, Martin Luther King, John Kennedy, and even Princess Diana. For Lady Diana, not only is her boyfriend Dodi spelled out across her name, but even the name of their chauffeur, Henri Paul is there! And more are added regularly. But by far the most ironic “discovery” concerns the death of Drosnin himself. The place, method, and motive for his death are all spelled out. (13)

McKay’s technical paper claims to duplicate the WRR paper but finds the 32 rabbis encoded in the Hebrew of Tolstoy’s *War and Peace*. (14) McKay and his co-author use the same statistical methods, and have Jewish authorities to back their spellings for the rabbis names, just as WRR had. So what does this tell us? At this point, no one knows for certain.

Finally, let’s consider how Christians might want to think about this whole controversy.
How Should Christians Respond to the Bible Codes?

How should thinking Christians respond to these seemingly incredible findings of future events foretold in the Bible, but hidden in codes only a computer can find? Undoubtedly, it is too early to say very much, as even the specific methods and mathematical checks have yet to be agreed upon. But certain things appear to be clear.

We know very little about how sequences of letters behave when not written by an author, but rather put together by a program within a computer. Witztum, Rips, and Rosenberg make certain assumptions about what would and would not be a significantly close connection between two sets of words to rule out random placement. But these are, in the end, arbitrary. What McKay and Dror Bar-Natan have done in their own paper, “Equidistant Letter Sequences in Tolstoy’s War and Peace,” is demonstrate to their satisfaction that whatever phenomena occurs in the Hebrew text of Genesis can also be found in the Hebrew text of War and Peace.(15)

The scholarly arguing about method and mathematics is still going on, but what seems to be emerging is the fact that almost any “message” can be found if a sufficiently long text is used. If this is true, then we have learned something new about how humans who can program computers can find non-random messages in random texts, but we have not shown that a divine intelligence wrote the Bible.

An important question to ask ourselves is, “Why are we so fascinated by codes and mysterious messages in a book as clear as the Bible?” Do we not trust that God has given us all we need to know, both for ourselves and to evangelize the world, in the text that all of us can read? Perhaps for His own pleasure, God has indeed hidden certain things in the text of the Bible, but surely they are not the main message. God has given us the Bible so that we might know Him and make Him known. ELS codes in the Bible do not seem to do much more than pique curiosity.

Our responsibility is to read the text for what it says, not for what may be hidden under the surface. We know from the Book of Revelation that some great cataclysm is coming, and as it draws nearer, we are warned not to be misled. Jesus vividly portrayed how obvious His return would be: “Just as the lightning comes from the east and flashes even to the west, so shall the coming of the Son of Man be.”(16) So as you watch the news and the millennium approaches, keep your “baloney detectors” alert!

Will Bible codes become an important tool in the apologetic toolkit of evangelical Christians? We should be very cautious when we do not use God’s Word as He wrote it. Merely studying the Bible codes will not necessarily result in Christian faith. For example, Michael Drosnin, after years of research for his book, The Bible Code, was still an atheist: “I had proof there was a code, but not proof there was a God. . . . I don’t believe in God. . . . The message of the Bible code is that we can save ourselves.”(17) If that is all that Drosnin came to believe after working with these codes for five years, we are probably better off having people read the Bible and encountering the real God through His own words. One needs no codes to read and understand John 3:16.

Notes

5. Ibid.
The Christian Canon

Don Closson provides a summary of the process through which the books of the New Testament were selected by the early church fathers and brought down to modern times. Understanding how the books of the Bible were determined according to important criteria of authorship, wide acceptance and relevance, help give us an appreciation for the wonder of God's word to us.

The Early Church Fathers

Some Christians are unnerved by the fact that nowhere does God itemize the sixty-six books that are to be included in the Bible. Many believers have at best a vague notion of how the church arrived at what we call the Canon of Scripture. Even after becoming more aware, some believers are uncomfortable with the process by which the New Testament Canon was determined. For many, it was what appears to be a haphazard process that took far too long.

Furthermore, whether talking with a Jehovah’s Witness, a liberal theologian, or a New Ager, Christians are very likely to run into questions concerning the extent, adequacy, and accuracy of the Bible as God’s revealed Word.

In this essay, therefore, we will consider the development of the doctrine of the Scriptures in the Church Age. Just how did the church decide on the books for inclusion in the New Testament? This discussion will include both how the Canon was established and the various ways theologians have viewed the Bible since the Canon was established.

The period immediately following the passing of the Apostles is known as the period of the Church Fathers. Many of these men walked with the Apostles and were taught directly by them. Polycarp and Papias, for instance, are considered to have been disciples of the Apostle John. Doctrinal authority during this period rested on two sources, the Old Testament (O.T.) and the notion of Apostolic succession, being able to trace a direct association to one of the Apostles and thus to Christ. Although the New Testament (N.T.) Canon was written, it was not yet seen as a separate body of books equivalent to the O.T. Six church leaders are commonly referred to: Barnabas, Hermas, Clement of Rome, Polycarp, Papias, and Ignatius (Berkhof, The History of Christian
Although these men lacked the technical sophistication of today’s theologians, their correspondence confirmed the teachings of the Apostles and provides a doctrinal link to the N.T. Canon itself. Christianity was as yet a fairly small movement. These Church Fathers, often elders and bishops in the early Church, were consumed by the practical aspects of Christian life among the new converts. Therefore, when Jehovah’s Witnesses argue that the early church did not have a technical theology of the Trinity, they are basically right. There had been neither time nor necessity to focus on the issue. On the other hand these men clearly believed that Jesus was God as was the Holy Spirit, but they had yet to clarify in writing the problems that might occur when attempting to explain this truth.

The early Church Fathers had no doubt about the authority of the O.T., often prefacing their quotes with “For thus saith God” and other notations. As a result they tended to be rather moralistic and even legalistic on some issues. Because the N.T. Canon was not yet settled, they respected and quoted from works that have generally passed out of the Christian tradition. The books of Hermas, Barnabas, Didache, and 1 and 2 Clement were all regarded highly (Hannah, Lecture Notes for the History of Doctrine, 2.2). As Berkhof writes concerning these early Church leaders, “For them Christianity was not in the first place a knowledge to be acquired, but the principle of a new obedience to God” (Berkhof, History of the Christian Church, 39).

Although these early Church Fathers may seem rather ill-prepared to hand down all the subtle implications of the Christian faith to the coming generations, they form a doctrinal link to the Apostles (and thus to our Lord Jesus Christ), as well as a witness to the growing commitment to the Canon of Scripture that would become the N.T. As Clement of Rome said in first century, “Look carefully into the Scriptures, which are the true utterances of the Holy Spirit” (Geisler, Decide For Yourself, 11).

The Apologists

After the early Church Fathers comes the era of the Apologists and Theologians, roughly including the second, third, and fourth centuries. It is during this period that the Church takes the initial steps toward establishing a “rule of faith” or Canon.

During this period both internal and external forces caused the church to begin to systematize both its doctrines and its view of revelation. Much of the systemization came about as a defense against the heresies that challenged the faith of the Apostles. Ebionitism humanized Jesus and rejected the writings of Paul, resulting in a more Jewish than Christian faith. Gnosticism attempted to blend oriental theosophy, Hellenistic philosophy, and Christianity into a new religion that saw the physical creation as evil and Christ as a celestial being with secret knowledge to teach us. It often portrayed the God of the O.T. as inferior to the God of the N.T. Marcion and his movement also separated the God of the Old and New Testaments, accepting Paul and Luke as the only writers who really understood the Gospel of Christ (Berkhof, History of Christian Doctrine, 54). Montanus, responding to the gnostics, ended up claiming that he and two others were new prophets offering the highest and most accurate revelation from God. Although they were basically orthodox, they exalted martyrdom and a legalistic asceticism that led to their rejection by the Church.

Although the term canon was not used in reference to the N.T. texts until the fourth century by Athanasius, there were earlier attempts to list the acceptable books. The Muratorian Canon listed all the books of the Bible except for 1 John, 1 and 2 Peter, Hebrews, and James around A.D. 180 (Hannah, Notes, 2.5). Irenaeus, as bishop of Lyon, mentions all of the books except Jude, 2 Peter, James, Philemon, 2 and 3 John, and Revelation. The Syriac Version of the Canon, from the third century, leaves out Revelation.
It should be noted that although these early Church leaders differed on which books should be included in the Canon, they were quite sure that the books were inspired by God. Irenaeus, in his work Against Heresies, argues that, “The Scriptures are indeed perfect, since they were spoken by the Word of God [Christ] and His Spirit” (Geisler, Decide For Yourself, 12). By the fourth century many books previously held in high regard began to disappear from use and the apocryphal writings were seen as less than inspired.

It was during the fourth century that concentrated attempts were made both in the East and the West to establish the authoritative collection of the Canon. In 365, Athanasius of Alexandria listed the complete twenty-seven books of the New Testament which he regarded as the “only source of salvation and of the authentic teaching of the religion of the Gospel” (Hannah, Notes, 2.6). While Athanasius stands out in the Eastern Church, Jerome is his counterpart in the West. Jerome wrote a letter to Paulinus, bishop of Nola in 394 listing just 39 O.T. books and our current 27 N.T. ones. It was in 382 that Bishop Damasus had Jerome work on a Latin text to standardize the Scripture. The resulting Vulgate was used throughout the Christian world. The Synods of Carthage in 397 and 418 both confirmed our current twenty-seven books of the NT.

The criteria used for determining the canonicity of the books included the internal witness of the Holy Spirit in general, and specifically Apostolic origin or sanction, usage by the Church, intrinsic content, spiritual and moral effect, and the attitude of the early church.

The Medieval and Reformation Church

In the fourth century Augustine voiced his belief in the verbal, plenary inspiration of the N.T. text, as did Justin Martyr in the second. This meant that every part of the Scriptures, down to the individual word, was chosen by God to be written by the human writers. But still, the issue of what should be included in the Canon was not entirely settled. Augustine included the Book of Wisdom as part of the Canon and held that the Septuagint or Greek text of the O.T. was inspired, not the Hebrew original. The Church Fathers were sure that the Scriptures were inspired, but they were still not in agreement as to which texts should be included.

As late as the seventh and eighth centuries there were church leaders who added to or subtracted from the list of texts. Gregory the Great added Tobias and Wisdom and mentioned 15 Pauline epistles, not 14. John of Damascus, the first Christian theologian who attempted a complete systematic theology, rejected the O.T. apocrypha, but added the Apostolic Constitution and 1 and 2 Clement to the N.T. One historian notes that “things were no further advanced at the end of the fourteenth century than they had been at the end of the fourth” (Hannah, Notes, 3.3). This same historian notes that although we would be horrified at such a state today, the Catholicism of the day rested far more on ecclesiastical authority and tradition than on an authoritative Canon. Thus Roman Catholicism did not find the issue to be a critical one.

The issue of canonical authority finally is addressed within the bigger battle between Roman Catholicism and the Protestant Reformation. In 1545 the Council of Trent was called as a response to the Protestant heresy by the Catholic Church. As usual, the Catholic position rested upon the authority of the Church hierarchy itself. It proposed that all the books found in Jerome’s Vulgate were of equal canonical value (even though Jerome himself separated the Apocrypha from the rest) and that the Vulgate would become the official text of the Church. The council then established the Scriptures as equivalent to the authority of tradition.

The reformers were also forced to face the Canon issue. Instead of the authority of the Church, Luther and the reformers focused on the internal witness of the Holy Spirit. Luther was troubled by
four books, Jude, James, Hebrews, and Revelation, and though he placed them in a secondary position relative to the rest, he did not exclude them. John Calvin also argued for the witness of the Spirit (Hannah, Notes, 3.7). In other words, it is God Himself, via the Holy Spirit who assures the transmission of the text down through the ages, not the human efforts of the Catholic Church or any other group. Calvin rests the authority of the Scripture on the witness of the Spirit and the conscience of the godly. He wrote in his Institutes,

Let it therefore be held as fixed, that those who are inwardly taught by the Holy Spirit acquiesce implicitly in Scripture; that Scripture, carrying its own evidence along with it, deigns not to submit to proofs and arguments, but owes the full conviction with which we ought to receive it to the testimony of the Spirit. Enlightened by him, we no longer believe, either on our own judgment or that of others, that the Scriptures are from God; but, in a way superior to human judgment, feel perfectly assured as much so as if we beheld the divine image visibly impressed on it that it came to us, by the instrumentality of men, from the very mouth of God.

He goes on the say, “We ask not for proofs or probabilities on which to rest our judgment, but we subject our intellect and judgment to it as too transcendent for us to estimate.”

Modern Views

Although the early church, up until the Reformation, was not yet united as to which books belonged in the Canon, they were certain that the books were inspired by God and contained the Gospel message that He desired to communicate to a fallen world. After the Reformation, the books of the Canon were widely agreed upon, but now the question was, Were they inspired? Were they God breathed as Paul declared in 2 Timothy 3:16?

What led to this new controversy? A great change began to occur in the way that learned men and women thought about the nature of the universe, God, and man’s relationship to both. Thinking in the post-Reformation world began to shift from a Christian theistic worldview to a pantheistic or naturalistic one. As men like Galileo and Francis Bacon began to lay the foundation for modern science, their successes led others to apply their empirical methodology to answering philosophical and theological questions.

Rene Descartes (1596-1650), although a believer, began his search for knowledge from a position of doubt, assuming only that he exists because he is able to ask the question. Although he ends up affirming God, he is able to do this only by assuming God’s existence, not via rational discovery (Hannah, Notes, 4.2). Others that followed built upon his system and came to different conclusions. Spinoza (1633-77) arrived at pantheism, a belief that all is god, and Liebnitz (1646-1716) concluded that it is impossible to acquire religious knowledge from a study of history.

Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679) took another step away from the notion of revealed truth. He attempted to build a philosophy using only reason and sense perception; he rejected the idea that God might have imprinted the human mind with knowledge of Himself. Another big step was taken by Immanuel Kant (1724-1804). Attempting to protect Christian thinking from the attacks of science and reason, he separated knowledge of God or spirit and knowledge of the phenomenal world. The first was unknowable, the second was knowable. Christianity was reduced to a set of morals, the source of which was unknowable by humanity.
The 1800s brought with it the fruit of Kant’s separation of truth from theology. German theologians built upon Kant’s foundation resulting in man becoming the source of meaning and God fading into obscurity. Frederick Schleiermacher (1768-1834) replaced revelation with religious feeling, and salvation by grace with self-analysis. The Scriptures have authority over us only if we have a religious feeling about them first. The faith that leads to this religious feeling may come from a source completely independent of the Scriptures.

David Strauss (1808-74) completely breaks from the earlier high view of Scripture. He affirms a naturalistic worldview by denying the reality of a supernatural dimension. In his book, Leben Jesu (“The Life of Jesus”), he completely denies any supernatural events traditionally associated with Jesus and His apostles, and calls the Resurrection of Christ “nothing other than a myth” (Hannah, Notes, 4.5). Strauss goes on to claim that if Jesus had really spoken of Himself as the N.T. records, He must have been out of His mind. In the end, Strauss argues that the story we have of Christ is a fabrication constructed by the disciples who added to the life of Christ what they needed to in order for Him to become the Messiah. Strauss’s work would be the foundation for numerous attacks on the accuracy and authenticity of the N.T. writers, and of the ongoing attempt, even today, to demythologize the text and find the so-called “real Jesus of history.”

What Now?

As one reviews the unfolding story of how the Canon of Christian Scriptures has been formed and then interpreted, we can get a fairly accurate picture of the changes that have taken place in the thinking of Western civilization. Two thousand years ago men walked with Christ and experienced His deity first hand. God, through the Holy Spirit, led many of these men to compose an inspired account of their experiences which revealed to the following generations what God had done to save a fallen world. This text along with the notion of Apostolic succession was accepted as authoritative by the emerging Christian population, and would eventually come to dominate much of Western thought. In the sixteenth century, the Reformation rejected the role of tradition, mainly the Roman Catholic Church, when it had begun to supersede the authority of Scripture. Later, the Enlightenment began the process of removing the possibility of revelation by elevating man’s reason and limiting our knowledge to what science could acquire. This was the birth of Modernism, attempting to answer all the questions of life without God.

The wars and horrors of the twentieth century have crushed many thinkers’ trust in mankind’s ability to implement a neutral, detached scientific mind to our problems and its ability to determine truth. As a result, many have rejected modernism and the scientific mind and have embraced a postmodernist position which denies anyone’s ability to be a neutral collector of truth, which might be true for everyone, everywhere. This has left us with individual experience and personal truth. Which really means that truth no longer exists. What does this mean for the theologian who has accepted the conclusions of postmodern thinking? One theologian writes, “At the present, however, there is no general agreement even as to what theology is, much less how to get on with the task of systematics. . . . We are, for the most part, uncertain even as to what the options are” (Robert H. King, Christian Theology: An Introduction to Its Traditions and Tasks, 1-2).

This same theologian argues that Christian theology can no longer rest upon metaphysics or history. In other words, neither man’s attempt to explain the causes or nature of reality nor the historical record of any texts, including the Bible can give us a sure foundation for doing theology. We have the remarkable situation of modern theologians attempting to do theology without any knowledge of God and His dealings with His creation. It is not surprising that modern theologians are seeing Hare Krishna and Zen Buddhism, along with other Eastern traditions, as possibilities for integration with Christian thought or at least Christian ethics. These traditions are not rooted in historical events and
often deny any basis in rational thinking, even to the point of questioning the reality of the self (King, Christian Theology, 27).

Once individuals refuse to accept the claim of inspiration that the Bible makes for itself, they are left with a set of ethics without a foundation. History has shown us that it rarely takes more than a generation for this kind of religion to lose its significance within a culture. How then do we know that Christianity is true? William Lane Craig, in his book Reasonable Faith, makes an important point. As believers, we know that the Scriptures are inspired, and that the Gospel message is true, by the internal witness of the Holy Spirit. We show that it is true to unbelievers by demonstrating that it is systematically consistent. We make belief possible by using both historical evidence and philosophical tools. However, it is ultimately the Holy Spirit that softens hearts and calls men and women to believe in the God of the Bible.

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Don Closson provides a good understanding of hermeneutics, the ways in which one interprets the Bible with accuracy and integrity. He provides a step by step guide to understanding and interpreting Scripture in a consistent way. He helps us understand how to deal with the cultural, historical and language barriers we face in dealing with a text written in a different language and culture than our own.

Understanding the Bible

If you have ever had a prolonged discussion with a Jehovah’s Witness, Mormon, or New Ager over a passage of Scripture, you might relate to an experience that I had recently. I sat down with someone who had obviously spent considerable time in the Bible, who stated a desire to know God’s truth and was willing to work diligently to please God, sacrificing both time and money. However, when it came to determining what the Bible taught concerning how we might please Him and what we must do to be saved, we found little we could agree upon. At times it felt as if we were reading two completely different texts.

The problems I encountered were the result of different rules of interpretation. These rules are part of a discipline known as hermeneutics, which many consider to be both an art and a science. The
rules that one uses to interpret Scripture play a vital role in determining the meaning of a passage, and thus, our understanding of God and ourselves. Does John 1:1 refer to Jesus as the co-creator of the universe, existing with God the Father eternally, indeed, being of the same essence as the Father? Or is Jesus’ divinity somehow inferior to the divinity of God the Father, a view that Jehovah’s Witnesses hold? The way we interpret this passage will be determined by the rules of interpretation we bring to our study. It is obvious that both interpretations cannot be correct. When John wrote the words for his Gospel, and specifically for the first chapter, he had one meaning in mind. He may not have understood all of the implications of what he was writing, nor could he have imagined all of the applications possible in future contexts. However, via the inspiration of the Holy Spirit John’s words were to communicate a specific truth about God.

There are three good reasons why we have difficulty understanding the biblical text. First, we are separated from the historical events written about by thousands of years of history. Second, we live in a dramatically different culture, and third, the biblical texts were written in foreign languages. These obstacles to understanding can be daunting to those who want quick and easy comprehension of the Bible. They also make it possible for others to place their own agenda over the text, knowing that few will take the time to uncover what the writer’s original intent might have been.

Our goal should be to exegete, or draw meaning from the Scriptures, rather than to impose meaning onto them. Jehovah’s Witnesses have decided that Jesus cannot be God; they claim that it is an irrational doctrine. As a result, they have worked hard at interpreting direct references to His deity as something else. In Hebrews 1:6 the angels are told to worship Jesus. Since the Witnesses at one time taught that Jesus was an angel, they translate the word found in the passage as obeisance rather than worship. More like a gesture of respect than the worship of the one true God. Unfortunately, they have to misquote a reference work in order to justify their translation. Their New World Translation has changed numerous passages in order to keep their doctrines intact.

In this essay we will review some of the principles of hermeneutics that have been accepted by the majority of conservative Protestants for many years. Our goal in doing so is that we may be able to rightly divide the Word of truth.

**God’s Communication Link**

One of the first steps to correctly interpreting Scripture is being aware of what the Bible says about itself and understanding how it has come down to us through the centuries.

Rather than causing a complete text about Himself and His creation to simply appear, God chose to use many individuals, over thousands of years to write His words down. God has also revealed something of Himself in nature. General revelation, in the world around us, gives us an indication of God’s glory and power. However, without special revelation, the specific information found in the Bible, we would be lacking the redemptive plan that God has made available through Jesus Christ. The Bible clearly claims to have revealed information about God. Deuteronomy 29:29 declares that, “The secret things belong to the LORD our God, but the things revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may follow all the words of this law.” In 1 Corinthians 2:12-13 the writer adds that, “We have not received the spirit of the world but the Spirit who is from God, that we may understand what God has freely given us. This is what we speak, not in words taught us by human wisdom but in words taught by the Spirit, expressing spiritual truths in spiritual words.”

The unique nature of the Bible is made clear by Paul in 2 Timothy 3:16. Paul tells Timothy that “All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness.”
None of the original writings, or autographa, still exist. Nevertheless, textual criticism has confirmed that the transmission of these writings have been very accurate. The accuracy of the Old Testament documents are attested to by the Dead Sea Scrolls which gives us copies of parts of the Old Testament almost a thousand years closer to the original texts than previously available. The dependability of the New Testament is confirmed by the availability of a remarkable volume of manuscripts which were written very near the time of the original events.

Once we appreciate what God has done to communicate with us, we may begin to apply the principals of interpretation, or hermeneutics, to the text. To be successful this process must take into account the cultural, historical, and language barriers that limit our understanding of the original writings. There are no shortcuts to the hard work necessary to accomplish this task.

Some have wrongly argued that knowledge of the culture and languages of biblical times is not necessary, that the Holy Spirit will interpret the text for us. The role of the Holy Spirit is to illumine the believer in order to accept and apply what is found in Scripture. The Bible says that the natural man does not accept the things of the Spirit (1 Cor 2:14). The Greek word for “accept” means “to take something willingly and with pleasure.” The key role of the Spirit is not to add information to the text, or to give us special translating abilities, but to soften our hearts in order to receive what is there.

The goal of this process is to be mature in Christ. The Bible is not an end, it is a means to becoming conformed to the image or likeness of Christ.

**What Is a Literal Interpretation?**

Prior to the Protestant Reformation in the 1500s, biblical interpretation was often dominated by the allegorical method. Looking back to Augustine, the medieval church believed that every biblical passage contained four levels of meaning. These four levels were the literal, the allegorical, the moral, and the eschatological. For instance, the word Jerusalem literally referred to the city itself; allegorically, it refers to the church of Christ; morally, it indicates the human soul; and eschatologically it points to the heavenly Jerusalem.(1) Under this school of interpretation it was the church that established what the correct meaning of a passage was for all four levels.

By the time of the reformation, knowledge of the Bible was scarce. However, with a new emphasis on the original languages of Hebrew and Greek, the fourfold method of interpretation was beginning to fade. Martin Luther argued that the church shouldn’t determine what the Scriptures mean, the Scriptures should govern what the churches teach. He also rejected the allegorical method of interpreting Scripture.

Luther argued that a proper understanding of what a passage teaches comes from a literal interpretation. This means that the reader must consider the historical context and the grammatical structure of each passage, and strive to maintain contextual consistency. This method was a result of Luther’s belief that the Scriptures are clear, in opposition to the medieval church’s position that they are so obscure that only the church can uncover their true meaning.

Calvin agreed in principle with Luther. He also placed great importance on the notion that “Scripture interprets Scripture,” stressing that the grammar, context, words, and parallel passages found in the text were more important that any meaning we might impose on them. He added that, “it is the first business of an interpreter to let the author say what he does say, instead of attributing to him what we think he ought to say.(2)

Another approach to interpretation is letterism. While often ignoring context, historical and cultural
setting, and even grammatical structure, letterism takes each word as an isolated truth. A problem with this method is that it fails to take into account the different literary genre, or types, in the Bible. The Hebrew poetry of the Psalms is not to be interpreted in the same way as is the logical discourse of Romans. Letterism tends to lead to legalism because of its inability to distinguish between literary types. All passages tend to become equally binding on current believers.

If we use Jesus as our model for interpreting Scripture we find that He treated the historical narratives as facts. Old Testament characters and events are talked about as if they actually existed and happened. When making applications from the Old Testament text, Jesus used the normal, rather than allegorical meaning, of the passage. Jesus condemned the Scribes and Pharisees for replacing the original intent of the Scriptures with their own traditions. Jesus took a literal approach to interpretation which took into account the literary type of the passage.

Paul tells Timothy that he is to do his “best to present himself to God as one approved, a workman who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth.” Having the right method of interpretation is a critical precursor to accomplishing this admonition.

**Applying the Hermeneutic Process**

Next, we will look at how one might approach a specific text. A first step should be to determine the literary genre of the passage. A passage might be legal, narrative, polemic, poetry, wisdom, gospel, logical discourse, or prophetic literature, each having specific guidelines for proper interpretation. For instance, the wisdom literature found in Proverbs is to be seen as maxims or general truths based on broad experience and observations. “They are guidelines, not guarantees; precepts, not promises.”

Now, it would be helpful to identify the use of figurative language in the passage. Various forms of Hebrew poetry, simile, metaphor, and hyperbole need to be recognized if the reader is to understand the passage’s meaning. Hyperbole, for example, uses exaggeration to make a point. John says that the whole world would not have room for the books that would be written if everything about Jesus’s life was written down (John 21:25). John is using figurative speech. His point is that there were many things that Jesus did that weren’t recorded.

The Hebrew language of the Old Testament is filled with examples of figurative text. Judges 7:12 claims that “The Midianites, the Amalekites and all the other eastern peoples had settled in the valley, thick as locusts. Their camels could no more be counted than the sand on the seashore.” Were there actually billions of camels in the valley, or is this an overstatement for the sake of making the point that there were many camels present? Interpreting a passage begins by looking for the plain literal meaning of the text, but if there are obvious contradictions of known facts we look for a figure of speech. Clues for interpreting a figure of speech are usually found in the immediate context.

After a passage’s literary type is determined and figures of speech are identified, we can begin to focus on the content of a section of Scripture. Four levels of study are recommended. Word studies come first. Words are the building blocks of meaning, and by looking at the root origin or etymology of a word; its historical development over time; and the meaning of the word at the time of its use in Scripture we can gain insight into a passage’s meaning.

Much is to be gained by focusing on the verbs and conjunctions within a text. In the Greek language, verbs have a tense, a mood, a voice, and a person. For instance, Ephesians 5:18 says to not get drunk with wine, for that is dissipation, but be filled with the Spirit. Does “be filled” mean a one time event? Do we accomplish this via hard work? Actually, the passive voice and present tense of the
Greek word used translates better as “be kept being filled in Spirit.” It implies an ongoing process that God performs as a result of our submission to Him, not as a result of our personal efforts.

Connective words like “and” or “for” are important when reading long or difficult passages. The word “for” introduces a reason for a preceding statement. In Romans 1:15-17 Paul says that he is eager “to preach the gospel . . . for I am not ashamed . . . for it is the power of God for salvation . . . for in it the righteousness of God is revealed.” And, in Romans 8, “for” occurs 15 times.

Other techniques for studying words include looking at synonyms, antonyms, and cross references. Cross-references might be verbal, parallel (using the same words), or conceptual (using the same idea).

**Continuing the Hermeneutic Process**

Syntax is the way in which words are grouped together within phrases, clauses, and sentences. Two types of phrases are prepositional, like “in Christ” and “from God our Father,” and participial, such as “speaking the truth in love” or “making peace.” There are dependent clauses like “when we pray for you” and independent clauses such as “we always thank God.” There are simple and compound sentences, simple ones having only one independent clause, compound ones having at least two.

Why do we need to know about syntax? Because without it we have no valid assurance that our interpretation is the meaning God intended to convey. Since God used languages that function within normal grammatical rules, knowing these rules is necessary in order to discern the meaning of a text.

The next level of study should be context. First locate the beginning of an idea and its topic sentence. Start with the paragraph, and then consider the chapter and the entire book. Determine who is being addressed, who is speaking, and what the occasion is. Hebrews chapter six has been interpreted in a number of different ways depending on how one answers these questions. Since the book was written to Jewish believers, deals with Christian maturity, and begins by exhorting the reader to leave elementary teachings and press on to maturity, many feel that the passage deals with Jewish believers tempted to return to Temple worship and the Jewish community. It warns not of the loss of salvation, but the negative impact on their Christian life if they return to the Jewish community and worship. In other words, they cannot start over if they ruin their testimony among the Jews.

Finally, ignoring the cultural context of a passage is one of the greatest problems in Bible interpretation. By culture we mean the behavior of a people as reflected by their thoughts, beliefs, social forms, speech, actions, and material artifacts. If we ignore culture, we often wrongly read into the Bible our twentieth century ideas. Knowledge of the religious, economic, legal, agricultural, architectural, and domestic practices of biblical times will decrease the likelihood of misinterpreting difficult passages.

God’s plagues on Egypt is one example of how cultural knowledge can help us to understand a text. The specific plagues sent by God spoke directly against the Egyptian gods. Turning the Nile into blood invalidated the protection of Isis, a goddess of the Nile, as well as Khnum, a guardian god of the Nile. The plague of frogs defied the Heqet, the goddess of birth who had the head of a frog. The plague of gnats ridiculed Set, god of the desert. Other plagues mocked Re, a sun god; Hathor, goddess with a cows head; Apis, the bull god; Sekhmet, goddess with power over disease, as well as others. God was communicating very clearly with the Egyptian people concerning His role as the creator and sustainer of the universe.
Reference works like Bible dictionaries, concordances, word study books, and commentaries are available to assist us in our study of the Bible. The goal of this process is to apply God’s Word to our lives, but we must first have accurate knowledge of what God’s Word means. Understanding precedes application.

As Psalm 19:1 explains, “The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands.” Paul, in Romans 1:20 says, “…since the creation of the world God’s invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse.”

Notes


2. Ibid., p. 67.


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