

# Worldviews Through History – Compared to a Christian View

*Kerby Anderson provides a summary of how mankind has viewed the world from the Romans until today. This summary provides us a perspective against which to compare and contrast a Christian, biblical worldview based on New Testament principles.*

## Roman Worldview

On the Probe Web site we often talk about [worldviews](#). I want to explain how the worldviews we talk about developed through history. We will be using as our foundation an excellent book written by Professor Glenn Sunshine whom I have met and also had the privilege of interviewing. His book is *Why You Think the Way You Do: The Story of Western Worldviews from Rome to Home*. {1}

Glenn Sunshine is a member of the church that Jonathan Edwards attended when he was at Yale. Professor Sunshine gave a lecture about Jonathan Edwards's worldview at a conference they held, and Chuck Colson invited him to teach with the Centurions program. He gave a talk about "How We Got Here" and then later turned it into *Why You Think the Way You Do*.



Since we will be talking about worldview, it would be good to begin with Glenn Sunshine's definition. "A worldview is the framework you use to interpret the world and your place in it." {2} You do not need to be a philosopher to have a worldview. All of us have a worldview.

Although Glenn Sunshine begins with the worldview of the Roman world, he quickly takes us back to neo-Platonism. It was the religion and philosophy based upon Plato's ideas. Neo-

Platonism was the belief that the fundamental ground of reality is non-physical. Instead it is found in the world of ideas (and is known as *idealism*). These ideas cast shadows that cast other shadows until they arrive at the physical world.

According to this worldview, the whole universe exists as a hierarchy. The spiritual is superior to the physical. This provides a scale of values for the world, but also provides a scale for humanity. In other words, those who are superior should rule over those who are inferior because they have demonstrated their ability to rule or conquer.

This view of hierarchy led to the idea of the father having superiority over all members of the family. It led to the idea that men are superior to women. It led to the idea that the emperor should rule and be worshipped. And it led to the idea that slaves are inferior to free people and nothing more than "living tools."[{3}](#)

This explains not only the success of Rome but also its ugly underside. Essentially there are two pictures of Rome: "the glittering empire and the rotten core."[{4}](#)

In Rome, human life did not have much value. While it is true that Romans abandoned human sacrifice, they engaged in other practices equally abhorrent. "They picked up the Etruscan practice of having people fight to the death in games in honor of the dead."[{5}](#)

Slavery provided the economic foundation for the empire. Abortion and infanticide were regularly practiced. "Roman families would usually keep as many healthy sons as they had and only one daughter; the rest were simply discarded."[{6}](#) And Roman law required that a father kill any visibly deformed child.

# Transformation of the Pagan World

How did Christianity transform the pagan world? In AD 303, the Roman emperor Diocletian began a severe persecution of Christians. But because Christians were faithful and even willing to go to their deaths for their beliefs, their credibility increased. Eventually they were accepted and allowed to exercise their faith. Constantine even legalized the Christian faith by AD 313.

Once that took place, Christian ideas were allowed to percolate through society. One of the most important ideas was that human beings are created in the image of God. This idea has a profound impact. First, it meant that people are fundamentally equal to each other. No longer were there grounds for saying that some people are superior to others. In fact, "Christians were the first people in history to oppose slavery systematically."[\[7\]](#)

Christians (who believed that all are created in the image of God) treated the sick differently. They believed that even those who were deathly ill still deserved care. Dionysius of Alexandria reported that Christians (often at great risk to their own lives) "visited the sick fearlessly and ministered to them continually."[\[8\]](#) They would rescue babies abandoned in an act of infanticide. They would oppose abortion.

In economics, we can also see the influence of Christianity. The idea that God created the universe and then rested showed that God worked. That would mean that human beings (made in the image of God) are expected to work as well. God gave Adam and Eve intellectual work (in naming the animals) and physical work (in tending the Garden). Contrast this with the Roman world where physical work was seen as something that only slaves would do. Christians saw labor as something that was intrinsically valuable.

Labor is good; drudgery is bad. Drudgery is a result of the

Fall (Genesis 3). So Christians were the first to develop technology to remove drudgery from work. Other civilizations had technology, but the West uniquely applied such things as water power to make work more valuable and worthwhile by eliminating the drudgery and repetitive nature of certain tasks.

Property rights were also well-developed during this period. "The medieval world under the influence of Christianity has a much stronger emphasis on property rights than other cultures had." [\[9\]](#)

These ideas come from a biblical worldview and began to be developed during the Middle Ages. This led to a complete transformation of western society and set it on a trajectory to our modern world.

## **Christianity and Politics**

Glenn Sunshine points out that in the West, the dynamic between church and state is unique. Christianity was originally a persecuted minority religion. Even when Christianity was declared a legal religion, the church did not depend upon the state. So the question of the relationship between church and state has been an open question.

During the Middle Ages, two men helped shape political thinking. The first was Augustine, who described two realms: the City of God and the City of Man. He argued that human government is the result of sin. He believed that it is based upon selfishness. Government itself is corruption. In the absence of government, anarchy reigns. So government is a necessary evil.

The City of God is different in that it is not based upon force or coercion. It is based upon love, charity, and repentance. That doesn't mean that the City of Man and the City of God cannot work together. But overall, Augustine had a

more pessimistic view of government.

Aristotle had a different view of government. As people in the Middle Ages began to rediscover Aristotle, they began to develop a different view of government. They saw government as a necessary institution that God has placed in the world. It had positive and legitimate functions.

Aristotle believed that government had a more positive role in society. But the Christian theologians had to also deal with the problem of original sin. They wanted to find a way to prevent original sin from corrupting the government. The tension between these two views is what drives the discussion of western political theory.

Sunshine notes that “another check on civil government involved the idea of rights.”[\[10\]](#) We normally associate the idea of rights, especially inalienable rights, with eighteenth century political theorists. However, John Locke’s idea that we have inalienable right to life, liberty, and property is already found in the writings of medieval theologians. The basis for this is a belief that all are created in the image of God. Therefore, all of us have a number of natural rights that the state cannot remove. Natural law was the idea that God wove moral laws into the fabric of the universe.

There also was the belief that there should be limitations on the jurisdiction of civil government and church government. One example is the Magna Carta, that stated that the English church was to be free and its liberties unimpaired by the crown.

## **The Renaissance and Enlightenment**

What about the transformation into the modern world? In the early modern period, starting with the Renaissance in the fifteenth century to the seventeenth century, there are a whole series of events that shook the worldview consensus that

developed in the Middle Ages.

Previously there were certain beliefs about truth: (1) that truth was absolute, (2) that truth is knowable to the human mind, and (3) that truth is necessary for society (a society could not be based upon a lie). The best good guide for truth would be the great civilizations of the past that lasted for so long and thus must have been based upon truth.

The idea was to go to the past to find truth. During the Renaissance scholars were very successful in collecting manuscripts and finding ancient sources. Unfortunately, they found so many sources that they discovered there was not a coherent perspective. The ancient writers disagreed with each other. In a sense, the Renaissance was a victim of its own success. There was too much information. The more ancient sources they found, the less likely they would find agreement in the perspectives. Once it became obvious that this grand synthesis was not possible, the entire purpose of intellectual activity was thrown into question.

Then there were the wars of the Reformation in which various factions fought over who was the true follower of the prince of peace. The devastation of the religious wars left many people wondering if there really was religious certainty. No longer was the question "is Christianity true" but rather "which Christianity is true?" Now you had a multiplicity of options that left people confused. This also generated questions about the role of religion in society.

Then you also had the discovery of the New World and whole people groups that had never heard the gospel. Some began to ask questions like: Is it fair of God to send them all to hell because they had never heard of Christianity? Or, in light of biblical history, where did they come from? How do these people fit with the story of Noah? These discoveries called into question biblical morality and biblical history.

Also, people started using a new way of looking at knowledge. They began to use the scientific method to evaluate everything. This begins a significant shift in how we understand the world. There is a movement away from certainty toward probability. There is also a movement away from studying ancient authors toward scientific experimentation.

In the modern world, therefore, truth is not found in the past but in the present and future. With this is also questioning of biblical authority.

## **The Modern World and Christianity**

Let me conclude by talking about our modern world and how Christians should respond. Sunshine concludes his book with chapters on “Modernity and Its Discontents” and “The Decay of Modernity.” Essentially the modern world has left humans with a loss of truth, certainty, and meaning in life. “Materialism provides a ready answer to the question of the meaning and purpose of life: there is none.”[\[11\]](#) From a Darwinian perspective, our only purpose is to pass our genes on to the next generation.

This rejection of spirituality and meaning has ushered in various other worldviews as alternatives. These would be such worldviews as postmodernism, neo-paganism, and the New Age Movement. Sunshine argues that in many ways we have been catapulted back to Rome.

Like Rome we value toleration as the supreme virtue. Rome believed that toleration was important because it kept the empire together. If you go beyond the lines of toleration, you are persecuted. This is similar to the mindset today. The highest value in a postmodern world is toleration. Toleration so defined means that we will embrace any and all lifestyles people may choose.

The Romans lived in an oversexed society.[\[12\]](#) So do we. Rome

practiced abortion. So does our society. Rome was antinatal and made a deliberate attempt to prevent pregnancy. They focused on sexual enjoyment and did not want to bother with kids. In our modern world, birthrates in most of the western democracies are plummeting.

Western civilization is a product of ancient Roman civilization plus Christianity. Sunshine argues that once you removed Christianity, modern society reverted back to Roman society and a recovery of the ancient pagan worldview.

So how should Christians live in this world? Of course, we should live out a biblical worldview. Every generation is called to live faithfully to the gospel, and our generation is no exception.

This is especially important today since we are facing a society that is not willing to accept biblical ideas. In many ways, we face a challenge similar to the early church, though not as daunting. From history we can see that the early church did live faithfully and transformed the Roman world. Christians produced a totally new civilization: western culture. By living faithfully before the watching world, we will increase our credibility and earn the respect from those who are around us by living in accordance with biblical principles.

## Notes

1. Glenn Sunshine, *Why You Think the Way You Do: The Story of Western Worldviews from Rome to Home* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2009).
2. Ibid., 13.
3. Ibid., 31
4. Ibid., 20
5. Ibid., 30
6. Ibid., 33-34
7. Ibid., 43



8. Ibid., 44
9. Ibid., 76
10. Ibid., 91
11. Ibid., 177
12. Ibid., 33

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# Archaeology and the Old Testament

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



This article is also available in [Spanish](#).

## Understanding Archaeology

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## **The Discovery of the Hittites**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## **Sodom and Gomorrah**

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

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

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

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

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

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

Five cities of the plain are mentioned in Genesis 14: Sodom, Gomorrah, Admah, Zoar, and Zeboiim. Remnants of these other four cities are also found along the Dead Sea. Following a southward path from Bab edh-Drha there is the city called Numeria. Continuing south is the city called es-Safi. Further south are the ancient cities of Feifa and Khanazir. Studies at these cities revealed that they had been abandoned at the same time about 2450-2350 B.C. Many archaeologists believe if Bab ed-Drha is Sodom, Numeria is Gomorrah, and es-Safi is Zoar.

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

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

## **The Walls of Jericho**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



considerations, scarab data and a carbon-14 date all point to a destruction of the city around the end of the Late Bronze Age, about 1400 BCE.”[\[8\]](#)

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

## House of David

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## Notes

1. See [Are the Biblical Documents Reliable?](http://www.probe.org/are-the-biblical-documents-reliable/) available on the Web at [www.probe.org/are-the-biblical-documents-reliable/](http://www.probe.org/are-the-biblical-documents-reliable/)
2. Randall Price, *The Stones Cry Out* (Eugene, OR.: Harvest House Publishers, 1997), 46. e, 173.
3. Nelson Glueck, *Rivers in the Desert*, (New York: Farrar, Strous and Cudahy, 1959), 136. e, 173.
4. Fred Wright, *Highlights of Archaeology in the Bible Lands*, (Chicago: Moody Press, 1955), 94-95.
5. Price, 118.
6. John Garstang, *The Foundations of Bible History; Joshua, Judges* (London: Constable, 1931), 146.
7. Kathleen Kenyon and Thomas Holland, *Excavations at Jericho Vol. 3: The Architecture and Stratigraphy of the Tell*, (London: BSA), 370.
8. Bryant Wood, "Did the Israelites Conquer Jericho?" *Biblical Archaeological Review*, March/April, 1990, 57.
9. John Wilford, "Areologists say Evidence of House of David Found." *Dallas Morning News*, 6 August 1993, 1A
10. Price, 173.

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18. Wilford, John. "Archaeologists say Evidence of House of David Found." *Dallas Morning News*, 6 August 1993, 1A and 11A.
19. Wood, Bryant. "Did the Israelites Conquer Jericho?" *Biblical Archaeological Review*, Vol. 16:2, 1990.
20. Wright, Fred. *Highlights of Archaeology in the Bible Lands*. Chicago: Moody Press, 1955.
21. Yamauchi, Edwin, *The Stones and the Scriptures*. Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott Company, 1972.

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# Authority of the Bible – A Strong Argument for Christianity

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



*This article is also available in [Spanish](#).*

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

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



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

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

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

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

## **Prophecy**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## Unity

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

# Archaeology

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## **The Bible Alone Is God's Word**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## Notes

1. For more information refer to the articles "The Historical Reliability of the Gospels" ([probe.org/historical-reliability-of-the-gospels/](http://probe.org/historical-reliability-of-the-gospels/)) and "The Uniqueness of Jesus" ([www.probe.org/uniqueness-of-jesus](http://www.probe.org/uniqueness-of-jesus)).
2. Ralph H. Alexander, "Ezekiel," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelin (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986), 869.
3. Norman Geisler and William Nix, *A General Introduction to the Bible*, (Chicago, IL.: Moody Press, 1986), 364-367.
4. Nelson Glueck, *Rivers in the Desert: A History of the Negev* (New York: Farrar, Strauss, and Cudahy, 1959), 31.
5. William F. Albright, *Archaeology and the Religion of Israel* (Baltimore: John Hopkins, 1953), 176.
6. Randall Price, *The Stones Cry Out* (Eugene, OR.: Harvest House Publishers, 1997), 25.
7. Ibid., 152-53.
8. Norman Geisler, *Baker Encyclopedia of Christian Apologetics* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999), s.v., Archaeology, New Testament.
9. Josh McDowell, *Evidence That Demands a Verdict* (San Bernardino: Here's Life Publishers, 1999), 66.

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# Tales From the Crypt: Do We Have the Bones of Jesus?

*February 26, 2008*

The last week in February started out with an incredible announcement. James Cameron (director of the film *Titanic*) and Simcha Jacobovici announced that they have found the bones of Jesus! At their news conference, they promoted their Discovery Channel special *The "Lost Tomb of Jesus"* that will air on March 4<sup>th</sup> and also promoted the book by Simcha Jacobovici and Charles Pellegrino entitled *The Jesus Family Tomb: The Discovery, the Investigation, and the Evidence That Could Change History* released by Harper-Collins.

If proved reliable, these findings would call into question the very cornerstone of Christianity: the resurrection of Jesus. But are they true?

The foundational claim is that they have discovered the family tomb of Jesus Christ. Is this really the tomb of Jesus or his family? There are many good reasons to believe this tomb has no relationship at all to Jesus and his family. Many are asking what to think about these claims. Therefore, I put together a quick two-page summary of some of the criticisms and concerns that surfaced in the first few hours after the announcement. Before we look at those criticisms, let's first review the history of this tomb.

We have known about this tomb since it was discovered in 1980. Back then, Israeli construction workers were digging the foundation for a new building in a Jerusalem suburb. Their digging revealed a cave with ten limestone ossuaries.

Archeologists removed the limestone caskets for examination.

When they were able to decipher the names on the ten ossuaries, they found: Jesua, son of Joseph, Mary, Mary, Mathew, Jofa and Judah, son of Jesua. At the time, one of Israel's most prominent archeologists (Professor Amos Kloner) didn't associate the crypt with Jesus. He rightly argued that the father of Jesus was a humble carpenter who couldn't afford a luxury crypt for his family. Moreover, the names on the crypt were common Jewish names.

None of this has stopped Cameron and Jacobovici from promoting the tomb as the family tomb of Jesus. They claim to have evidence (through DNA tests, archeological evidence, and Biblical studies) to prove that the ten ossuaries belong to Jesus and his family. They also argue that Jesus and Mary Magdalene might have produced a son named Judah. However, a number of biblical scholars say this is really just an old story now being recycled in an effort to create a media phenomenon that will sell books and guarantee a large audience for the television special.

First, does it really make sense that this would be the family tomb of Jesus? Remember that Jesus was in Jerusalem as a pilgrim and was not a resident of the city. How would his family be able to buy this tomb? As we already mentioned, Joseph (who had probably already died in Galilee) and his family did not have the funds to buy such an elaborate burial site. Moreover, they were from out of town and would need time to find this tomb location. To accept this theory, one has to believe they stole the body of Jesus and moved it to this tomb in a suburb of Jerusalem all within about a day's time.

Second, if this is the family tomb of Jesus and his family, why is Jesus referred to as the son of Joseph? As far as we can determine from history, the earliest followers of Jesus never called Jesus the son of Joseph. The record of history is that it was only outsiders who mistakenly called him that.

Third, if this is the family tomb of Jesus, why do we have the name of Matthew listed with the rest of the family? If this is the Matthew that traveled with Jesus, then he certainly was not a family member. And you would have to wonder why James (who remained in Jerusalem) would allow these inscriptions as well as allow the family to move the body from Jerusalem to this tomb and perpetrate a hoax that Jesus bodily rose from the grave. Also, the fourth-century church historian Eusebius writes that the body of James (the half-brother of Jesus) was buried alone near the temple mount and that his tomb was visited in the early centuries.

Fourth, there is the problem with the common names on the tombs. Researchers have cataloged the most common names at the time. The ten most common were: Simon/Simeon, Joseph, Eleazar, Judah, John/Yohanan, Jesus, Hananiah, Jonathan, Matthew, and Manaen/Menahem. These are some of the names found on the ossuaries and thus suggest that the tomb belonged to someone other than Jesus of Nazareth and his family. In fact, the name Jesus appears in 98 other tombs and on 21 other ossuaries.

Finally there is the question of the DNA testing. Apparently there is evidence that shows that the DNA from the woman (in what they say is the Mary Magdalene ossuary) and the DNA from the so-called Jesus ossuary does not match. So they argue that they were not relatives and thus must have been married.

But does the DNA evidence really prove that? It does not prove she is his wife. In fact, we really don't even know who in the ossuaries are related to the other. Moreover, we do not have an independent DNA control sample to compare these findings with. At best, the DNA evidence shows that some of these people are related and some are not.

All of this looks like sensationalism from Simcha Jacobovici (who has a reputation as an Indiana-Jones type) and James Cameron (the director of the highly fictionalized Titanic). The publicity is certain to sell books and draw a television



audience, but it is not good history or archaeology.

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### **Follow-up from Kerby 2/28/07**

My commentary was a brief (two-page) summary of some of the criticisms and concerns that many people surfaced in the first few hours after the announcement. Now that we have a few days of reflection on the claims by James Cameron and Simcha Jacobovici, I think we can begin to provide an even more detailed perspective.

Here are some good commentaries and blogs posted by experts in the field as well some news articles that quote these people. Some of these experts have been able to see the Discovery Channel special "The Lost Tomb of Jesus" and thus can give even more detail than I was able to do when I first wrote my commentary on Monday, February 26. The first two links are for commentaries by Dr. Darrell Bock, Dallas Theological Seminary. He was on my radio program "Point of View" and provided some great insight. The next link is for a commentary by Ben Witherington, Asbury Theological Seminary. The following three are news articles quoting from experts:

Hollywood Hype: The Oscars and Jesus' Family Tomb, What do they share?

<http://dev.bible.org/bock/node/106>

No need to yell, only a challenge for some who need to step up and could:

<http://dev.bible.org/bock/node/107>

The Jesus Tomb? Titanic Talpiot tomb theory sunk from the start:

[benwitherington.blogspot.com/2007/02/jesus-tomb-titanic-talpiot-tomb-theory.html](http://benwitherington.blogspot.com/2007/02/jesus-tomb-titanic-talpiot-tomb-theory.html)

'Jesus tomb' documentary ignores biblical & scientific evidence, logic, experts say

<http://www.bpnews.net/bpnews.asp?ID=25053>

Ten reason why the Jesus tomb claim is bogus:

<http://tinyurl.com/2rmj8a>

Remains of the Day: Scholars dismiss filmmakers' assertions that Jesus and his family were buried in Jerusalem:

<http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2007/februaryweb-only/109-33.0.html>

Kerby Anderson

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## In Defense of History

*Don Closson critiques the postmodern notion that we have limited or no access to history, except through biased lenses. He vies for a humble, but confident view of history as a scholarly pursuit, while writing in defense of history as a bedrock of Christian truth claims.*

A convenient claim of our postmodern times is that historical truth does not exist, or, at the very least, is not accessible to us. It is fashionable to believe that all historical writing is fiction in the sense that it is one person's subjective opinion. History as an enterprise is more like the creation of literature, say some, than a scientific investigation. Because we cannot be certain about the events of history, all perspectives must be treated as equally valid. One historian has written, "The Postmodern view that language could not relate to anything but itself must . . . entail the dissolution of history . . . and necessarily jeopardizes historical study as normally understood."[1](#)

If history is something that we create rather than uncover via the rules of scientific historical research, why do history at all? The postmodern response is that all history is politically motivated. French philosopher Michel Foucault became famous for insisting that power creates knowledge rather than the traditional assumption that knowledge is power. He wrote that since there is no access to value-free historical information, the need to write about history must come from the desire to control the past for political purposes. In effect, all historical writing is a form of propaganda.



This popular way of viewing history has dramatic implications for Christians who share their faith. One of the first objections that a Christian is likely to encounter when sharing the Gospel is the denial of any confident access to what has happened in the past. Since Christianity is a faith that is tied to history, this creates an immediate impasse. Paul says in 1 Corinthians 15 that if Christ has not been raised from the dead in a real historical sense, then our preaching is useless, our faith is futile, we are still in our sins, and we are to be pitied more than all men. Christian evangelists and apologists often point to the existence of archeological remains, ancient manuscripts, and written accounts of historical events in arguing that Christianity is a reasonable faith and that the Bible is a trustworthy and accurate account of the life of Christ. The Judeo/Christian tradition stands on the belief that God acts in history and that history reflects this divine incursion.

## **The Argument Against History**

Until recently, students of history had two competing approaches to their craft to consider. One approach, represented by Sir Geoffrey Elton, argued that historians should focus on the documentary record left by the past in

order to find the objective truth about what actually happened. These pieces of data are then used to construct a narrative of political events which, in turn, becomes the core of any serious historical writing. Put another way, it's the facts that count, and the facts should be used to understand the actions and motivations of political leaders who determine the paths taken by nations or kingdoms. All of this assumes our ability to discover objective truth about history.

The other approach represented by E. H. Carr and his book *What is History?* argues that history books and the people who write them are products of a given time and place. Therefore, history is seen and written through the lens of the historians' prejudices. This is often called the *sociological view of history* where a study of the historian is just as important as the comprehension of his writings.

Over the last three or four decades, Elton's emphasis on facts has been slowly losing ground. As one writer put it, "Few historians would now defend the hard-line concept of historical objectivity espoused by Elton."[\[2\]](#) Even worse, Carr's sociological view is being replaced by one that is even further removed from seeing history as objective truth. The arrival of postmodern theory in the 1980s eradicated the search for historical truth and diminished the voice of professional historians to be just one discourse among many.

Historian David Harlan commented that by the end of the 1980s most historians—even most working historians—had all but given up on the possibility of acquiring reliable, objective knowledge about the past.[\[3\]](#) By the mid-1990s some historians were saying that "History has been shaken right down to its scientific and cultural foundations."[\[4\]](#) An Australian academic went so far as to declare the killing of history.[\[5\]](#)

The denial of objective historical knowledge is impacting our culture and the church. Individuals involved with a movement called [the Emergent Church](#) generally agree with

postmodernity's denial of our ability to know objective historical truth. They also claim that those who believe they can be certain about the past are dangerous. But it is the culture at large, and especially the unsaved that makes this issue so important.

## **A Double Standard**

A close look at this issue reveals a growing tendency to utilize a double standard when it comes to determining what happened in the past.

It seems that the only historical record that Western culture is certain of is that the Nazis committed mass genocide against six million European Jews. The rest of history is relegated to the uncertainties of our postmodern suspicions. This loss of confidence has become so extreme that some nations, especially in Europe, have resorted to the force of law to regulate what can and what cannot be said regarding some historical events.

Let's look at one example. France has made it a crime to deny the Holocaust and has successfully prosecuted a number of authors who have questioned the particulars of the event. Once a nation goes down this path of legislated historical truth, it's difficult to turn back. French lawmakers recently attempted to legislate away denials of the Armenian genocide in 1915 by the Turkish Ottomans. The problem with these actions is not the historical accuracy of the position taken by the French government (the historical evidence supports the French view), but rather that history is being decided by legislative acts rather than by a consensus of historians who hold academic standards in high regard.

The temptation to legislate historical truth lures the other side to legislate its own version. Turkey has now prosecuted authors for admitting the possibility that the Armenian

holocaust actually happened in 1915. It was decided that such a view was un-Turkish.

If objective historical truth cannot be discerned, it doesn't make much sense to legislate one version of it. This Orwellian response to a loss of academic confidence only creates mistrust and a greater opportunity for the abuse or propagandistic use of history.

How should Christians respond to this battle over the past?

History is important to the Christian faith. We need to encourage high standards of academic scholarship, even when the outcome doesn't immediately support our biblical views. We also need to humbly concede that the process will be inexact, and that absolute certainty regarding any single event will always escape our grasp. Our goal should be to find a middle position between absolute certainty about what happened and the complete despair that some postmodernists advocate.

## **Converging Lines of Evidence**

Can we really know anything about history? Thus far we have considered some of the arguments against what is called objective historical knowledge or historical certainty. Let's look now at three ways of thinking about doing history that might help restore confidence in the process.

The first method is called the *converging lines of evidence* approach. How would this technique apply to the subject of the Holocaust? The first sources of evidence would include written documents and photographs from the period, including personal letters, official papers, and business forms. German administrators were highly efficient record keepers, thus making significant amounts of data available. Another source of evidence would be eyewitness accounts from survivors. These have been carefully collected and recorded over the years. Evidence from the physical remains of the concentration camps

themselves and inferential evidence from comparing European population counts before and after the war provide more resources. None of this information is taken at face value, and no one line of evidence is conclusive. But as the evidence accumulates our confidence in understanding the event rises with it.

The second model for acquiring historical knowledge is called the *hermeneutical spiral*. This method argues that every time we ask a question regarding a topic, the research gives us answers that bring us a little closer to understanding the event. It also gives us new questions to research. Each pass we make at understanding brings us a little closer to the event itself. If applied to understanding Paul's letter to the church in Corinth, one might begin by reading the letter in English and attempting to understand its purpose or message. This would raise questions about Paul's audience, prompting research into the culture of the first century. Eventually one might learn biblical Greek to better understand exactly what Paul was trying to communicate. As D. A. Carson writes, "I hold that it is possible and reasonable to speak of finite human beings knowing some things truly, even if nothing exhaustively or omnisciently."[\[6\]](#)

The third approach is known as the *fusion of horizons* model. Just as no two people have an identical view of the horizon, no two people will have an identical perspective on a historical event. They will interpret the event differently because of their cultural backgrounds. To overcome this, the learner must try to step out of his or her current cultural setting, with its beliefs and presuppositions, and then become immersed in the language, ideas, and beliefs of the past, attempting to step into the shoes of those participating in the event itself.

# History and Christianity

Bernard Lewis, perhaps America's foremost scholar on the Middle East, writes that great efforts have been made, and continue to be made, to falsify the record of the past and to make history a tool of propaganda.[\[7\]](#) How does this falsifying of history impact Christians and the church?

First, the Christian faith stands on a historical foundation. Unlike other religious systems, a real person, not just teachings or a life example, is at the center of Christianity. Jesus provided a once-for-all payment for sin, and it is our faith in that provision that makes salvation possible. Christians also believe that God has revealed himself through the inspired writings of the Old and New Testaments. Since their influence depends on both their antiquity and authenticity, archeological remains and ancient manuscripts are vital for making a defense for the authority of the Bible.

Second, historical knowledge is important when we answer critics of the Christian faith. A current example is the comparison of Islam and Christianity regarding tolerance and civil rights. The myth of Islamic tolerance was created in the seventeenth century when French Protestants used Islam to shame the Catholic Church.[\[8\]](#) Unfortunately, they had little or no firsthand experience with the brutality of Islam towards those under its rule. This tolerance myth has been utilized in recent decades by Muslim writers in the West to continue the misinformation. Only recently have scholars begun to speak out and refute the tolerance myth and uncover the brutality of worldwide jihad over the centuries. It is ironic that as this program is being written, the president of Iran has convened a conference to promote the idea that the Jewish Holocaust is a myth created by the west to impose a homeland for the Jews in the Middle East.

Whether it's the Crusades, the Inquisition, or the slave trade in the west, we need to be able to trust the consensus of



historians who are committed to high academic standards to get an accurate picture of what actually happened so that we can give a wise response to our critics. In some cases, we may need to apologize for those who acted in the name of Christ yet whose actions violated the teaching of Scripture. In other cases, we may have to gently correct misconceptions about an historical event in the media or in our schools that are the result of inaccurate or incomplete information.

If we give up on the possibility of acquiring historical knowledge, we also give up an important tool for showing that our faith is reasonable.

## Notes

1. Richard J. Evans, *In Defense of History* (W. W. Norton & Company, 1999), 3.
2. Ibid., 2.
3. Ibid., 4
4. Ibid., 3
5. Ibid., 4.
6. D. A. Carson, *Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church* (Zondervan, 2006), 116.
7. Serge Trifkovic, *Defeating Jihad* (Regina Orthodox Press, 2006), 265.
8. Robert Spencer, ed., *The Myth of Islamic Tolerance: How Islamic Law Treats Non-Muslims* (Amherst, N.Y.: Prometheus Books, 2005), 17.

# History and the Christian Faith

*For many people in our world today “history,” as Henry Ford once said, “is bunk.” Indeed, some people go so far as to say that we really can’t know anything at all about the past! But since the truth of Christianity depends on certain historical events (like the resurrection of Jesus, for example) having actually occurred, Dr. Michael Gleghorn shows why there is no good reason to be so skeptical about our knowledge of the past.*

## The Importance of History

Can we really know anything at all about the past? For example, can we really know if Nebuchadnezzar was king of Babylon in the sixth century B.C., or if Jesus of Nazareth was an actual historical person, or if Abraham Lincoln delivered the Gettysburg Address? Although these might sound like questions that would only interest professional historians, they’re actually important for Christians too.

But why should Christians be concerned with such questions? Well, because the truth of our faith depends on certain events having actually happened in the past. As British theologian Alan Richardson stated:



The Christian faith is . . . an historical faith . . . it is bound up with certain happenings in the past, and if these happenings could be shown never to have occurred . . . then the . . . Christian faith . . . would be found to have been built on sand.[{1}](#)

Consider an example. Christians believe that Jesus died on the cross for the sins of the world. Now, in order for this belief

to even possibly be true, the crucifixion of Jesus must have occurred in history. If the account of Jesus' death on the cross is merely legendary, or otherwise unhistorical, then the Christian proclamation that he died on the cross for our sins cannot be true. As T. A. Roberts observed:

The truth of Christianity is anchored in history: hence the . . . recognition that if some . . . of the events upon which Christianity has been traditionally thought to be based could be proved unhistorical, then the religious claims of Christianity would be seriously jeopardized.[\[2\]](#)

What actually happened in the past, therefore, is extremely significant for biblical Christianity. But this raises an important question: How can we really know what happened in the past? How can we know if the things we read about in our history books ever really happened? How can we know if Jesus *really* was crucified, as the Gospel writers say he was? We weren't there to personally observe these events. And (at least so far) there's no time machine by which we can visit the past and see for ourselves what really happened. The events of the past are gone. They're no longer directly available for study. So how can we ever *really* know what happened?

For the Christian, such questions confront us with the issue of whether genuine knowledge of the past is possible or whether we're forever doomed to be skeptical about the historical events recorded in the Bible. In the remainder of this article I hope to show that we should indeed be skeptical, particularly of the arguments of skeptics who say that we can know nothing of the past.

## **The Problem of the Unobservable Past**

It shouldn't surprise us that the truth of Christianity depends on certain events having actually happened in the past. The Apostle Paul told the Corinthians: "if Christ has

not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith" (1 Cor. 15:14). For Paul, if the bodily resurrection of Jesus was not an actual historical event, then faith in Christ was useless. What happened in the past, therefore, is important for Christianity.

But some scholars insist that we can never *really* know what happened in the past. This view, called radical historical relativism, denies that real, or objective, knowledge of the past is possible. This poses a challenge for Christianity. As the Christian philosopher Ronald Nash observes, ". . . the skepticism about the past that must result from a total historical relativism would seriously weaken one of Christianity's major apologetic foundations." {3}

But why would anyone be skeptical about our ability to know at least some objective truth about the past? One reason has to do with our inability to directly observe the past. The late Charles Beard noted that, unlike the chemist, the historian cannot directly observe the objects of his study. His only access to the past comes through records and artifacts that have survived to the present. {4}

There is certainly some truth to this. But why does the historian's inability to directly observe the past mean that he can't have genuine knowledge of the past? Beard contrasts the historian with the chemist, implying that the latter does have objective knowledge of chemistry. But it's important to remember that individual chemists don't acquire *all* their knowledge through direct scientific observation. Indeed, much of it comes from reading journal articles by other chemists, articles that function much like the historical documents of the historian! {5}

But can the chemist really gain objective knowledge by reading such articles? It appears so. Suppose a chemist begins working on a new problem based on the carefully established results of previous experiments. But suppose that he hasn't personally

conducted all these experiments; he's merely read about them in scientific journals. Any knowledge not directly verified by the chemist would be indirect knowledge.[\[6\]](#) But it's not *completely* lacking in objectivity for that reason.

While historical knowledge may fall short of absolute certainty (as most of our knowledge invariably does), this doesn't make it completely subjective or arbitrary. Further, since most of what we know doesn't seem to be based on direct observation, our inability to directly observe the past cannot (at least by itself) make genuine knowledge of history impossible. Ultimately, then, this argument for historical relativism is simply unconvincing.

## **The Problem of Personal Perspective**

I recently spoke with a young man who told me that he gets his news from three different sources: CNN, FOX, and the BBC. When I asked him why, he told me that each station has its own particular perspective. He therefore listens to all three in order to (hopefully) arrive at a more objective understanding of what's really going on in the world.

Interestingly, a similar issue has been observed in the writing of history. Historical relativists argue that no historian can be completely unbiased and value-neutral in his description of the past. Instead, everything he writes, from the selection of historical facts to the connections he sees between those facts, is influenced by his personality, values, and even prejudices. Every work of history (including the historical books of the Bible) is said to be written from a unique viewpoint. It's relative to a particular author's perspective and, hence, cannot be objective.

How should Christians respond to this? Did the biblical writers reliably record what happened in the past? Or are their writings so influenced by their personalities and values that we can never know what *really* happened? Well, it's

probably true that every work of history, like every story in a newspaper, is colored (at least to some extent) by the author's worldview. In this sense, absolute objectivity is impossible. But does this mean that historical relativism is true? Not according to Norman Geisler. He writes:

Perfect objectivity may be practically unattainable within the limited resources of the historian on most if not all topics. But . . . the inability to attain 100 percent objectivity is a long way from total relativity.[\[7\]](#)

While historians and reporters may write from a particular worldview perspective, it doesn't follow that they're completely incapable of at least some objectivity. Indeed, certain safeguards exist which actually help ensure this. Suppose a historian writes that king Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon did not capture Jerusalem in the sixth century B.C. His thesis can be challenged and corrected on the basis of the available historical and archaeological evidence which indicates that Nebuchadnezzar did do this. Similarly, if a newspaper runs a story which later turns out to be incorrect, it might be forced to print a retraction.

While complete objectivity in history may be impossible, a sufficient degree of objectivity can nonetheless be attained because the historian's work is subject to correction in light of the evidence. The problem of personal perspective, then, doesn't inevitably lead to total historical relativism. Therefore, objections to the historical reliability of the Bible that are based on this argument are not ultimately persuasive.

## **Problems with Historical Relativism**

We've seen that historical relativism denies that we can know objective truth about the past. While this poses a challenge to biblical Christianity, the arguments offered in support of this position aren't very convincing. Not only are the

*supporting* arguments unconvincing, however, the arguments *against* this position are devastating. Let's look at just two.

First, there are many facts of history that virtually all historians agree on – regardless of their worldview. For example, what responsible historian would seriously deny that George Washington was the first president of the United States, or that Abraham Lincoln delivered the Gettysburg Address? As one historical relativist admitted, “there are basic facts which are the same for all historians.”[\[8\]](#) But consider what this means. If a Christian, a Buddhist, an atheist, and a Muslim can all agree on certain basic facts of history, then it would seem to follow that at least some objective knowledge of history is possible. But in that case, total historical relativism is false, for it *denies* that such knowledge is possible.

Another reason for rejecting historical relativism is that it makes it impossible to distinguish good history from poor history, or genuine history from propaganda. As Dr. Ronald Nash observes, “If hard relativism were true, any distinction between truth and error in history would disappear.”[\[9\]](#) Just think about what this would mean. There would be no real difference between history and historical fiction! Further, there would be no legitimate basis for criticizing obviously false historical theories. This reveals that something is wrong with historical relativism, for as Dr. Craig reminds us, “All historians distinguish good history from poor.” For example, he recalls how Immanuel Velikovsky attempted “to rewrite ancient history on the basis of world-wide catastrophes caused by extra-terrestrial forces . . . dismissing entire ancient kingdoms and languages as fictional.”[\[10\]](#)

How did historians react to such ideas? According to Edwin Yamauchi, who wrote a detailed critical analysis of the theory, most historians were “quite hostile” to Velikovsky's work.[\[11\]](#) They were irritated by his callous disregard for the

actual historical evidence. In a similar vein, one need only remember the tremendous critical response to some of Dan Brown's more outrageous claims in *The Da Vinci Code*. It's important to notice that when scholars criticize the theories of Velikovsky and Brown, they tacitly acknowledge "the objectivity of history."[\[12\]](#) Their criticism shows that they view these theories as flawed because they don't correspond to what really happened in the past.

Well, with such good reasons for rejecting historical relativism, we needn't fear its threat to biblical Christianity.

## Determining Truth in History

How can we determine what actually happened in the past? Is there any way to separate the "wheat" from the "chaff," so to speak, when it comes to evaluating competing interpretations of a particular historical person or event? For example, if one writer claims Jesus was married, and another claims he wasn't, how can we determine which of the claims is true?

Well as you've probably already guessed, the issue really comes down to the evidence. For information about Jesus, virtually all scholars agree that our most valuable evidence comes from the New Testament Gospels. Each of these documents can be reliably dated to the first century, and "the events they record are based on either direct or indirect eyewitness testimony."[\[13\]](#) They thus represent our earliest and best sources of information about Jesus.

But even if we limit our discussion to these sources, different scholars still reach different conclusions about Jesus' marital status. So again, how can we determine the truth? We might employ a model known as inference to the best explanation. Simply put, this model says that "the historian should accept the hypothesis that best explains all the evidence."[\[14\]](#) Now admittedly, this isn't an exact science.



But as Dr. Craig reminds us, “The goal of historical knowledge is to obtain probability, not mathematical certainty.”[\[15\]](#) To demand more than this of history is simply to make unreasonable demands. Even in a court of law, we must be content with proof beyond a reasonable doubt -- not beyond all possible doubt.[\[16\]](#)

Keeping these things in mind, does the evidence best support the hypothesis that Jesus was, or wasn't, married? If you're interested in such a discussion I would highly recommend Darrell Bock's recent book, *Breaking the Da Vinci Code*. After a careful examination of the evidence, he concludes that Jesus was definitely *not* married – a conclusion shared by the vast majority of New Testament scholars.[\[17\]](#)

Of course, I'm not trying to argue that this issue can be decisively settled by simply citing an authority (although I certainly agree with Dr. Bock's conclusion). My point is rather that we have a way of determining truth in history. By carefully evaluating the best available evidence, and by logically inferring the best explanation of that evidence, we can determine (sometimes with a high degree of probability) what actually happened in the past.

Christianity is a religion rooted in history. Not a history about which we can have no real understanding, but a history that we can know and be confident in believing.

## Notes

1. Alan Richardson, *Christian Apologetics* (London: SCM, 1947), 91, cited in Ronald H. Nash, *Christian Faith and Historical Understanding* (Dallas: Word Publishing/Probe Books, 1984), 12.
2. T. A. Roberts, *History and Christian Apologetic* (London: SPCK, 1960), vii, cited in Nash, *Christian Faith and Historical Understanding*, 12.
3. Nash, *Christian Faith and Historical Understanding*, 77-78.

4. This information comes from Ronald Nash's discussion of Charles Beard's essay, "That Noble Dream," in Nash, *Christian Faith and Historical Understanding*, 84.
5. William Lane Craig, *Reasonable Faith: Christian Truth and Apologetics* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 1994), 176.
6. Nash, *Christian Faith and Historical Understanding*, 85.
7. Norman Geisler, *Christian Apologetics* (Grand Rapids, Baker, 1976), 297, cited in Nash, *Christian Faith and Historical Understanding*, 88-89.
8. E.H. Carr, *What is History?* (New York: Random House, 1953), 8, cited in Craig, *Reasonable Faith*, 185.
9. Nash, *Christian Faith and Historical Understanding*, 88.
10. Craig, *Reasonable Faith*, 186-87.
11. Edwin Yamauchi, "Immanuel Velikovsky's Catastrophic History," *Journal of the American Scientific Affiliation* 25 (1973): 134, cited in Craig, *Reasonable Faith*, 187.
12. Craig, *Reasonable Faith*, 187.
13. Lee Strobel, *The Case for Christ*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1998), 25.
14. Craig, *Reasonable Faith*, 184.
15. Ibid.
16. Ibid.
17. Darrell L. Bock, *Breaking the Da Vinci Code* (Nashville: Nelson Books, 2004), 31-45. Also see my previous article, "Redeeming The Da Vinci Code," at [probe.org/redeeming-the-da-vinci-code/](http://probe.org/redeeming-the-da-vinci-code/).

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# When Nations Die

*One of the more popular Probe radio programs has been "[Decline of a Nation](#)." Kerby Anderson returns to this important theme by summarizing the significant work by Jim Nelson Black in his book *When Nations Die*. When we look at three thousand years of history, we observe that civilizations rise but eventually fall and die. The history of the world is the history of nations that are conquered by other nations or collapse into anarchy.*



*This article is also available in [Spanish](#).*

Jim Nelson Black sees ominous parallels to our own country. He says,

As I have looked back across the ruins and landmarks of antiquity, I have been stunned by the parallels between those societies and our own. For most of us the destruction of Carthage, the rise of the Greek city-states, and the Fall of Rome are mere ghosts of the past, history lessons long forgotten. And such things as the capture of Constantinople, the dissolution of the Holy Roman Empire, the collapse of the kingdoms of France and Spain, and the slow withering decline of the British Empire are much less clear and less memorable. Most of us do not remember much from our history lessons about the French Enlightenment or, for that matter, the issues that led to the American Revolution. But this is the legitimate background of our own place in history, it is vital that we reconsider the nature of life in those earlier times. For within those eras and movements are the seeds of the troubles we face today.[\[1\]](#)

There are many reasons for the decline and fall of a nation,

but an important (and often overlooked) reason is its abandonment of religion. Russell Kirk has said that the roots of “culture” come from the “cult.” In other words, culture (cult-ure) is based upon some form of religious or spiritual worldview. Egypt was a religious society founded on the worship of nature gods and goddesses. Greece and Rome had their pantheon of pagan deities. And the list of nations in India, China, and other parts of the globe all demonstrate the principle that civilization arises from religion.

And the opposite is also true. When the traditional beliefs of a nation erode, the nation dies. Religion provides the set of standards that govern a nation. Historian Will Durant said, “There is no significant example in history, before our time, of a society successfully maintaining moral life without the aid of religion.”[\[2\]](#)

Unfortunately, this nation has embarked on a journey to maintain a society without a religious code. The Ten Commandments are pulled from the walls, and religious values are stripped from the public square.

Christian principles are no longer taught in the public schools and often ridiculed in the arenas of education and media. One has to wonder what the fate of this country will be in the future.

## **Social Decay**

In his book *When Nations Die*, Jim Nelson Black lists three aspects of decay: social decay, cultural decay, and moral decay. Three important trends demonstrate social decay. They are “the crisis of lawlessness,” the “loss of economic discipline,” and “rising bureaucracy.”

History provides ample illustrations of the disastrous consequences of the collapse of law and order. “In ancient Greece, the first symptoms of disorder were a general loss of

respect for tradition and the degradation of the young. Among the early symptoms was the decline of art and entertainment. The philosophers and pundits distorted the medium of communication. Rhetoric became combative and intolerant; intellectuals began to deride and attack all the traditional institutions of Hellenic society.”{3}

New thinkers in the society argued for “fundamental change” and called for giving the youth a “voice in society.” Without traditional guidelines, the young men grew wild and undisciplined destroying the old order. Slowly Greece devolved into a disreputable and lawless nation. The Romans conquered Greece in 146 B.C. By placing everything under military authority, they were able to restore order and bring back the rule of law.

In a study of the French Revolution, José Ortega y Gasset noted that “Order is not pressure which is imposed on society from without, but an equilibrium which is set up from within.”{4} The Roman Empire (as well as other great civilizations) understood that discipline and custom were essential to stability.

A similar story can be found in ancient Egypt during the fourth century B.C. Lawlessness and violence crippled the economy, and the nation was in chaos. When Alexander the Great invaded the country in 333 B.C., his first task was to restore order and institute martial law (which he did in a ruthless manner). With the death of Alexander, Egypt returned to its old ways until the Roman Empire brought peace to the region through conquest and martial law.

Carthage was once called “the eternal rival of Rome” but its preeminence and impact waned as it “sank into debauchery and dissipation as a result of great wealth and luxury.” Law and order were destroyed from within. Moreover, the rich young men of Carthage no longer wanted to serve in the military so they hired mercenaries to do their fighting. But when the army came

into fierce conflict with Rome and other adversaries, the mercenaries ran and left the nation defenseless. Carthage fell to Rome in 146 B.C., and the first act of the Roman legions was to restore law and order.

In these and many other examples, social decay led to the decline and fall of a great civilization. If we are to prevent a repeat of history, then we must learn from these lessons of history.

## Cultural Decay

Four important trends demonstrate cultural decay. They are the “decline of education,” the “weakening of cultural foundations,” the “loss of respect for tradition,” and the “increase in materialism.”

In his study *The Civilization of Rome*, Donald Dudley says that no single cause, by itself, would have brought the empire to its knees. Instead, the fall came through “a number of weaknesses in Roman society; their effects may be variously estimated, but in combination they must have been largely responsible for the collapse.”[\[5\]](#)

The cultural decay of a nation leads inexorably to social and cultural decline. And the patterns are similar from one civilization to another. Samuel Eisenstadt wondered if the similarities were apparent or if they were historical and legitimate. After studying the work of a half dozen historians, he concluded that the similarities were actual. He concluded that “despite the great difference in cultural background most of these empires have shown similar characteristics, and that these characteristics provide the key to an understanding of the processes of their decline.”[\[6\]](#)

The Roman poet Livy wrote that greed and self-indulgence led Romans to dangerous excesses. He said, “For it is true that when men had fewer possessions, they were also modest in their

desires. Lately riches have brought avarice and abundant pleasures, and the desire to carry luxury and lust to the point of ruin and universal perdition.”{7}

In describing the decadence of the Roman Republic, historian Polybius wrote that this preoccupation with luxury led to carnal indulgences. “For some young men indulged in affairs with boys, others in affairs with courtesans.” They paid a talent (roughly a thousand dollars) for a boy bought for sexual pleasure and three hundred drachmas for a jar of caviar. “Marcus Cato was outraged by this and, in a speech to the people, complained that one might be quite convinced of the decline of the republic, when pretty boys cost more than fields and jars of caviar cost more than plowman.”{8}

As we look at our society today, we too find ourselves in a world where values have been inverted and where citizens pursue hedonistic pleasures without counting the cost. Our nation would be wise to learn the lessons of the past.

## Moral Decay

Three important trends demonstrate moral decay. They are the “rise in immorality,” the “decay of religious belief,” and the “devaluing of human life.”

The classic study of Roman civilization, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, written by English historian Edward Gibbon was published in that famous year of 1776. He “observed that the leaders of the empire gave into the vices of strangers, morals collapsed, laws became oppressive, and the abuse of power made the nation vulnerable to the barbarian hordes.”{9}

British historian Catherine Edwards demonstrated that our current examples of immorality are not a modern phenomenon. In her study of the “politics of immorality” in ancient Rome, she says that contraception, abortion, and exposure were common

ways to prevent childbirth in Rome. Husbands refused to recognize any child they did not believe to be their own. "Until accepted by its father, a Roman baby did not, legally speaking, exist."[{10}](#)

Life became cheap in the latter days of the Roman Empire. Burdensome regulation and taxes made manufacturing and trade unprofitable. Families were locked into hereditary trades and vocations allowing little if any vocational choice. Eventually, children were seen as a needless burden and abortion and infanticide became commonplace. In some cases, children were sold into slavery.

Manners and social life fell into debauchery. Under Justinian, entertainment grew bawdier and more bizarre. Orgies and love feasts were common. Homosexuality and bestiality were openly practiced. Under Nero, Christians were blamed for the great fire in Rome and horribly persecuted.

Similar patterns can be found in other civilizations. In Greece, the music of the young people became wild and coarse. Popular entertainment was brutal and vulgar. Promiscuity, homosexuality, and drunkenness became a daily part of life. And all moral and social restraints were lost leading to greater decadence.

In Carthage, worship turned from Baal to the earth goddess Tanit. "Sacrifices to the goddess of fertility were supposed to ensure productivity, long life, and even greater profits."[{11}](#) Ornately carved funeral monuments depicting infant sacrifice can be seen today along with thousands of tiny stone coffins to infants sacrificed to the pagan goddess.

The parallels to our own nation are striking. No, we don't sacrifice infants to a pagan goddess, but we have aborted nearly 40 million babies on the altar of convenience. And various sexual practices are openly accepted as part of an alternative lifestyle. It's no wonder that many believe our



country is a nation in decline.

## Are We A Nation in Decline?

Throughout this article we have been describing the patterns of decline in a nation. Do these patterns apply to our own nation? Many people looking at the patterns of social, cultural, and moral decay in other countries and civilizations have concluded that we are headed down the same path.

Russell Kirk put it this way:

*It appears to me that our culture labors in an advanced state of decadence; that what many people mistake for the triumph of our civilization actually consists of powers that are disintegrating our culture; that the vaunted 'democratic freedom' of liberal society in reality is servitude to appetites and illusions which attack religious belief; which destroy community through excessive centralization and urbanization; which efface life-giving tradition and custom.* [{12}](#)

When we understand the factors that led to the decline of great civilizations, we can easily see that this country can succumb to similar temptations and decadence. What happened in Greece, Rome, Egypt, Carthage, and many other civilizations can happen to us.

Professor Allan Bloom in his book *The Closing of the American Mind*, said, "This is the American moment in world history, the one for which we shall forever be judged. Just as in politics the responsibility for the fate of freedom in the world has devolved upon our regime, so the fate of the philosophy in the world has devolved upon our universities, and the two are related as they have never been before." [{13}](#)

We as a nation and a people must rise to the occasion or suffer a fate similar to that which has befallen civilizations

in the past. The task is not easy since the patterns of decay found in other nations strike ours as well. Nations were subverted by false and foreign ideologies. We too find hostile ideas in the public arenas of media, politics, and education. Sexual promiscuity led to the downfall of these nations. So too we find similar patterns of sexual promiscuity and debauchery.

As nations fell into decline, life became cheap. Infants were strangled, exposed to the elements, or sold into slavery. Others were sacrificed to pagan goddesses in order to ensure productivity or a long life. Today life has become cheap. At one end of the spectrum, unborn babies are aborted. At the other end, physician-assisted suicide is becoming acceptable for the aged.

In his study of history, Arnold Toynbee describes the predictable pattern of “challenge and response.” We as a nation are challenged in fundamental ways, and our response will either pull us back from the brink or push us over it. Will we follow the path to renewal and reformation or will we follow the path to destruction? The choice is ours.

## Notes

1. Jim Nelson Black, *When Nations Die* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale, 1994), 3.
2. Ibid., 9.
3. Ibid., 35-36.
4. Jos Ortega y Gasset, *Mirabeau: An Essay on the Nature of Statesmanship* (Manila: Historical Conservation Society, 1975).
5. Donald Dudley, *The Civilization of Rome* (New York: Meridian, 1993), 238.
6. Samuel Noah Eisenstadt, *The Decline of Empires* (Englewood

Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1967), 2-3.

7. Livy, preface to bk. I, *The History of Rome from Its Foundation*, trans. Aubrey de Selincourt (Baltimore: Penguin, 1967).

8. Polybius, *The Histories*, trans. W.R. Paton (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1930).

9. Black, *When Nations Die*, 187.

10. Catherine Edwards, *The Politics of Immorality in Ancient Rome* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 50.

11. Black, *When Nations Die*, 165.

12. Russell Kirk, "Can Our Civilization Survive?" address to Heritage Foundation, 24 July 1992.

13. Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1987), 382.

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# Archaeology and the New Testament

*Dr. Patrick Zukeran shows that numerous people, places and events described in the New Testament have been verified by archeology.*



*This article is also available in [Spanish](#).*

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.<sup>{1}</sup> 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.<sup>{2}</sup>

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 is Tacitus. 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 Kerezah, 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 Maritima. 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 Pilate ruled as procurator from 26-36 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 41-54 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 Tübingen 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 Achaia. 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."[\[8\]](#) A. N. Sherwin-White states, "For Acts the confirmation of historicity is overwhelming. . . . Any attempt to reject its basic historicity must now appear absurd. Roman historians have long taken it for granted."[\[9\]](#)

# 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](http://probe.org/authority-of-the-bible-a-strong-argument-for-christianity/)" at [probe.org/authority-of-the-bible-a-strong-argument-for-christianity/](http://probe.org/authority-of-the-bible-a-strong-argument-for-christianity/).
2. Josephus, Book 18, Chapter 3:3
3. Tacitus, *Annals*, 15.44
4. Julius Africanus, *Chronography*, 18:1.
5. Ibid.
6. William Ramsay, *St. Paul the Traveler and the Roman Citizen* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1982), 8.
7. John McRay, *Archaeology and the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI.: Baker Books, 1991), 227.
8. Norman Geisler, *Baker Encyclopedia of Apologetics* (Grand Rapids, MI.: Baker Books, 1999), 47.

9. A. N. Sherwin-White, *Roman Society and Roman Law in the New Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1963), 189.

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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.<sup>{1}</sup> 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 later Syriac) contained the Apocrypha.{3}

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.{4} 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.{5} 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.”[\[6\]](#) 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.”[\[7\]](#) 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.[\[8\]](#)

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 Nicea, 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. 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.[\[9\]](#)

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.”[\[10\]](#) 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.<sup>{15}</sup> Others contain extensive factual errors.<sup>{16}</sup> 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.<sup>{17}</sup>

## Notes

1. F. F. Bruce, *The Canon of Scripture* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1988), 43.
2. Ibid., 45.
3. Gleason L Archer., *A Survey of Old Testament Introduction* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1974), 73.
4. Merrill F. Unger, *Introductory Guide to the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1970), p 99.
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.
11. Christopher A. Hall, *Reading Scripture With The Church Fathers* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1998), 187.
12. Ibid.
13. Ibid.
14. Norman L. Geisler, *Baker Encyclopedia of Christian Apologetics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House Company, 1999)

85.

15. Ibid., 32.

16. Unger, 109-111.

17. Geisler, 31

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# The Social and Historical Impact of Christianity

*Probe founder Jimmy Williams examines the charge that Christianity has been detrimental to society, providing evidence for the contrary—that it has been a force for good.*

## Introduction

W.E.H. Lecky has commented on the Enlightenment that “The greatest religious change in the history of mankind” took place “under the eyes of a brilliant galaxy of philosophers and historians who disregarded as contemptible an Agency (*Christianity*) which all men must now admit to have been . . . the most powerful moral lever that has ever been applied to the affairs of men.”[\[1\]](#)

And yet, the West is in the process of abandoning its Judeo-Christian base which was the very source of this social development (Is this good or bad? Can we even ask such questions of history?).

**The Negative Charge:  
Christianity has been a repressive force**

## against the advancement of civilization.

A. Karl Marx termed Christianity an opiate of the masses, a tool of exploitation.

B. Sigmund Freud called Christianity an illusion, a crutch, a source of guilt and pathologies.

C. Bertrand Russell: "I say quite deliberately that the Christian religion, as organized in its churches, has been and still is the principal enemy of the moral progress in the world."[\[2\]](#)

D. Arnold Toynbee: "When the Greco-Roman world was converted to Christianity, the divinity was drained out of nature and concentrated in a single, transcendent God. Man's greedy impulse to exploit nature used to be held in check by his awe, his pious worship of nature. Now monotheism, as enunciated in Genesis, has removed the age-old restraint."[\[3\]](#)

E. Gloria Steinem observed that human potential must replace God by the year 2000.

F. Lyn White: "Christians, in absolute contrast to ancient paganism and Asia's religions, not only established a dualism of man and nature, but also insisted that it is God's will that man exploit nature for his proper ends."[\[4\]](#) "The crisis will not abate until we reject the Christian axiom that nature has no reason for existence save to serve man."[\[5\]](#)

Summary: Christianity. . .

1. Is a crutch
2. Impedes science
3. Is a source of bigotry
4. Causes wars
5. Causes pollution and animal extinction
6. Contributes to the population explosion
7. Causes inflation.



# Analysis of the Charges

(Unfortunately, *some* of the charges are true.)

A. The church, as an institution, has not always been a positive influence for social change.

1. Two major errors:

**Platonism** – The spiritual sphere is the real world. Matter is evil. Thus, the body is the prison of the soul. This sacred/secular distinction has resulted in the “pie in the sky” religion which has at times not been concerned about social reform.

**Humanism** – Views the physical and social needs of man as the only importance. The institutional church has, at times, failed at preaching regeneration.[{6}](#)

2. Jesus was concerned for the *total* man. Should we put a “new suit” on the man, or a “new man” in a suit? Jesus would have done both—put a new suit on a new man! (See the Gospels).

B. When the church is assimilated by the culture in which it finds itself, it loses its cutting edge. Example: Under Constantine in the 4th century, “The church became a little worldly and the world became a little churchy.”

C. The institutional church and true Christianity are not always synonymous. Professing Christians many not live up to the ideals and practices of its Founder (“Faith without works is dead,” James 2:26).

1. Renaissance popes are *not* Christianity; St. Francis of Assisi *is*.

2. Pizarro and Cortez are *not* Christianity, Bartolome de Las Casas *is*.

3. Captain Ball, a Yankee slave captain, is *not* Christianity, Wilburforce *is*.

D. Jesus Himself foretold that “tares” would be won among the “wheat.” (Matt. 13:25-39 ff).

## **Christianity's Positive Impact**

### **A. The Rise of Modern Science**

1. Science rose in the West, not in the East. Why?
2. Whitehead and Oppenheimer insisted that modern science could not have been born except in a Christian milieu.
3. Many pioneering scientists were not only theists, but Christians: Newton, Pasteur, Kepler, Pascal, Fleming, Edwards.
4. Concepts conducive to scientific inquiry were expressly Christian:
  - a. Positive attitude toward the world.
  - b. Awareness of order (i.e. cause/effect, cf. Rom. 1:20).
  - c. Views of man as a superintendent of nature.
  - d. Positive attitude toward progress (“Have dominion . . .” [Gen. 1:28ff])

### **B. The Development of Higher Education**

1. The Puritans were 95 per cent literate.
2. The University movement and the quest for knowledge (Berkeley, Descartes, the British Empiricists, Locke & Reid).
3. 100 of the first 110 universities in America were founded for the express purpose of propagating the Christian

religion.

4. The American university emerged from American Seminaries (Witherspoon, Princeton; Timothy Dwight, Yale).

C. Christianity and the Arts: the influence has been so broad as to be inestimable.

D. Social Change

1. Means of Social Change

a. Reform—moderately effective, but slow. Not always good.

b. Revolution—more rapid, but usually bloody.

c. Regeneration—Changing persons changes society. Jesus said, “Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God. . . That which is born of flesh is flesh: that which is born of spirit is spirit” (John 3:3,6). Paul spoke of the Christian rebirth in this way, “Do not be conformed to this world-system, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind . . .” (Romans 12:2).

d. There is a difference between *professing* Christianity and *possessing* a personal relationship with Christ.

2. Examples in the Early Church

a. In 252 A.D., the Christians of Corinth saved the city from the plague by responding to the needs of those who were simply dragged into the street.

b. In 312 A.D., half of the Roman Empire came under the political and social influence of Christianity under the rule of Constantine.

c. Early Christians stood in opposition to infanticide, degradation of women, gladiatorial combats, slavery, etc.

### 3. Examples in the Middle Ages (Consider the Monks, not the knights.)

- a. Monasteries served as hospitals, places of refuge.
- b. Monastic schools trained scribes to preserve manuscripts.
- c. Monasteries also developed agricultural skills and knowledge.
- d. The Scholastics remain a pivotal period of intellectual growth.
- e. A time of major artistic development: architecture, music, literature.

### 4. Examples during the Reformation

- a. A myriad of forces were at work in the vast social and religious shift known as the Reformation (i.e. Luther, printing, Gutenberg Bible).
- b. Calvin and the other reformers must not be ignored. Says Fred Graham in *The Constructive Revolutionary*, "Economic, scientific, and political historians . . . generally know little about Calvin's own secular ideas. They assume that it was simply the rupture with tradition made by Calvinists which produced certain changes of life-styles which, in turn, affected society in Protestant countries in later centuries. But the heart of this study shows clearly that Calvin himself was aware of the epochal character of his own (social and economic) teaching and of the transforming implications of the Genevan pattern which he had a hand in forming" (11).

### 5. Examples in Colonial America.

- a. The First Great Awakening (1725-75) raised up many American universities. 100 of the first 110 American universities were founded expressly for the purpose

of training men to propagate the Christian faith.

b. American educational and political systems, Christian influences.

1) Colonial education was classical and Christian, with the Bible and its principles primary to all learning. The New England Primer appeared about 1690 and was almost universally adopted. It was the chief beginning reading book for American schools for over 100 years. The contents clearly show its religious character and purpose which included forty pages containing the Westminster Shorter Catechism.

2) Framers of the Constitution and Declaration of Independence. The vast majority at the Constitutional Convention (55 delegates) were members of Protestant churches: 28 Episcopalians, eight Presbyterians, seven Congregationalists, two Lutherans, two Dutch Reformed, two Methodists, two Roman Catholics, three Deists, one unknown.

c. The Wesley-Whitefield revivals resulted in millions of Christian conversions. Wesley, the founder of Methodism, was converted after hearing the preface of Luther's commentary on Romans read at Aldersgate: "About a quarter before nine, which they were describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, and Christ alone, for my salvation, and an assurance was given me that He had taken away my sins, even mine."

d. Wesley preached the social responsibilities of Christian piety:

1772 – Slavery was judicially excluded from England,  
14,000 freed

1792 – Conditions aboard slave ships were regulated by law

1808 – The English slave trade was abolished.

1831 – All European slave trade abolished. England spent 15 million pounds for enforcement, even making payments to Spain and Portugal to stop the trade.

1833 – Slavery abolished in British Empire: 45 million pounds paid in compensation to free 780,933 slaves. Wilberforce, along with Buxton, Macaulay, and Clark . . . all evangelicals who were converted under Wesley's ministry, were the top leaders in ending slavery (This British action in the 1830's profoundly affected American attitudes which resulted in the Civil War).

e. Prison reform: John Howard, Elizabeth Fry (England); Fliedner (Germany). Florence Nightingale, the mother of modern nursing, was trained in one of Fliedner's schools in Kaiserswerth.

f. Labor reform: Anthony Ashley Cooper (Earl of Shaftesbury, self-described "Evangelical of the Evangelicals" pioneered child-labor laws, prohibited women working in the mines, established mental health sanitarium, built parks and libraries).

g. Harriett Beecher Stowe. Daughter of a preacher, married to a preacher; all her brothers were preachers. Her book, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* ignited the minds and imaginations of people in both North and South. "So this is the little lady who made this big war," said Abraham Lincoln upon meeting her for the first time. Her book was the first great American bestseller. (Initial print run was 300,000 copies. Sold three million copies in America, then 40 million worldwide in 40 languages).

h. The Third Great Awakening (1858-59) produced a rash of

missionary and philanthropic organizations in the U. S. and England:

- Barnardo's Homes (world's largest orphanage system)
- William Booth's Salvation Army
- Henri Dunant, a student evangelist in Geneva, founded the Red Cross in 1865
- YMCA was founded in 1844 and grew greatly
- The missionaries from William Carey on:

–CMS (Christian Missionary Society) taught 200,000 to read in East Africa in one generation

–Secured the abolition of widow-burning and child sacrifice

–Brought medicine to the world

–Actually founded the educational systems in China, Japan, and Korea.

i. Today: World Vision, Wycliffe Bible Translators, Mission agencies, Parachurch groups, Denominational missionaries, medical personnel, teachers, and volunteers.

## Conclusion

"It is impossible to exaggerate the importance of the coming of Christianity. It brought with it, for one thing, an altogether new sense of human life. For the Greeks had shown man his mind; but the Christians showed him his soul. They taught that in the sight of God, all souls were equal, that every human life was sacrosanct and inviolate. Where the Greeks had identified the beautiful and the good, had thought ugliness to be bad, had shrunk from disease and imperfection and from everything misshapen, horrible, and repulsive, the Christian sought out the diseased, the crippled, the mutilated, to give them help. Love, for the ancient Greek, was never quite distinguished from Venus. For the Christians held that God was love, it took on deep overtones of sacrifice and compassion." – R. R. Palmer (standard college history text)

“The history of Christianity is inseparable from the history of Western culture and of Western society. For almost a score of centuries Christian beliefs, principles, and ideals have colored the thoughts and feelings of Western man. The traditions and practices have left an indelible impress not only on developments of purely religious interest, but on virtually the total endeavor of man. This has been manifest in art and literature, science and law, politics and economics, and, as well, in love and war. Indeed, the indirect and unconscious influence Christianity has often exercised in avowedly secular matters—social, intellectual, and institutional—affords striking proof of the dynamic forces that have been generated by the faith over the millenniums. Even those who have contested its claims and rejected its tenets have been affected by what they opposed. Whatever our beliefs, all of us today are inevitable heirs to this abundant legacy; and it is impossible to understand the cultural heritage that sustains and conditions our lives without considering the contributions of Christianity.”

“Since the death of Christ, his followers have known vicissitudes as well as glory and authority. The Christian religion has suffered periods of persecution and critical divisions within its own ranks. It has been the cause and the victim of war and strife. It has assumed forms of astonishing variety. It has been confronted by revolutionary changes in human and social outlooks and subjected to searching criticism. The culture of our own time, indeed, has been termed the most completely secularized form of culture the world has ever known. We live in what some have called the post-Christian age. Yet wherever we turn to enrich our lives, we continue to encounter the lasting historical realities of Christian experience and tradition.”[\[7\]](#)

In contrast to the Christian system, modern materialistic philosophies do not provide a strong basis for reform. Humanism is, in effect, a philosophic smuggler; it has



borrowed the “dignity of man” from Christian precepts and has not bothered to say, “Thank you.”

## Notes

1. W. E. H. Lecky, *History of European Morals*, NY: Appleton, 1905, Vol. I, 28-29) (explanatory insert mine).
2. Bertrand Russell, *Why I Am Not a Christian*, p. 21.
3. Arnold Toynbee, *Horizon* magazine, 1973).
4. Lyn White, *Science Magazine*, 1967.
5. *The Environmental Handbook*, p. 25.
6. Alan Menninger: *Whatever Became of Sin?*
7. Roland H. Bainton, Professor Emeritus, *Ecclesiastical History*, Yale University. *Horizon Magazine*, Marshall B. Davidson, et. al., American Heritage Publishing Co., Inc.: New York. Distributed by Harper and Row, 1964.

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