

“I WANT TO BELIEVE, BUT...”

Is the Bible Reliable? 

by Steve Hixon



Looking at Current Issues from a Biblical Perspective

The December 10, 1990 issue of U.S. News & World Report contains a major article in its Science & Society section entitled "Who Wrote the Bible?". It begins: "Who, then, wrote the 27 books that make up the New Testament? Could these books have been written by contemporaries of Jesus? Are they close to their original form? Or were they revised by the early church leaders to reflect changing views of who Jesus was, to address the problems of a growing church or even to advance political agendas?" The article then goes on to explore some of the answers. But the very questions themselves point to what may be a stumbling block to some people who are investigating Christianity, and, as the U.S. News article shows, there's a lot of misinformation floating around out there.

Many people, for instance, assume that the Bible is no more accurate than the information people whisper in the "telephone game". Remember that? A group of people pass a sentence down the line and what the last person hears usually bears little or no resemblance to the original message. But is that what happened with the Bible? People commonly ask, "After translating the Bible from one language to another, from Greek to Latin to German to French to English, hasn't it lost a lot of the meaning along the way?". However, the English Bible that we use has been translated directly from Hebrew (the Old Testament language) & Greek (New Testament language) without any other languages in between.

The Bible is really a library, not a book. Actually, it is 66 books written over 1600 years by 40 authors, yet there is remarkably the same view of God (creator, savior, judge, holy, love), the same view of human nature (heights of goodness, depths of wickedness, highly significant, deeply fallen, greatly loved), and the same view of Jesus Christ (fully God and fully man, lived a perfect life, died an unjust death that paid for sin). Michael Green comments: "The really astonishing thing when you come to study the Bible is that, for all their diversity, the writers tell one story." Even Mark Twain, a non-believer, said, "It's not what I don't understand about the Bible that bothers me; it's what I do understand!"

WHAT ABOUT THE OLD TESTAMENT?

In 1895 Professor Julius Wellhausen proposed the theory that the Old Testament, and especially the first five books (which the Bible claims Moses wrote), was written in pieces by unknown authors and put together like a patchwork quilt. Genesis, for instance was supposedly written about 1000 years after Moses' death; and naturally most of the miracles were therefore fabrications. This became known as the Documentary Hypothesis, or the JEDP theory, because the different "unknown" authors were known by Jehovah, or Elohist, or

Deutero, etc. This theory gained widespread publicity for several years until it began to fall apart. There is now general agreement that there is no real foundation for the hypothesis, and yet in many places it is still taught as fact (much like the theory of evolution). One professor at a leading university replied to Cyrus Gordon (who had refuted the theory): "I am convinced by what you say, but I shall go on teaching the old system, because what you have told me means I should have to unlearn as well as study afresh and rethink. It is easier to go on with the accepted system of higher criticism for which we have standard textbooks." Herman Wouk, the Jewish author of *The Winds of War*, commented on this type of thinking: "It is a hard thing for men who have given their lives to a theory, and taught it to younger men, to see it fall apart."

Other scholars said that Moses couldn't have written the Pentateuch, that man was too primitive back then, and that the laws found in Exodus and Leviticus were too advanced for Moses' time. Therefore someone else must have written them later. This theory was popular until the Code of Hammurabi was found in 1902, which was actually written several centuries before Moses. This was a highly advanced moral code from Babylon, proving that Moses could easily have written the Law when he did. (Later critics said Moses just copied the Code, but there are major ethical and spiritual differences between the two.)

The Dead Sea Scrolls

Probably the most impressive archaeological discovery of this century was the finding of the Dead Sea scrolls. In the early spring of 1947 a Bedouin goat herdsman entered a cave near the Dead Sea, about 10 miles east of Jerusalem, and found a number of ancient scrolls in a jar. He had stumbled upon the library of a community called the Essenes, who lived in the desert at the time of Jesus. Among these writings was a complete copy of the book of Isaiah. Until then, our oldest copy of Isaiah came from AD 826. This ancient scroll, however, was written at about 250 BC. Suddenly our earliest copy had jumped 1000 years! Most importantly, however, was the fact that, despite centuries of copying, there were only minor differences between the two versions, most of which could be compared to the differences in the English spelling of the words "honor" and "honour". One example of the difference between the 800 AD version and the 250 BC version: Isaiah 45:8 - "*pour down righteousness*" (800 AD) vs "*rain down righteousness*" (250 BC). Not much of a difference! One reason for the good condition of the copies of the Bible has been the quality and care given to the process by those who did the copying; often it was their life's work. Those scribes and monks who gave their lives to copying the Scriptures made sure they were 100% accurate. Indeed, in the

ancient world a Jewish scribe was compared to "a plastered cistern that loses not a drop" (Mishna, Aboth 2.8).

WHAT ABOUT THE NEW TESTAMENT?

It is important with any document to determine what it claims for itself. The New Testament claims to be the very word of God, in the same sense that the Old Testament had God's authority; the authors often used the phrase "thus says the Lord."

Paul affirms the authority of the Bible when he states in 2 Timothy 3:16 that *"all Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness."*

The Apostle Peter confirms that Paul's letters have the same weight as Scripture, when he writes, *"Bear in mind that our Lord's patience means salvation, just as our dear brother Paul also wrote you with the wisdom that God gave him. He writes the same way in all his letters, speaking in them of these matters. His letters contain some things that are hard to understand, which ignorant and unstable people distort, as they do the other Scriptures, to their own destruction."* (2 Peter 3:15-16)

Jesus also claims Scriptural authority for His own teachings in Luke 21:33 when he says *"Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away."*

3 TESTS FOR ANY HISTORICAL DOCUMENT

In attempting to discern the accuracy of any ancient historical document (secular or religious), there are three essential tests: the Bibliographical test (How many copies do we have, and how early are they?), the Internal Evidence test (What does the document claim for itself, and how accurate is it?), and the External Evidence test (What do other sources say, as well as archaeology?).

1. The Bibliographical Test

While over 6,000 copies of New Testament manuscripts exist today, other pieces of ancient literature, each of which is considered to be reliable and accurate, have far fewer copies. For instance, we have only 643 copies of Homer's *Iliad* (2nd best to the New Testament). In the case of the Roman historian Tacitus, who is considered to be a first-rate source of historical information, there is a 1000-year gap between his original and the earliest copy (only 20 of which exist). Aristotle's *Poetics* has a 1400-year gap (300 bc - 1100 ad), and for the Greek historian Thucydides, the gap is 1300 years.

With the New Testament, however, we have the Chester Beatty papyri, which contains extensive portions of Scripture as early as AD 150, we have the John Rylands fragment of the Gospel of John, which was from about AD 120, (meaning the original had to be about AD 100 or before). Of this Rylands fragment of John 18, now in Manchester, England, one author writes, "No scholar thinks this is an original - They would say it was a copy of a manuscript written 30-50 yrs before that."

We have Codex Sinaiticus (now in the British museum), discovered by Count Konstantin von Tischendorf when visited St Catherine's monastery at the foot of Mt Sinai in 1844. He

found 44 pages of the ancient manuscript in a waste basket (two other baskets had just been burned!) Most of the Old Testament and all of the New Testament are there, written in about AD 400. This is the oldest complete copy of the New Testament available.

A group of second-generation Christian writers and the letters they authored have come to be known as the *"Apostolic Fathers"*. They are significant not only because they describe what early Christianity was like, but also because they quote much of the New Testament in their letters. For example: Clement (bishop of Rome) wrote to Corinth in AD 96 and quotes verses from Matthew, Mark, Luke, Acts, Romans, 1 Corinthians, Ephesians, Titus, Hebrews, and 1 Peter.

Listen to what Biblical scholars have said about the bibliographical evidence for the New Testament:

✍ *Sir Frederic Kenyon*: "The interval between the dates of original composition and the earliest extant evidence becomes so small as to be in fact negligible. The last foundation for any doubt that the Scriptures have come down to us substantially as they were written has now been removed."

✍ *F.J.A. Hort* wrote that, apart from spelling and minor grammar, not more than 1/1000 part of New Testament is affected by differences of reading, and none of the differences involve any major doctrine.

✍ *William Albright*, the world's foremost biblical archaeologist said: "We can already say emphatically that there is no longer any solid basis for dating any book of the NT after about AD 80."

✍ *William Ramsay* was a skeptical archaeologist and historian. But after tracing Paul's journeys according to the book of Acts, he came to regard Luke as the most accurate source for first-century historical information.

✍ *Clark Pinnock* remarks: "The widespread distrust of the gospels does not stem from any knowledge of the facts but from anti-Christian propaganda."

2. The Internal Evidence Test

How accurately does the text represent the historical details it claims to recount? One scholar notes: "The ability to tell the truth is closely related to the witnesses' nearness both geographically and chronologically to the events recorded... The legal details in the trial narrative of the gospel and the geographical and cultural accuracy of Acts call for an early date and presuppose close research on the part of the writer."

Listen to the following New Testament quotes, and ask yourself the question: Do these sound like the rantings of religious fanatics, or of ordinary people recounting something they really experienced? In other words, do they sound like eyewitnesses or frauds?

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

✓ Paul addresses Festus and says, *"What I am saying is true and reasonable. The king is familiar with these things.... I am convinced that none of this has escaped his notice, because it was not done in a corner."* (Acts 26:24-48)

✓ *"Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were*

handed down to us by those who from the first were eyewitnesses and servants of the word. Therefore, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning..." (Luke 1:1-3)

✓ "In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar -- when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, Herod tetrarch of Galilee, his brother Philip tetrarch of Iturea and Traconitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene..." (Luke 3:1)

✓ "We did not follow cleverly invented stories when we told you about the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty." (2 Peter 1:16)

✓ "We are writing to you about something which has always existed yet which we ourselves actually saw and heard; something which we had the opportunity to observe closely and even to hold in our hands..." (1 John 1:1, Phillips version)

Lawrence J. McGinley of St. Peter's College comments: "Eyewitnesses of the events in question were still alive when the tradition had been completely formed, and among those eyewitnesses were bitter enemies of the new religious movement." Likewise, Will Durant, historian and author of The Story of Civilization, although he does not claim to be a Christian, writes:

"The evangelists record many incidents that mere inventors would have concealed: competition of the disciples for high places in the kingdom, their flight after Jesus' arrest, Peter's denial of Christ, references to some people thinking Jesus was insane, Jesus not always knowing the future, Christ's moments of bitterness, and his despairing cry on the cross.

"That a few simple men should in one generation have invented so powerful and appealing a personality, so lofty an ethic, and so inspiring a vision of human brotherhood, would be a miracle far more incredible than any recorded in the gospels."

3. The External Evidence Test

What do historical contemporaries of Bible times say about the same events? The Jewish Talmud was hostile to Christianity but still contains allusions to Jesus - that his followers believed him to be virgin-born, that he performed miracles, that he was executed for heresy. They even recorded that "Jesus was hanged on Passover Eve."

Josephus, a Jewish historian born in AD 37, gives numerous details about people mentioned in the New Testament, such as Herod, John the Baptist, Jesus, James, Pilate, Festus, and Agrippa. Josephus bears witness to Jesus's date, to his being the brother of James the Just, to his reputation as a miracle-worker, to his crucifixion under Pilate as a consequence of charges brought against him by the Jewish rulers, to his claim to be the Messiah, and to his being the founder of the "tribe of Christians."

Tacitus, another Roman historian, mentions the fire of Rome (which Nero blamed on the Christians), and Christ's execution under Pilate.

A man named Pliny was governor of Bithynia in AD 112 and wrote to the emperor Trajan about Christian activities:

"On an appointed day the Christians are accustomed to meet at daybreak and to sing a hymn to Christ, as to a god... After this they depart, and meet again to take food. To find out

the truth concerning them I applied torture to two maidservants..."

History has also preserved the personal testimonies of two friends of the apostle John: Papias, bishop of Hierapolis in AD 130 and Polycarp, bishop of Smyrna.

Examples from Archaeology

There have been numerous instances where "modern" scientists discounted the Bible, assuming the information was inaccurate, only to be proved wrong themselves by more recent discoveries. For example, in John chapter 5 the author refers to a pool in Jerusalem surrounded by 5 covered colonnades. Critics used to say this must have been a figment of John's imagination, because they knew of no such structure. However, evidence for the pool and five colonnades was recently uncovered in an archeological dig. Others have doubted Pontius Pilate's existence, but in Caesarea, they recently found an inscription with his name and coins minted in his honor in AD 30-31.

"The gospels were written by brave men, many of whom were called upon to die for their historical claims. There was nothing to gain by forgery or deceit. Their works were written in association with eyewitnesses of the events they record, and enjoy a rich textual witness second to none."

Clark Pinnock

📖 WHAT ABOUT THE CANON?

Often people will ask, "Isn't the New Testament just the result of a bunch of men picking out their favorite books hundreds of years after they were written? How can we know that those books are God's Word and not others?" A church council in AD 393 did not come up with a new list of books for the New Testament, but simply recognized what had already happened. They conferred on no book an authority it did not already possess - rather they were included because of the authority they had from the 1st Century, when they were passed along from church to church and universally recognized as having the stamp of God's authority on them.

📖 WHAT ABOUT SCIENCE?

The Bible is not a science textbook. But it does describe history with great accuracy. The Biblical writers placed much more emphasis on history than other religions do. R.C. Sproul comments:

"The difference between Greek mythology and the Bible is a radically different view of the significance of history. For the Greek there is no overt attempt to ground myth within the framework of history. On the other hand, that which is anti-historical is relegated to the level of falsehood by the Hebrews."

Clark Pinnock reiterates this view when he says, "The fact is that we must come to know Jesus Christ historically before we can know Him personally."

Sproul also makes the point that the Bible uses language

common to the average man. "The Scripture describes nature from a phenomenological perspective. That is, the world of nature is described as it appears to the naked eye." For instance, Troy Dungan, weatherman for the Channel 8 News uses technological jargon and high-tech equipment, but at the end of the broadcast he tells us when the sun will "rise." Everyone knows the sun doesn't really rise, but Troy isn't considered inaccurate because he says that. Likewise, if the Bible says the sun "rose", that doesn't disqualify it as an accurate source of information. It is simply using language that ordinary people understand.

For example, for a long time the type of Greek used in the New Testament was thought to be a special "Holy Ghost language" because it differed from classical Greek. In 1863 J.B. Lightfoot said: "If we could only recover letters that ordinary people wrote to each other, without any thought of being literary, we should have the greatest possible help for the understanding of the New Testament." Soon after this, ancient documents were found in the town of Oxyrynchus (120 miles from Cairo, Egypt). These documents included not only a fragment of Romans 1, but also a number of letters written by ordinary people about their daily lives - a river-woker declaring his trade, a man willing his furniture and dishes to his children, two people co-renting a camelshed, a woman detailing work to be done on her property - all in the same type of Greek used in the New Testament. It turned out that the "language of the Holy Ghost was largely identical with the language of the common people!" (F.F. Bruce)

BUT IS IT TRUE ABOUT GOD?

No one can prove that the Bible is God's Word anymore than they can prove that God exists. But what people need to know is that becoming a Christian doesn't mean throwing your brain away. God doesn't ask us to have "blind faith", but rather to step out in faith, based on very good evidence. Christianity is a reasonable faith, i.e., it makes sense and it is backed up by historical facts. But each person must make their own decision.

The point is that God has gone to great lengths to communicate with us. He has used a variety of methods to convey to us what He is like and how He has acted in history. Ultimately the Written Word points to Jesus, the Living Word, who came to us as the clearest possible representation of God's nature. It is our individual response to Jesus Christ that matters above all things.

"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made.

"He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him. Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God -- children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God.

The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth."

John 1:1-14



FOR FURTHER STUDY...

F.F. Bruce, *The New Testament Documents - Are They Reliable?*,
Josh McDowell, *More Than A Carpenter*, and
Evidence That Demands a Verdict
Clark Pinnock, *Set Forth Your Case*
R.C. Sproul, *Reason to Believe*