

A DEFENSE OF THE RELIABILITY OF THE BIBLICAL ACCOUNT

INTRODUCTION

There has been the argument on whether or not the Bible is an accurate writ. Tough-minded skeptics have argued that since human authorship can be traced in the bible then it may not be. Such arguments lack the understanding of the superintendence of the Holy Spirit on the human writers of the Bible. It is believed that the Bible is completely trustworthy as a guide to salvation and the life of faith and will not fail to accomplish its purpose. Howbeit the concern of this paper is to argue for the accuracy of the Bible.

ACCURACY OF THE BIBLE

Some Bible critics argue that we should disregard the Bible because it's impossible that our modern versions could match the original texts. But how does this argument stand up to scrutiny? The Bible was not translated into English until the late 1300s.¹ Did the Bible change over the many centuries up until then? How was the Bible actually put together? How do we know that the Bible contains the books that it should have? These are important questions, and many books have been written to address them. These questions concern the canon—the group or list of books that are considered to be inspired by God. The word canon is originally from a Semitic word, qanehin Hebrew.² It meant “reed” or “stalk,” which is how it is used in Job 40:21 and 1 Kings 14:15. From this it conveys a secondary meaning of something with which to measure, a standard or benchmark. The word then found its way into Greek, where it took the form kanon. And through Greek and into the Latin canna, it comes to us in the English form of canon – not to be confused, of course, with the large, heavy military gun known as a cannon (a word which also derives from the root meaning “reed” because it is a tube).³

The dictionary states that other meanings of canon include regulations, principles, rules or standards of judgment. These bring us back to the ancient meaning of a measure, standard or benchmark—in this case the issue of which writings meet the standard or benchmark of being considered part of the inspired, hand-recorded Word of God. The word Bible comes to us again through Latin from the Greek word biblia, meaning

¹ H.S. Miller, *General Biblical introduction*, (Houghton: The word Bearer press, 1952), 75.

² *Ibid.*

³ www.thefreedictionary.com/inerrancy in the Bible.

“books.” It contains the books (originally written on scrolls) that are acknowledged or understood to be the canonical—divinely inspired—books of God. One might say, accurately, that they are the standard by which every human being should live. As the apostle Paul wrote to his fellow minister Timothy in 2 Timothy 3:15-17: “From childhood you have known the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus.”⁴

All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work.” “Holy Scriptures” in verse 15 means “sacred writings”—words that were divinely inspired by God. Verse 16 says literally in Greek that “all Scripture is God breathed . . .”[NIV, emphasis added throughout]. And indeed we find the Bible to truly be the breath of God for human beings in whom He placed the breath of life. The Bible is a manual intended by God to show human beings two things: It shows us how to live, and it is a guide to God’s plan for the salvation of mankind.⁵

THE BIBLE AND TEXTUAL CRITICISM

“Textual criticism” is the field of study in which experts compare the various manuscripts in existence to one another, seeking to come as close as possible to what the original author wrote. The original manuscripts are called “autographs,” literally “self writings.” Today, with the passage of so much time, no autographs—original copies—exist of any of the Old or New Testament books. Over the centuries minor differences (called variants) often make their way into successive copies of handwritten documents, even with the greatest of care of the scribes involved. Thus, the field of study called textual criticism exists to try to identify these variations and determine what the original texts said.

After 1455 and Johannes Gutenberg’s invention of the first movable metal type printing press, the Bible could be printed over and over again with predictable accuracy, so variants no longer were a concern. However, before that time manuscripts still had variants. Thus the period before 1455 is where textual criticism comes into play. Because of the strict requirements and

⁴ J.B. Green, *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan publishing house, 1989), 76.

⁵ David Horton, *The portable Seminary*, (Minesota: Bethany House, 2006), 23.

few locations where the Old Testament was copied, few variants or versions of the Old Testament ever came into existence. When the Dead Sea Scrolls (primarily portions of the Old Testament dating mostly from the first century B.C.) were discovered in 1947, many people were initially concerned that they would show marked differences with the Masoretic Text of the Old Testament. Because the Dead Sea Scrolls were a thousand years older than the oldest and most reliable Masoretic Text we have today (the Leningrad Codex, dating to A.D. 1008), scholars thought they might find drastic differences over that long passage of time. But did they?

After years of study, they found that the Dead Sea Scrolls they examined have only a relatively few minor, insignificant differences from today's Masoretic Text of the Old Testament. "These oldest-known Biblical texts have one absolutely crucial feature," explains

historian Ian Wilson. "Although . . . a thousand years older than the texts previously available in Hebrew, they show just how faithful the texts of our present Bibles are to those from two thousand years ago and how little they have changed over the centuries.⁶ Two Isaiah scrolls, for instance, contain the Isaiah text almost exactly as it is in our present-day Bibles . . . "Although there are, as we might expect, some minor differences, these are mostly the interchange of a word or the addition or absence of a particular phrase. For example, whereas in present-day Bibles Isaiah 1:15 ends, 'Your hands are covered in blood', one of the Dead Sea pair adds, 'and your fingers with crime'. Where Isaiah 2:3 of our present day Bibles reads, 'Come, let us go up to the mountain of [the LORD]', to the house of the God of Jacob', the Dead Sea Scroll version omits, 'to the mountain of [the LORD]'. "Such discrepancies are trifling, and there can be no doubt that the Biblical books someone stored away so carefully at Qumran two thousand years ago were as close to those we know in our present Hebrew and Old Testament Bibles as makes no difference."⁷

Where there are differences, however, this does not mean the Dead Sea Scrolls were correct and the Masoretic Text *incorrect*. We should keep in mind that the Dead Sea Scrolls were not necessarily transcribed with the same meticulous preservation practices as those used by the main scribes of the time. Nonetheless, the remarkable discovery of

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Benson, Graham, *The Bible Is History*, (1999), 205.

the Dead Sea Scrolls is astounding confirmation that the Old Testament has indeed been accurately preserved for us today.⁸

HOW DO WE KNOW THE BIBLE IS ACCURATE AND INFALLIBLE?

How can you be sure that the Bible is the same now as when it was written? The Bible has been copied and translated so many times! Haven't you ever played the game where people sit in a circle and pass a sentence from one person to the next until it comes back around in a completely distorted version? If that could happen in a room in just a few minutes, think of all the errors and changes that must have filled the Bible in the centuries since it was first written!⁹

There are three lines of evidence that support the claim that the biblical documents are reliable: these are the bibliographic test, the internal test, and the external test. The first test examines the biblical manuscripts, the second test deals with the claims made by the biblical authors, and the third test looks to outside confirmation of the biblical content.

The Bibliographic Test

1. The Quantity of Manuscripts: In the case of the Old Testament, there is a small number of Hebrew manuscripts, because the Jewish scribes ceremonially buried imperfect and worn manuscripts. Many ancient manuscripts were also lost or destroyed during Israel's turbulent history. Also, the Old Testament text was standardized by the Masoretic Jews by the sixth century A.D., and all manuscripts that deviated from the Masoretic Text were evidently eliminated. But the existing Hebrew manuscripts are supplemented by the Dead Sea Scrolls, the Septuagint (a third century B.C. Greek translation of the Old Testament), the Samaritan Pentateuch, and the Targums (ancient paraphrases of the Old Testament), as well as the Talmud (teachings and commentaries related to the Hebrew Scriptures). The quantity of New Testament manuscripts is unparalleled in ancient literature. There are over 5,000 Greek manuscripts, about 8,000 Latin manuscripts, and another 1,000 manuscripts in other languages (Syriac, Coptic, etc.). In addition to this extraordinary number, there are tens of thousands of citations of New Testament passages by the early church fathers. In contrast, the typical number of existing manuscript copies for any of the works of the Greek and Latin authors, such as Plato, Aristotle, Caesar, or Tacitus, ranges from one to 20.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ken Graham.

2. The Quality of Manuscripts: Because of the great reverence the Jewish scribes held toward the

Scriptures, they exercised extreme care in making new copies of the Hebrew Bible. The entire scribal process was specified in meticulous detail to minimize the possibility of even the slightest error. The number of letters, words, and lines were counted, and the middle letters of the Pentateuch and the Old Testament were determined. If a single mistake was discovered, the entire manuscript would be destroyed. As a result of this extreme care, the quality of the manuscripts of the Hebrew Bible surpasses all other ancient manuscripts. “The 1947 discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls provided a significant check on this, because these Hebrew scrolls antedate the earliest Masoretic Old Testament manuscripts by about 1,000 years. But in spite of this time span, the number of variant readings between the Dead Sea Scrolls and the Masoretic Text is quite small, and most of these are variations in spelling and style.”¹⁰ While the quality of the Old Testament manuscripts is excellent, that of the New Testament is very good--considerably better than the manuscript quality of other ancient documents. Because of the thousands of New Testament manuscripts, there are many variant readings, but these variants are actually used by scholars to reconstruct the original readings by determining which variant best explains the others in any given passage. Some of these variant readings crept into the manuscripts because of visual errors in copying or because of auditory errors when a group of scribes copied manuscripts that were read aloud. Other errors resulted from faulty writing, memory, and judgment, and still others from well-meaning scribes who thought they were correcting the text. Nevertheless, only a small number of these differences affect the sense of the passages, and only a fraction of these have any real consequences. Furthermore, *no* variant readings are significant enough to call into question any of the doctrines of the New Testament. The New Testament can be regarded as 99.5 percent pure, and the correct readings for the remaining 0.5 percent can often be ascertained with a fair degree of probability by the practice of textual criticism.

3. The Time Span of Manuscripts: Apart from some fragments, the earliest Masoretic manuscript of the Old Testament is dated at A.D. 895. This is due to the systematic destruction of worn manuscripts by the Masoretic scribes. However, the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls dating from 200 B.C. to A.D. 68 drastically reduced the time span from the writing of the Old Testament books to our earliest copies of them. The time span of the New Testament manuscripts is exceptional. The manuscripts written on papyrus came from the second and third centuries A.D. The John Rylands Fragment (P52) of the Gospel

¹⁰ H.S. Miller, *General Biblical introduction*, (Houghton: The word Bearer press, 1952), 89.

of John is dated at A.D. 117-38, only a few decades after the Gospel was written. The Bodmer Papyri are dated from A.D. 175-225, and the Chester Beatty Papyri date from about A.D. 250.¹¹ The time span for most of the New Testament is less than 200 years (and some books are within 100 years) from the date of authorship to the date of our earliest manuscripts. This can be sharply contrasted with the average gap of over 1,000 years between the composition and the earliest copy of the writings of other ancient authors. To summarize the bibliographic test, the Old and New Testaments enjoy far greater manuscript attestation in terms of quantity, quality, and time span than any other ancient documents. It is especially interesting to make specific comparisons between the New Testament and other writings.¹²

The Internal Test

The second test of the reliability of the biblical documents asks, "What claims does the Bible make about itself?" This may appear to be circular reasoning. It sounds like we are using the testimony of the Bible to prove that the Bible is true. But we are really examining the truth claims of the various authors of the Bible and allowing them to speak for themselves. (Remember that the Bible is not one book but many books woven together.) This provides significant evidence that must not be ignored.

A number of biblical authors claim that their accounts are primary, not secondary. That is, the bulk of the Bible was written by people who were eyewitnesses of the events they recorded. John wrote in his Gospel, "And he who has seen has borne witness, and his witness is true; and he knows that he is telling the truth, so that you also may believe" (John 19:35; see 21:24). In his first epistle, John wrote, "What was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we beheld and our hands handled concerning the Word of life . . . what we have seen and heard we proclaim to you also" (1 John 1:1, 3). Peter makes the same point abundantly clear: "For we did not follow cleverly devised tales when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of His majesty" (2 Peter 1:16; also see Acts 2:22; 1 Peter 5:1). The independent eyewitness accounts in the New Testament of the life, death, and resurrection of Christ were written by people who were intimately acquainted with Jesus Christ. Their gospels and epistles reveal their integrity and complete commitment to the truth, and they maintained their testimony even through persecution and martyrdom. All the evidence inside and outside the New Testament runs contrary to

¹¹ J.B. Green, *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, 98

¹² Gordon, J. Wenham, *World biblical commentary*, (Waco Texas: Word Book, publisher, 1987), 89.

the claim made by form criticism that the early church distorted the life and teachings of Christ. Most of the New Testament was written between A.D. 47 and 70, and all of it was complete before the end of the first century. There simply was not enough time for myths about Christ to be created and propagated. And the multitudes of eyewitnesses who were alive when the New Testament books began to be circulated would have challenged blatant historical fabrications about the life of Christ. The Bible places great stress on accurate historical details, and this is especially obvious in the Gospel of Luke and the Book of Acts, Luke's two-part masterpiece (see his prologue in Luke 1:1-4).¹³

The External Test

Because the Scriptures continually refer to historical events, they are verifiable; their accuracy can be checked by external evidence. The chronological details in the prologue to Jeremiah (1:1-3) and in Luke 3:1-2 illustrate this. Ezekiel 1:2 allows us to date Ezekiel's first vision of God to the day (July 31, 592 B.C.). The historicity of Jesus Christ is well-established by early Roman, Greek, and Jewish sources, and these extrabiblical writings affirm the major details of the New Testament portrait of the Lord. The first-century Jewish historian Flavius Josephus made specific references to John the Baptist, Jesus Christ, and James in his *Antiquities of the Jews*. In this work, Josephus gives us many background details about the Herods, the Sadducees and Pharisees, the high priests like Annas and Caiaphas, and the Roman emperors mentioned in the gospels and Acts. We find another early secular reference to Jesus in a letter written a little after A.D. 73 by an imprisoned Syrian named Mara Bar-Serapion. This letter to his son compares the deaths of Socrates, Pythagoras, and Christ. Other first- and second-century writers who mention Christ include the Roman historians Cornelius Tacitus (*Annals*) and Suetonius (*Life of Claudius, Lives of the Caesars*), the Roman governor Pliny the Younger (*Epistles*), and the Greek satirist Lucian (*On the Death of Peregrine*). Jesus is also mentioned a number of times in the Jewish Talmud.¹⁴

CONCLUSION

The crux of the matter is that, whether or not man believes does not change the accurate state of the scripture. One can always lean on the testimony of 2Tim 3:16a. The superintendence of the Holy Spirit makes the Bible accurate despite the human writers' style and languages of compilation.

¹³ Frank, E. Gaebelin, *Exploring the Bible*, (Edinburgh: Marshall, Morgan and Scott, Ltd, 1971).

¹⁴ George, E. Mendenhall, *Biblical Archaeology*, 322.

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