

Apologetics Sunday School  
April 19 & 26, 2015  
“Isn’t The Bible Historically Unreliable?”  
Rev. Dave Dorst

Intro: What are your hermeneutical presuppositions?

I know that sounds like a very personal question, or just theologically confusing language. But it’s not that hard – hermeneutics is the study of a text, and presuppositions are the ideas that you bring to that text. So when I ask that of you, I’m really asking what ideas, biases, and commitments do you already have when you read the Bible? Such as: Do you think that the New Testament is more important than the Old? Do you think some of it is true and helpful, but other parts are “unenlightened” and need to be discarded because they don’t fit in with modern, advanced thinking? Was it written by men and tainted by their biases, or was it written by God and handed to men to pass on, or was it written as some partnership of God and men?

And a huge part of everyone’s presuppositions is: Do you think that you are reading truth or just subjective spiritual concepts? Are you reading fables that are being passed off as actual events? Now, of course, we’re not talking about the wisdom literature that is not trying to be historical, or the parables of Jesus that are obviously illustrations that He made up to prove a point. But the fact that there are talking donkeys, men who survive being swallowed by great fish, great bodies of water parting conveniently for God’s people, and blind people given sight without operations. Are those historical facts, or just writers telling tall tales to make their God and their faith seem exciting?

Our apologetic task these two weeks is to be prepared to answer people who assert that the Bible is not historically reliable.

7 common objections to the Bible:<sup>1</sup>

**1) The Bible is very old and was written by gullible, illiterate people; therefore, we can’t trust it.**

If you think it was written by illiterate people, you haven’t read it. That’s very insulting. Yes, they weren’t exposed to modern science, but that doesn’t make them gullible, they still knew a miracle when they saw one. Paul and Luke, who wrote the majority of the New Testament, were very accomplished academics; students back then memorized long passages, their rigorous training would put us to shame.

There was an archeologist named Sir William Ramsey who thought that Luke was foolish for including so many specific dates, places, and names in his stories, because they would be easy to check out and refute. So, for 30 years Ramsey studied and searched to find inconsistencies in Luke and Acts, and at the end of that time concluded, “Luke is a historian of the first rank... This author should be placed along with the very greatest of historians.”<sup>2</sup> “You may press the words of Luke in a degree beyond any other historian’s and they stand the keenest scrutiny and the hardest

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<sup>1</sup> Mark Mittelberg, *The Questions Christians Hope No One Will Ask (With Answers)* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale, 2010) pp. 72-90

<sup>2</sup> Sir William Ramsay, *The Bearing of Recent Discoveries on the Trustworthiness of the New Testament* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1915), p. 222.

treatment... Christianity did not originate in a lie; and we can and ought to demonstrate this as well as believe it.”<sup>3</sup>

Would people die for something they know to be false? Yes, people die for lies all the time, but the early Christians, especially disciples, were close enough to know whether it was true or false. They were not gullible, they believed it to death because it was true.

Non-Christian historical sources confirm many of the details (Josephus, 39 ancient sources total).

**2) The Bible was written too far after the events actually happened to be considered reliable.**

Not a single book of the New Testament was written after 70 AD, except maybe Revelation and that's not a timely historical account like the Gospels. The books were written by eyewitnesses, or those who researched and got it from eyewitnesses (Luke & Mark). The Old Testament prophets generally wrote their own books speaking of the events that happened in their lifetimes (as well as foretelling the things that God revealed to them about the future). Moses is ascribed to be the author of Genesis, and he wasn't alive for any of it. So we must acknowledge that he was relying on tradition along with the leading of the Holy Spirit and direct knowledge given to him from the Lord. But other than Genesis, you have a hard time making the case that the Scripture writers did not know either firsthand or through eyewitness accounts the truth of what they were writing.

**3) Even if it was accurate at first, the Bible was copied & translated so many times it has been corrupted.**

People seem to think that the Bible is like the telephone game – it gets corrupted the further it gets passed along because people are just translating the translation. But that's not how we get our Bibles, we take the oldest, most reliable manuscripts and translate them straight into our language from the original languages. Any corruptions that happened in between have no bearing on what we have as our English translations. We may not have the absolute originals, but earliest copies were within a hundred years and easily exposed as frauds if need be.

**4) The NT consists of carefully chosen books by biased people, banning others that shed light on the “real historical” Jesus.**

This is just not true. All the accepted Gospels and NT books were written in the first century and accepted by the church immediately, even if some were in doubt about making the canon. The Gnostic gospels were written in the 2<sup>nd</sup> to 4<sup>th</sup> centuries, were highly sectarian, full of fictitious events, and were usually falsely attributed to an apostle.

**Closely Related: History is written by the winners who make themselves look good and twist the true record.**

Oh, really, when exactly have Jews and Christians been the winners who rewrote history? Maybe for a little bit of time during David and Solomon's day, or after Constantine in the 4<sup>th</sup> century, which was well after the Scriptures were all finished being written. But to say that Scripture writers were part of the victorious people is a huge stretch. And it also ignores the fact that the Scriptures are brutally honest about the sins, disobedience, and losses of Israel and God's people. The Egyptians and Romans were famous for recording everything as a victory, ignoring their defeats, but the Bible records exactly the outcomes of the battles, wins or losses. And it presents its human leaders as totally fallible, pointing out their sins. The only perfect people are God and Jesus.

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid, p. 89.

## **5) Since ancient mystery religions taught of dying and rising gods, Jesus' death and resurrection was just borrowed from them.**

I once had a girl tell me that there are hundreds of pagan stories of people being born of virgins, living a perfect life, dying and rising again. I said I'd never heard that, tell me about one. She couldn't remember any names, but was sure she could find it easily.

If you want to delve into this question, find a copy of *The Case for the Real Jesus* by Lee Strobel, who investigates the claims that Christianity modeled itself after gods like Attis, Adonis, Osiris, and Mithras. Not only is there no resurrection for those gods, but some of them are dated later than Jesus! "The tide of scholarly opinion has turned dramatically against attempts to make early Christianity dependent on the so-called dying and rising gods of Hellenistic paganism." (Mark Mittelberg, *The Questions Christians Hope No One Will Ask*, p. 88) Pretty weak argument, but even if some of it is true, you still have to disprove the resurrection of Christ on historical grounds before you can dismiss it as just being derivative.

## **6) You can make the Bible say anything you want it to, it all comes down to subjective opinion anyways.**

Well, people certainly do twist the Scriptures and make isolated passages say more than they do (polygamy is godly, stoning disobedient children, etc). But this is more a case of misunderstanding the context and the entire message of the Scriptures. The Bible is quite clear about its central message, and it tells us that we'll be held accountable to the standards it sets. But you cannot point to anything that says that Jesus sinned, or that God will count up our good deeds and open heaven to us on that basis.

## **7 Apparent Contradictions in the New Testament:<sup>4</sup>**

- 1) 4 Gospels record the sign over Christ's cross differently
- 2) 3 Synoptics record different # of angels at Jesus' tomb
- 3) Matthew & Mark – 1 or 2 blind men?
- 4) Matthew & Mark – 1 or 2 demon-possessed men?
- 5) Matt – donkey & colt at triumphal entry, Mark & Luke mention only colt
- 6) Matt & Luke – centurion or 2 elders talk to Jesus?
- 7) Matthew – Judas hanged himself, Acts – Judas fell & body split open

All of these are easily explained instances of one text having a fuller explanation and the other(s) not giving all the details. For the signs above the cross, John's is the full text and the others abbreviate (or they translate from one of the other languages it was written in). For #2 - #5, both accounts are right, the one account just doesn't mention both for some reason (such as that the early church knew the one man but didn't know the other). Centurion speaking or having elders speak on his behalf is the same thing. Both Judas accounts are true.

-The Biblical scribes were so accurate that they didn't try to harmonize them!

Eric Lyons has written two books that talk about so many more apparent contradictions: *The Anvil Rings: Answers to Alleged Bible Discrepancies, Vol 1 & 2*.

2 Questions to ask when someone says the Bible is full of errors and contradictions:

-“Which ones bother you the most?” (make them answer)

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<sup>4</sup> Mark Mittelberg, *The Questions Christians Hope No One Will Ask* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale, 2010) pp. 63-70.

-“Is there something in your life that you’re afraid you’d have to change if the Bible turns out to be true, and the actual word of God?” (sensitively, of course)

R.C. Sproul tells the story of a fellow seminary student claiming the Bible was full of errors. So Sproul told him to write all the errors down and they could go over it in the library. Sproul explained and disproved each one one-by-one to the student’s satisfaction. At the end of it, he expected the guy to be convinced, but he stuck to his unbelief. Remember that people will hang on to many of these unfair characterizations of the Bible even if proven wrong. Paradigm shifts are hard!

### **7 things that don’t “Prove the Bible Beyond a Shadow of a Doubt”, but together make a strong case:<sup>5</sup>**

#### **1) The Scripture Itself claims to be the highest authority, and claims to be written by God.**

Now people will say that this doesn’t prove anything, because any book can claim it’s the ultimate truth but we don’t have to believe it. But a book at least has to claim to be the highest authority and written by God to actually be considered that. The easiest starting point to determine who the author of a book is is to see who claims to be the author. You accept that, unless you have a compelling reason to reject it.

#### **2) The Bible is better authenticated than any other work of antiquity.**

The number of ancient manuscripts that we have and their age gives us greater confidence that the Bible has been faithfully and accurately transmitted through the ages, more so than Plato or Homer or any other work of antiquity. Aristotle wrote in 340 BC, the earliest copy of his work we have are from 1,400 years later. Caesar composed his Gallic Wars in the 50s BC, we have 10 copies from the 900s AD. The Bible has an abundance of riches: 20,000 copies of the New Testament in existence today.<sup>6</sup>

#### **3) Archaeology has confirmed many parts of Scripture, and has never found evidence disproving the Bible.**

Jericho has been proven by the archeological evidence, as have many things around Jerusalem. Names of Kings in the OT (Sargon and Belshazzar) were assumed to be made up until they found records. However, the Garden of Eden, the Tower of Babel, and Noah’s Ark have not been found, so we can’t say that archeology has proven all of the Bible. But we can say that it has never been in conflict with the Bible. Keep in mind that archeology is an uncertain science, subject to the interpretation and bias of the observer, sometimes overturned by newer evidence.

#### **4) Predictive Prophecies Fulfilled**

Daniel 2 predicts the next 3 world empires (MedoPersia, Greece and Rome), not to mention the hundreds of prophecies about the life of Christ. People can always claim the writings were written after the fact, or were vaguely worded, or events were twisted to fit the prophecies (Jesus’ bones not broken, Jesus riding into Jerusalem on a donkey).

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<sup>5</sup> Taken from Chapter 1 of Ken Ham & Bodie Hodge’s *How Do We Know The Bible Is True?* (Green Forest, AR:MasterBooks, 2011).

<sup>6</sup> Josh McDowell, *More Than A Carpenter* (Wheaton: Tyndale, 1977), p. 48.

## **5) Internal Consistency**

Dozens of authors with a consistent message, and no discrepancies. But this one is easily argued against: people could argue it's very inconsistent message between Leviticus and Ecclesiastes and Philippians. (Richard Dawkins calls the Bible "a chaotically cobbled-together anthology of disjointed documents"). And people can point out alleged discrepancies.

## **6) The Bible must be believed by faith**

Of course, it's not a blind faith with no support. If I become convinced that the Bible is in error, then I will not keep believing it just because "faith makes it true." But this is important because it helps me take by faith the things that I don't understand.

## **7) Personal Testimony – "He changed my life"**

Just because I experienced something doesn't make it irrefutable proof against your doubts. But if nobody's life was ever changed by the Scriptures, then we would have good reason to doubt them, since they promise new life in Christ, new hearts that beat in time with the Spirit, comfort and peace that passes understanding.

## **What about the Jesus Seminar?<sup>7</sup>**

70 scholars who got together, founded in 1985, and "voted" on what they thought could actually be true in the Gospels – cast doubt on 82% of Jesus' teachings in the Gospel.

-They based their voting on knowledge of two Gnostic gospels (Q and Thomas) that are much later than the NT books.

-They rejected miracles outright.

-They used unjustified late dates for the Gospels and therefore concluded that the NT is made up of myths about Jesus.

Conclusion: Is it any wonder that a group that used the wrong procedure, based on the wrong books, grounded in the wrong assumptions, and employing the wrong dates came to all the wrong conclusions? Their versions of Jesus were all over the map: Jesus was a cynic, a sage, a Jewish reformer, a feminist, a prophet-teacher, a social prophet, an end-times prophet. Just poor scholarship all the way around.

Conclusion:

You can stand completely confident in the fact that whoever you're talking to cannot tear down the Bible with any actual facts. They can throw a bunch of things they've heard through the years ("The Bible was written by ignorant shepherds", "The Bible is riddled with errors", "The Bible is just one of the many religious books written by men"), but they can't prove any of that. Put the burden of proof on them, don't feel like you have to explain everything. You know why you trust the Bible, present it courageously. It's going to take the Holy Spirit to really break through to them, but you give them a bridge by giving them a voice of confidence in the Bible's reliability.

Matthew 5:18 – "For truly, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished."

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<sup>7</sup> Ravi Zacharias, Norman Geisler, *Who Made God?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), pp. 125-126.