

Is the Bible True? The Refabrications of Jesus and the Integrity of Scripture

Belief in the integrity, reliability, and authority of Scripture is a significant distinctive in the Methodist tradition (and in historical Christian orthodoxy). Both Old Testament and New Testaments are considered God's Word, given to inform and shape our view of God, others, and the world around us (2 Timothy 3:16).

Unfortunately, there are many today who reject the validity and veracity of Scripture. Often, this rejection is based on the premise the Bible is nothing more than a collection of antiquated stories, myths, and semi-historical accounts that have been exaggerated, redacted, or edited over time. This ideology, of course, serves to reduce the Bible to something much different than God's authoritative Word!

In a sense, proponents of this Bible-as-unreliable framework attempt to "deconstruct" or dismantle the truth claims of Scripture, most commonly by emphasizing perceived textual inconsistencies or by discounting supernatural phenomena found in the biblical narrative. One of the most frequent points of attack is the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, because if doubt can be raised about the person of Jesus as recorded in the gospels, then the entire framework of Christian orthodoxy comes tumbling down.

Thankfully, there are wonderful resources available today that address the integrity and authority of Scripture, many of which include robust defenses of the deity of Christ, the process of scriptural canonization, and other subjects connected to the Bible's consistency and reliability.

One such resource is the book *Fabricating Jesus*, by author Craig Evans (1), which provides a helpful framework for defending against these deconstructionist views. Evans' arguments and the following article, "How Do We Know the Bible is Accurate?" help clear up many questions related to the historicity of Jesus and the reliability of Scripture.

Some of Evans' main points from the book include the following (paraphrased):

- 1) The early church grew rapidly based on the work and ministry of the Holy Spirit, not due to the written testimony found in what we today call the New Testament. In other words, the early church did not need to create a written document (the New Testament) to prove its beliefs or grow the church, as deconstructionists often contend.
- 2) Liberal scholars tend to disregard Jesus' Jewish upbringing and assume growing up in Galilee meant he was uneducated or even illiterate. No evidence exists for this idea. In fact, there is scriptural evidence that stands in contrast to this argument. Most notably, Jesus reads from the Isaiah scroll in Luke 4. He later writes on the ground in John 6.
- 3) Jesus recognized all three portions of the Old Testament (the law, prophets, and writings) as valid, and quoted from all three segments regularly. Jesus quoted Deuteronomy 15 times, the book of Isaiah 40 times, and the Psalms 13 times. He also quoted from Zechariah and Daniel. In other words, there is no section of the Old Testament text that can be thrown out or dismissed—Jesus attests to the accuracy and reliability of the whole Old Testament.

- 4) Extra-biblical text has been given equal weight to Scripture (among progressive theologians) based on false dating and the assumption that the current canon was not divinely inspired. Evans quotes Philip Jenkins, author of *The New Christendom*, who says, "Reviewing suggestions for a potentially revised New Testament canon, we are repeatedly struck by just how weak the claims of most of the candidates are...Contrary to recent claims, the more access we have to ancient 'alternative gospels,' the more we must respect the choices made by the early church in forming its canon." (Page 98 in Evans' book.) Those who oversaw the canonization process did so with heavenly wisdom (2 Peter 1:20-21).
- 5) Viewing the life and times of Jesus from a Greco-Roman (Western) point of view rather than from a Jewish (Eastern) perspective also leads to significant interpretive difficulties. What we read in the gospel accounts is reflective of Ancient Near Eastern culture, so any attempt to deconstruct the Bible's truth claims by reading the text through the lens a western cultural perspective is misguided.
- 6) Archaeology remains a great friend to biblical apologetics, consistently demonstrating the historicity of place names and events recorded in the scriptural record. Relatedly, in attempting to disprove the Bible's accuracy through archaeological discovery (or the absence thereof), it's important to remember this old adage among biblical archaeologists: "The absence of evidence is not evidence of absence." In other words, just because I don't yet see something does not mean it does not exist—perhaps it is simply yet to be discovered?
- 7) Secular literature written in the first century verifies the historicity of Jesus, including his role as healer, miracle-worker, and prophet.

This is but a small sample of what the field of biblical apologetics addresses. There are very logical reasons to believe in the integrity and authority of the scriptural record as preserved through the centuries, and incredible supporting evidence for the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus in particular. The question that must be asked is what is the purpose behind current attempts to deconstruct the Bible and discredit its claims about Jesus? Is it to call into question his authority in order to set ourselves up as a new authority? Have we become obsessed with novelty to the point that being different from the crowd is seen as true intellectualism? Intellectualism looks at the facts without wishful thinking and assumes that intelligence and integrity have always been present in those who desire to preserve the truth; without this, it is nothing more than arrogance masquerading as intellectualism. We may think we have progressed beyond our forefathers to the point where we are free to change what the historical Christian church has held onto as core teaching, but we'd be wrong.

Evans' book reveals some of the weaknesses inherent to the arguments against the Bible's trustworthiness. Accepting the Bible as true is not a leap of faith. There is plenty of evidence to conclude that we can trust it for everything necessary for knowing how to live our lives for God. Paul said it himself to young Pastor Timothy: "All Scripture is inspired by God and is useful to teach us what is true and to make us realize what is wrong in our lives. It corrects us when we are wrong and teaches us to do what is right" (2 Timothy 3:16, NLT).

How do we know that the Bible is accurate?

Here are some reasons we can know the Bible is reliable and has been translated accurately. After considering these facts, I believe an argument against its accuracy is flimsy at best and nothing more than an excuse for an autonomous determination (at worst).

The Seven-fold Division of the Bible:

1. The Law (Pentateuch)

2. The Prophets
3. The Writings (Poetic Books)
4. The Gospels
5. Book of Acts
6. The Epistles
7. Book of Revelation

Jesus agreed that Scripture (the Old Testament, or Tanakh) was divided into three sections: the law, the prophets, and the psalms, or writings (Luke 24:44). Therefore, Jesus accepted the accuracy of Scripture as dependable and trustworthy. The gospels, the book of Acts, the epistles, and the book of Revelation were written after his ascension into heaven.

Some say that perhaps the Scriptures were accurate at one point but given how far removed we are from the original text there is no way we can trust that current translations are accurate renderings of God's original message. It is a legitimate concern, but it is answered when we understand how Scripture was translated. The oral tradition was the basis of the New Testament writings combined with the Holy Spirit's inspiration. Oral tradition was accurate. Dr. Gary C. Burger of New Media Ministries was helpful in citing some of the reasons to trust the oral tradition. Consider these things:

1. The New Testament was written within 30-70 years of Christ's death. Some refute this, but they are in the minority among biblical scholars.
2. Revisionism usually only takes place where there are not witnesses still alive to refute the statements. If "stories" were being told inaccurately, they would never have passed the muster of the many who witnessed the events in person.
3. Passing on truth then was not like the "telephone" game we play now with children. Stories were told aloud in the presence of other witnesses so that clarification was always being made about what was true and what was false. Oral tradition was a very public procedure in the presence of other witnesses and experts.
4. Memorization was the means of education due to the expense of owning a copy of the Torah personally. Accurate memorization was the key to learning and was highly valued.
5. Creeds and songs were also used as a way of passing on the truth. The rhyme and rhythm ensured an accurate reproduction.
6. Finally, people died to pass on this story. One must ask the question, "Why would so many be willing to die for a story that they thought might not be true?" People paid a high price for sharing what they believed to be true. One must wonder the risk today of simply disregarding the value of Scripture. As Dr. Sarah Summer has said, "Many of our post-modern theologians wouldn't take a bullet for what they teach, but they will take cash!"

Written tradition was also accurate. Consider the copying methods for Scripture, according to Evans, given below.

1. Moses gave this responsibility to the Levites as a sacred trust (Deut 31:24-26).
2. Their watch over the copying of the Torah came close to idolatry. The Torah scrolls were the most sacred possession in the Holy land.
3. Out of reverence for "The Word of God," a system for copying was established:
 - a. Old copies had to be reproduced for multiplication and replacement.
 - b. The number of words on the new page had to be exactly the same as the one being copied.
 - c. Every line had to be exactly the same as the one being copied.

- d. After a page was copied, the words were counted to make sure they were exactly the same and that the center word was exactly the same. If there were 288 words, then word number 144 had to be exactly the same, or they would begin again.
 - e. A synagogue roll had to have columns no less than 48 lines and no more than 80 lines; the breadth must consist of 30 letters. No letter or yod (the tenth smallest letter of the Hebrew alphabet) could be written from memory.
 - f. The space of a hair thread must intervene between consonants.
 - g. There must be three lines between every book.
 - h. Scribes had to copy letter for letter, not word for word or sentence for sentence.
 - i. The scribe would have his work checked by another scribe, and then a third one would count to see what the middle word was to ensure accuracy (see the 4th bullet point).
 - j. After the whole book was transcribed and checked by these three, another person would count the phrases to quadruple check the doctrine.
 - k. If a mistake was made (as in the case of the Qumran community), they would roll it up in a clay jar and bury it (it was the living Word of God). That's why the scrolls of Qumran were there to be discovered in 1947. The scribes would then repent, do mikvah (Jewish baptism ritual of cleansing), and start all over.
 - l. This was called "building a fence around the scripture." This was done so as to prevent the loss of a single letter or word (Bullinger, The Companion Bible).
 - m. Because of the accuracy of this method, the need to keep older, worn- out copies was not seen as necessary. Just as one would not keep old receipts after accurate financial records are entered and affirmed.
4. The Tanakh is the original Hebrew canon of what we call the Old Testament, containing the 39 books.
 5. The Masoretic Text is the authoritative Hebrew text of the Jewish Bible, regarded almost universally as the official version of the Tanakh.
 6. The Septuagint (250 B.C.) is a Greek translation of the Hebrew text.
 7. The Dead Sea scrolls (at least 100 B.C.) are 95% consistent with the Septuagint and the Tanakh. The differences are no more than five percent, and they are grammatical and spelling differences along with the reordering of text in the case of Jeremiah. None of these differences affect the doctrine or the character of God being taught by the Bible.
 8. Most of the New Testament writers used the Septuagint as the source for their Old Testament references and quotations.

Taking into account that humans are imperfect and that minor errors are possible, it is more than just remarkable (I would argue that it's miraculous) that 66 books, written by 40 plus authors over a period of 1,500 years, could be so consistent in their proclamation of the whole character of God and His plan to love and restore His creation. It is more than remarkable that prophets' prophetic words (i.e., Isaiah 53 and Psalm 22) have verifiably been shown to have been written at least 100 years before the life of Christ, yet depicted his life, death, and resurrection with such accuracy. The New Testament also proves to have been an accurate interpretation of the Tanakh. Therefore, it would take more faith to believe that the Bible is not the Word of God than it would be to believe it is. The words of the apostle Paul, who was a Hebrew scholar, are taken to heart in light of these facts:

"All Scripture is inspired by God and is useful to teach us what is true and to make us realize what is wrong in our lives. It corrects us when we are wrong and teaches us to do what is right" (2 Timothy 3:16).

Both Jews and Christians defend the unchanging Word of God. This is a devotional written by Rabbi Eckstein on the strength of Scripture.

God's Unchanging Word

"Your word, Lord, is eternal; it stands firm in the heavens." Psalm 119:89 When a young Bedouin shepherd followed his errant goat into a cave in the hill country around the Dead Sea, he did more than recover his lost goat - he unearthed a treasure that would substantiate the accuracy of the Hebrew Bible, or what Christians call the Old Testament.

The Dead Sea Scrolls, which were discovered in 1947, are a collection of more than 900 pieces of parchment upon which manuscripts from every book of the Hebrew Bible, except for Esther, were recorded and preserved. The most complete of these scrolls is the entire book of Isaiah.

Until this discovery, the Hebrew Bible in use today was translated from what is called the Masoretic Text. The Masoretes were Jewish scholars who, between 500 and 950 CE, gave the Hebrew Bible, or Old Testament, the form that we are most familiar with today. With the discovery of the scrolls, scholars now had manuscripts in their hands that predated the Masoretic Text by one thousand years!

For many years, the present-day Hebrew Bible had been criticized for being corrupted over time and not well preserved. Now here was the opportunity to see how well the Dead Sea documents would match up with the Masoretic Text. The book of Isaiah was used as the test. After years of careful study, the results were nothing less than amazing: Scholars found that the two were practically identical. Most variants were minor spelling differences, and none affected the meaning of the text.

Hebrew scholar Millar Burrows wrote, "It is a matter of wonder that through something like one thousand years the text underwent so little alteration. As I said in my first article on the scroll, 'Herein lies its chief importance, supporting the fidelity of the Masoretic tradition.'"

While that certainly is a remarkable discovery for biblical scholars, it also is significant for us—devoted readers and students of God's Word. It means, as the Psalm writers affirmed thousands of years before the Dead Sea scrolls were even written, that God's Word "is eternal; it stands firm in the heavens."

We can come to the Bible assured of God's promises, assured that what the patriarchs and the prophets recorded is true today as it was then. As the prophet Isaiah wrote, "The grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of our God endures forever" (Isaiah 40:8).

While all else may fall around us—relationships sour, economies flounder, health declines—God's Word endures. Let that be a comfort to you today in whatever situation you are facing.

With prayers for Shalom, peace, Rabbi Yechiel Eckstein (February 15, 2012)