



Isn't the Bible Full of Errors?

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Mark Pickering and Peter Saunders continue Christian Medical Fellowship's 'Deadly Questions' series.[1]

Virtually every area of apologetics stands or falls on the Bible. We claim Jesus is the only way because he made that clear in the Bible. We also know that God will be fair to those who've never heard the gospel because of his character revealed in the Bible. Without a reliable record of God's workings in history our faith is meaningless. No matter how firmly we believe in Christ, without a sure foundation in Scripture we may well be deluding ourselves. The fundamental problem with non-Christian pictures of Jesus is that they have no historical basis - they are made up fables.

Sadly, that is how many of our friends view the biblical Jesus. Most Muslims in particular see the Bible as a corruption of God's original revelation. Hence they discount the biblical Jesus as the mental product of devious priests.[2] Countless others regard the Bible as historically unreliable at best, dismissing it without a serious hearing.

Of course we should not forget the action of the Holy Spirit. 'The word of God is living and active - it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart.'^[3] We must never be put off from sharing the gospel or the Bible with friends simply because they could have objections we can't answer. We may find that God has been at work and that they are ready to hear without bringing up objections. However, there will always be those with genuine questions, and for their sake as well as ours we need to be able to give reasons why we hold Scripture to be trustworthy.^[4]

Be Specific

Whenever the issue of biblical reliability is raised, you should generally challenge people to be specific. If someone says the Bible is full of contradictions, ask them to show you one. If they say it has been changed, ask them, 'which verses?', 'when?', 'who?' and 'how was it done?' If someone says that particular books were not included, ask them why they trust these books and if they've read them. In a lot of cases you will find that they don't know and are simply repeating what they've heard, trying to brush aside the Bible without seriously considering it. Even if they are prepared to answer in detail (and a few will be!), this is good, because if you don't know the answer, it is a chance to go away and learn! A vague charge of 'You surely don't believe what the Bible says?' shouldn't be left without a response.

Presuppositions

Many people who raise objections to the Bible will have subconscious presuppositions that affect the way they see it. For instance, a Muslim who holds the Qur'an to be perfect cannot agree with the Bible in total, as the two disagree on so many fundamentals. An atheist who continues to deny God's existence cannot accept any book as supernatural revelation. Realising the presuppositions that lie behind a person's objections to the Bible can help, as it is often worth dealing with the presupposition itself. Otherwise we may find ourselves answering question after question that are in fact smoke screens for the real issue.

Types of 'Error'

There are essentially four different areas where people may charge the Bible with error: errors of fact, errors of verbal transmission, errors of written transmission, and contradictions. Each of them must be understood separately.

Errors of Fact

Much of the Bible consists of relating particular events, be they miracles, parables, battles or the reigns of kings. Did the authors get it right or wrong in putting down the details? Can we trust their version of events?

Many biblical events cannot be corroborated

independently because of their nature. Paul's visions of glory in 2 Corinthians 12 were not witnessed by anyone else, so we must take his word for it. On the other hand, there are hundreds of biblical events that can and have been independently verified. The civilisations of Assyria and Babylonia lay forgotten for centuries, recorded only in the Bible and in Greek myths. Many scholars assumed that they were fictitious until 19th century archaeologists dug up the palaces at Nineveh, Babylon and elsewhere, uncovering inscriptions, statues and even libraries, with many exact details of the biblical record being confirmed.

One striking example is Daniel's record that Belshazzar was reigning when Babylon fell to the Medo-Persians in 539 BC.[5] Yet Babylonian king lists recorded Nabonidus as the final ruler of Babylon. Even Herodotus, a famous Greek historian (c. 484-425 BC), does not mention Belshazzar. Historians therefore judged Daniel to be in error. However, two inscriptions, now in the British Museum in London, set the record straight. One records that Nabonidus spent the later years of his reign at Tema, an Arabian oasis. The second relates a prayer of Nabonidus for his son Belshazzar. So Belshazzar was in fact the acting monarch, reigning in place of his absent father. It also explains why Daniel was offered the third highest place in the kingdom (Daniel 5:7,29) - Belshazzar himself was only the second! This stunning verification of the accuracy of Daniel is just one example from hundreds of other discoveries that have confirmed Scripture.[6]

In the New Testament, Luke records dozens of individual details, many of which have been verified independently by archaeology. Concerning the census under Quirinius,[7] Josephus records Quirinius as in office in AD 6, some years after Jesus' birth. Many assumed that Luke was wrong. Yet an inscription in Antioch provides evidence that Quirinius was also governor around 7 BC, whilst other sources confirm further details about the census.[8] Sir William Ramsay concluded after thirty years of study that 'Luke is a historian of the first rank; not merely are his statements of fact trustworthy ... this author should be placed along with the very greatest of historians.'[9]

There are many other examples of corroboration

between the Bible and archaeology, or secular historians. All of these should further increase our confidence in the Bible.[10]

Yet some may suggest that at least parts of the Bible are lies - fabrications made up to suit the needs of the authors rather than to serve the truth. This is extremely unlikely. Tradition records that eleven of the twelve apostles were executed for their faith - they would hardly go to such lengths if they had knowingly lied about Jesus' resurrection. There are many passages that condemn lying,[11] which would be strange if the authors themselves were lying. Similarly, many of the authors record unflattering events in their own lives. David gives evidence of his own adultery [12] and Peter (whose preaching formed the basis for Mark's gospel) does not omit his own denial of Christ.[13]

Verbal Transmission

Anyone who has played Chinese Whispers knows that verbal transmission can go horribly wrong! Certain scholars in the past assumed that parts of the Bible were subject to years of verbal transmission before being written down, the assumption being that many details would have changed in the interim. To this charge two points should be made.

Firstly, ancient powers of verbal transmission were amazing. We tend to forget this in our modern world of PCs, photocopiers and the printed page. Early Muslims memorised over 6,000 verses of the Qur'an accurately and many still do today. Powers of memory are increased further when teachings are composed in easily memorable forms, as were Jesus' parables, for instance.

Secondly, there simply was no long chain of verbal transmission for most of the Bible. Scholars tended to assume that the gospels as we have them were not written down until the second century or later, therefore requiring long periods of verbal transmission. This is not the case, as later scholarship has shown. The gospels were either the products of eyewitnesses [14] or those who knew the eyewitnesses.[15] Furthermore, Paul's letters were direct literary compositions and the prophetic books would have been composed by the prophets themselves.

Even books spanning long sections of history were composed largely from earlier written sources.[16]

Written Transmission

There are no extant original manuscripts of the books of the Bible. The translations we have are based on manuscripts that are copies of copies. This has led some to suggest that the text of the Bible has suffered greatly in the copying process. Are they justified in this assumption?

Such accusations generally show ignorance of the facts. Let's look first at the New Testament (NT). All ancient books in existence have survived only as copies of copies, yet the number, quality and age of the NT manuscripts is far superior to that of any other ancient work. F.F. Bruce concluded that 'there is no body of ancient literature in the world which enjoys such a wealth of good textual attestation as the New Testament.'[17] Even Homer's *Iliad*, one of the most famous works of ancient literature, has survived in just 643 manuscripts (ie. handwritten copies from before the advent of the printing press), the earliest of which dates from hundreds of years after its original composition. This situation is far better than for most ancient works, the basic integrity of which is not usually questioned. Yet the NT has survived in over 24,000 manuscripts, including lectionaries and early translations. NT manuscripts have survived from at least the early second century onwards (eg. the John Rylands fragment of John 18:31, 33, 37, 38 in Manchester). This is a far smaller time gap from composition to first extant manuscript than any other ancient work.[18] Later NT manuscripts can be easily viewed, such as the Codex Alexandrinus (5th century) and Codex Sinaiticus (4th century) in the British Library.

Turning to the Old Testament (OT), the situation is not quite the same, largely due to the greater age of the books concerned. Still, there are hundreds of OT manuscripts surviving, and these again compare extremely favourably with those surviving from other works of the same period. The Jewish scribes (Masoretes) responsible for faithfully transmitting the texts turned their job into an art form, devising complex, multi-layered checks for ensuring that no mistakes had crept in, such as counting the number of times each letter

of the alphabet appears in each book.

The Dead Sea Scrolls are a fascinating witness to the authenticity of the OT text. Prior to their discovery in 1947, the oldest complete OT texts dated from around AD 900. The Dead Sea Scrolls date to around a century or so before the time of Christ and include many OT manuscripts. The book of Isaiah was found amongst the scrolls and 'proved to be word for word identical with our standard Hebrew Bible in more than 95 percent of the text. The 5 percent of variation consisted chiefly of obvious slips of the pen and variations in spelling.'[19]

It is worth knowing something about the kinds of variant readings found in manuscripts of the Bible. Virtually all manuscripts contain variants, as happens whenever long passages are copied out by hand. This should not worry us. The biblical text that we have to defend is that of the original autograph, not later copies, as it was the authors that were inspired, not the copyists. Manuscripts are valuable in that they help to show us what the text of the original autographs was.

The vast majority of variants are variations in spelling and grammar that have no bearing on the meaning. Others are obvious slips of the pen, with one letter mistaken for another, or lines and phrases inadvertently missed out or repeated. Occasionally variants do change the meaning of the text and there are rare examples of a deliberate change, (such as harmonising the wording in two similar passages). Again, we should not be worried by the existence of these variants. There are a comparatively small number that change the meaning of the text and in virtually every case the original reading can be determined by comparing manuscripts together, a process known as textual criticism.[20] Bruce Metzger, one of the world's leading authorities on NT textual criticism, states that not one doctrine of the church is in jeopardy because of a variant reading in the New Testament.

Contradictions

The final category of alleged error is that of contradiction. Many people believe the Bible to be 'full of contradictions'. Shabir Ally, a Canadian Muslim apologist, has written a booklet entitled *101 Clear Contradictions in the Bible*, which has

been answered point by point in *101 'Cleared-Up' Contradictions in the Bible*.^[21] As mentioned earlier, it's always useful to ask people to be specific. Most people who claim there are hundreds of contradictions can't even name one. However, some will bring up examples, so it's worth looking at the different kinds of 'contradiction' that might come up.

Some are due to simple scribal error. 2 Kings 24:8 gives Jehoiachin's coronation age as eighteen, whilst most manuscripts of 2 Chronicles 36:9 give it as eight (see NIV footnote). The original reading is easy to determine and nothing of any importance is affected. Copying errors of numbers are fairly common. As mentioned before, it was the authors who were inspired, not the scribes!

Others are due to taking verses out of context. Matthew 7:8 tells us, 'seek and you will find', but Proverbs 1:28 says, 'they will look for me but will not find me'. The verses are clearly talking about different situations, hence there is no contradiction. Whenever a 'contradiction' is brought up, it's always worth reading the few verses before and after to get the context; usually the solution is obvious from there alone.

Further examples arise in the parallel accounts of the gospels. The events of Easter morning, for instance, can seem difficult to fit into a convincing framework. However, with a little thought and background information, things become a lot clearer.^[22] Far from casting doubt on their accounts, this should strengthen our trust in them. Anyone who enjoys a good detective story will know that different accounts that at first seem irreconcilable can often dovetail perfectly once things are put together in the proper sequence. Four witnesses who gave verbatim accounts of the same incident would instantly be suspected of foul play.

Another example of a 'difficult' contradiction is the genealogies of Jesus in Matthew 1 and Luke 3. Both are identical from Abraham to David (Luke goes further back to Adam), but from David to Jesus they diverge. How is it possible that both could be correct? A look at the surrounding chapters shows us that Matthew gives the nativity story entirely from Joseph's perspective, whilst Luke recounts Mary's side of the story. It is one

possibility, therefore, that Matthew is giving Joseph's genealogy, whilst Luke records Mary's. Luke only records males in the genealogy, so if this is true, Joseph would strictly be the son in law of Heli,^[23] replacing Mary in the genealogy simply for reasons of genealogical form.^[24]

We will always have questions about certain verses. Sometimes the answer is there waiting for us to find,^[25] sometimes we simply cannot know for sure. However, the more we study the questions we have, the more answers we will find and the more our confidence in Scripture will grow. Unanswered questions will worry us less as we look back at the many that have already been answered. We should keep in mind that there has never been another book that has been attacked so consistently, yet has withstood the criticism so resolutely.

Conclusion

We have looked briefly at the four main areas in which the Bible is often charged with error, showing that the charges are unfounded. I hope that some of the questions raised will stimulate you to a continuing interest in answering the hard questions of Scripture.

If the Bible is a reliable record of God's workings in history, then it is vital that we take time to read it. It is sad indeed that so many Christians who will devote their God-given intellects to the practice of medicine, often give so little time to studying and understanding his written word. Most Christians have never read the whole Bible even once, despite coming to faith years ago. This is a great pity and if you are not already in the process of studying the whole Bible, let me encourage you to do so.^[26]

Not only should we read the Bible, but we must also live it. 'Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says.'^[27] Similarly, we must share it. Our friends, colleagues and patients are perishing in darkness and it is the message of the gospel, contained within the Bible, that alone can give them hope and salvation.

References

§ Based on the Confident Christianity evangelism training course, online at www.cmf.org.uk/evang/conf/intro.htm

§ Dealt with more fully in Pickering M. Islam - How to Reach Your Neighbour. *Nucleus* 2000; October:30-38

§ Hebrews 4:12

§ 1 Peter 3:15

§ Daniel 5:7, 29

§ A fascinating tour of biblical evidence in the British Museum is available. Interested groups should contact students@cmf.org.uk for details.

§ Luke 2:1, 2

§ McDowell J. *The New Evidence that Demands a Verdict*. Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1999: 63

§ Quoted in *ibid*

§ For further information see McDowell J. *Op Cit*: chs 3, 4

§ Eg. Exodus 20:16; Leviticus 19:11; Proverbs 12:22; Colossians 3:9; Revelation 21:8

§ Psalm 51

§ Mark 14:66-72

§ John 21:24

§ Luke 1:1, 2

§ Eg. Joshua 10:13; 1 Kings 14:19

§ Quoted in McDowell J. *Op cit*: 37

§ McDowell J. *Op cit*: 33-37. See also Bunn A. Is Christianity Evidence-Based? *Nucleus*, 2001; January:17-27

§ Archer, GL, quoted in McDowell J. *Op cit*: 79

§ For a very helpful overview, see eg. Greenlee JH. *Introduction to New Testament Textual Criticism*. Carlisle: Paternoster, 1996

§ Available online at debate.org.uk/topics/apolog/contrads.htm

§ See for instance Wenham J. *Easter Enigma*. Carlisle: Paternoster, 1997

§ Luke 3:23

§ Further details are given in sections 26-29 of the rebuttal to Shabir Ally. See ref 19

§ A good place to start would be Archer GL. *Encyclopedia of Bible Difficulties*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982

§ Bible reading plans are available from students@cmf.org.uk

§ James 1:22