

ST. BARTHOLOMEW'S CHURCH IN THE TOWN OF TONAWANDA, NY

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"Is the Bible God's Word" (part 3)

BIBLICAL IGNORANCE

A couple weeks ago, Newsweek featured a cover article entitled, "*The Mystery of Mary Magdalene.*" While it was a typically amateurish article by someone who really doesn't know the Scriptures (are we surprised?), what I did find interesting was what one reader wrote to the editor the following week: "*I am increasingly troubled to see Newsweek headed down the path of what can only be viewed as religious advocacy. "An Inconvenient Woman" has the fatal flaw of assuming as fact a variety of fantastical and preposterous religious beliefs, most notably a virgin birth and a return from the dead, for which there is not a scintilla of credible evidence. Those who point to the Christian Bible as all the evidence they need simply choose to ignore the fallacy of the self-proving document; that is, that the bible is regarded as the "word of God" by Christians simply because it says it is. Instead of analyzing the "mystery" of Mary Magdalene and her relationship with Jesus, shouldn't we be asking whether these people existed at all?"*"

This reader raises an interesting question; do we just believe the Bible is the Word of God simply because it says so? Is there not a scintilla of evidence for the claims made in Scripture? If someone were to ask you why do believe the Bible is God's Word, what would you say?

As with anything in life, if it is the truth you can find the evidence for it. The truth is there is so much evidence for Christ's resurrection, His deity and the Bible as God's Words that thousands of books have been written on the subject. Now such evidence may not necessarily prove anything empirically but such evidence can confirm the truth. And that certainly is the case with the Bible.

If you have been with us you know that we have been doing a series answering this question, "Is the Bible God's Word?" It's obviously a vitally important question for us as believers and for the world as a whole. Civilization, indeed life itself hangs in the balance. In order to answer the question, we need to answer four other key questions.

FOUR KEY QUESTIONS

Recall them from our previous times together: **What does the Bible claim? Is the Bible relevant? Is the Bible reliable? How has the Bible impacted our world?** We have looked at the first two, and briefly touched on the third when I did a sermon on the book, *The Da Vinci Code*. What I would like to look at today is to continue looking at the third question "Is the Bible reliable?"

Before we do that, let me just say something that I have found true about life. Everything in life, in the natural realm, doesn't just happen. There is a process involved. Our bodies grow and develop. Our minds grow and develop, so too our families, our communities, the nations of the world, indeed all of nature and civilization. And it is no different when it comes to the salvation and spiritual development of an individual and of the world. The way God has revealed Himself and the way His message of truth and grace have spread, all take time. Why is this? It is simply how God has ordained life in the natural realm. And the same can be said of the Scriptures themselves. The Bible didn't just fall from the sky or

was dropped off a spaceship. It came together over thousands of years and we will see it has withstood the test of time.

Now if we are going to look at the question of the Bible's reliability we first need to look at what it says about itself. The key verse that sums it all up when it comes to the written Word of God is found in **2 Timothy 3:16-17**: "***All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness that the man of God might be adequate, equipped for every good work.***" The Greek word we translate as "inspired" literally means "God-breathed." In other words, it is God who is ultimately doing the talking. When the Apostle Paul says "all Scripture," he is referring to our Old Testament or the Hebrew Bible. The New Testament had not yet been compiled.

Throughout the Hebrew Bible we hear over and over it again, the words, "***Thus saith the Lord***" or "***The Lord spoke these words***", or "***The angel of the Lord came and spoke***" or we read that God revealed Himself to a prophet in a vision. In fact there are over 3800 such declarations in the Old Testament alone.

The Hebrew Bible is divided into three sections: the Law, the Prophets and the Writings (or *Hagiographa* which literally means "sacred writings" and from which we get the word, "Holy Scriptures"). Jesus affirms this three-fold division on several occasions. For example, in **Luke 24:44**, after His resurrection Jesus says His disciples "***These are the words which I spoke to you while I was still with you, that all things must be fulfilled which were written in the Law of Moses and the Prophets, and the Psalms (first book of the Writings) concerning Me.***"

And then all the books of the Hebrew Bible are honored by Jesus in **Mt. 23:35** and **Lk. 11:51** when He uses the phrase "***from the blood of Abel to the blood of Zechariah.***" This phrase is a reference to all the martyred prophets from one end of the Hebrew Bible to the other, from **Genesis 4:3-15** to **2 Chronicles 24:19-22**. For while *Malachi* is listed as the last book in our English Bibles, in the Hebrew Bible, it is the Book of *Chronicles* which is listed last. Therefore, Jesus is affirming the Hebrew Bible as God's Word!

Now some in and certainly many outside of the Church contend that the Bible cannot be error free. Hence, they do not consider God's Word to be always true. Yet, let's look at what the Lord God says concerning His Word in the Hebrew Scriptures from each of the three parts:

Num. 23:19 (The LAW): "***God is not a man, that He should lie, or a mortal, that he should change His mind. Has He promised and will He not do it? Has He spoken, and will He not fulfill it?***"

Is. 40:8 (The PROPHETS): "***The grass withers, the flower fades; but the Word of our God will stand forever.***"

Ps. 119:89 (The WRITINGS): "***The Lord exists forever; Your Word is firmly fixed in heaven.***"

Now let's look at what Jesus said about the Hebrew Scriptures, His Bible. Recall He read from it, quoted from it, talked about it and taught from it. He said in **Mt. 5:18**: "***For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished.***" Or when Jesus says in **Mk 14:49**, after the authorities come to arrest Him, "***The Scriptures must be fulfilled.***"

THE FORMATION OF THE HEBREW BIBLE

How did we get the Hebrew Bible? It was **Moses** who put the words of God’s Law and Miracles down for a record and witness of the divine covenant (**Ex. 24:7**). Though God often spoke through Moses orally, Moses also wrote down God’s commands (**Ex. 17:14; 24:4,7; 34:27; Num. 33:2; Dt. 28:58, 61; 31:24-26**). He also is considered to be the author of the first five books of the Old Testament. His authorship was affirmed by Jesus in **Jn. 5:45-47**. These five books are known to the Jews as the *Pentateuch* or *Torah*. They serve as the foundation for the Hebrew Scriptures. We know this from Jewish history.

When the Book of the Law was found by Hilkiah, it was read first to the King and then to the congregation (**2 Kings 22-23; 2 Chron. 34**). It was read to the people by Ezra (**Neh. 8:9,14-17; 10:28-39; 13:1-3**). Throughout the Hebrew Scriptures the Pentateuch is revered, **Joshua 1:7, 8:31; Hosea 8:12; Daniel 9:11**, to name a few examples. As a result, the Pentateuch is always the first section in the Hebrew Bible. Though Moses was one of the earliest and greatest prophets (**Num. 12:6-8**), more were expected to follow (**Dt. 18:15-22; 34:10**).

Samuel was the next prophet who wrote down God’s Word (**1 Sam. 10:25; 1 Chron. 29:29**), which was mainly historical in nature. We know other prophets also wrote down their oracles – **Is. 30:8; Jer. 25:13, 29:1; Ez. 43:11; Habakkuk 2:2; Dan. 7:1; 2 Chron. 21:12 (Elijah)**.

Why did they write down God’s Word? To send it to another place (**Jer. 29:1; 36:1-8; 2 Chron. 21:12**); to preserve it for the future as a memorial (**Ex. 17:14**) or witness (**Dt. 31:24-26**) and that it might be there for the time to come (**Is. 30:20**.) The unreliability of oral tradition was well known to the Old Testament writers. For example, the Book of the Law was lost during the wicked reigns of Manasseh and Amon. When it was rediscovered by the priest Hilkiah, it teaching came as a great shock, for it had been forgotten (**2 Kings 22-23; 2 Chron. 34**).

During the **Intertestamental Period** (period between the prophet Malachi and Jesus 300 BC- 30 AD) there were other writings used, commonly called the **Apocrypha**, but these were never considered to have the same authority as the earlier writings. Note that while Jesus affirmed the older Hebrew Scriptures, He never quoted from any of the books that were considered Apocryphal. First century Jewish historian, Josephus, and Jewish philosopher, Pliny, both wrote that such books were not considered by Jews to have the same authority as their Hebrew Scriptures. Yet, the books of the **Apocrypha** are contained in some Christian Bibles. In our (the Anglican) tradition, we can read them for some historical background and for moral example but not to establish any doctrine for the reasons mentioned above.

THE PRESERVATION OF THE HEBREW BIBLE

But can we trust that what we use today to translate the Hebrew Bible into our English Old Testament is the same that Jesus used and even before the time of Jesus? The answer is a resounding **“Yes!”** There are three main sources that we base our present day Old Testaments on. They are...

1. **Masoretic Texts** – written in Hebrew, these manuscripts refer to the Hebrew Bible that were copied by the Marosetes, Jewish scholars and scribes who lived in Tiberius on near the Sea of Galilee and flourished from 500-1000 AD. They standardized the traditional Hebrew consonantal text by adding vowel pointing and marginal notes. The oldest dated Masoretic manuscript is dated 895 AD. These Hebrew copies were considered the earliest known preserved copies until 1947. Renowned biblical scholar FF Bruce writes, *“The Masorettes were well disciplined and treated the text with the greatest*

imaginable reverence, and devised a complicated system of safeguards against scribal slips. They counted for example, the number of times each letter of the alphabet occurs in each book; they pointed out the middle letter of the Pentateuch and the middle letter of the whole Hebrew Bible, and made even more detailed calculations than these.”

2. Dead Sea Scrolls – These are the hundreds of ancient manuscripts that were found in a cave in Qumran near the Dead Sea in 1947. This was a treasure trove of valuable Hebrew manuscripts dating from the first century AD and earlier. It contained a complete scroll of Isaiah with a date of at least 100 BC and portions of all our Old Testament books except Esther, with the oldest fragment being from Exodus and dated about 250 BC! Amazingly, when compared with *the Masoretic Texts* (see above), they are remarkably similar, the only differences found in spelling and grammar. For example of the 166 words in Isaiah 53, there are only seventeen letters in question. Ten are a matter of spelling, four are minor stylistic changes such as conjunctions and the remaining three letters comprise the word, “light” which is added to verse 11 but does not affect the meaning greatly. Thus, after 1000 years of transmission there is only one word in question and it doesn’t even affect the meaning of the passage!

3. Septuagint (LXX) - much older than the Masoretic text, this was a Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures undertaken by 70 Jewish scholars in Alexandria, Egypt during the 3rd century BC. After the conquests of Alexander the Great, Greek became the common language of much of the Near East. So Jews translated their Hebrew Bibles into Greek. Later, the *Septuagint*, was used by the early Church because it was written in Greek, and thereby could reach the Gentiles more effectively. Thus, today’s scholars have these copies to compare and contrast with the other Hebrew manuscripts, as well.

One can also add the Syriac, Aramaic and Latin manuscripts and other fragments of the Hebrew Scriptures that have been discovered, plus the quotations of the Old Testament by the early Church Fathers from the late first through the fourth centuries.

So by comparing all these different translations and manuscripts we can be confident that the very Scriptures that claim to be God’s Word have been remarkably preserved throughout the centuries despite persecutions, heresies, and the ravages of time.

Next time, we will look at how the New Testament came to be, how it was preserved, and how archaeological discoveries have consistently confirmed the historical accuracy of the Bible.

Let us pray...

Heavenly Father, we thank you for the gift of Your Word, how it testifies to Your Son, our Savior Jesus Christ. We thank You for its preservation and for using it to bring us into a saving relationship with You. May Your Holy Spirit help us to read, study and inwardly digest Your Word. And may we always be doers of Your Word, and not hearers only. We ask all this Your name – forever the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, AMEN!