

What is up with the Bible?

Question 8

The Bible is the book of Christians. Today it is becoming a less and less understood book as fewer and fewer people read it. Usually when Christians do apologetics (defending the faith) the question they must answer is, “is the Bible reliable?” The Bible is mistrusted in many ways with numerous questions, including the following, being asked:

- *Why were numerous other gospels of Jesus left out and only four (Matthew, Mark, Luke and John) allowed in the Bible?*
- *Hasn't the Bible been copied and passed down through so many centuries that it is filled with mistakes? Can we really say what the Bible says today is what it said when first written?*
- *Isn't the Bible itself full of errors? The Old Testament and New contradict, so do Paul and James, just to name a few.*
- *Wasn't the Bible put together by the most powerful Christians hundreds of years after Jesus?*
- *Can we really think that this book is in any way more inspired or different from any other religious book?*

These questions and others like them are challenging. They are questions that I struggled with for many years. There are numerous resources out there and I am not going to reproduce them all, mostly because it is late in the semester and I do not have time to do a well thought out study. I also feel that as Christians we have lost grasp of what the Bible truly is and its place in our life. So I think answering the questions above and others like them are important but all I will do is point you in the direction of good resources:

1. Books

- a. Lee Strobel – *The Case for Christ*
- b. Lee Strobel – *The Case for the Real Jesus*
- c. FF Bruce – *The New Testament Documents: Are they Reliable?*
- d. Craig Blomberg – *The Historical Reliability of the Gospels*
- e. Philip Jenkins – *Hidden Gospels – How the Search for Jesus Lost its Way*
- f. FF Bruce – *The Canon of Scripture*
- g. Jaroslav Pelikan – *Whose Bible Is It? A History of the Scriptures through the Ages*
- h. Bruce Metzger – *The Text of the New Testament: Its Transmission, Corruption, and Restoration*
- i. Bruce Metzger – *The Canon of the New Testament: Its Origin, Development, and Sacrifice*

2. Online Articles

- a. The Canon of Scripture - <http://www.bible-researcher.com/canon.html>
- b. Catholic Encyclopedia: Canon of the New Testament - <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/03274a.htm>
- c. What is the Canon? - <http://www.carm.org/questions/canon.htm>
- d. How and When was the Canon of the Bible Put together - <http://www.gotquestions.org/canon-Bible.html>
- e. Council of Nicea - <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/3801.htm>

*Also helpful is an extensive study I did that shows how the New Testament came together (“Where the New Testament Came From”)

If the Church presented Jesus as the radical, amazing person and savior that he is then perhaps these attacks on scripture would not come as frequently. The fact is that the Church has made Jesus boring so people go looking for a more interesting Jesus in places like *The Da Vinci Code*, the Gospel of Thomas and others.

Here I want to spend time talking about the inspiration of the Bible (what it means and does not mean) and what the Bible really is and is not.

Let me state that I am not saying the questions above are unimportant. For me finding good answers to those questions was a huge step in my faith. Reading some of those books on the list above greatly helped me. But there is more to faith than simply proving it and there is more to the Bible than simply proving it was written early and has been passed down accurately. We must move from mere belief to a change of lifestyle!

I. Inspiration of the Bible

A. Theories of Inspiration

1. Dictation – Writers of the Bible were merely secretaries who wrote exactly, word-for-word, what God told them to write (Qur'an viewed in this way by Muslims) – very few Christians are here
2. Verbal – God does supervise all the words (inerrancy)
3. Dynamic – God gives ideas; humans give the words (infallible)
4. Illumination – God only enhances human abilities, then the human writes
5. Intuition – No help from God; it's the word of poetic genius

B. What is Inspiration?

1. The Holy Spirit inspired the Scripture writers as they wrote (in some way) – as we read it the Holy Spirit speaks through the Scripture to illuminate us (God's authority comes through the Scripture).
 - a. "The biblical documents suggest that the Spirit used a wide range of means in influencing the writers of Scripture...because of this variety, we ought not to apply any one theory to the entire Bible...by direct command, a sense of urgency, or simply a personal desire or compulsion, God's Spirit moved spiritual persons within the faith community to write or compile from dictation, experience, tradition, or wisdom those documents which reflect what God desired to have recorded in order that his purposes might be served" (Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God*, 382).
2. *Related question: What is the Bible?*
 - a. Is the Bible an answer book that is meant to be our sole means of deciding the answer to every (or nearly every) question?
 - i. The Bible does not appear to be this. It is not a systematic theology with part one answering all our questions of who God is, part two on Jesus and so forth. There are questions we deal with that are not specifically dealt with in the Bible. The Bible certainly does provide answers but it is much more than *just* an answer book
 - b. Why do we see the Bible in this way? (i.e "roadmap" "answer book" etc.)
 - i. The modern world became very scientific and the answer to anything was to dissect it: to understand an animal we dissect it and discover all truth about it. Christians applied this scientific method to the Bible: dividing it into chapter and verse and down to word. Then when faced with a question they found the right verses, lined them up and had an answer!
 1. Appears the real truth is the theology behind the Bible – from the Bible we learn about God, or end times, or creation and that is the proper doctrine!
 2. To be right is to believe this proper doctrine
 3. But it no longer lets the Bible speak for itself – the theology is the focus and all rough edges in the Bible are smoothed away
 - c. What if the Bible is primarily a story of God's work in the world?
 - i. It does not so much always give answers (though it does sometimes) but it also helps us ask the right questions. Mostly, it shows us how to live in line with God's plan!
 - ii. 1 Timothy 3:16 – all scripture is God-breathed and useful for teaching *to live the right way!*
3. Importance of Context
 - a. Ancient people would not ask the questions we ask (for example, they did not worry about the relation of God to modern science since there was no modern science)
 - i. So when Jesus says the mustard seed is the smallest seed but we know there are smaller seeds, we do not get worried. Jesus spoke to people in a specific culture and the smallest seed they knew of was the mustard seed = context.
 - b. Bible is God's book – God inspired it
 - c. Bible is a human book – humans wrote it
 - d. Interaction between these two: God inspired humans but the humans still had passions and thought processes and their own methods which influenced how they wrote.
 - i. Example – Gospel of Mark has very bad Greek grammar compared to the others

4. Bible and God's Mission

- a. **The Bible does not exist so we can have the right answer to every question nor so that we can prove people wrong who disagree with us. It exists to show us what God's mission is and to empower us to become part of that mission!**

II. The Authority of the Bible

*NT Wright talks about the authority of the Bible and its relation to God's mission in *The Last Word: Beyond the Bible Wars to a New Understanding of the Authority of Scripture*.

- ♦ “The phrase ‘authority of scripture’ can make Christian sense only if it is a shorthand for ‘authority of the triune God, exercised somehow through scripture’” (Wright, 23).
 - Scripture points to God's authority – Rom. 13:1; John 19:11; Matt. 28:18; Phil. 2:9-11; John 1 (the word became flesh; was not just written down); Heb. 1:1-2; John 8:39-40
- ♦ The Bible is not the sort of thing people would think of when they think of “authority”
 - Authority makes you think of rules and doctrines; the Bible is primarily a story – How can a story be authoritative?
- ♦ “The Biblical writers live with the tension of believing both that in one sense God has always been sovereign over the world and that in another sense this sovereignty, this saving rule, is something which must break afresh into the world of corruption, decay and death, and the human rebellion, idolatry and sin which are so closely linked with it... God's authority, if we are to locate it at this point, is his sovereign power accomplishing this renewal of all creation. Specific authority over human beings, notably the church, must be seen as part of that larger whole” (29).
- ♦ Authority of scripture must be related to the mission of the church, the work of the Spirit, the ultimate future hope and the way it is anticipated in the present, and the nature of the church – failing to pay attention to how scripture functions with these is part of the problem (30)
- ♦ “Even when Biblical writers were telling the story of Israel, this was never merely in order to provide facts about the past for their own sake. The story was told in order to generate once more the sense of Israel as the people called by YHWH for his purposes in the world, so that the writing and telling of the story formed the further living embodiment of YHWH's call and promise. It was written to shape and direct the life of God's people... to attempt to sum up the role which scripture played within Israel we would need to say something like ‘God's sovereign activity in, through, to and for Israel by means of his spoken and written word.’ Or to put it more simply, ‘God's sovereignty operating through scripture’” (40).
- ♦ “A historically grounded understanding of Jesus' proclamation, achievement, death and resurrection suggests that at the heart of his work lay the sense of bringing the story of scripture to its climax, and thereby offering to God the obedience through which the kingdom would be accomplished... Jesus thus does, climactically and decisively, what scripture had in a sense been trying to do: bring God's fresh Kingdom-order to God's people and thence to the world” (42-3).
- ♦ “The earliest apostolic preaching was neither a standard Jewish message with Jesus added on at the end, nor a free-standing announcement of a new religion cut off from its Jewish roots, but rather the story of Jesus understood as the fulfillment of the Old Testament covenant narrative, and thus as the *euangelion*, the good news or ‘gospel’-the creative force which called the church into being and shaped its mission and life. It was this biblical story rather than some other... that provided the interpretive matrix within which the accomplishment of Jesus made the sense it did” (47).
 - “Here we have the roots of a fully Christian theology of scriptural authority: planted firmly in the soil of the missionary community, confronting the powers of the world with the news of the Kingdom of God, refreshed and invigorated by the Spirit, growing particularly through the preaching and teaching of the apostles, and bearing fruit in the transformation of human lives as the start of God's project to put the whole cosmos to rights. God accomplishes these things, so the early church believed, through the ‘word’: the story of Israel now told as reaching its climax in Jesus, God's call to Israel now transmuted into God's call to his renewed people. And it was this ‘word’ which came, through the work of the early writers, to be expressed in writing in the New Testament as we know it” (50).

- Contradictions come about when a Western modern thought mindset is imposed on texts – would a contradiction to us be a contradiction to the thought world of the first century? (52-3)?
- ♦ “It is not hard to imagine illustrations of how this continuity and discontinuity function. When travelers sail across a vast ocean and finally arrive on the distant shore, they leave the ship behind and continue over land, not because the ship was no good, or because their voyage had been misguided, but precisely because both ship and voyage had accomplished their purpose. During the new, dry-land stage of their journey, the travelers remain-and in this illustration must never forget that they remain-the people who made that voyage in that ship” (57).
 - “The New Testament understands itself as the new covenant charter, the book that forms the basis for the new telling of the story through which Christians are formed, reformed and transformed so as to be God’s people for God’s world. That is the challenge the early Christians bequeath to us as we reconsider what ‘the authority of Scripture’ might mean in practice today” (59).
 - Compared to “alternative” Christian stories – over time (100s-200s AD) people created various forms of Christianity which scholars today argue should get a fair hearing. The thing they all have in common is that they disconnect Jesus from Jewish history. For them Jesus is no longer part of that story (62-4)
 - Furthermore, the kind of spirituality the other Christianities had did not lead to persecution and death as did the Christianity of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. When people reading the Gospel of Thomas went off to meditate, this bothered no one. When people reading Luke said Jesus is Lord and Caesar is not, when they declared injustice in the empire, they were killed!
 - Reformation literal
 - “literal” is the “sense of the letter” – how the author originally intended it; if it was intended as a metaphor than so be it, it is a literal metaphor (for them literal is not opposed to metaphorical)
- ♦ “To affirm ‘the authority of scripture’ is precisely not to say, ‘We know what scripture means and don’t need to raise any more questions.’ It is always a way of saying that the church in each generation must make fresh and rejuvenated efforts to understand scripture more fully and live by it more thoroughly, even if that means cutting across cherished traditions” (91).
- ♦ “The whole of my argument so far leads to the following major conclusion: that the shorthand phrase ‘the authority of scripture,’ when unpacked, offers a picture of God’s sovereign and saving plan for the entire cosmos, dramatically inaugurated by Jesus himself, and now to be implemented through the Spirit-led life of the church precisely as the scripture-reading community” (114).

III. God’s Mission – The Bible Story

A. Inspiration and Authority

1. We have seen that God inspired humans to write scripture and that this scripture is authoritative in that it points to God who is the ultimate and final authority.
2. This scripture tells a story that we are a part of – this is a story God wants us to know so that we know how to live as players in the story
3. The story is one of God’s mission in Creation.

B. The Story We Find Ourselves In

1. Creation (Gen. 1-2) – God creates the world and it is good.
2. Crisis (Gen. 3-11) – Humans ruin God’s good world by bringing in disobedience, anger, vengeance, pride, jealousy, hatred, etc.
3. Israel (Gen. 12-end of the Old Testament)
 - a. God does not leave humans in this mess. He calls Abraham (Gen. 12) to be a blessing to the nations; the promise is that through Abraham’s descendants the whole world will be blessed.
 - i. God’s plan: to renew his relationship with humans (and all creation)
 - b. God interacts with Abraham’s descendants, Israel. He powerfully frees them from slavery in Egypt, demonstrating his love and power. Then he settles them in the land he promised them with the hope that they would model how life should be lived and be a blessing. But they continually worship idols, are greedy and fall into ruin. Often God judges them and just as often they turn back to him and he forgives them.

- c. Finally the story ends with the people of Israel demoralized: they are ruled with an iron fist by a series of powerful empires (Babylon, Persia, Greece, and Rome). They have failed at being a blessing and it appears God has turned his back on them.
 - d. Hope comes from the prophets who promise God will return and a new covenant will exist
 - 4. Christ – Jesus of Nazareth arrives on the scene - his life, death and resurrection is the climax to the whole story. Jesus does what Israel failed (as a Jew he represents Israel); through Jesus the crisis is undone and a new creation is formed. Jesus offers himself as a sacrifice for all evil; he saves humanity from its sin, setting us free to live how we were created to live.
 - 5. Church – People who follow Jesus band together; they are communities of people who are new creation. These communities exist with the purpose of spreading blessing (the “good news”) to all of humanity.
 - a. This is the part of the story we live in!
 - b. The Bible tells the story in parts 1-4 (and some in part 5). As we know this story of where God started and where God is going we see how we are to live.
 - i. We work with God (co-mission) in spreading the good news that there is a better way to live, the crisis can be overcome, and there can be new creation!
 - 6. Consummation – the Bible story hints of the end when all things are made new
 - a. Jesus’ work of new creation on the cross will be completely finished one day. We look to that future, to where God is, and we work to move towards it.
- C. God’s Mission – Our Mission
- 1. The Bible story shows us that God is on a mission to save all creation.
 - 2. Jesus Christ accomplishes this salvation once and for all
 - 3. Our Mission – to join God in spreading this grace, the good news of Jesus, to all creation
 - a. Inviting people to follow Jesus, to know the love and grace and forgiveness and to live a new way of spreading those good things!

III. Conclusion

A. Defending the Bible

- 1. Defending the reliability of the Bible is important, especially with the many attacks on it today.
- 2. We also defend it by living it out. Further, the best way to show someone it is true is by inviting them to live in the story of God on the side of God.
- 3. May we be people who demonstrate a new way of living as new creations.