

Lesson 9: Reliability of the Bible

1. Thus far, we have looked primarily at corroborating evidence that supports Biblical narrative. That is important and, frankly, the amount of extra-biblical evidence is extraordinary. However, at some point, we must conclude that the Bible is the inspired Word of God for us to get any benefit from it. To conclude that, you must be comfortable with the fact that the Bible is reliable. It is reliable from a scientific point of view: that is, it does not contradict any laws of science. It is reliable from an historical point of view: we know of no historical items in the Bible that have been disproved by historians—in fact, there are ample occurrences of facts in the Bible that historians have vehemently refuted, and that only later have been proven correct (modern rediscovery of the Hittite nation is but one example). It is reliable from an archaeological point of view: as with historical facts, archaeology continues to “dig up” and confirm things we can read about in the Bible. And, most importantly, it is reliable from a spiritual point of view. But, how do we know that?
2. The corroborating evidence we've studied to date (and a lot more that we haven't broached) is one way. Another way is to study the unique nature of the Bible in terms of its recording and transmission and to study how we got the canon. That's what we'll do in this lesson.
3. The Uniqueness of the Bible—the Bible stands alone among all other books, religious or secular. The following is an incomplete list of ways in which the Bible is absolutely different.
 - A) It is unique in its continuity:
 - a) It was written over a period of over 1400 years, by more than 40 authors from vastly different walks of life, during times of both war and peace.
 1. Moses was a political leader and judge who was trained in the Egyptian educational system.
 2. David, of course, was a shepherd boy turned King, and was a musician and a poet.
 3. Amos was a herdsman.
 4. Joshua was a valiant military leader.
 5. Nehemiah was a cupbearer to a pagan King.
 6. Daniel was a leader in the Babylonian government during the captivity of Judah.
 7. Luke was a doctor and an historian.
 8. Peter was a fisherman.
 9. Matthew was a tax collector.
 10. Paul was a rabbi.
 - b) It was written on three continents (Africa, Asia and Europe) and in many types of locales
 1. Moses wrote in the wilderness.

2. Jeremiah wrote from the captivity.
 3. Daniel wrote from a hillside and in a palace.
 4. Paul wrote from inside prison walls.
 5. Luke wrote while traveling extensively.
 6. John wrote while in exile on the island of Patmos.
- c) It was written in three languages (Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek)
1. Hebrew is used for practically all of the Old Testament.
 2. Daniel 2 through Daniel 7 and most of Ezra 4 through Ezra 7 are in Aramaic. Note that Aramaic was the “common language” of the near East until the time of Alexander the Great (~4th century B.C.) and is linguistically very close to Hebrew and similar in structure.
 3. Greek is used for practically all of the New Testament and was the lingua franca—the international language spoken by a vast majority of peoples—during the time of Christ. This was a primarily a result of Alexander the Great.
- d) It was written in a wide variety of literary styles.
1. Poetry (Psalms, Proverbs)
 2. Historical narrative (Chronicles, Kings)
 3. Song (Psalms, Song of Solomon)
 4. Romance (Esther)
 5. Didactic treatise—that is, moral instruction (The whole Bible)
 6. Personal correspondence (Paul's letters, Peter's letters)
 7. Memoirs (Acts, Gospels)
 8. Satire (portions of the Psalms, portions of the Prophets)
 9. Biography (Gospels)
 10. Law (Deuteronomy)
 11. Prophecy (Daniel, Jeremiah, etc.)
 12. Parable (Gospels)
 13. Allegory—that is, the representation of abstract ideas by characters, events and figures in dramatic form (Revelation, Daniel, Jeremiah)
- e) It addresses thousands of subjects, hundreds of which are controversial:
1. Marriage, divorce and remarriage
 2. Homosexuality
 3. Adultery
 4. Murder
 5. Obedience and submission to authority
 6. Parenting
- f) However, despite all of this variety, the Bible is extraordinarily singularly themed and harmonious. It represents the slow unfolding of God's plan of redemption and God is *always* the central character. Norman Geisler and William Nix put it this way in their book *A General Introduction to the Bible*:

1. “The 'Paradise Lost' of Genesis becomes the 'Paradise Regained' of Revelation. Whereas the gate to the tree of life is closed in Genesis, it is opened forevermore in Revelation.”
2. There are absolutely no contradictions in doctrine anywhere in the Bible and many of the other so-called “discrepancies” in facts can reasonably be explained. New Testament writers relied upon the writings of the Law, the Prophets and the Historical books and never contradicted them.
3. Compare the Bible's harmony with that of the compilation of Western classics called *Great Books of the Western World*. It includes over 450 works by more than 100 authors and spans about 25 centuries. It contains works by Homer, Plato, Dante, Shakespeare, Tolstoy and Darwin. These authors display an incredible diversity of views on most subjects—this diversity is often manifested with contradictory positions. Usually, more modern “thinkers” go out of their way to critique and refute the ideas of their earlier predecessors.

B) It is unique in its circulation

- a) The best selling fiction books, such as *To Kill a Mockingbird*, *Gone with the Wind*, and *Catcher in the Rye*, have all sold more than 10,000,000 copies worldwide since their release.
- b) Dr. Seuss books have sold somewhere around 100,000,000 worldwide.
- c) Of course, most people are aware that the Bible is the highest selling book in all of history, but the numbers, frankly, are staggering. Between the years 1816 and 1992, estimates say the number of Bibles sold is on the order of 6,000,000,000! It has been translated into 2000 languages already and sometime in the next 15 years, the Bible will be available in every language on the face of the earth. No other book comes close. Not even the Koran or Chairman Mao's *Little Red Book*, which was mandatory for every Chinese adult to own between 1966 and 1971.

C) It is unique in its survival

- a) Despite using fragile and perishable materials and being hand copied for tens of centuries, the Scriptures have never faced extinction. Compared with other ancient writings, the Bible has vastly more manuscript evidence to support it than the next top ten pieces of classical literature *combined*.
 1. Bruce Metzger, a Princeton professor and one of the world's leading Biblical text critics once said “...the textual critic of the New Testament is embarrassed by the wealth of his material.”
- b) The Jews had a remarkable system to ensure correct preservation of the Old Law text. They literally counted every letter, syllable, word and paragraph and copies that did not satisfy that count were destroyed, not re-written or corrected. Another textual critic said “They had special classes of men whose sole duty was to preserve and transmit these documents with practically perfect fidelity—scribes, lawyers, and massorettes. Who ever

counted the letters and syllables of Plato or Aristotle? Cicero or Seneca?"

4. The canon itself is testimony of the Bible's reliability.

A) The word canon comes from the root word "reed," which was used in early times as a measuring rod and thus, came to mean "standard."

B) Origen, a third century "church father", said he used the word "...canon to denote what we call the 'rule of faith,' the standard by which we are to measure and evaluate."

C) Note that the church (whether Christ's church, the catholic church, or any other body of religious Christ believers) did *not* create the canon and it did *not* determine which books would be called scripture and which would not. The earliest Christians discovered, through reasonable tests, which books were inspired and which were not. Early Christians, then, simply accepted books that were the Word of God—this is not the same as declaring a book as the Word of God simply because it was accepted by the church. That's an important distinction to make! God gives each book its divine authority and, through the help of the Apostles and their "students," divine inspiration was discovered and accepted.

a) Here are the tests for inclusion:

1. Was the book written by a prophet of God? That is, did that prophet's predictions *always* come true? If so, you had a true prophet and, thus, an inspired book.

2. Was the writer confirmed by acts of God? Miracles were used throughout the Old Law and New Testament stories to confirm what the speaker said was true.

3. Did the message tell the truth about God? God cannot tell a lie and will not contradict Himself. If the book was in harmony with other accepted books of the canon, it passed this test.

4. Does the book come with the power of God? God's message transforms lives (1 Peter 1:22-23) and is given by God's inspiration (2 Tim 3:16). If a book does not provide that life-changing power, it cannot be from God.

5. Was the book accepted by the people of God? The best people to know of the inspiration of a particular are those people who knew the prophet or apostle. In other words, definitive evidence is a result of its original acceptance by contemporary believers. For example, Acts 2:41-43 shows this in action. To pass the apostolic test did not necessarily mean that an apostle was the author—it also includes the idea of apostolic authority or approval.

1. 2 Peter 3:14-16 is another clear example

D) There were several very practical factors that resulted in the canonization of the New Testament

a) The books were prophetic—they were written by an apostle or prophet of

God, so they were valuable. Since they were valuable, they should be preserved. Paul's epistles were collected and circulated very early in the history of the church for this very reasoning.

- b) The varied churches scattered throughout Asia and Europe needed to know which books should be read and studied. These churches had many problems to address (reference the church in Corinth!) and this needed assurance regarding which books would or should serve as their source of authority. Also, because these churches were in different parts of the world and a lot of missionary work was happening (it took less than 35 years for the church to spread from Jerusalem to Rome!), the inspired books needed translating. Thus, translators needed to know which books and letters to translate!
- c) Heretics attempting to change the gospel arose very early. As early as A.D. 140, the heretic Marcion developed his own incomplete canon and began to propagate it—thus the church needed to counter his influence. Other churches in the East also used books that were counterfeit.
- d) The church began to be persecuted very early, but the edict of Diocletian, in A.D. 303, called for the destruction of the sacred books of the Christians. Who would die for books that they did not know to be inspired?
- E) Athanasius of Alexandria, in A.D. 367, was the first to list the canon as we know it today in a letter to the churches:
 - a) “Again it is not tedious to speak of the books of the New Testament. These are the four gospels, according to Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. Afterwards, the Acts of the Apostles and Epistles (called Catholic), seven, viz. of James, one; of Peter, two; of John, three; after these, one of Jude. In addition, there are fourteen epistles of Paul, written in this order. The first, to the Romans; then two to the Corinthians; after these, to the Galatians; next, to the Ephesians; then to the Philippians; then to the Colossians; after these, two to the Thessalonians, and that to the Hebrews; and again, two to Timothy; one to Titus; and lastly, that to Philemon. And besides, the Revelation of John.”
- F) Jerome and Augustine published the same list shortly after Athanasius.
- G) Polycarp, in the early 2nd century, and Clement of Alexandria, in the early 3rd century, as well as other church fathers refer to New Testament books with the phrase “as it is said in these scriptures,” just as they referenced the Old Law.
- H) Irenaeus, who was a disciple of Polycarp (who himself was a disciple of John), provides solid evidence of the almost total acceptance of the fourfold gospel throughout the kingdom. He also shows similar acceptance of most of the other books—his canon included 22 of the 27 books in the canon today, with no other books that were later removed.
- I) Thus, the “church councils” in A.D. 393 and A.D. 397, merely recorded the previous canonicity of the 27 books of the New Testament. They did not

confer anything to those books (e.g., authority) that hadn't already been accepted by the church in the previous centuries. It would be similar if you gathered 100 highly trained classical musicians and asked them to “decide” whether Mozart and Beethoven were world-class composers. They have already been accepted as such, so the meeting of the minds in that instance would be simply to acknowledge that fact.

5. What about the New Testament Apocrypha?

A) There are about 17 widely known books that address Christian ideals and thoughts, but have been rejected as canon. There are many others, but the following list represents the most well-known books.

- a) Epistle of Pseudo-Barnabas (~A.D. 70-79)
- b) Epistle to the Corinthians (~A.D. 96)
- c) Second Epistle of Clement (~A.D. 120-140)
- d) Shepherd of Hermas (~A.D. 115-114)
- e) Didache, Teaching of the Twelve (~A.D. 100-120)
- f) Apocalypse of Peter (~A.D. 150)
- g) The Acts of Paul and Thecla (~A.D. 170)
- h) Epistle to the Laodiceans (4th century?)
- i) The Gospel According to the Hebrews (~A.D. 65-100)
- j) Epistle of Polycarp to the Philippians (~A.D. 108)
- k) The Seven Epistles of Ignatius (~A.D. 100)

B) Why were they rejected?

- a) None of them enjoyed any more than a temporary or local recognition.
- b) Most of them never did have anything more than a semi-canonical status, being appended to several manuscripts or mentioned in tables of contents.
- c) No major canon or church council ever included them as inspired books of the New Testament
- d) The limited acceptance of most of these books was a result of them being attached to references in canonical books (e.g., Col. 4:16) or their alleged apostolic authorship (e.g., the Acts of Paul and Thecla).
- e) In all, there was little doubt in the early church that these books were not canonical.

6. The Old Testament Canon

A) The council of Jamnia, in A.D. 90, is often incorrectly attributed as finally establishing the Old Testament canon. However, it appears that council questioned the right of a *few* of the books already in the Old Testament canon to *remain* there—not whether this book or that one should be added. In addition, that council was quite informal—we know only that a few of the rabbis discussed these questions. No formal decisions or declarations were made because of the discussions.

B) The evidence supports the claim that the Hebrew canon was established between ~350 and 150 B.C. From the 4th century on, Jews themselves were

convinced that the voice of God (that is, His prophets) was silent. No word from God clearly implies no *new* word from God.

- C) Intertestamental books record this fact. 1 Maccabees 14:41 tells of the appointment of Simon as a leader and priest until such time “as a trustworthy prophet should arise.” Earlier it describes the sorrow throughout Israel because prophets had ceased appearing to them.
 - D) The Greek Septuagint appears with the same books that we have today (though it is divided differently). The Septuagint was written sometime between 400 and 150 B.C. Because it is a translation from the Hebrew, the necessary inference is that there was a Hebrew canon to start with!
 - E) Of course, Christ Himself pointed to all the books of the Hebrew canon during His ministry. Most of those points were directly to verses within specific books in the Septuagint. For example, when Christ said in Luke 11:51 'From the blood of Abel to the blood of Zechariah,' He was providing witness of the Hebrew canon, since Abel was martyred in Genesis and Zechariah, also martyred, appears last in the Hebrew Old Testament order.
7. In short, there is very little question among scholars about whether the Old Testament and New Testament canons are complete. The evidence appears overwhelming.