

Apologetics – 5 The Reliability of the Christian Scriptures

Thusfar the argument:

1. The Christian presupposes God. He argues from God, not to God.
2. The unbeliever uses truth, goodness or beauty, but denies God. We ask the unbeliever to either account for those in a godless universe, or to give them up and live in a world where they don't exist.
3. A universe with truth, goodness and beauty presupposes that it is fundamentally personal, not impersonal.
4. An All-Personal God explains morality, reason, causation, design, and existence itself.
5. The only contender for an Absolute Person is the God of the Christian Scriptures.

The Bible, and the truths of the Bible contain the only consistent personalistic account of Reality. But can the Christian give a reasonable account for the reliability of the Christian Scriptures?

Scripture's Doctrine of Scripture

What does the Bible say about itself? It claims to be God's book, originating from the very breath of God (2 Tim 3:16). The Bible is God's self-witness; it is God speaking to us. The words "Thus saith the LORD" occur 279 times in the OT. There is no higher authority, no greater ground of certainty than that established as the Holy Spirit enables Christians to believe, understand and use the Scriptures rightly.

This immediately places the Christian Scriptures under the scrutiny of an extremely high standard. God cannot breathe out error, so if all the Scriptures are God-breathed, then all that is Scripture will be without error and completely reliable.

By *reliable* we mean:

- Faithfully transmitted from source to us today, without corruption or intentional alteration.
- Accurate in its recording of historical or other fact
- Truthful in its statements, without internal or external contradiction.

Old Testament Reliability

With this backdrop, we can still make a good case for the accuracy of the OT account. Here are some factors that argue for the historical accuracy of the OT:²

Textually

- The text of the Hebrew OT has been preserved with an accuracy unparalleled in any other Near-East literature. The Jews have always held Scripture in very high regard and were exceedingly careful to preserve their texts.

- A group of scribes known as the Massoretes (500-900 AD) carefully copied and cared for the Hebrew Bible. They were so meticulous in their work that they successfully transmitted the text with marvelous accuracy.
- An example of how well the OT text was preserved over the years is found among the texts of the Dead Sea Scrolls (DSS). Prior to the finding of the DSS, the oldest copy of Isaiah available dated back to about 900 AD. In the DSS was a copy of Isaiah from about 150 BC. Looking at the two copies, scholars found only minor differences, mostly matters of spelling, word order, and word use. The text had been preserved very faithfully during that entire time period (about 1,000 years). This strongly suggests a very careful and faithful preservation work over the years that separate the two copies. And if this is true of Isaiah, it's likely true of the rest of the OT books.

Historically

Archaeology largely supports biblical dates. Evidence supports the age and origin of Abraham, Moses and many of the other figures in the OT. One scholar asserts that “no archaeological discovery has ever [contradicted] a biblical reference.”

There are significant similarities between the biblical accounts and the findings of archaeology regarding the social and political patterns of the times. For example, Babylonian legal documents found in 1925 near the Tigris River reflect and confirm the practices mentioned in the Bible.

Various people groups mentioned in the OT, once regarded by skeptics as legendary, have been discovered. A good example of this is the Hittite nation. Other than in the Bible, no evidence was found for them until scholars found a huge library full of Hittite cultural items. Another example is the Babylonian king Belshazzar.

The Assyrian and Hittite law codes prove that OT laws had counterparts in other Near Eastern cultures.

Excavations of ancient sites have proven that the other religions mentioned in the OT did exist and that some of their rituals and practices were similar to those the Israelites practiced.

The story of the Israelite conquest of Canaan and settlement is confirmed by archaeology. Evidence of the violent destruction of Canaanite cities squares with the OT record of the times.

Close parallels exist between the covenants (agreements or treaties) God made with Abraham and those secular kings made with their subjects.

While skeptics and critics would likely take issue with some of the above points, the more scholars dig around and explore in the Middle East, the more evidence comes to light supporting the OT record of events. Archaeology disproves many alleged biblical errors and inaccuracies.

Miracles in the Bible

The OT does not read like a standard history book—it's full of miraculous stories. There are those who dismiss such accounts immediately simply because they don't believe such miraculous events could have happened. Thus, even if archaeology and related sciences could vouch for all the ordinary data contained in the OT (e.g., dates, places, reigns of kings, etc.), it could say nothing about such

miraculous events. They are unverifiable. The only reason we know they happened is that those who saw them happen recorded them.

Before tackling the issue of the historical accuracy of the OT accounts, one must first decide upon the issues of the existence of God, revelation and the possibility of miracles. If one admits that God could exist and that He could intervene in the normal flow of events with a miracle, then the contents of the OT are not so ridiculous after all. On the other hand, if one is dead-set against the possibility of miracles, then he'll find much to ridicule in the OT.¹

New Testament Reliability

Textually

A large amount of manuscript evidence exists supporting the NT.

There are about 5,600 Greek manuscripts of the NT in existence today. In contrast to this, other books from biblical times may be recorded in only a few manuscripts (MSS) or even a few scraps of MSS. Further, the oldest of these MSS may come from a time many hundreds of years after the book was originally written. The oldest NT documents come from a time only 50 years or so after the autographs. So there are no other books like the NT. No other ancient books have so much high quality MSS evidence to back up their claims.

There are many versions of the NT in other languages. The NT was translated into many languages, such as Latin, Syriac and Egyptian (a.k.a. Coptic). These are important because they were translated from the Greek very early on and likely reflect an early (and thus more likely accurate) reading of the Greek.

The NT has also been preserved in the form of quotations in other works. Some of these writings contain lengthy quotations from the Bible. These are important because they go back to an early form of the Greek NT.

Because of the hand-copying process, slight errors were inserted into the text. However, such errors are generally small and insignificant, and can be identified by comparing several texts to each other. And even though there are differences between the various families of Greek MSS, these differences (called variants) are generally minor and do not demand any changes in doctrine or practice. No essential teaching of the NT is greatly affected by any copying errors or variations from one text to another.

Historically

This historical accuracy of the NT is verifiable. One does not find historical errors in the text of the Bible.

Luke, the author of Luke and Acts, was a very careful and accurate historian. He includes a great deal of secular history in his accounts—rulers, dates, places, customs and the like (e.g., [Luke 3:1-2](#)). Luke even is able to accurately record the correct titles of the many Roman government officials mentioned in his books, no small feat in itself. Archaeology has repeatedly vindicated Luke's historical accounts, so that Luke is now considered among the best ancient historians ever.

Archaeology has confirmed many details from the pages of the NT. Entire books have been written on how archaeology supports NT claims.

Archaeologists found an inscription warning Gentiles not to enter certain sections of the Temple area. This temple barrier was undoubtedly the source of Paul's statement about the "middle wall of partition" which separated Jews and Gentiles at the Temple (Eph 2:14).

An inscription by Erastus, the city treasurer in Corinth who Paul mentioned (Rom 16:23) was uncovered in 1929.

Scholars found the amphitheater where the riot caused by Demetrius took place (Acts 19:23-41).

Even ancient coins confirm the details related in the NT.

The Pavement, which the Jews called Gabbatha, was buried for centuries and discovered only recently.

The Pool of Bethesda, which had no record except in the NT, has been positively identified.

The ossuary (burial box) of the high priest Caiaphas has been found.

The Bible's Internal Consistency

Sceptics and critics commonly assert that the Bible is full of contradictions. Not just a few, but hundreds, even thousands. Lengthy books have been written detailing the supposed contradictions in the Bible. In a normal storybook, contradictions wouldn't make much difference. But when a book claims to be inspired and inerrant, the very words of God, contradictions, if genuine, would present a major problem. We would expect there to be no contradictions and no mistakes in God's Word.

How should we respond to this accusation?

- We must from the outset admit that there are a few apparent contradictions and problems that have not yet been satisfactorily resolved. But such are few and far between. To say that the Bible is "full" of contradictions is a serious overstatement.
- Most critics use the word "contradiction" very loosely. Two accounts that seem not to correspond are not necessarily contradictory. A genuine contradiction must assert that something is true and false at the same time and in the same respect. For example, the Bible commands, "Thou shalt not kill." Yet God tells the Israelites to kill the Canaanites and others. The Bible even supports capital punishment, the killing of a guilty criminal. Is this a contradiction? *No, because the Fifth Commandment deals with murder, not the killing associated with warfare or capital punishment. The word "kill" is used in a different sense. No genuine contradiction exists here.*
- Some supposed contradictions result from two or more different perspectives on events, such as the varying accounts in the Gospels. For example, one writer mentions only one angel at Jesus' tomb while another writer says there were two. There is no contradiction here. Had the first writer said that there was *only* one, then a genuine contradiction would exist. But he doesn't say that.

- Some supposed contradictions arise from a copyist's error. Because the Bible was copied by hand for many years before the printing press, it was inevitable that small typographic errors crept into the text. By comparing texts, scholars are able to weed out these mistakes most of the time. Some of the apparent contradictions are likely due to an error of this sort. Such errors are not true contradictions.
- The problem of outstanding discrepancies in the Bible becomes smaller as time goes by. As scholars study the manuscripts and dig around in the Middle East, these problems yield to close examination and solutions arise. Such has happened many times in the past and continues to happen today. There is less reason today to believe that the Bible is full of contradictions than at any time in the history of the church.