Why trust the Bible?

Written by Jim Denison

Some questions come from people who are skeptical about the Christian faith. Some come from believers who have skeptical friends. And some come from believers who are struggling with the issue themselves. Our question is found in the hearts of all three.

Who of us hasn’t wondered at times why we believe this ancient book is the revelation of the God of the universe? Think about it for a moment: the Creator of all that exists reveals himself to a small group of former Egyptian slaves in a remote corner of the globe. Not to kings and emperors, or to scholars in leading universities, but to shepherds, fishermen, tax-collectors, refugees. On documents which no longer exist, so that we must depend on the copies which history has handed down to us. Through circumstances completely foreign to our culture and lives today.

Think of King Arthur and Camelot, and you envision ancient history. The Bible sitting on your shelf is more than twice that old. If we aren’t sure King Arthur existed or why he matters, what of this ancient book upon which we build our faith? Why should we believe it to be the word of God?

The Bible claims to be the word of God

This fact does not settle the issue, of course. The Koran claims to be the word of Allah; the Book of Mormon claims to be the revelation of God. But at least we know that Christians do not believe something about the Bible which it does not claim for itself.

Paul was convinced that “all Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness” (2 Timothy 3:16). He meant the Old Testament which was the Bible of his day. Peter, the leader of early Christianity, considered Paul’s writings to be Scripture as well: “[Paul] writes the same way in all his letters, speaking in them of these matters. His letters contain some things that are hard to understand, which ignorant and unstable people distort, as they do to the other Scriptures, to their own destruction” (2 Pt 3:16, my emphasis).

Jesus believed his words to be divinely inspired: “Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away” (Lk 21:33). Speaking of the totality of biblical revelation, the writer to the Hebrews claims, “The word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart” (Heb 4:12).

Someone said, “God said, I believe it, and that settles it.” His friend replied, “No, God said it and that settles it, whether I believe it or not.” J. I. Packer called the Bible “God preaching”; Augustine described it as “love letters from home.”

The copies we possess are trustworthy

Now let’s turn to objective evidence that the Bible is right in its self-description as God’s inspired, authoritative word. We begin with the manuscript evidence. No original manuscript of any ancient book exists today; the materials used in that era could not stand the effects of elements and time.

For instance, we have only nine or ten good copies of Caesar’s Gallic Wars, none made earlier than 900 years after Caesar. Tacitus, the greatest ancient Roman historian, wrote 14 books of his Histories; we possess only 4½, none made earlier than the tenth century A.D. We can find only five manuscripts of any work of Aristotle, none copied earlier than fourteen centuries after Aristotle wrote the originals.

By contrast, we possess 5,000 ancient Greek manuscripts of the New Testament, and 10,000 copies in other ancient languages. Fragments and parts of these copies date back as early as 30 years after the originals were written. Complete versions of the Gospels, Acts, Paul’s letters and Hebrews date to the early part of the third century, Revelation to the latter half...
of that century. Complete volumes date to the fourth century. Extensive quotations of Scripture in the letters of early Christians date to A.D. 100.

“Textual critics” are scholars who devote their attention to comparing ancient manuscripts and trying to produce a copy as close to the original as possible. Those who work with biblical texts believe that the Old and New Testaments we possess today are virtually identical to the originals. The only questions which remain affect matters of spelling, punctuation, and isolated verses; none relates to essential doctrines or practices of the faith.

Archaeology confirms the biblical record

Archaeological finds continue to give us confidence that the biblical writers recorded history accurately. For instance, the Pool of Bethesda (Jn 5:2) was once dismissed as non-historical. Now tour guides in Jerusalem point groups to its location in the northeast quarter of the Old City. I've seen the ruins myself.

We have a stone inscription documenting the life and office of Pontius Pilate; the ossuary (coffin) of Caiaphas, the High Priest of the crucifixion; an inscription found at Delphi which describes the work of Gallio, proconsul at Corinth (Ac 18:12-17); and scores of other artifacts which document the accuracy of biblical history and description.

Conclusion

There are strong evidential reasons to believe the Bible is God’s word. But the best test comes from personal experience. I once owned a 1965 Ford Mustang, and found myself under its hood as often as I was behind its wheel. Chilton’s Car Repair Manual became my constant companion. I learned to trust its advice because it worked.

Try living by the Bible. Accept its Savior as yours; make its principles the guideposts of your life. And you'll learn for yourself that its words are the word of God.

What makes the Bible different from other religious books?

My grandfather was born before the turn of the 20th century. In his lifetime he saw the advent of the automobile, commercial airplanes, and the computer. But he never met a Muslim, a Hindu, a Buddhist, or a Mormon. Our question never occurred to him.

Today it's a common issue: why do we believe the Bible is right and other religious books are wrong? Other religions are just as sincere in their commitment to their sacred writings as Christians are to ours. Is it not the height of bigotry and hypocrisy to claim that our book is right and theirs are not? In our post-9-11 world, there has been an explosion of interest in Islam and an accompanying cry for tolerance. When we claim that our holy book is true and theirs is not, aren't we just as intolerant as those who attacked our nation?

Different paths, different mountains

Conventional wisdom these days dictates that the various religions are just different roads up the same mountain. It doesn't matter which God you trust, because they are all the same. Allah is Jehovah; Buddhists and Hindus seek the same God we worship. Different holy books are simply religious diaries. Who's to say that your diary is right and mine is wrong?

Such an approach to world religions and their writings feels tolerant and hopeful. But is it true? Do other religions agree with this characterization of their faith commitments? In a word, no.

Buddha taught that there is no “god,” despite the fact that some of his followers now worship him. He instructed his disciples to avoid all material desires, that they might cease their sufferings. The Four Noble Truths and Eight-fold Noble Path are the key to enlightenment. The Tripitaka is the oldest compilation of the rules, sermons, and doctrines of this approach to life.

Hindus believe in thousands of territorial deities but no “Lord” of the universe; Brahman is the divine force which sustains the universe, not a personal God to be worshiped. The Rigveda, their earliest scriptures, refer to Brahman as the power which is
present in religious sacrifices and actions. Their *Upanishads* glorify the concept of Brahman over other inferior forms of personal deities.

Muslims believe that Allah (the Arabic word for God) is the one supreme ruler of the universe; that Jesus was a prophet but not the divine Son of God; and that "salvation" comes through obedience to the Koran. This book is Allah's self-revelation through his prophet Mohammed. All other holy books are inferior to it, for its pages alone contain the very word of God.

Jews believe that Yahweh revealed himself through the Laws and Prophets of their Scriptures, that Jesus was not the Messiah, and that the New Testament is not the word of God. They base their hope of heaven on the mercy of God in response to their lives of obedience and morality.

Mormons believe that God revealed himself in the Bible, but also in their Book of Mormon, a history of the early peoples of the Western hemisphere. Joseph Smith translated the book from golden plates which he claimed to have received from the angel Moroni. *Doctrine and Covenants* contain further revelations received by Smith from God. *The Pearl of Great Price* contains more writings of Smith. They picture God as an eternal being of flesh and bone who had physical relations with Mary to produce Jesus. Salvation and heavenly rewards come through obedience to these revelations.

If any one of these religions is right, the others by definition are wrong. None believes that other religions are equally correct or divinely inspired. The scriptures which the various world religions trust do not describe different paths up the same mountain, but very different mountains.

*Examine the evidence*

So far we have demonstrated the fact that the world's great religious books cannot all be right. In fact, if any of them is correct in its teachings regarding the supernatural and eternal, the others are by definition wrong. So, how do we decide which documents to trust?

Examine the evidence for their truth claims. Hindu documents, for instance, posit an afterlife filled with reincarnations. Is there any historical support or objective evidence for such a position? Does objective, independent evidence exist to document the Buddha's enlightenment, or Mohammad's experiences with Allah? A number of cities, inscriptions, and places are described only in the Book of Mormon; to date, none have been found by archaeologists.

Conversely, independent evidence for the existence and deity of Jesus Christ is remarkable. Manuscript evidence documenting the trustworthy nature of the biblical materials is overwhelming. There are excellent reasons to believe the Bible is what it claims to be: the word of God.

*Conclusion*

What makes the Bible different from other holy books? In a word, Jesus. He taught that no one comes to the Father except through him (Jn 14:6). The Bible was written to help us believe in him and find life in his love (Jn 20:31).

The sacred writings of the various world religions each tell a different story about the divine, the afterlife, and the purpose of life today. Different roads lead to different destinations. The road you choose determines where your trip will end. Choose wisely.

*Isn't the Bible filled with contradictions?*

Here is one of the most common ways skeptics justify their skepticism about the Bible. The question is based on the commonplace supposition that contradictions are bad. If you can find a statement I make which disagrees with something I've already said, you'll feel justified in rejecting both. Even though one may be right. Even though they both may be. Why?

*Contradict the contradictions*
We have Aristotle (384-322 B.C.) to thank or blame. In his desire to compile all knowledge into an organized system, he devised laws of logic as organizational tools. One of them is called the law of contradiction: A cannot equal B and at the same time not equal B. A fish cannot also be a mammal, if a biologist like Aristotle is going to classify it. From then to now, we Westerners have adopted Aristotle's law as the basis for determining all truth. If we can find a contradiction in the Bible, we have reason to dismiss its veracity.

But there's a fly in the ointment. Aristotle applied his laws to physical and rational truth, not to spiritual or relational experience. It may appear contradictory to claim that you love your children and yet sometimes wish they'd never been born. But if you're a typical parent, both are sometimes true. Jesus claimed to be fully God and fully man; God is three and yet one; the Bible is divinely inspired but humanly written; God knows the future but we have freedom to choose. Inside every essential Christian doctrine there is a paradox, an apparent contradiction.

Many of the so-called contradictions in the Bible fit into such spiritual or relational categories. For instance, the Bible teaches that "God is love" (1 Jn 4:8). Yet it also states clearly, "The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness" (Ro 1:18). And it warns, "For those who are self-seeking and who reject the truth and follow evil, there will be wrath and anger" (Ro 2:8). How can God both love and hate? Don't ask Aristotle. But you can ask any parent.

Not all truth fits into test tubes. My seventh-grade geometry teacher claimed that parallel lines never intersect. But to prove it, he'd have to draw them forever. Black and white are not the only crayons in the box.

Consider the context

A second category of apparent contradictions in the Bible is more historical and factual. For example, here are two of the common questions I've been asked. Each is clarified when we understand the larger context of the text in question.

"The Old Testament teaches, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' But Jesus told us to turn the other cheek. Which is right?" Both. Moses was dealing with an ancient culture in which blood vengeance was common and drastic. If you kill my son, I kill your entire family. To limit retribution to the actual criminal and crime was a great step forward. On the other hand, Jesus was speaking to the issue of personal insult. People in his day used only the right hand in public (as the left was used for personal hygiene). To "strike you on the right cheek" (Mt 5:39) with my right hand meant to slap you, a threat to your social standing but not your life. Here you are to forgive rather than punish.

"Matthew says that Judas hanged himself; the book of Acts says he fell down and died. Which is it?" Matthew's gospel does indeed record Judas's suicide by hanging (Mt 27:5). In Acts 1 Peter says, "Judas bought a field; there he fell headlong, his body burst open and all his intestines spilt out" (v. 18). It may be that Judas's body decomposed, so that when the rope broke or was cut, it fell as Peter describes. Or it may be that the Greek word translated "hanged" is actually the word "impaled" (both meanings are possible), so that Peter describes more vividly the way Judas killed himself. Either option is a possible way to explain the apparent contradiction.

When we consider the intended meaning of the text and its larger context, such apparent contradictions are resolved.

Check all the options

A third category of supposed contradictions is not the result of context. For instance, 2 Samuel 24:1 states that the Lord incited David to take a census of the people; 1 Chronicles 21:1 records, "Satan rose up against Israel and incited David to take a census of Israel." But the Jewish people saw all that happens as within the providence and permission of God, so that Satan's activity (1 Chronicles) was permitted by the Lord and thus attributable to him (2 Samuel). And the people grew in their knowledge of God, so that the Chronicler (writing 400 years after 2 Samuel) could record Satan's activity in more detail than the people had earlier understood.
Matthew 4 records Jesus’ temptations in a different order than does Luke 4. But neither claimed to be writing chronology, so that the order is immaterial. One could set them in time order, the other in spiritual priority, for instance. 1 Kings 7:13 states that Huram, one of the builders of Solomon’s temple, came from the tribe of Naphtali; 2 Chronicles 2:14 says his mother was from the tribe of Dan. But she could have lived in the territory of Naphtali, or her parents could have come from both tribes.

Conclusion

The next time someone claims the Bible is full of contradictions, ask him if he has read the Bible. Then ask if it is a contradiction to dismiss a book he hasn’t read. Now offer to help him study the Bible and meet its Author. It is a contradiction to me that a holy and perfect God would want me to live in his perfect paradise. I’m glad it’s not to him.

Who decided what books should be in the Bible?

My earliest experience with the Bible was leafing through an ancient King James Version my parents kept in the guest room. The fountain-penned family tree calligraphied in the first pages fascinated me. The printed thees and thous made no sense, the begats even less. I assumed the entire thing had been handed from God to man in black leather.

Most people know better. They’ve heard somewhere along the way that some books were excluded from the Bible, and wonder why. Maybe a group of church officials decided the whole thing. Maybe there were books which told a different story than the one we have in our Bibles. Maybe there was a smoke-filled room somewhere. Maybe there were hanging chads.

The actual story is nowhere near that interesting.

How the Hebrew Scriptures came to be

Christians typically call this section the Old Testament, but those who wrote the New Testament didn’t. When Paul, writing from death row in Rome, asked Timothy for his scrolls and parchments (2 Tim 4:13), he was asking for his copies of the only Bible he knew. Most scholars appropriately call these 39 books the Hebrew Scriptures, in deference to the Jewish faith which they express.

The Hebrew Bible was first divided into Law, Prophets, and Writings, the arrangement current in Jesus’ day (see Lk 24:44). The Jews numbered the Scriptures as 24 books, combining Ezra/Nehemiah, 1 and 2 Samuel, 1 and 2 Kings, 1 and 2 Chronicles, and the 12 Minor Prophets as “The Twelve.” These books were written and compiled over centuries of use. According to Jewish tradition, a council of rabbis and scholars met at Jamnia on the Mediterranean Sea, in AD 90 and again in AD 118. They finalized the list of books as we have them today, recognizing what their people had accepted as God’s word for centuries.

How the New Testament joined the Old

Eventually the Christian movement began recording its faith and doctrines as well. The eyewitnesses to Jesus’ life and ministry were dying or growing old. Fraudulent claims were beginning to appear. Believers needed a canon (“rule”) by which to measure truth and defend the faith. The New Testament was the result. Over time, four criteria were developed for accepting a book as inspired.

First, the book must have been written by an apostle or based on his eyewitness testimony. Matthew the tax-collector was a disciple of Jesus before he wrote his gospel, as was John. Mark was an early missionary associate of Paul (Ac 13:4-5) and was a spiritual son to Peter (1 Pt 5:13); early Christians believed that he wrote his gospel based on the sermons and experiences Peter related to him.

Luke was a Gentile physician who joined Paul’s second missionary journey at Troas (note Ac 16:10, where Luke changes the narrative from “they” to “we”); he wrote his gospel and the book of Acts based on the eyewitness testimony of others (Lk 1:1-4). Paul’s letters came from an eyewitness to the risen Christ (cf. Ac 9:1-6), as did the letters of James (half-brother of Jesus), Peter, Jude (another half-brother of Jesus), and John. This criteria alone excluded most of the books suggested for the canon.
Second, the book must possess merit and authority in its use. Here it was easy to separate those writings which were inspired from those which were not. For instance, The First Gospel of the Infancy of Jesus Christ tells of a man changed into a mule by a bewitching spell but converted back to manhood when the infant Christ is put on his back for a ride (7:5-27). In the same book, the boy Jesus causes clay birds and animals to come to life (ch. 15), stretches a throne his father had made too small (ch. 16), and takes the lives of boys who oppose him (19:19-24). It wasn't hard to know that such books did not come from the Holy Spirit.

Third, a book must be accepted by the larger church, not just a particular congregation. Paul's letter to the Ephesians was an early instance of a letter which became "circular" in nature, read by churches across the faith. His other letters soon acquired such status. By the mid-second century, only the gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John were accepted universally by the church, as quotations from the Christians of the era make clear. Others were not considered to be inspired by God.

Last, a book came to be approved by the decision of the church. The so-called Muratorian Canon was the first list to convey the larger church's opinion regarding accepted books of the New Testament canon. Compiled around A.D. 200, it represented the usage of the Roman church at the time. The list omits James, 1 and 2 Peter, 3 John, and Hebrews, since its compiler was not sure of their authorship. All were soon included in later canons.

The list we have today was set forth by Athanasius in A.D. 367. His list was approved by church councils meeting at Hippo Regius in 393 and Carthage in 397. These councils did not impose anything new upon the church. Rather, they codified what believers had already come to accept and use as the word of God. By the time the councils approved the 27 books of our New Testament, they had already served as the established companion to the Hebrew Scriptures for generations.

Conclusion

So who decided what books should be in the Bible? Ultimately, their Author. The same Holy Spirit who inspired the biblical revelation (2 Pt 1:20-21) led the Christian movement to those books he inspired. You can know that the Bible you hold today is the book God means you to have. He did in fact hand it to man, through man. Though the color of the cover is your choice.