

Christian Apologetics

Foundations- Unit 316

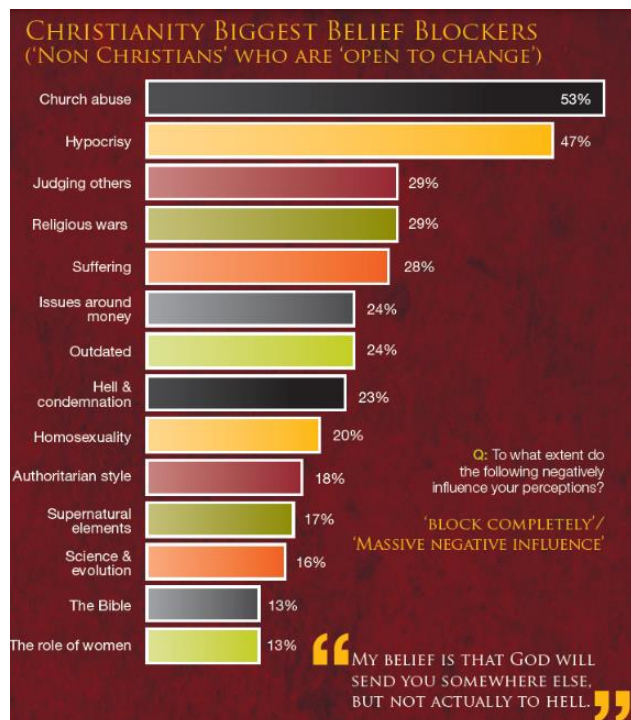


Week 6 – The Bible

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“I see much of the Bible’s teaching as historically inaccurate,” said Charles, an investment banker. “We can’t be sure the Bible’s account of events is what really happened.”

“I’m sure you’re right, Charles,” answered Jaclyn, a woman working in finance. “But my biggest problem with the Bible is that it is culturally obsolete. Much of the Bible’s social teaching (for example about women) is socially regressive. So it is impossible to accept the Bible as the complete authority Christians think it is.”¹



Let’s set aside the idea of the Bible being the ‘inspired word of God’ for a moment and treat it like any other ancient document or collection of documents.

“We believe that when the tools of the historian are applied to the biblical text, it builds its own case for its unique character. Or as one British scholar said, ‘We treat the Bible like any other book to show that it is *not like* any other book’”²

Answering the following questions may help to see this perspective;

1. How do we know the Gospel writers got the story correct?
2. If they got the right story how do we know the NT has been copied faithfully as we only have copies?
3. If we have the correct story, and it has been copied faithfully, how do we know the right documents were included in the Bible?

¹ Keller, Tim *The Reason for God*, page 97

² J. Komoszewski, M. Sawyer and Daniel Wallace, *Reinventing Jesus: How Modern Skeptics miss the Real Jesus and Mislead Popular Culture* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 2006), 18.

Question 1 – the Correct Story

Often the issue of what happened between the events of the NT and the writing down of those events is raised.

Komoshewski, Sawyer and Wallace make the following point;

“The stories about Jesus and the sayings of Jesus would have been repeated hundreds, perhaps thousands, of times by dozens of eyewitnesses before the first Gospel was ever penned.”³

Oral retelling was much more precise than we tend to think of it from our perspective of a literate society, because,

“...their recollections were not individual memories but *collective* ones – confirmed by other eyewitnesses and burned into their minds by the constant retelling of the story,”⁴

Therefore, judging on the standards of how to assess an ancient document’s accuracy, it would seem acceptable to suggest that the stories of the gospels and other NT stories are accurate.

Question 2 – has the Bible been copied faithfully?

Komoshewski, Sawyer and Wallace make the following points;

- The Greek NT used today as the foundation of modern translations, is based on thousands of manuscripts, with new ones coming to light still, and with some that are dated back to the second century.
- The difference in size of the entire NT from the earliest copies in the 2nd century to the latest copies, is an increase of about 2%. This shows a very stable transmission process.

³ Komoshewski, M. Sawyer and Daniel Wallace, 29

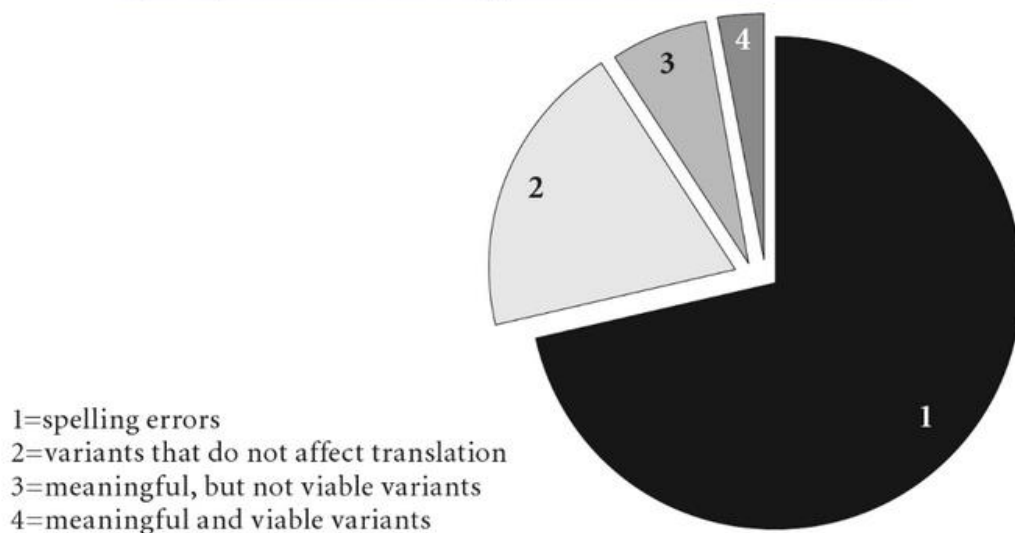
⁴ *ibid*, 33

- The earliest texts agree substantially with the later ones.

In the case of the OT the discovery of the Dead Sea scrolls pushed back our earliest copies of OT texts by around 1000 years and the same stability is shown in a comparison between the Dead Sea scrolls and much later copies of the OT books.

1% of all textual variants are described as ‘meaningful and viable’. However, neither these nor any of the other types of variants affect the foundational beliefs of Christianity.

Quality of Variants Among New Testament Manuscripts



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Comparison of Extant Historical Documents⁶

Histories	Oldest Manuscripts	Number Surviving
Livy 59b.c.– a.d. 17	4th century a.d.	27
Tacitus a.d.56– 120	9th century a.d.	3
Suetonius a.d. 69–140	9th century a.d.	200+

⁵ *ibid*, 63

⁶ *ibid*, 71

Thucydides 460–
400b.c. 1st century a.d. 20

Herodotus 484–
425b.c. 1st century a.d. 75

New Testament c. 100–150 a.d. c. 5,700 (counting only Greek manuscripts) plus more than 10,000 in Latin, and more than a million quotations from the church fathers, etc.

Question 3 – Were the Right Documents included in the New Testament?

Ben Witherington author of *The Living Word of God* makes this comment;

“The formation of the NT canon, ..., was a process that had already begun in the NT era, as 2 Peter 3:16 suggests. Paul Achtemeier stresses that “the formation of the canon represented the working out of forces that were already present in the primitive Christian community and that would have made some form of canon virtually inevitable.” It was not a matter of fourth-century politics, or a matter of a group of old men sitting down in the fourth century AD and deciding these issues. Nor was it a matter of ruling out a bunch of books that had previously been on somebody’s canon list.”⁷

In regards to the Old Testament the church did make more of a choice, not in the books that make it up, as this was already fixed in a number of ways, but in which group of OT translations to recognize; the Hebrew text or the Greek LXX (Septuagint). The Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox churches chose the Greek LXX as their copy of the OT and the Protestant movement mainly chose the Hebrew text, hence the differences in the books that appear in Catholic bibles as compared to Protestant bibles.

⁷ B. Witherington III, *The Living Word of God*, (Baylor University Press, Texas, 2007) p120
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Conclusion:

What then of the questions asked?

1. How do we know the Gospel writer got the story correct?
2. If they got the right story how do we know the NT has been copied faithfully as we only have copies?
3. If we have the correct story, and it has been copied faithfully, how do we know the right documents were included in the Bible?

Again setting aside the idea of God inspiring the Bible, it would appear that we can have excellent confidence that the biblical books we have today, the gospels in particular, are an accurate reflection of the original documents; there is abundant evidence of faithful copying of the documents and there was little manipulation by the church in regards to the list of accepted biblical books.

All in all the evidence suggests that the Bible, as a library of ancient documents has as much, or even more, validity than other ancient documents from a similar time.

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