

# Reading the Bible

Advance in Faith Unit 107



## Week 1 – The Reliability of the Scriptures

## Introduction

“The majority of evangelical Christians (appropriately in the view of the author) hinge their entire evangelical message on the authority of a “Great Book,” the holy, inspired Word of God. All religious truths regarding the nature of man and God, the nature and effects of sin, and the path to redemption flow from the contents of this one Book. Without the Book and its authoritative position, it becomes very difficult to maintain and communicate a cohesive, grounded, inerrant and changeless religious message.”<sup>1</sup>

If this is the case, and I believe it is, then how we understand the Bible, how we use the Bible, how we trust the Bible are all vital questions to be answered because how we answer them will have a direct impact on how we then apply scripture to our lives.

The challenge that we face today is that there is so much misinformation about the Bible that most people have no real idea of how it came to be. Much of the average person’s knowledge about the New Testament comes from such *authoritative sources* (*ha ha*) as Dan Brown’s *Da Vinci Code*.

Here are the claims made by Dan Brown in his book;

- The Bible did not arrive by fax from heaven – it was a product of man
- Only the gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John were *chosen* for inclusion in the NT
- The person that did the choosing was a pagan emperor Constantine the Great
- Constantine commissioned a new bible which confirmed Jesus as divine through the Council of Nicaea

How then do we deal with these ‘facts’ as presented by Mr Brown?

The only way to fight ‘bad’ information is with ‘good’ information.

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<sup>1</sup> J. P. Gundlach, Communicating the Authority of Scripture in a Post-Modern Environment ‘*IIM Magazine Online*, Volume 5, Number 26, July 12-19, 2003’

## 1/ The Authorship of the Bible

What kind of book is the Bible?

It is unique. The Bible is a library of 66 books, written over a period of 1500 years, on 3 continents (Africa, Asia, Europe) in 3 languages (Hebrew, Aramaic, Greek), by 40+ people, e.g.:

- Joshua—soldier
- David—shepherd/king
- Daniel—prisoner/politician
- Isaiah—official historian
- Amos—farmer
- Luke—doctor
- Paul—religious scholar/prisoner
- Peter—fisherman

This is what it says about itself;

**2 Tim 3:16,17**

**2 Pet 1:20,21**

What does this teach us?

(a) ***The Bible is the Word of God.***

In 2 Tim 3:16 the claim is made that every single scripture (in the OT) is God breathed. There is no theory of process just a simple statement that God breathed his life, power, meaning and message into these words (the OT).

Peter placed both his words and the words of other apostles on the same level as the words of the Old Testament – 2 Peter 3:15, 16

“Bear in mind that our Lord's patience means salvation, just as our dear brother Paul also wrote you with the wisdom that God gave him. <sup>16</sup>He 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 **the other Scriptures**, to their own destruction.”

**(b) *The Bible is also the words of men***

One of the most important aspects of the human side of the Bible is that, in order to communicate his Word to all human conditions, God chose to use almost every available kind of communication: narrative history, genealogies, chronicles, laws of all kinds, poetry of all kinds, proverbs, prophetic oracles, riddles, drama, biographical sketches, parables, letters, sermons, and apocalypses.<sup>2</sup>

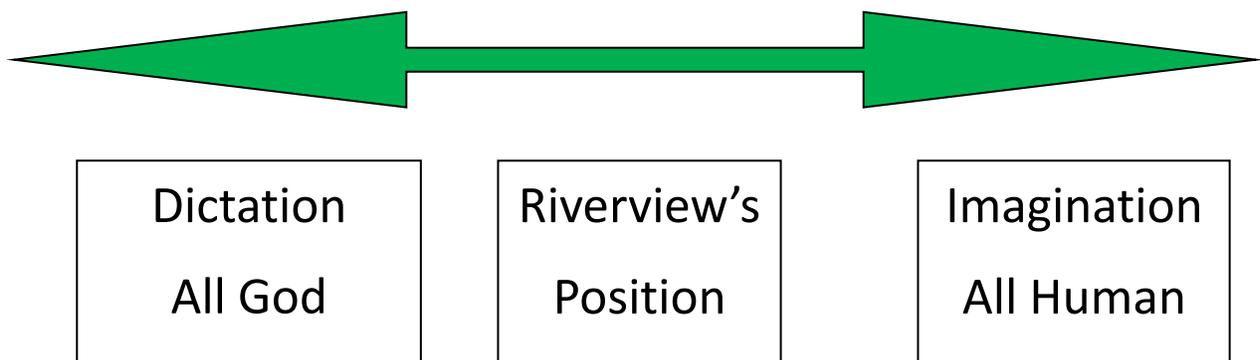
In speaking through real persons, in a variety of circumstances, over a 1,500-year period, God’s Word was expressed in the vocabulary and thought patterns of those persons and conditioned by the culture of those times and circumstances. That is to say, God’s Word to us was first of all his Word to them.<sup>3</sup>

We have a responsibility then to understand these vocabularies and thought patterns as much as we can.

**(c) *The Bible is both divine and human.***

Thus *God spoke* through humans, determining his message, yet not violating their personality and *men spoke* from God, using their faculties freely, yet not distorting his message.

The origin of the message is from God. The content of the message is from God. But the delivery of the message is through human beings.



<sup>2</sup> Gordon D. Fee and Douglas K. Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1993), 22.

<sup>3</sup> Gordon D. Fee and Douglas K. Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1993), 23.

## 2/ The Canon of the Old Testament (Hebrew Bible)

The Old Testament is **Hebrew Scripture** or Tanakh, and is composed of the Law or Torah, the Prophets or Neviim, and the Writings or Ketuvim. The three-fold division of Hebrew Scripture was evident at the time of Jesus, who referred to "The Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms (Luke 24:44)."

The writings of the Old Testament of the Bible were preserved in three languages - Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek, and have been passed on to us mainly through 4 manuscripts: the Greek Septuagint from Alexandria; the Masoretic Hebrew text; the newly discovered Dead Sea Scrolls of the Essenes; and the Targums, Old Testament Books translated into Aramaic. The differing traditions have led to the disparity found in the Old Testament canons among modern religions.

The following canon was definitively established for Judaism by the second century AD. The Law contained the Pentateuch of Moses. The Prophets include the Former Prophets that are part of the historical Books, the Major Prophets, and the Prophets of the Book of the Twelve. The Writings comprised a body of wisdom literature, history, poetry, and songs. The Masoretic Hebrew Text developed from the eighth through tenth century AD reflected the following Hebrew canon.

<b>The Hebrew Bible</b>		
<b>Law</b>	<b>Prophets</b>	<b>Writings</b>
Genesis	Joshua	Psalms
Exodus	Judges	Proverbs
Leviticus	Samuel	Job
Numbers	Kings	Song of Songs
Deuteronomy	The Twelve	Ruth
	Isaiah	Lamentations
	Jeremiah	Ecclesiastes
	Ezekiel	Esther
	Daniel	Ezra-Nehemiah
		Chronicles

The **24** Books of the Hebrew Bible are equivalent to the **39** Books common to all Christian Old Testaments. This is because Samuel, Kings, Chronicles, and Ezra-Nehemiah were each divided into two parts in the Christian canons, and the one Book of the Twelve Minor Prophets was split into twelve books, one for each prophet. The above table lists the Book of Daniel with the Prophets, as found in the Dead Sea Scrolls, instead of the Writings, as found in the Masoretic texts.

### **3/ The Canon of the New Testament**

How did the NT come to be the NT? Brown's claim, which is not original by any means, is that a group of men got together to decide what the 'true' story of Jesus should be. His claim is that this occurred with the Council of Nicaea in 325 AD.

#### ***a/ When were the books written?***

The historical evidence places the writing of the NT books within 100 years of Jesus death.

The gospels were written close enough to the death and resurrection of Jesus that there were still eye-witnesses to His life, alive.

**Luke 1:1-4****Mark 15:21****1 Cor. 15:1-6**

If these Christians were still alive then it would seem appropriate to say that other people, such as the bystanders, Roman officials, Jewish officials who witnessed Jesus life and death were also alive.

This group of eye witnesses, both supportive and opposed to the story of Jesus, were far too numerous to allow a fictitious account of Jesus to be written or at least spread otherwise they were there to contradict the gospel story.

***b/ What of the first few years?***

But some may ask what about during the time after Jesus left and the time the first NT letter was written? Komoszewski, Sawyer and Wallace in their book ‘Reinventing Jesus’ say this;

The 120 at Pentecost did not go into permanent retreat; for at least a generation they moved among the young Palestinian communities and through preaching and fellowship their recollections were at the disposal of those who sought information... But when all qualifications have been made, the presence of personal testimony is an element in the formative process which it is folly to ignore.

We are left with one alternative: the proclamation of the gospel had a stable core that was reproduced in public and private settings and confirmed by eyewitnesses.<sup>4</sup>

The interval between Jesus and the written Gospels was not dormant. The apostles and the other eyewitnesses were proclaiming the good news about Jesus Christ wherever they went... The stories about Jesus and the sayings of Jesus would have been repeated

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<sup>4</sup> J. Ed Komoszewski, M. James Sawyer, Daniel B Wallace *Reinventing Jesus* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 2006,) 31

hundreds, perhaps thousands, of times by dozens of eyewitnesses before the first Gospel was ever penned.

**This allowed the gospel story to remain stable throughout the oral period. During this period there were many eyewitnesses of the sayings and events to retain quality control.**

*c/ When and how did the writings become the New Testament?*

Brown's claim, which again is not original by any means, is that Constantine demanded that the Council of Nicaea choose only those books that agreed with the position that Jesus was divine.

But what is the historical evidence? Ben Witherington author of *The Living Word of God* makes this comment;

“The formation of the NT canon . . . , was a process that had already began 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.”<sup>5</sup>

The books chose themselves; the church did not choose the books.

*d/ What is the Historical Evidence?*

This table shows you a breakdown of what ancient manuscripts we have available from particular authors, including NT manuscripts. Many of these manuscripts are partial ones but many are also complete.

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<sup>5</sup> B. Witherington III, *The Living Word of God*, (Baylor University Press, Texas, 2007) p120

## Manuscript Evidence for Ancient Writings

Author	Written	Earliest Copy	Time Span	# Mss.
Caesar	100-44 B.C.	900 A.D.	1,000 yrs	10
Plato	427-347 B.C.	900 A.D.	1,200 yrs	7
Thucydides	460-400 B.C.	900 A.D.	1,300 yrs	8
Tacitus	100 A.D.	1100 A.D.	1,000 yrs	20
Suetonius	75-160 A.D.	950 A.D.	800 yrs	8
Homer (Iliad)	900 B.C.	400 B.C.	500 yrs	643
New Testament	40-100 A.D.	125 A.D.	25-50 yrs	24,000

Our faith in the Bible as God’s Word to us rests on very firm historical evidence. We can have absolute confidence that God is speaking to us today through the words that were written 2000 years ago. Our responsibility is to studiously consider what scripture has to say so as to discern God’s desires for our lives.

The Bible has over the last several millennia survived the critical scrutiny of many of the greatest minds that ever existed. We shouldn’t think it is now in danger of being explained away or shown to be irrelevant.

## Resources

The main text for this unit is “How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth” by Gordon Fee and Douglas Stuart.

Their other book is also excellent; “How to read the Bible Book by Book”.

E. Randolph Richards and Brandon J. O’Brien, *Misreading Scripture with Western Eyes – Removing Cultural Blinders to Better Understand the Bible* (InterVarsity Press, 2012)

Christopher Wright, *Knowing Jesus through the Old Testament* (Monarch Books, 1992)

James K. Hoffmeier, *The Archaeology of the Bible* (Lion Books, 2008)

Robert F. Hull Jr., *The Story of the New Testament* (Society of Biblical Literature, 2010)

J. Ed Komoszewski, M. James Sawyer, Daniel B Wallace, *Reinventing Jesus* (Kregel Publications, 2006)

## Group Questions:

1. What has been your understanding of how the Bible came to exist?
2. Have you ever been asked questions about the Bible that you found difficulty answering? Are you able to give some examples?
3. What parts of the Bible have you found difficult to read?

## Take Home Exercise:

Read article from Fee and Stuart Chapter 2: *The Basic Tool – A Good Translation*

This article available on the Riverview Church website under Media, Courses, 107

<https://www.riverviewchurch.com.au/media/courses>

## Memory Work:

2 Peter 1:20 Above all, you must understand that no prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet's own interpretation. <sup>21</sup> For prophecy never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.