

IS THE BIBLE A GOOD THING?

WHY I'M HERE...

Reader: This is the word of the Lord.
People: Thanks be to God.

Christian View of the Bible.

For centuries, the people of God have responded that way when parts of the Bible were read. The Christian faith assumes that the Bible is something to be thankful for. The Christian faith is built on the notion that the Bible is a gift that God has given to the world. Also, reading the Bible actually builds faith as you read it.

But...There Are Significant Challenges Involved in Believing This.

There are a great number of obstacles that stand between us and trusting the Bible. I hope to address some of those obstacles tonight. My desire is that through tonight and our subsequent get together, I can help clear the path for you to deal with God through Bible

If you are a Christian.

I hope this will strengthen your faith and help you explain it to others. I want you to have a greater confidence in and appreciation of the Bible. This will help you to read it more, which will build your faith.

If you are not a Christian.

I hope this will help take away some barriers between you and Bible. I also hope this will be an encouragement and a challenge to you to check out historic Christianity. Keep in mind that reading the Bible is actually the source of faith.

Note: This will not give you an air-tight case for Christianity

Tonight: Intellectual Obstacles

March 5: Personal Obstacles & How To Read the Bible Well

A Little Bit About Myself.

I am forty two years old and have been a Christian for almost twenty years, and a Christian minister for nearly ten. Several years after I became a Christian, I began to wrestle with these kinds of questions for a period of about two years. My wrestling was very intense and I was willing to walk away from the faith if the issues about trusting the Bible seemed insurmountable. At every step along the way, I found many satisfactory answers. Over time, I got to the point where I thought the case for trusting the Bible was solid (though not airtight). Personally, I also got to the point where I gave God, the Bible, and the church the “benefit of the doubt”.

So I know what it means to ask these questions. I know how important these questions are. But I also believe that these questions have very compelling answers that support having confidence in the Bible.

INTELLECTUAL OBSTACLES

- 1) Why These 66 Books and Not Others?
- 2) Trusting in the Bible is a Circular Argument.

1) WHY THESE 66 BOOKS AND NOT OTHERS?

The Basic Objection runs something like this...

“I don’t know if I can trust the Bible because what if the early church suppressed some other books from getting into the Bible? Also, didn’t the Roman Emperor Constantine use the finalization of the books of the Bible to serve his political ends?”

Proponents

Elaine Pagels (Beyond Belief, promoting the inclusion of the “Gnostic Gospels”)

Da Vinci Code (it’s a work of fiction, but the ideas behind it have been persuasive; the Bible we have is the product of a conspiracy theory)

Bart Ehrman (God’s Problem, Misquoting Jesus; major themes are that the Bible is irrelevant and that the early church got the Bible wrong)

Jesus Seminar (1990s group of Biblical scholars seeking to find the real, historical Jesus; basic assumption is that the Jesus we have in the New Testament isn’t the real historical Jesus)

What These Objections Can Result In...

At minimum, these objections can lead to a great deal of skepticism when we read the Bible. If we cannot be sure of the text that we have in front of us, why should we take it seriously? And, if the Bible is the product of some kind of back-room political power-brokering, then to take the Bible seriously would actually do us harm. When taken to their logical conclusion, these ideas lead to dismissal of the Bible.

Question: Why These Books and Not Others.

OT—39 books; NT—27 books

OLD TESTAMENT

Why the Bible, anyway?

God of the Bible is personal (i.e., not an impersonal force). Therefore, this God does what personal beings do—speaks. God has spoken through his people to guide us. One of the unique things about the God of the Bible is that God is personal and gracious and speaks to use in a language we can understand. So from the perspective of faith, the Bible is the result of God's kindness.

This guidance answers life's most pressing questions: *Who is God? Who are we? Why are we here? What's wrong with the world?* As such, the Bible is a great gift.

How Does God Speak? Through Specific Individuals

God has chosen specific individuals through whom He will speak to the world. You can see this pattern being established in the Old Testament:

Deuteronomy 18:17-18 ¹⁷ *And the LORD said to me, 'They are right in what they have spoken. ¹⁸ I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their brothers. And I will put my words in his mouth, and he shall speak to them all that I command him.*

God approves a person to speak on His behalf. Through God's Spirit, this person has special access to God's mind/thoughts/desires/intentions that others do not. Sometimes this involves out extraordinary experiences (Moses and the burning bush, prophetic dreams etc.). That person is held responsible to speak for God (and not for their own gain, advantage, profit, etc.). The people, on the other hand, are bound to trust that the words from the prophet are God's words.

Question of OT Canon "Why These 39 Books and Not Others?"

There really isn't a significant question to "why these books and no other" with respect to the 39 books of the Old Testament (the same 39 books are 24 books in the Hebrew Bible which is also referred to as the Tanakh). Different branches of Judaism place varying degrees of emphasis on extra-Scriptural sources (oral tradition, rabbinic commentary, etc.), but many of these were not codified until the 2nd century AD. Also, Jesus has a fairly low view of the canonicity of the oral tradition that was eventually codified.

From a Christian perspective, what is important is that Jesus did a couple of things:

Jesus accepted the Old Testament as Canonical.

There are numerous instances where Jesus quotes from the Old Testament Scriptures indicating his recognition of their authority.

Matthew 5:17-18 ¹⁷ *"Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. ¹⁸ For truly, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished.*

Matthew 22:31-32 ³¹ *And as for the resurrection of the dead, have you not read what was said to you by God: ³² 'I am the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob'? He is not God of the dead, but of the living."*

Jesus Rejected Oral Traditions that Were Later Codified Into Extra-Canonical Sources

In perhaps his best known sermon (the “Sermon on the Mount”), Jesus clears away the oral tradition that had been gathering throughout the centuries. This oral tradition was the Jewish religious leaders’ well-intentioned attempt to provide guidance for how to best keep the Old Testament laws. Jesus rejected this oral tradition and makes it clear that it is not to be treated in the same way as the Old Testament Scriptures.

Matthew 5:21-24 ²¹ *"You have heard that it was said to those of old, 'You shall not murder; and whoever murders will be liable to judgment.' ²² But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment; whoever insults his brother will be liable to the council; and whoever says, 'You fool!' will be liable to the hell of fire. ²³ So if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, ²⁴ leave your gift there before the altar and go. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift.*

NEW TESTAMENT

Question of NT Canon—“Why These 27 Books and No Others?”

- Today—27 books accepted as canonical (only fringe groups challenge this)
- AD 397, Council of Carthage. 27 books of NT confirmed.
- AD 367, Festal Epistle of Athanasius. 27 books of NT confirmed.

Big Question is....

“What happened between time of the apostles and 4th Century?”

AD 270-340 (Source: Eusebius, Church Historian)

Four Categories of Books

- 1) *Universally Accepted*—21 Books (4 Gospels, Acts, 13 Pauline letters, I Peter, I John, Hebrews)
- 2) *Mostly Accepted, With Some Voices Against*—6 Books (James, 2 Peter, Jude, 2 & 3 John, Revelation)
- 3) *Spurious, Never Accepted*—Various (e.g., Acts of Paul, Shepherd of Hermas, Revelation of Peter)
- 4) *Heretical Books* (Gospel of Peter, Gospel of Thomas, Acts of Andrew & John, Gospel According to Hebrews)

Note: Eusebius was not giving his personal opinion. He was reflecting the church's judgment.

AD 185-253 (Source: Origen, Church Father & Historian)

- 1) *Universally Accepted*—21 Books (4 Gospels, Acts, 13 Pauline letters, I Peter, I John, Revelation)
- 2) *Mostly Accepted, With Some Voices Against*—6 Books (Hebrews, 2 Peter, 2 & 3 John, James, Jude)
- 3) *Heretical Books* (Barnabas, Shepherd of Hermas, Didache, Gospel of Hebrews)

Note: Origen not stating his opinion, but reflecting view of church.

AD 150 (Irenaeus, Church Father)

Affirms 20 Books (4 Gospels, Acts, 12 Pauline letters, I Peter, I John, Revelation)

AD 140 (Marcion, First Major Heretic)

Published a list of canonical books (some of Luke, 10 of Paul's letters; basically an Anti-Semite)

Important thing about Marcion is that he forced the church to clarify (vs. establish) what was canonical and what wasn't. Before Marcion, there wasn't as big of a need to do this. In other words, *theology develops as a result of historical events*.

Before Marcion....

AD 130—Justin Martyr uses phrase “it is written” when he quotes gospels

AD 120—Papias writes that gospels are Scripture

AD 115—Polycarp quotes Psalm 4 and Ephesians 4 as Scriptural
(dealing with Scriptural authority as early as AD 115)

AD 96—Clement of Rome alludes to OT and NT and says “the words of our Lord”

AD 80—Ignatius alludes to Romans 4 and gospel material as Scriptural

~AD 65—I Timothy 5:18, Paul cites OT & NT as Scripture

Note: This New Testament practice of quoting other parts of the New Testament as authoritative should not be surprising. In a faith that grew out of Judaism, there already was a precedent of God speaking to the world through His people and through this process, an authoritative text is created.

Criteria Used for Determining Whether a Book Was “In” or “Out”

To make these assessments, the historic church had principles which guided them in the clarification of the canon of the New Testament. Here are those guidelines.

Apostolicity. Apostles were eyewitnesses to Jesus and were entrusted by Jesus to be the gatekeepers of the Christian faith. Was the book written by, or under the authority of, an apostle. Or, was the book consistent with the Apostles’ teaching.

Orthodoxy. Is the book consistent with the rest of Scripture?

Catholicity. Is the book widely accepted throughout the church.

CONCLUSIONS ON CANON...

- The idea that God spoke authoritatively through a certain group of people should be expected in a religious faith that has its roots in Judaism.
- Related to this, the concept that some books were uniquely authoritative and some were not was alive and well from the earliest days.
- There has always been a “core canon” that has not been disputed (gospels and letters of Paul).
- There has been some historical debate over the canonicity of a small percentage of the books in the New Testament.
- What happened in the 4th Century wasn’t just a random, arbitrary decree made by Constantine or some Pope or some church council. Rather, it is the end of a process which had been going on for centuries.
- True, it takes faith to believe that these 27 books are the correct ones. But this review of history indicates that such a faith isn’t a leap into the dark.

FOR FURTHER READING...

The ESV Study Bible. In addition to having great text notes, this Bible has a couple of essays on Canon (see attached). I would wholeheartedly recommend this to anyone who is interested in reading and studying the Bible.

The Gospel Code, by Ben Witherington. A book that deals with problems concerning the process by which the books in the Bible were decided upon. Ben is a New Testament scholar that does a good job with some of the popular arguments against historic Christian faith (especially those raised in the Da Vinci Code).

The Last Word, by N.T. Wright. A book that deals with how to understand the authority that Scripture is to have in our lives. He also has a chapter that deals with some of the questions of Canon. Wright is the Bishop of Durham in the Church of England.

2) TRUSTING THE BIBLE IS A CIRCULAR ARGUMENT

What's a circular argument?

"I know the Bible can be trusted because the Bible says we should trust the Bible."

This is a circular argument. The conclusion ("I know the Bible can be trusted") is assumed in the premise ("The Bible says we should trust the Bible.") We cannot know that the Bible can be trusted without trusting the Bible in the first place. This knowledge (that the Bible can be trusted) is based on faith—it is based on something I cannot exhaustively prove. This does not sit well with us.

Why does this not sit well with us (an important philosophical aside)?

We live in a time where faith and reason are seen to be entirely separate from each other. This is so much a part of Western culture that we can just accept it without thinking. This effects many areas of our lives:

- Faith is about things that I *believe in*, whereas reason is about things I *know*.
- Things I *believe in* are of *indeterminate certainty*. Things I *know* are *certain*.

"There is clearly a sacred dimension to our existence, and coming to terms with it could well be the highest purpose of human life. But we will find that it requires no faith in untestable propositions—Jesus was born of a virgin; the Koran is the word of God—for us to do this."

--Sam Harris, [The End of Faith](#).

A Very Frequently Occurring Example...

Person 1: I believe in God the Father, Almighty
Maker of heaven and earth.

Person 2: I hope you find meaning and purpose in that belief.

Person 1: I know that two plus two equal five.

Person 2: You are wrong.

We owe this faith/reason split to the philosophical era known as The Enlightenment (Western Europe, centered in 18th Century). As a Christian, I challenge the truthfulness of this split.

A Better Way of Understanding Faith & Reason.

Faith and reason are intertwined. In fact, faith forms the foundation for knowing.

“There is no knowing without believing, and believing is the way to knowing.”
(Lesslie Newbigin, The Gospel in a Pluralist Society)

The truth of the matter is, however, that **all knowledge is based on faith**. All knowledge is based on assuming that certain things—things that we cannot exhaustively prove—are true and reliable.

We know things that aren’t verified all the time

- I know that Barack Obama is our President
(but I’ve never met him and I’ve never been to the White House)
How do I know this? Because I believe the news reports to be true. I haven’t flown to the White House to verify this, but I trust what I am told.
- I know that the earth is a sphere
(but I’ve never been in outer space and seen it with my own eyes)
How do I know this? Because I believe what I was taught about the solar system in elementary school science classes. I haven’t taken a rocket-ship into outer space to verify this.

Objection....But Those Things Can Be Verified.

True, but then you’re faced with similar issues of trust. Can I trust that I actually went to the White House when I verified this information? Can I trust my eyes? Can I trust the method I used to verify the President’s identity. Furthermore, we don’t live our lives this way. We very often take things to be “knowledge” that we are really taken on faith.

Furthermore....Science Itself Requires Faith.

Our popular understanding of Science...

“In arriving at a scientific law there are three main stages: the first consists of observing the significant facts; the second in arriving at a hypothesis which, if it is true, would account for the facts; the third in deducing from this hypothesis consequences which can be tested by observation.” (Bertrand Russell, The Scientific Outlook)

But...

The “significant facts” are determined by the beliefs that the scientist has. There is already an act of faith in play here. Furthermore, much hypothesizing relies on gut instinct and intuition.

“The supreme task of the physicist is the search for those highly universal laws from which a picture of the world can be obtained by pure deduction. There is no logical path leading to these laws. They are only to be reached by intuition, based upon something like an intellectual love.” (Albert Einstein, The World As I See it)

Science moves forward on that which the scientist believes to be right but cannot yet be demonstrated. This is an act of faith and underlies the scientific endeavor. A quote from Sam Harris is to the point here. Sam is making the statement that one day we will be able to see that everything in the sacred religious texts will one day be disproved by science.

“Why is love more conducive to happiness than hate? Is there life after death? These are ultimately questions for a mature science of the mind. If we ever develop such a science, most of our religious text will be no more useful to mystics than they now are to astronomers.” (Sam Harris, The End of Faith)

Don’t you see how this is a statement of faith? This statement cannot be proven, but Harris is advocating that science be moved forward with this belief in place, guiding and supporting the scientific endeavor. He does this not because he’s a bad scientist. Rather, he does this because this is how science actually occurs—it is rational inquiry into the world on the basis of faith. Newbigin sums this up quite well.

“A good scientist is one who has a sound intuition about where that something lies, and on that basis is able to identify facts which may be significant for searching in that direction. But he has no proof in advance that his intuition is correct. It is a matter of faith, and he has to stake his professional life on it, in the sense that if the intuition is false he may waste years of his life in a futile quest.”

(Lesslie Newbigin, The Gospel in a Pluralist Society)

What Doubt & Agnosticism

What about doubt? What if I were to say to you “There is only one God”? If you were not a Christian, you probably would say “I doubt that.”

But here’s the thing, even our doubts have faith beneath them. For example, if you doubt my statement, you doubt it because you believe something else.

1) You believe that it is more likely that there is not just one God¹. In other words, your doubt of my statement is based in a *belief* in something else. Of course, you could never prove there is more than one God—it is something you simply believe.

2) You’re not sure whether or not my statement is true. Again, there is a faith that lies underneath your statement. You *believe* that there are some criteria, that if met, would cause you to change your beliefs about God. This belief cannot be proven, it is something that you simply take to be true.

Some Conclusions...

- Trusting in the Bible is a circular argument. That is true. But everything else is a circular argument as well. We cannot escape some kind of faith to be at the bottom of how we view the world, God and ourselves.
- Because trusting in the Bible is a circular argument, you will never trust in the Bible without a commitment of faith.
- This means that if you are waiting for a waterproof, air-tight argument for the trustworthiness (i.e., an argument that does not require faith) you will be waiting forever.
- This also means that you trust the Bible the way you deal with any kind of circular belief system—you jump in and try it on.
- A growing faith in God means that over time, you learn how to “give God the benefit of the doubt” in areas that are unclear and uncertain.

¹ You could also believe that there is no such thing as a god. The logic would be the same.

FOR FURTHER READING...

Longing to Know, by Esther Lightcap Meek. A great introduction to the field of epistemology (the study of how we know things). Eshter is a Christian philosopher who looks at epistemology from a decidedly Christian perspective. Written for a non-academic audience.

The Gospel in a Pluralist Society, by Lesslie Newbigin. His chapter entitled “Knowing and Believing” is brilliant. The whole book is good, but that one stands out. Newbigin was a Presbyterian missionary in India for 30 years.

Proper Confidence, by Lesslie Newbigin. A good (though somewhat dense) book on how we know things. Newbigin gives a philosophical treatment on how to understand the Bible.

The Structure of Scientific Revolutions, by Thomas Kuhn. A look at how science is *really* done.