

Why should I believe the Bible is the word of God?

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 first 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 Peter 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" (Luke 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" (Hebrews 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 (John 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 (Acts 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.