

Ancient words...but ever true?

Can we still trust the Bible?

It used to be so easy, didn't it?

We had the King James Bible, perhaps with the words of Jesus in red. There was a column down the middle of the page that had some occasionally helpful references, and perhaps a wide margin where you could add your own "inspired" commentary. Like Henry Ford's automobiles, you could have any color you wanted, provided it was black. And there was no question that this was the word of God.

Not now. There are dozens of versions of the Bible that come in a dazzling variety of bindings. Computer programs give us access to hundreds of reference works at the touch of a keyboard.

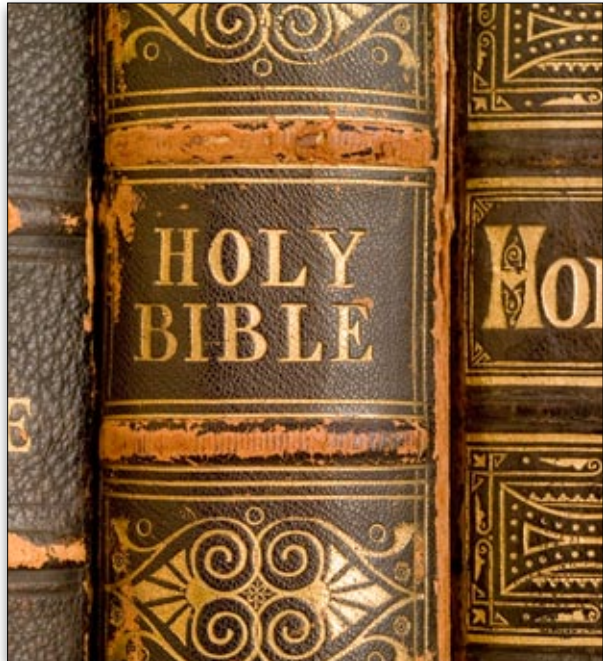
And we have discovered that answers to hard questions and explanations of difficult scriptures are not as clear-cut as we once thought.

Even more ominously, we have seen the Bible itself come under increasing criticism. Ever since *The Da Vinci Code* captured popular imagination, there has been a rash of books about many so-called Gospels, epistles and other ancient writings that never made it into the official Bible. Other writers claim to have discovered coded information buried in the original Bible texts, revealing detailed predictions of major news events of our time.

Many of these books are just opportunistic productions, written quickly to cash in on the wave of interest created by Dan Brown's novel. But others are well researched, and written by serious scholars, well qualified to offer their point of view.

What are we supposed to make of this flood of information? Has there been a conspiracy to keep vital information from us? Is the Bible just a collection of old manuscripts gathered together and preserved by human beings? Can we still trust it as the word of God?

We must not be afraid to face these tough ques-



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tions. And as we do, we hope to show you that there are answers, and that there is no reason to lose confidence in the book God gave “to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus” (2 Tim. 3:15).

But does the Bible contradict itself?

The answer is yes and no. The Bible is written in many literary styles. Some of these styles communicate in ways that we are not used to in the modern world. They use analogies, figures of speech and symbolic language that don't immediately make sense to us.

If everything in the Bible is taken in a crassly or simplistically literal manner, there will seem to be some contradictions. Even the most conservative reliable scholarly statements about Scripture admit that the Bible contains grammatical irregularities, exaggerations, imprecise descriptions and inexact quotations. We have to admit that 1 Cor. 1:14, for example, is an error, for Paul tells us that it is.

Our ability to understand and to reason is shaped by our personal experiences and the traditions and ways of thinking that shape our ideas and worldview. People living thousands of years ago had very different worldviews from ours. Even today, because of different traditions and experiences, equally sincere people come to different conclusions about what the Bible teaches, especially in regard to the details.

The Bible is not always as user-friendly as we have come to expect literature to be in the 21st century. But the main, overarching lessons of Scripture are not really controversial. As Mark Twain once said, “It ain’t the parts



of the Bible that I can’t understand that bother me, it is the parts that I do understand.”

So are you saying that the Bible is not historically reliable?

Compared to most other ancient writings it is very reliable. But its standard of accuracy is looser than the expectations of modern science and history. Genealogical lists may be incomplete (Matt. 1:8; 2 Chron. 22-24), the length of kings’ reigns may be misinterpreted due to coregencies, narrated events may be out of sequence (Matt. 4:18-22; 8:14; Luke 4:38-5:11), predicted events may not be fulfilled in every detail (Acts 21:11, 32-33; 27:10, 22), etc.

All biblical statements are true, but some are imprecise and incomplete. The “truth” about a subject does not require that we accept every biblical comment as historically or scientifically precise. Most alleged discrepancies in the Bible are easily resolved, and they do not alter the essential message of the story.

Each part of the Bible should be evaluated according to its own usage and purpose. Its purpose rarely includes details of history and science. Some things we need to know, and others we do not. God is not primarily concerned with whether we understand astrophysics, botany, and chronology, and we err if we try to use his inspired book for purposes for which it was not designed.

Are you saying it doesn’t all apply to us?

Some parts of the Bible are designed for a specific situation in a specific culture, and it would be wrong for us to take them out of that context and indiscriminately impose our modern situations and ways of expressing ourselves on them. First-century Christians were advised to pray with their hands raised (1 Tim. 2:8). Slaves were advised to submit even to harsh masters (1 Pet. 2:18). Virgins were advised to remain virgins (1 Cor. 7:26). Women were told how to dress when they prayed (1 Cor. 11:5), and men were given advice regarding hair length (v. 14). Similarly, people were told to greet one another with a kiss. These behaviors were appropriate in first-century Mediterranean culture, but are not necessary in Western culture today.

If the apostles could speak in our culture, they would quote the Old Testament in a different way, or maybe even use different scriptures. Parables might refer more to urban life, and advice about slavery would not be included.

The Bible was written *in* a different culture and *for* a different culture. Its truths were given with words and styles shaped by that culture. The fact that it is able to

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So can we still regard the Bible as a reliable guide to all aspects of life today?

Once again, yes and no. The Bible does not claim to tell us everything we need to know about all subjects, or even most subjects. When Scripture talks about the sun rising, as in Matthew 5:45 for example, its purpose is not to make a statement about astrophysics. When it calls a mustard seed the smallest seed (Matt. 13:31-32), it is not trying to give us a botany lesson. The Scriptures do claim to be a trustworthy guide for our relationships with God and with other humans. They give truth about faith, worship, salvation, morals and ethics (2 Tim. 3:15-16). But they do it in a way that can be understood by all people at all times.

Remember, the Bible is intended to reach out to people across the ages – in New Testament times, during the Dark and Middle Ages, through the 19th-century indus-

speaking across cultures, to address situations that never existed when it was written, is also a testimony to its abiding authority. Its timeless truths are given to us in cultural clothes.

Isn't that encouraging a "pick and choose" approach to living by every word of God?

No. At least, not in a way that allows you to just accept the parts that you like and discard what you don't. But most of us use a filter on the Bible—a filter that in most cases we haven't thought much about. We claim the Bible is an authority for our beliefs and practices, yet we rightly do not accept parts of it as being normative for our life.

For example, the Bible says you must destroy your house if it has persistent mildew (Lev. 14:43-45). But most of us would not take that seriously. Common sense clicks in to allow us to place this scriptural instruction in its original setting and purpose.

However, we are not suggesting that you should routinely ignore the Bible and follow your common sense. We do not have to choose between such extremes. But Christians should think about the *kind* of authority the Bible has. Its purpose is to introduce you to the good news of the kingdom of God, and to make you wise unto salvation.



So what advice do you give to someone who is reading some of these things for the first time?

Perhaps it will help to think of the Bible as a tree. Many Christians see that the tree is solid and well-rooted, and in that they are correct. But they may then assume that all its branches and even the smallest twigs are equally solid. They think they can place their ladder against any part of the tree without realizing that some of the twigs were never designed to carry such weight.

Small branches may support the ladder for a while, but when a strong wind blows, or some extra stress comes along, the ladder becomes unstable and possibly dangerous.

We need to begin at the trunk of the tree, and move out on branches only after testing them for stability. Some parts of the Bible are good for decoration, as it were, but not for support. They have value, but not always in the way we assume. They were inspired for one purpose, and we go wrong if we try to make them serve a different purpose. Never lose sight of the fact that the information in the Bible is there to make us "wise about salvation." You can trust it for that.

But once you say that Scripture has limitations, don't you open up a Pandora's Box?

You can believe some things without having cast-iron proof. There are some things that you must accept on faith. Not blind faith—but faith based on evidence and substance, as the epistle to the Hebrews says. A person who is committed to God has a reason to have faith. But you can't necessarily lay out those reasons in a scientific way that proves to an unbeliever that what you believe is true.

But neither can those who doubt lay out a scientific proof for their reasons. An atheist cannot prove that God does not exist, or that Jesus was not resurrected. So don't consider the evidence of your faith as somehow being an inferior kind of evidence in comparison with the faith of the skeptic.

Personal experience helps us understand that the Bible has authority. This is the book that has the courage and honesty to tell us about our own depravity, and the grace to offer us a cleansed conscience and eternal life. It gives us spiritual transformation and strength, not through rules and commands, but in an unexpected way—through grace and the redemptive work of our Lord. The Bible testifies to the love, joy and peace we can have through faith—realities that are, just as the Bible describes, beyond our ability to put into words. This book gives us meaning and purpose in life by telling us of divine creation and redemption.

We realize that not everyone will be comfortable with that understanding. Others come to different conclusions about the reliability of the Bible. Some Christians believe that every word should be taken literally. Others claim that it is less reliable than we have described here. We respect their faith in Christ, but we repeat our belief, in summary, that the Bible is the inspired word of God, authoritative and reliable in matters of faith, worship, morals, and ethics.

So what about those "extra-Biblical" Gospels and epistles that didn't make it into the New Testament? Why didn't they? How do we know what should be in it?

That is really worthy of a separate article. You'll find it on page 14. ●