

# Explore God

## “Is the Bible Reliable?”

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Digging Deeper

Explore God: “Is the Bible Reliable?”

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### Background Notes

**Key Scripture Text(s):** Several throughout.

*This series is part of **Explore God Chicago 2019**, a Community Outreach Initiative led by a committee of local pastors and business and ministry leaders. We all have questions about God, faith, and purpose; Explore God is a unique effort to come together to look at these questions in an open, authentic way. Join us as we explore The 7 Big Questions over the next 7 weeks.*



### Introduction

*“Is the Bible Reliable?” is the question that shapes our conversations this week.*



The influence of the Bible in history and literature is indisputable. *How* this collection of ancient writings achieved its prominence is, of course, a constant matter of dispute. Spanning two millennia, the production of the Bible involved dozens of writers, editors, scribes, prophets, teachers, mystics, sages, and to the faithful — saints. They came from all walks of life: shepherds, kings, peasants, professionals, itinerant tradesmen, fishermen, tentmakers, and courtiers. Some were well off in the noble classes, while others were nomadic and landless. They belonged to local communities of faith who shared beliefs about the one they called God, Yahweh, Lord, Creator, Redeemer, Judge, King, Jesus, and Spirit.

Given the remarkable human diversity suggested by the wide cast of characters, we must not forget that the Bible is by no means a monolithic work, but the collection of many individual writings commonly referred to simply (and more accurately) as “the books of the Bible.” Bringing together the individual publications into a single volume happened over the whole span of the persons and communities involved in that project. At the earliest stages, when literacy was uneven across social classes, the origin of the Bible’s literary content was largely *oral*, taking the form of free-form poems, spellbinding stories, and wise sayings. The content took the form of all available literary types: poetry, prose, story, allegory, parable, correspondence, speeches, hymns, ritual liturgies, primitive science, ancient biography, mysterious apocalyptic, coded symbols, family trees, census lists, law code, and covenants — to name the most recognizable and familiar.

Biblical languages ranged from the Northwest Semitic dialect of Hebrew, the primary tongue of the Old Testament (aka, Hebrew Bible, *Torah* or *Tenak*); also incorporating Aramaic, the *lingua franca* used as the common or commercial tongue among peoples of diverse speech in the ancient Near east; finally adding *Koine* Greek, the common language of the Greco-Roman world in New Testament times. Employment of wide-ranging languages meant that the writers, editors, and scribes who gave us the books of the Bible needed sufficient training to author literature accessible to the existing reading and listening audiences.

Communities also matter for the Bible’s origin. Writers wrote among and for groups of like-minded followers of religious belief. What they wrote about lived in the thoughts, conversation, intentions, actions, and

gatherings of actual persons joined together by family, fealty, friendship, and faith. Competent students of the biblical books are themselves inevitably woven into communities also, and the ways they have been formed socially will shape how they approach, process, understand, and apply the materials that comprise the Bible. Or, to put it another way, we would best give up the idea that this is “my Bible” and submit to both the verdict of history and literature that at the very least this is “our Bible” and these are “our books.”

All of which defers the question of this week’s emphasis, “Is the Bible reliable?” Clearly, the term “reliable” is value-laden calling for a judgment about the Bible’s adequacy in some specific sense. An illustration from ordinary life may help. Suppose I’m fresh out of high school and plan to attend a local college requiring a daily commute of ten miles or so. Further assume that I desire a degree of independence about when I arrive at school each day. What will be needed is a *car* that is adequate for this task. Yet, my resources are limited, necessitating a pre-owned vehicle, but one that I can count on to travel twenty miles daily, with a fuel economy that fits my meager budget. In shopping around, the choices are legion, and each vehicle’s age, condition, fuel economy, and insurance costs vary widely. Nonetheless, I come back to the simple standard: “a reliable car that I can afford with a useful life of at least four years.” I can settle for nothing less and can afford nothing more. My goal of reliability includes the evaluation of adequacy for the purpose the car is intended. The car must faithfully start in all kinds of weather, be safe to drive, consume modest fuel, and have low registered miles. In short, I’m looking for a car I can *trust* for the purpose it must fulfill.

Granted, the books of the Bible would seem more important than a car, but the principle remains constant: can I trust the collection called the Bible for the purpose it promises to fulfill? This assumes, of course, that these ancient texts make such claims about themselves with a clear purpose in mind — a purpose relevant the human being that I am. Reliability and adequacy are fraternal twins in this conversation, and so I have chosen to weave their complementary values throughout this week’s study. Taken together they give testimony to the twin truths that present themselves to us whenever we read the Bible: 1) *Reliability*: Is the Bible a source that we can *trust*; 2) *Adequacy*: Does the Bible address our most essential *needs*. I have left aside, for the time being, the popular craving, Is the Bible relevant today? Relevance is a capricious term that bends to the winds of fading, fans, and fickleness. Should it happen that the values of reliability and adequacy prove to touch us with persuasive power, well then relevance may prove irrelevant! Having the twin truths of the Bible renders a third value unnecessary comfort food.

Of course it will be insufficient, and therefore inadequate, to focus exclusively on the outer form, literary or otherwise, of the biblical books if we ignore the overriding claim about these writings: that they are initiated and guided by something Jews and Christians alike refer to as *inspiration* — the idea that God is the true Agent and nurturing Parent of the writers, communities, and words that comprise this collection of texts. There is a mysterious duality found on the pages of the Bible. Whereas the actual role of writers, pens, scrolls, language, and literature are concrete and tangible in the Bible, yet:

***Beyond them, above them, under them, around them, and with them breathes the Spirit of God  
To whom they all bear witness,  
By whom they each give testimony.***

It is our claim that the unity of human writer and Holy Spirit, engaging with each other, makes possible the biblical text that is thereby both reliable and adequate. As Christian readers of the whole Bible, we also affirm that the fulfillment of this witness and this testimony converges in the person of Jesus Christ who makes the books of the Bible fully reliable and finally adequate.

### **The Dimensions of Biblical Reliability and Adequacy**

To introduce key themes and develop a few of them, we offer a look at a general perspective on the reliability and adequacy of the Bible. Helping us with this foray is a useful article by A. Higgins, part of his *A Christian World-View* series, titled “The Adequacy of Scripture.” The substance of his work on our topic follows here.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> A. Higgins, “The Adequacy of Scripture,” *A Christian World-View*, October, 2016. <http://truthandtidings.com/2016/10/a-christian-worldview-the-adequacy-of-scripture/>

In a book published posthumously, Carl Sagan wrote, “Our planet is a lonely speck in the great enveloping cosmic dark. In our obscurity, in all this vastness, there is no hint that help will come from elsewhere to save us from ourselves.”

Have we actually been consigned to grope blindly in moral and spiritual darkness without any ray of light? Are we shut up to our own powers of reasoning and our puny intellects? Are the philosophers of our day and the talk show hosts our beacons of light amidst the darkness?

With all deference for Mr. Sagan’s brilliance, we are not in cosmic darkness, and help has come from “elsewhere” to save us. Others might provide volumes and title them as *Guidebooks to the Universe*, but we have a book, written by a far more capable Author, which is our unfailing guide and light for all of life’s needs.

Paul wrote in 2 Timothy 3:15-17, that the inspired Word of God is “able to make wise unto salvation ... that the man of God might be ... thoroughly furnished unto all good works.” It is absolutely adequate for our every need. In the context of 2 Timothy 3, it is able to take a child (v15) to the maturity of a man of God (v17). We read that it is “profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness” (v16). Someone has helpfully noted:

*Doctrine – to tell us what is right;*

*Reproof – to show us if we are not right;*

*Correction – to help us to get right;*

*Instruction – to keep us right.*

Every trial we face will find its comfort and direction in the Word of God; every dilemma we encounter will find its guidance in the Book. There is no difficulty or decision we will ever face for which God has not provided principle or precept in His Word. Our great deficiency is insufficient knowledge of the Book to discover those answers. The problem is never with the Word of God; it is always with us.

The adequacy of the Scriptures is due to the fact that they are God-breathed revelation, reliable, and relevant to each of us. To approach the Scriptures with a mindset that there are things we face in the 21st century for which the Scriptures have no answer is to call into question the wisdom and foresight of its Author.

Elders, husbands, wives, gospel workers, teachers, businessmen, and workers, will all find instruction to guide them in life within its covers. It is absolutely adequate for everything.

### **The Revelation**

It is obvious that, if we are to know God, He must reveal Himself to us. Our darkness and self-occupation as sinners, our distance and direction away from God, and our disinterest and defilement mean that there is no way we could ever attain to the knowledge of God if left to ourselves (Job 11:7; Rom 3:11). But the great wonder and mercy is that we have a self-revealing God, a God Whose eternal intention has been to reveal Himself to and to communicate with us. This was not based upon a need to be known, but on a desire to make known His heart to His creatures for our joy and blessing.

As the “Word” from eternity past, from “the beginning,” Christ has ever been God’s ultimate media for communication to humanity. It has ever been His purpose to communicate through that “Word” to us. In His Son, we have the incarnate Word; in the Scriptures we have the inspired Word. God speaks through creation to all of humanity. In the coming of the Lord Jesus, God spoke with clarity and finality; and in the written Word, God has spoken to us in a written, permanent manner. How thankful we are that there is a written, permanent record of the mind of God as revealed in His Word.

The Scriptures allege themselves to be nothing less than the revealed truth of God. Often, the terms verbal and plenary are applied to the concept of inspiration. These terms mean that, when the original manuscripts were penned by “holy men of God” under the control of the Spirit of God, they were word for word, in their entirety, the complete and accurate message of God to humanity.

### **Their Reliability**

Books have been written on the subject of the reliability and accuracy of the Word of God, so it would be impossible, and unwise, to try and give a detailed defense of its reliability in the short space of this article. A few highlights will have to suffice, and the interested reader can research the myriad resources available on the subject. Consider first that we are not dealing with “scientific” evidence, since the essence of the scientific method is the ability for predictable “replication.” We are in the realm of historical and literary evidence. That does not mean that our conclusion is not as valid. It simply

means that scientific methods of proving accuracy do not apply in the authenticating of something which is historical. It is akin to a court case in which evidence is presented until there is no reasonable doubt in the minds of the jurors. Consider then, as evidence:

### **The Scripture Itself**

We don't have the originals as we would have made idols out of them. But we do have an abundance of manuscripts, some dating back to only a little over a century from the time of the apostles. This dwarfs the period of time between most of the classic works of ancient history to which no objection is raised by scholars. This would include the works of Plato, Homer, Thucydides, and Pliny the younger.

There are over 5000 manuscripts of the Word of God. Once again, this is far greater than any of the ancient writings of history. These manuscripts have come from sites in many different places so as to refute any idea of collusion.

If you are in university or exposed to those who challenge the Bible, you will at some point hear that there are over 200,000 errors in the manuscripts available to examine. These are not errors, but differences between the manuscripts. The vast majority of these differences (99%), are minor and are of the nature of whether it should say "a" or "the" or a similar minor change. No passage or doctrine is significantly changed when all these alleged "errors" are taken into account. They actually confirm that there was no collusion or attempt to deceive.

### **The Testimony of the Savior**

In a court of law, a person is allowed to testify for Himself, and that testimony is then either upheld or refuted by others as they witness to His truthfulness, accuracy, and character. The Lord Jesus viewed the Scriptures as the Word of God. His emphatic "It stands written" was a testimony to His insistence that the Scripture comes from God.

The Lord Jesus quoted from Genesis through Deuteronomy, the Psalms, and the Prophets. He stated that it was truth. He pointed to His death and resurrection as being the testimony of Scripture. The fulfillment of those events attests to the reliability of Scripture.

### **The Testimony of the Spade**

Archeology has consistently and repeatedly affirmed the accuracy of Scripture. Caution is needed here, as this does not prove inspiration – it only attests to its accuracy. But proof of its accuracy in the face of its many detractors goes a long way toward upholding inspiration. Consider the following:

Sodom and Gomorrah: Thought to be a myth but then records of all five cities were found, and the area was rich in bitumen or brimstone. Evidence of burning of this was found on top of Mount Jebel Usdum (Mt. Sodom).

Jericho: Excavated in 1930-36; Garstang showed that the walls fell outward. The city was not plundered, but burned. It occurred in harvest time, as Joshua says.

Sargon: His name was unknown outside of the Bible, and men denied he existed (Isa 20:1). His palace in Khorsabad was discovered in 1843 by a French archeologist. As well, the inscription on fragments of a stela found in Ashdod in 1963 (now in the Israel Museum) confirms the Biblical details of his capture of Ashdod in 711 BC.

The Babylonian chronicles: Now in the British Museum, they cover a period from 615-539 BC and detail the fall of the Assyrian empire and Nineveh, as Nahum and Zephaniah had predicted and as Jeremiah recorded. They confirm, as well, the attacks on Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar.

Belshazzar: Many denied his existence, and thus the reliability of Daniel. But in 1854, a Babylonian inscription was unearthed which told how Nabonidus entrusted the kingship to his eldest son Belshazzar. Thus Daniel could only rise to the third ruler in the kingdom.

*Politarch inscription: In Acts 17:6 and 8, Luke refers to city officials in Thessalonica as Politarch. Prior to 1853, no mention of this could be found in Greek literature. However, in 1835, an arch in Thessaly revealed the title Politarch with a list of rulers' names.*

### **The Testimony of the Seers**

It has been estimated that there were about 60 prophecies fulfilled in the life and death of Christ. Even if we take a look at only eight over which He had no influence in fulfilling, it is remarkable: the place of His birth; time of His birth; manner of His birth; His betrayal; manner of His death; treatment He received (spitting, mocking, derision); piercing of His hands, feet, and side; His burial.

The chance that one man could fulfill all by accident or coincidence is 1 in 1017. Add to these the fulfilled prophecies of the Old Testament: Daniel's seventy weeks; Cyrus named before birth; the movement of nations in Daniel and the succession of empires, and the chances are slimmer still.

### **The Testimony of Sinners**

One of the greatest tributes to any literary work is when a person credits it with changing his or her life. Books of this nature are rare; and lives changed by these books are rarer still. Yet heaven and a coming universe will be filled with individuals who will attest that the Word of God changed their lives and their eternity.

#### The Testimony of its Survival

The Bible has withstood the passage of time, the prophecies of its enemies, and persecution from its foes. How many books written more than 25 years ago survive? They are called the "classics" for their longevity. How many survive 100 years? And rarely does a small fraction of books endure 1000 years. The Bible has withstood changes in culture, thinking, nations, and societies. The passage of time has not dulled its message or silenced its voice.

Critics have attacked the Bible at every turn. This became an art form in the 1800s with the form critics who attempted to deconstruct the Bible and deny its claims. Attempts have been made to deny its inspiration and the reliability of its historical record as well. Men have guaranteed that the Bible would be a forgotten book. Voltaire attacked it and promised its demise. The critics tried to deny Moses' authorship on the basis that writing was not known in Moses' time. Then someone discovered the "black stele" with writing on it from the laws of Hammurabi – three centuries before Moses.

In the Old Testament, Manasseh must have tried to destroy the Scriptures, as one copy was hidden in the temple and found by Josiah. Antiochus Epiphanies plundered Jerusalem in the 2nd Century BC, forbidding the Bible to be read and destroying every copy he could. During the first three centuries, Roman emperors sought to destroy the Bible. In AD 303, Diocletian unleashed his 10 persecutions, issuing an edict to destroy the Bible.

*Wycliffe translated the Bible into English from Jerome's Latin Vulgate edition in 1320 which sold for \$200 a copy. Forty years after his death, his bones were dug up, burned, and strewn along the river.*

*In 1450, the invention of the printing press enabled the Bible to be published. A copy of that first Bible is in the Library of Congress and has been valued at over \$1,000,000 – not bad for a book which is supposed to be nonexistent today.*

While the tactics of its enemies have now changed from attempting to destroy the Bible to discrediting and marginalizing it, it continues to speak to generation after generation. The Bible has survived.

### **The Testimony of the Stone**

The ultimate proof of the Word of God is the open sepulcher and silent, yet eloquent, stone. The Savior attested to the authenticity of the Scriptures. He said that He would rise from the dead. His resurrection testifies to His truthfulness and thus, the truthfulness and accuracy of the Scriptures. Resurrection verifies all that Christ said and taught.

Someone might argue that this is circular reasoning. We are claiming the Bible is true and reliable because the Lord Jesus rose from the dead; yet that account of His resurrection is in the Bible which we are trying to prove. Keep in mind that this is historical evidence. The crucifixion of Christ is an attested fact in history. The preaching of a band of apostles who testified to His resurrection is a fact of history. Every attempt by unbiased legal minds to disprove the resurrection on the basis of the evidence has failed.

### **The Relevance**

Finally, the issue of its relevancy must be faced. Many books are authoritative and accurate, dealing with everyday life needs such as fixing a car, finding a destination, or making a purchase. They would be relevant if you were in need of the information which they provide. They would not, however, be relevant to a large number of people, much less the entire human family. The Bible, however, is. It addresses and answers the deep questions of life. Why am I here? Where am I going? How can I be sure? It gives direction for the great quest of life. How can I find meaning, security, and significance? It lifts man from the quagmire of life: the helplessness of his sin and eternal doom. It supplies to each of us a quality of life that is described as eternal. No other book even attempts to promise these things.

What Higgins' essay offers the ordinary reader is a layperson-friendly overview of the common *witnesses* to the reliability and adequacy of the biblical materials. Any one of these excursions opens up whole vistas of further

research and new directions for continuing exploration. Together, they plant seeds of curiosity and give invitations to investigate large tracts of biblical real estate for future development. Resources for doing this include:

Archaeology remains an unfinished science, with new discoveries announced continuously. If readers find this intriguing, they are invited to follow the latest developments in such publications as *Biblical Archaeological Review* (BAR).

The work of scribes and the making of ancient manuscripts, along with their modern study, can be studied in books like Karel van der Toorn's *Scribal Culture and the Making of the Hebrew Bible*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007.

A general introduction to the Bible's formation appears in David Ewert's *From Ancient Tablets to Modern Translations*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983.

Specific information on New Testament documents is found in F. F. Bruce's accessible work, *The New Testament Documents: Are They Reliable?* Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981 (Sixth Edition).

The literary forms of the Bible receive excellent treatment in Leland Ryland, *The Literature of the Bible*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1974.

Solid historical settings for both Old and New Testament are surveyed in Jack Finnegan, *Light from the Ancient Past, Volumes 1 & 2*. Princeton University Press, 1959 (reprinted 1974).

Fourteen scholars in several fields of history, literature, biblical languages, and theology contribute to a topical study, introducing biblical backgrounds in *The Origin of the Bible*, edited by Philip Wesley Comfort. Wheaton: Tyndale, 1992.

## **The Bible as *Witness***

The common way of describing the Bible is to say quote simply, "The Bible is the Word of God." That statement is a: confession, creed, and statement of faith. Between the subject, "Bible," and the predicate "Word of God" there stands the simple verb "is" which connects them. Without any further reflection, the connections looks like a simple *equation*. But it is not, for "Bible" and "Word of God" do not refer to identical things, even though they are intimately related to each other. That said, if you ask me, "Do you believe that the Bible is the Word of God?" I would reply without hesitation, "Yes." My response comes with a careful qualification, however. It is a basic one, really. Simply put, "Word of God" is a larger and more supreme reality, greater than what is contained in the term "Bible." Let me offer a single example of how this works in the biblical text itself. Consider the following text from the Old Testament book called *Jeremiah*, written by the prophet of the same name.

*The words of Jeremiah son of Hilkiah, of the priests who were in Anathoth in the land of Benjamin, <sup>2</sup> to whom the Word of the Yahweh<sup>2</sup> came in the days of King Josiah son of Amon of Judah, in the thirteenth year of his reign. <sup>3</sup> It came also in the days of King Jehoiakim son of Josiah of Judah, and until the end of the eleventh year of King Zedekiah son of Josiah of Judah, until the captivity of Jerusalem in the fifth month. <sup>4</sup> Now the word of the Yahweh came to me saying, (Jeremiah 1:1-4).*

Two phrases (my *italics*) frame the biblical writer Jeremiah's introduction to his book: "the words of Jeremiah ..." and "to whom the Word of the LORD (Heb. *Yahweh*) came." There is a plain and straightforward grammatical difference between "the word of Yahweh" and "the words of Jeremiah." Of the two phrases, "the Word of Yahweh" holds the upper hand and occupies the supreme role in the two language acts described. For persons reading or hearing the text of Jeremiah's book (scroll), what lies before them (read or spoken) is the product of human language, "words" written by Jeremiah son of Hilkah, a priest from the town of Benjamin-Anathoth, during the kingly reigns of Josiah (627 BCE), Jehoiakim, and Zedekiah until the exile of Jerusalem

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<sup>2</sup> In the Hebrew text of the Old Testament, the covenant name for God is *Yahweh* which our English translations generally reproduce as "the LORD," where the capitalization signals the use of Yahweh, the divine name. We have chosen to use the Hebrew form.

(to Babylon) in the eleventh year, fifth month (586 BCE). They are Jeremiah's *words*, rooted in specific times and places, shaped by his personal development and lifelong experiences. They are Hebrew *words*, originally, carrying with them all the meanings, grammar, history, and ideas known to their writer, the man Jeremiah. Make no mistake, they are "the *words* of Jeremiah" and should be studied within the context of his life and times.

However, the text refuses to see Jeremiah's *words* as self-authorized, for he is not the one who decided to write them. Above, beneath, and beside those words there stands another. It is identified in the text of Jeremiah 1 as "the *Word* of Yahweh," and that *singular* Word "comes" to Jeremiah, confronts him, speaks to him, and finally authorizes him to speak and write. We come to know the presence of this other Word because Jeremiah is the *witness* who *testifies* to its coming. His words are the witness to this other Word. What follows this introduction is usually called Jeremiah's "call narrative" since it tells of the living encounter between Yahweh and Jeremiah, *the Word meeting with his words*.

<sup>4</sup> Now the word of Yahweh came to me saying, <sup>5</sup> "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations." <sup>6</sup> Then I said, "Ah, Lord Yahweh! Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy." <sup>7</sup> But Yahweh said to me, "Do not say, 'I am only a boy'; for you shall go to all to whom I send you, and you shall speak whatever I command you. <sup>8</sup> Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you to deliver you, says Yahweh." <sup>9</sup> Then Yahweh put out his hand and touched my mouth; and Yahweh said to me, "Now I have put my words in your mouth. <sup>10</sup> See, today I appoint you over nations and over kingdoms, to pluck up and to pull down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant." <sup>11</sup> The word of Yahweh came to me, saying, "Jeremiah, what do you see?" And I said, "I see a branch of an almond tree." <sup>12</sup> Then Yahweh said to me, "You have seen well, for I am watching over my word to perform it." (Jeremiah 1:4-12).

Jeremiah is a "made man," and by that we mean God forms the man Jeremiah in preparation for His future coming to Jeremiah as the Word which makes possible Jeremiah's own words. No longer the one "in the womb" Jeremiah is the fully grown witness. He is unfamiliar with this other Word which comes to him and yet he knows by the encounter that he must somehow witness to that Word. "I do not know how to speak ... I am only a boy," Jeremiah replies to the awesome presence of the Word of God that comes to him. In this, he resembles Moses in the presence of the burning bush (see Exodus 3), and immediately disclaims his ability to utter his words; if he cannot speak them, he surely cannot write them. What Jeremiah needs and what God supplies are a commission, a command, and a capacity. God sends Jeremiah to whom the Word has come, and supplies the *authorizing Word* that makes possible the speaking and writing of the Word which comes to him (1:7). God sends Jeremiah as a *witness* to others, bearing the Word with his words and protecting him from the intimidation of those who will oppose his witness. With dramatic flair, God engages in a tangible gesture by "putting out his hand," for His Word is a generous gift. God's gesture touches his mouth and liberates his speech so that the Word might be made flesh on Jeremiah's lips. In that moment, the mystery of *revelation* happens in Jeremiah's mouth; the revelation *comes as* the Word of Yahweh, but *becomes* Jeremiah's words. Those words do not cease to be Jeremiah's words, but they become authorized words and so are reliable witnesses to the Word of God (1:8-9).

To illustrate what happens in this mysterious revelation of the Word of the Lord, God's Word becomes for Jeremiah the *performative word* that is now "appointed over nations and kingdoms." It becomes the words available to the whole world to order the whole world in active and decisive ways: "to pluck up and to pull down, to destroy and to overthrow" — four strong verbs, powerfully to *deconstruct* the world; "to build and to plant" — two strong verbs to *reconstruct* the world. Make no mistake. Jeremiah will speak his words for these powerful outcomes, not because he knows how to speak because he does not, but because the Word of the Lord has engaged with Jeremiah's mouth and words.

To further illustrate for Jeremiah the dynamic of the Word witnessed by his words, God asks him a question: "What do you see?" There before him, standing on the ground where Jeremiah stands, he sees "a branch of an almond tree." Keep in mind, the Word of God keeps being giving to Jeremiah, not only that he might *hear* things, but also that he might *see* things. What he sees is *ordinary*: the branch of a tree! He might have just as well seen the branch of an almond tree at any other time and under ordinary circumstances. However, because

Jeremiah receives the question of God, “What do you see?” he is thereby directed to consider the tree as that to which he must now *bear witness*. The witness of Jeremiah is true and faithful and *reliable*, something God confirms: “You have seen well,” God responds. For what is required of reliable witnesses? *They must see well*, even as they must *hear well* if they are to speak and write *reliably*.

So far, Jeremiah has proven himself to be the man authentically touched by the Word of God which comes to him, and yet the work of revelation is not complete until what he sees or hears acquires truth and meaning from the Word of God which keeps coming to him. The branch of the almond tree is a *sign* that will permit Jeremiah to access the truth and the meaning of the Word, and God proceeds to supply the connection. Curiously, to modern readers of this text, the revelation of truth and meaning from the almond branch turns out to be Hebrew *pun* since the Hebrew word for “almond tree” is *shāqēr* and the word for “watching” is *shōqēr*. The verbal trick seems superficial to us, but the idea is that the Word of the Lord requires a tangible medium to communicate truth and meaning to the human receiver. In this example, the truth and meaning is that “I am watching over my word to perform it.” By implication, the Word of the Lord comes as *one thing* (the almond branch vision), whereas the truth and meaning comes with *many words* of description. A similar revelation follows in 1:13-16, where *the Word* appears as a “steaming pot tipped away from the north” — also visual and tangible— while the truth and meaning with *words* requires many human words for Jeremiah to speak or write.

The work of the prophet is to speak and write with *words* which he experiences when the *Word* of Yahweh comes to him. What is original with God is one, singular, a unity — consistent with the nature of God as One, unique, and singular. The Word of God has no parts, no separations, no divisions, but arrives as the One Word coming to the prophet who is empowered to describe, witness, and testify to what he sees and ears, using words formed on his own mouth and authorized by God. There is in this remarkable account of Jeremiah’s words the indispensable way God’s Word *becomes* Jeremiah’s words. At the same time, the account provides the indispensable *key* to the relationship between the two phrases: “the Word of Yahweh” and “the words of the Bible.” The books of the Bible are, then, the authorized *words* that bear witness to *the Word of Yahweh* that is being given to the writers. God chooses, forms, and calls the writers to be the witnesses. They are *faithful and reliable witnesses* because, like Jeremiah, they have been chosen, formed, and called for this very purpose. A careful and objective reading of the Old Testament offers countless examples of what the book of *Jeremiah* illustrates with such persuasive clarity. The sentence, “the Word of Yahweh came to ...” appears 110 times in the Old Testament. Throughout Israel’s history the Word of Yahweh keeps being given to God-formed witnesses whom He chose and called. They respond to their encounter with the Word of the Lord by speaking and writing their *testimony* in what we now possess as the words of *Scripture*, a word taken from the Latin *scripturus*, “what is to be written,” a future participle, but in the plural form, “Scriptures.” Many words will be required to reveal the truth and meaning of the One Word of Yahweh which encounters the writers.

There are good reasons why the Old and New are called “testament” by Israel and the church. On the first level, the *testament* is really the *covenant* between God and His people. But, like all ancient covenants, Old and New, are also testimonies or witnesses to the one Word of God. Might we not entertain the proposal to call them, respectively, *Oldest Witness* and *Newest Witness*, thereby preserving their identities as the reliable witnesses to this one Word?

In the next section, we turn to the New Testament understanding of all of this, with special emphasis on the central role of witnesses and the idea of *inspiration* which authorizes and makes possible the reliability of their writing.

### **The New Testament Witness and the Reliable Witnesses**

The earliest followers of Jesus were the primary witnesses of the Word of God. More deeply and directly than their ancestors the prophets, they “saw and heard” the Word of God become flesh and living among them (John 1:14a). Through their testimony they “beheld the glory” of God in the life of Jesus of Nazareth who was and is this Word *made flesh* (1:14b). In seeing this Word “coming to them,” they received the free and generous gift

“full of grace and truth” (John 1:14c). What they saw and heard is the same Word that came to Jeremiah through *vision and symbol*, but now as *flesh and blood*. Having received the Word as the human face of God, they became the authorized writers of the body of literature we call the New Testament. Through the medium of the written words, they proclaimed to others and so to us the Word of God.

John’s first letter to the general church summarized this for his readers:

We declare to you what was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life-- <sup>2</sup> this life was revealed, and we have seen it and testify to it, and declare to you the eternal life that was with the Father and was revealed to us-- <sup>3</sup> we declare to you what we have seen and heard so that you also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. <sup>4</sup> *We are writing these things* so that our joy may be complete. (1 John 1:1-4).

“Seen and testify,” “declare what we have seen and heard,” and “we are writing...” In these words, the apostolic witness named John, in his book, brings to speech and to text the direct encounter with the living Word. Asking the question “Is the Bible Reliable?” finally brings us to the true authentication of the biblical books found in the New Testament. More explicitly than the prophets of the oldest testament, the Christian writers bring to the table their personal encounter with the incarnate Word, Jesus. It is Jesus who assures the reliability of what the apostles and their associates write in the books of the New Testament.

And there is more from the testimony of the apostle Peter in his second letter:

<sup>12</sup> Therefore I intend to keep on reminding you of these things, though you know them already and are established in the truth that has come to you. <sup>13</sup> I think it right, as long as I am in this body, to refresh your memory, <sup>14</sup> since I know that my death will come soon, as indeed our Lord Jesus Christ has made clear to me. <sup>15</sup> And I will make every effort so that after my departure you may be able at any time to recall these things. <sup>16</sup> For we did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we had been eyewitnesses of his majesty. <sup>17</sup> For he received honor and glory from God the Father when that voice was conveyed to him by the Majestic Glory, saying, "This is my Son, my Beloved, with whom I am well pleased." <sup>18</sup> We ourselves heard this voice come from heaven, while we were with him on the holy mountain. <sup>19</sup> So we have the prophetic message more fully confirmed. You will do well to be attentive to this as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts. <sup>20</sup> First of all you must understand this, that no prophecy of scripture is a matter of one's own interpretation, <sup>21</sup> because no prophecy ever came by human will, but men and women moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God. (2 Peter 1:12-21).

Fully aware of his coming death, during the severe persecution of Christians in Rome under Emperor Nero’s reign, Peter turns his attention to the matter of *preserving* the apostolic witness to the life and work of Jesus the Word. In this text he speaks of “reminding” his audience of “these things” (the Jesus story) which is already in oral form in order to “establish them in *the truth that has come to you.*” Peter desires to “refresh” their memory and make possible, in the future, the “recall” of that story. Since the message of Jesus is about events that are beyond human imagination, he doesn’t want the oral account of them to slip into the realm of myth or fable, but to be supported by “eyewitnesses” who have directly and personally seen “his majesty.” That witness includes “that voice” which all of the apostles together heard on the mount of transfiguration (see Matthew 17:1-13, Mark 9:2-13, Luke 9:28-36, and John 1:14c), described here “majestic glory” given to Jesus by God the Father who declared Jesus to be “my Son, my Beloved.” Alongside the vision are the words heard “from heaven” that came to the apostles at a specific time and place. By calling the place of this remarkable unveiling of Jesus “the holy mountain” Peter implicitly compares this *place* with another mountain called Sinai where God revealed His glory to Moses. This unstated comparison borrows the authority of God’s oldest Word with the authentic Word, Jesus, in the newest Word. They are, in terms of reliability, the same. Then, in 1:21, Peter calls his written words “prophecy of scripture” (writings) made possible by the Holy Spirit who “moves” the writers with that which has been spoken by God. The witnesses of the apostles are just such words, backed by the authority of Jesus who himself is the embodied “Word of God.” The reliable Jesus, verified by reliable witnesses, now becomes the reliable words of the book we call “the New Testament.”

Peter’s choice of the word “moved” to describe how the Spirit authorizes the writing of scripture is poignant. To “move” like this is, in the Greek context, a nautical term suggesting the navigation of a vessel on the water of the sea. A fisherman by trade, Peter would know about such things, and about the fluidity of motion in his

boat. Freedom is apparent in the expression, allowing for the style, experience, and perspective of the human authors when they wrote scripture. Scholarly study of the biblical text confirms the exercise of such freedom, evidenced by the differing literary forms, vocabulary, grammar, and life experience allowed by the Spirit in the words of scripture. As readers, our interpretation of biblical texts must take into account this latitude of the writers when we evaluate their reliability. Difference does not imply contradiction, but commonly varied perspective by the authors as their words seek to be faithful to the Word of God that is coming to them when they write.

In the New Testament gospels we read how Jesus himself invites his disciples to be his witnesses. Each writer of the four gospels in their own way gives voice to their role in this regard. Perhaps Luke is most explicit and reflective when he opens his gospel by saying:

Since many have undertaken to set down an orderly account of the events that have been fulfilled among us,<sup>2</sup> just as they were handed on to us by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and servants of the word,<sup>3</sup> I too decided, after investigating everything carefully from the very first, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus,<sup>4</sup> so that you may know the truth concerning the things about which you have been instructed. (Luke 1:1-4).

Along with the other three gospels, the one Luke wrote follows the guidelines of what was known in the ancient world as books of “Lives (Greek: *bioi*),” a form of ancient biography exemplified by writers like Plutarch.<sup>3</sup> Luke adheres to the ancient standard of writing biographical accounts using sources that come from “eyewitnesses.” Living memory, in the eyes of ancient audiences, lent reliability to written accounts of famous persons. In his gospel Luke borrows from contemporary accounts of the life and work of Jesus, “handed on to us from the beginning” by the testimonies of those who were “servants of the word.”

This phrase, “servants of the Word,” suggests reliability in the strongest sense. It’s another way of saying that the eyewitnesses submitted what they said or wrote to the controlling standard of what actually took place. The “Word” was their master, and they were obliged to do the Word’s bidding in whatever went into their sources about Jesus. With these reliable sources in his hands, Luke “investigates everything carefully from the very first,” using the available standards of historical writing in use at the time. What he writes in the gospel of Luke, found in our New Testament, has an “orderly” arrangement so that the first reader (named here as Theophilus, his patron) “may know the truth” about whatever he had been taught. Luke puts the conscious process he follows into this little preface in much the same way ancient biographers would have shared with their readers the method which guided their literary projects. In so doing Luke aspires to the highest standard of accuracy, historical excellence, and reliability known at the time he was writing. Professionally, Luke was physician, accustomed to the life or death work of restoring health to his patients. With the same professional care he approaches his project of giving to his audiences a trustworthy account of the life of Jesus. As a result Luke becomes a “faithful witness of the witnesses.”

The authority of the scriptures in the New Testament can be seen in *the writings of Paul*. First, we consider a little background. A thoroughly Jewish scholar in his own right, he first encountered the risen Jesus in a vision. Within the naming conventions of Jewish culture, his birth name (also known as his *praenomen*) was *Saul*, the name by which we first know him throughout Acts 7:58-13:9. At the time, he was an adversary to the Christian movement (see Acts 8:1-4; Acts 9:1ff), launching a personal crusade against them, driven by religious zeal to keep Judaism free from unauthorized innovations. To Saul the Christians were a threat to the purity of Israel’s faith because they advocated that Jesus the Son of God, the crucified one, had risen from the dead, ascended to heaven, and became the Father’s right-hand man to bring the kingdom to the whole world. Paul objected to Jesus and his message on much the same grounds as the Jewish authorities who opposed Jesus directly and convicted him of death finally. However, the Saul project was suddenly interrupted when he was on his way to Damascus to arrest and litigate the Jesus followers. On the road to Damascus Jesus appears to him and convinces him to cease his opposition and embrace the movement by becoming the leader of a mission to bring

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<sup>3</sup> A scholarly and accessible treatment of this form of ancient writing appears in Richard Burridge’s *Four Gospels: One Jesus?* Third Edition (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014).

the gospel to non-Jews (Gentiles) throughout the Roman world. Wholly transformed by meeting the resurrected Jesus, Saul receives instruction and support from the Jewish Christian communities. When the Christian church in Antioch confirms his new calling to bring the gospel to the Gentiles, Saul begins to use his *nomen*, “Paul,” which had been given to him when he received Roman citizenship, a fact attested in Acts 22:25-29, 23:27.

Under the name Paul, with its world-wide implications, he engages with citizens of the Empire all across the Mediterranean, bearing the Word of Jesus to all who would listen to his message. The results were a growing tide of conversions and planted-churches, dotting the cities and towns throughout the Roman world. Then, near the end of his life, Paul the apostle to the nations found himself in Rome under house arrest, hoping to bear witness to the Emperor himself, at a trial that would end with his death by the edge of the executioner’s ax at the end of the Appian Way. Before his end came, Paul dictated words of what likely would be his last letter addressed to his young protégé, *Timothy*. Two distinct passages from that letter give us insight into Paul’s understanding of the role of Scripture and its authority. We begin with the first

You then, my child, be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus; <sup>2</sup> and what you have heard from me through many witnesses entrust to faithful people who will be able to teach others as well. <sup>3</sup> Share in suffering like a good soldier of Christ Jesus. <sup>4</sup> No one serving in the army gets entangled in everyday affairs; the soldier’s aim is to please the enlisting officer. <sup>5</sup> And in the case of an athlete, no one is crowned without competing according to the rules. <sup>6</sup> It is the farmer who does the work who ought to have the first share of the crops. <sup>7</sup> Think over what I say, for the Lord will give you understanding in all things. <sup>8</sup> Remember Jesus Christ, raised from the dead, a descendant of David-- that is my gospel, <sup>9</sup> for which I suffer hardship, even to the point of being chained like a criminal. But the word of God is not chained. <sup>10</sup> Therefore I endure everything for the sake of the elect, so that they may also obtain the salvation that is in Christ Jesus, with eternal glory. (2 Timothy 2:1-10).

Once more, as in the early texts we’ve examined this week, the emphasis falls on the crucial role of *witnesses* in preserving a reliable account of the gospel story. The Word is “heard through many witnesses,” “entrusted to faithful people,” “who will be able to teach others.” To preserve *the unbroken chain of apostolic testimony*, Paul authorizes Timothy to oversee for the next generation of Christians the faithful record of the gospel. That Timothy succeeded in this task is seen in the collection and transmission of Paul’s *written* letters which joined the four gospels as the New Testament scriptures. Peter, from whom we have already heard, confirmed the status of these letters as *scripture* in his own writings:

So also our beloved brother Paul wrote to you according to the wisdom given him, <sup>16</sup> speaking of this as he does in all his letters. There are some things in them hard to understand, which the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction, *as they do the other scriptures*. (2 Peter 3:15-16).

The clause, “as they do the other scriptures,” confirms that the leader of the apostles accept as *scripture* the written works of Paul on a par with the scriptures of the Old Testament. Both men already embraced the reliability of Judaism’s sacred books that make up the Hebrew Bible or Old Testament. Christians did not need to receive these former texts since the Old Testament was already accepted as the “manger in which the Christ child is laid” (Luther). On the authority of Jesus himself, Peter and the apostles continued to read and study the Old Testament as pointing to the coming of Jesus.

On one occasion after his resurrection, Jesus had encountered two of his followers on the road to Emmaus and in his conversation with them sought to dispel their doubts with the following words:

<sup>25</sup> Then he said to them, "Oh, how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared! <sup>26</sup> Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?" <sup>27</sup> Then beginning with *Moses and all the prophets*, he interpreted to them the things about himself *in all the scriptures*. (Luke 24:25-27).

Later that day, Jesus met with his apostles and said this:

<sup>44</sup> Then he said to them, "These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you-- that everything written about me in *the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms* must be fulfilled." (Luke 24:44).

The three divisions of Jewish scripture which Jesus designates correspond to the traditional labels of: Law, Prophets, and Writings, known to Jews by their Hebrew names, *Torah, Nebi’im, and Kethubim*, identified collectively with the acronym, *TeNaK*. Jesus connects his own life and work with the original message of the Hebrew Bible. Any future testimony about Jesus would include making that connection when the words of the

New Testament were written down. Taken together, Old and New Testaments would become for Christians the testimony of the Bible, the Book of books.

Returning to Paul's remarks in *2 Timothy*, we can confidently hold that Timothy's fulfilled project of preserving and transmitting the letters of Paul lies behind the intention of Paul when he says that the words of the faithful witnesses he received and gave to Timothy, must be entrusted to others for their transmission as well. The feature of reliable scripture depends on the success of that transmission, carefully planned and faithfully executed.

We are now ready to consider the second of Paul's remarks on the role of scripture in the life of the church.

<sup>14</sup> But as for you, continue in what you have learned and firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it, <sup>15</sup> and how from childhood you have known the sacred writings that are able to instruct you for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. <sup>16</sup> All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, <sup>17</sup> so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work. (2 Timothy 3:14-17).

The reference to Timothy's childhood instruction in "the sacred writings" points to the Old Testament known to every Israelite in Jesus' day: Law, Prophets, and Writings which comprise the *Tenak*, the holy scriptures. Given Timothy's role in transmitting the apostolic writings to the next generation of Christians, we are on firm ground the claim that these newest texts combined with the oldest texts will become "All scripture" for the growing community of Christians throughout the world. History confirms this belief so that when we pick up the book we call "the Bible," we are thereby holding in our hands "all scripture," both Oldest and Newest.

What does Paul say about this new and enlarged collection of sacred texts? Just as Timothy in his childhood was taught the Jewish Bible that was "able to instruct" him "for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus," so also the whole church with the complete Bible in their hands will be equally established in the faith of the gospel. How does Paul say this? He says it by using the Greek work *theopneustos*, translated in English as "inspired by God." That term means "God-breathed," an elegant metaphor describing the life-giving work of God whereby the Word of God which "comes to us" becomes the sacred writings which "are written for us." Between the Word and the words lies the breath of God — the "Spirit of God" — who empowers human beings to speak and write. This understanding is wholly consistent with the example of Jeremiah discussed previously in our study this week.

Paul is in agreement with the tradition of the apostles, later recorded by John in his gospel:

<sup>26</sup> "When the Advocate comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who comes from the Father, he will testify on my behalf. <sup>27</sup> You also are to testify because you have been with me from the beginning. (John 15:26-27).

<sup>12</sup> "I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. <sup>13</sup> When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth; for he will not speak on his own, but will speak whatever he hears, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. <sup>14</sup> He will glorify me, because he will take what is mine and declare it to you. (John 16:12-14).

Both the Father and the Son authorize the coming of the Spirit whom these texts call, "the Spirit of truth." "Truth" understood in this context is synonymous with *reliability*, the guarantee that the witness of the Spirit will assure the trustworthiness of what the apostles will speak and write. The Spirit "guides" them "into all truth." From the reliable testimony of the Spirit comes the reliable witness of what the apostles include in the scriptures they write.

Even before Paul wrote his letters to Timothy, he had written to the Corinthians using language that echoes the promise of Jesus about the work of the Spirit in bringing truth to the church:

<sup>9</sup> But, as it is written, "What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the human heart conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him"-- <sup>10</sup> these things God has revealed to us through the Spirit; for the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God. <sup>11</sup> For what human being knows what is truly human except the human spirit that is within? So also no one comprehends what is truly God's except the Spirit of God. <sup>12</sup> Now we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit that is from God, so that we may understand the gifts

bestowed on us by God. <sup>13</sup> And we speak of these things in words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit, interpreting spiritual things to those who are spiritual. (1 Corinthians 2:9-13).

Scripture is about words, spoken and then written, coming to life within the Christian community and giving voice through the witness of the apostles. All of this — all scripture — is the gift of the Spirit, proceeding from the Father and the Son, reaching the minds and hearts of the biblical writers.

The living proof of the scriptures' reliability begins with this remarkable process we call "inspiration," the breathing of life *from the Word* who is Jesus into *the words* which are scripture. When life arrives in that way, scripture takes on the role of a *sacrament* in which the ordinary language, grammar, vocabulary, and words of human writers who receive the breath of the Spirit will author texts that *become* reliable witness to the Word of God. Through this mysterious process of *inspiration*, the words of the writers become the Word of God for the people of God. Drawing a parallel to the person of Jesus himself, we might compare the *inspiration* of scripture to the *incarnation* of Jesus. In the body of the Virgin Mary, the human baby she bore became the Son of God. Recall the account from Luke's gospel when the angel Gabriel announced the conception of Jesus:

<sup>35</sup> The angel said to her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God. (Luke 1:35).

From the moment of his conception in Mary's womb, the Word of God from the Spirit of God transformed the human son into the Son of God. In like manner, inspiration of scripture transforms the words of the writer into reliable witnesses to the Word of God coming to them through the Spirit of God. Jesus is the original Word of God becoming flesh; Scriptures are human words becoming the Word of God. The second is the witness to the first, whereas both are the work of the Holy Spirit. *Reliability* describes the combined witness of Jesus and God, Word and Scripture.

During the reading of these God-breathed texts, the power of the Spirit's life, from the Father and the Son, is released in transformative ways. In Paul's words, "All scripture ... is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work." The ultimate evidence of the Bible's reliability, then, is in the kinds of lives its power makes possible, and without which, no such lives could ever be lived. The reliable Bible produces reliable beings.

Another apostolic voice, whose identity is not given to us in the book he wrote, gave his own witness to the reliability of scripture's transformative power:

<sup>12</sup> Indeed, the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow; it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart. <sup>13</sup> And before him no creature is hidden, but all are naked and laid bare to the eyes of the one to whom we must render an account. (Hebrews 4:12-13).

"Living and active," the Word of God functions much like the sword used by the Jewish priests during the course of offering animal sacrifices in the Temple. Torah instructed such priests to "divide" the sacrifice, a ritual procedure involving the separation of flesh and bone. William Gilders puts this succinctly when he writes: "In the Hebrew Bible, sacrifice always involves *transformation*."<sup>4</sup> Picking up this imagery from Jewish sacrificial practice, the writer of *Hebrews* speaks of the transformative power of "the Word of God" in terms of "joints and marrow," comparing it to the division of "soul and spirit" so that the true inner life of persons might be exposed and "thoughts and intentions" revealed to the transformative judgment of God. Jews and Christians alike in their own scriptures testify to the way God's Word is reliable in the formation of the people He calls His own. The power of human transformation and the evidence of a new human being are together the dual witness to the reliability of scripture as the Word of God.

## Conclusion

At the end of our study this week, I am reminded of the comments found at the end of John's gospel.

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.bibleodyssey.org/en/passages/related-articles/sacrifice-in-ancient-israel>. William K. Gilders, "Sacrifice in Ancient Israel", n.p. [cited 24 Jan 2019]. See also Miriam Feinberg Vamosh, "How Ancient Israelites Ate Their Meat," <https://www.haaretz.com/archaeology/.premium-how-ancient-israelites-ate-their-meat-1.5263870>

<sup>30</sup> Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. <sup>31</sup> But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name. (John 20:30-31).

<sup>25</sup> But there are also many other things that Jesus did; if every one of them were written down, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written. (John 21:25).

“Many other signs” and “many other things” did not become a part of John’s gospel project because “the world” could not house the libraries of books were all those signs or things written down. No doubt John knew already of the work comprising the gospels of *Matthew*, *Mark*, and *Luke*, as well as the letters of Paul, Peter, and others that appear in our New Testament. After all, could they, the witnesses of Jesus, ever say enough about this singular life of “the Word become flesh and living among us”?

*Reliability* is about trustworthiness of an original and its witnesses. The Bible is reliable, not because it says everything about everything, for even John admits that he took a pass on that herculean endeavor. Ultimate authority with respect to the Bible lies not in the Bible as a book or a collection of books, but in the One who of whom they bear witness. Of the witnesses, we require fidelity to the truth about which they testify. But to bear reliable witness, the writers of the Bible must be formed by the reliability of the God who inspires its writing through them. The texts we have studied, texts that have bearing on the subject of biblical reliability, tell us not only about the truth of God, but also about the truthfulness of the human authors. For readers of the Bible, the burden of evidence shifts back to them and their own testimony: that the readers *believe these witnesses*. In hearing their stories about *how* became witnesses, we are in a solid position to decide if these witnesses are worthy of the testimony they give.

Deciding on witnesses in the context of a legal proceeding is always a matter of considerable important if justice is to be served. For example, the following questions are commonly entertained when weighing the reliability of witnesses:

Did the witness have an opportunity to see or hear the events about which he or she testified?

Did the witness have the ability to recall those events accurately?

Was the testimony of the witness plausible and likely to be true, or was it implausible and not likely to be true?

Was the testimony of the witness consistent or inconsistent with other testimony or evidence in the case?

Did the manner in which the witness testified reflect upon the truthfulness of that witness's testimony?

To what extent, if any, did the witness's background, training, education, or experience affect the believability of that witness's testimony?

Did the witness have a bias, hostility or some other attitude that affected the truthfulness of the witness's testimony?<sup>5</sup>

Within the practice of Jewish law when the books of Bible were being written, the importance of having two or three witnesses to confirm a matter was a supreme principle (Deuteronomy 17:6; 19:15; Matthew 18:16; 2 Corinthians 13:1; 1 Timothy 5:19; Hebrews 10:28). In addition, the diversity of personal temperament, experience, culture, and the like guides students of the Bible in listening to the testimony witnesses give. Consider the variety within the disciples of Jesus based on simply reading the stories about them. Peter differs from Thomas, John from Matthew, James from Philip, Nathaniel from the others, and so on. By reflecting on their testimony in light of their personal characteristics, the witness they give about Jesus in the years after his lifetime on earth has the ring of truth about it. We also examine the profound impact that events and the experiences which people have with God also influence our inclination to believe what they say and write about Him.

However, there are also other witnesses that come from the artifacts of history. These include, but are not limited to, external evidence from source materials that confirm the reliability of biblical reports about cultural practices, historical events, notable persons, geography, and literature. When the writers of the biblical books show familiarity with such matters closest in time to events they report, then our confidence in their status as

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<sup>5</sup> See *People v Jackson*, 74 NY2d 787, 790 (1989); *People v Hudy*, 73 NY2d 40, 56 (1988).

witnesses increases. For example, reading the Jewish historian Josephus uncovers names and events that correspond with many of the same cases that we find in Scripture.

The volume of written research on these and other related studies is immense, as the footnote below illustrates.<sup>6</sup> You are encouraged to probe these more specialized works, written by authors with established competence in their respective fields. What this writer has discovered in nearly fifty years of personal education and continuing study is that the evidence for the reliability of the biblical witnesses accumulates over time, and so our own acceptance of biblical credibility in human terms is itself cumulative. Put more informally, the evidence “grows on you” the more you examine it.

We close with two letters, not from the Bible but from someone whose own life began in unbelief and ended in confident trust. We know him as C. S. Lewis, the popular writer of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, whose collected works of allegory, biography, and philosophy reveal a life with a constant curiosity, of moving imagination, and from growing trust. The letters are in response to inquiries Lewis received, and they suggest possible directions of thought that lead to accepting the reliability and adequacy of the Bible we hold in our hands. You are invited to absorb his reasoning, observe his method, and honor his process. What he says in the letters reveals a generous heart in obedience to divine truth, with plenty of “wiggle room” for the seeker, but solid perspective for the believer. Between those two poles lies the gracious space of the Word of God that keeps being given to us by the witness of the Bible.

### **C. S. Lewis on Inerrancy, Inspiration, and Historicity of Scripture<sup>7</sup>**

*A Letter from C. S. Lewis to Corbin Carnell, dated April 4, 1953*

Dear Mr. Carnell:

I am myself a little uneasy about the question you raise: there seems to be an almost equal objection to the position taken up in my footnote and to its alternative of attributing the same kind and degree of historicity to all books of the Bible. You see, the question about Jonah and the great fish does not turn simply on intrinsic probability. The point is that the whole Book of Jonah has to me the air of being a moral romance, a quite different kind of thing from, say, the account of King David or the New Testament narratives, not pegged, like them, into any historical situation.

In what sense does the Bible “present” the Jonah story “as historical”? Of course it doesn’t say, “This is fiction,” but then neither does our Lord say that the Unjust Judge, Good Samaritan, or Prodigal Son are fiction (I would put Esther in the same category as Jonah for the same reason). How does a denial, a doubt, of their historicity lead logically to a similar denial of New Testament miracles? Supposing (as I think is the case), that sound critical reading revealed different kinds of narrative in the Bible, surely it would be illogical to suppose that these different kinds should all be read in the same way?

This is not a “rationalistic approach” to miracles. Where I doubt the historicity of an Old Testament narrative I never do so on the ground that the miraculous as such is incredible. Nor does it deny a unique sort of inspiration: allegory, parable, romance, and lyric might be inspired as well as chronicle. I wish I could direct you to a good book on the subject, but I don’t know one.

With all good wishes, yours sincerely,

C. S. Lewis

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<sup>6</sup> Good summaries of this material: Steve Mason, *Josephus and New Testament* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2003); Yitzhak Meitlis, *Excavating the Bible: New Archaeological Evidence* (Savage, MD: Eschel Books, 2012); Craig Blomberg, *The Historical Reliability of the New Testament* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2007); Richard Baukham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2017); Wayne Grudem, editor, *Understanding Scripture: An Overview of the Bible's Origin, Reliability, and Meaning* (Crossway, 2012) — Seventeen scholars contribute essays to this valuable book.

<sup>7</sup> Cited from Dennis Bratcher’s lovely website *The Voice: Biblical and Theological Resources for Growing Christians*.

<http://www.crivoice.org/lewisbib.html>

*From a letter to Clyde S. Kilby, May 7, 1959, from C. S. Lewis*

Whatever view we hold of the divine authority of Scripture must make room for the following facts:

1. The distinction which St. Paul makes in 1 Cor vii between *ouk ego all' ho kurios* [not myself but the Lord] (v. 10) and *ego lego oux ho kurios* [I myself say, not the Lord] (v. 12).
2. The apparent inconsistencies between the genealogies in Matt. i and Luke ii; with the accounts of the death of Judas in Matt. xxvii 5 and Acts i 18-19.
3. St. Luke's own account of how he obtained his matter (i 1-4).
4. The universally admitted unhistoricity (I do not say, of course, falsity) of at least some of the narratives in Scripture (the parables), which may well also extend to Jonah and Job.
5. If every good and perfect gift comes from the Father of lights, then all true and edifying writings, whether in Scripture or not, must be in some sense inspired.
6. John xi 49-52 Inspiration may operate in a wicked man without him knowing it, and he can then utter the untruth he intends (propriety of making an innocent man a political scapegoat) as well as the truth he does not intend (the divine sacrifice).

It seems to me that 2 and 4 rule out the view that every statement in Scripture must be historical truth. And 1, 3, 5, and 6 rule out the view that inspiration is a single thing in the sense that, if present at all, it is always present in the same mode and the same degree. Therefore, I think, rule out the view that any one passage taken in isolation can be assumed to be inerrant in exactly the same sense as any other: e.g., that the numbers of O.T. armies (which in view of the size of the country, if true, involve continuous miracle) are statistically correct because the story of the Resurrection is historically correct. That the over-all operation of Scripture is to convey God's Word to the reader (he also needs his inspiration) who reads it in the right spirit, I fully believe. That it also gives true answers to all the questions (often religiously irrelevant) which he might ask, I don't. The very kind of truth we are often demanding was, in my opinion, not even envisaged by the ancients.

Quoted in Michael J. Christensen, *C. S. Lewis on Scripture*, Abingdon, 1979, Appendix A.

The example of Lewis shows the continuing quest for understanding the Bible, the ways the Word of God becomes the words of scripture, and they in turn become the Word of God. I have leaned heavily on the idea of the Bible as *witness* because I have come to see how thoroughly the notion of witness saturates what the biblical writers of the Bible are up to. In a certain sense, they are all bound by a covenant to testify about what they have seen and heard, and they consciously pursue fidelity in the witness which they give. Put another way, the human witnesses share in the reliability of what they write: their own moral development as the people of God shapes their faithfulness in what they write. Looked at in this way, we at the very least have a modest understanding of what it means to say that the Bible is reliable as the written witness to the one Word of God who is Jesus, God's Son, Savior of God's people, and Lord of the world. Clearly, to read the Bible and to receive it as reliable means that we must read all of scripture christologically, that is, in light of Jesus Christ, the Word become flesh and living among us. The standard of reliability does not lie outside the text of the Bible, for if it did, then we would worship the standard and not worship Jesus. In the words of the Bible's last book:

<sup>10</sup> Then I fell down at his feet to worship him, but he said to me, "You must not do that! I am a fellow servant with you and your comrades who hold the testimony of Jesus. Worship God! For the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy." (Revelation 19:10).

We are at liberty to paraphrase this marvelous text, "For the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of the Bible." And so, our commitment to the reliability of Scripture begins with the worship of God whose human form is Jesus.

**Glory to God, Amen!**