

A
Dodgy Bible?

**Biblical Authority
in a
Sceptical Age**

Oliver Bayley

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CONTENTS

	Page
Introduction	4
Chapter 1 All Believers.....	5
Chapter 2 The Two Basic Questions	11
Chapter 3 Question I and the Old Testament	14
Chapter 4 Question I and the New Testament.....	19
Chapter 5 Question II and the Old Testament	28
Chapter 6 Question II and the New Testament.....	34
Faithful Sheep Ministries	50

INTRODUCTION

Welcome! This book is one of the titles produced by Faithful Sheep Ministries.

The aim of Faithful Sheep Ministries is to strengthen and encourage our fellow Christians in this age of challenge and confusion. We particularly have in mind those Christians who lack Bible teaching on a regular basis, but who love the Lord and His Word, and who seek to serve Him as His "faithful sheep" in this needy world.

We aim to offer timely Bible teaching and reflection through a variety of ministries. Our theological stance is one of biblical orthodoxy, centred on the Historic Christian Creeds and the 39 Articles of the Church of England.

The Director of Faithful Sheep Ministries is the Rev. Oliver Bayley, a retired Anglican minister with extensive teaching and pastoral experience. Oliver and his wife Judith live, work and worship in Southampton, England.

Our hope is that the Lord will graciously use this book to bless and encourage you in His service.

Chapter 1

The Central Place of the Bible

The Bible is critically important in human existence.

If the Bible is true, reliable and trustworthy, then we can be sure that it contains the answers to humanity's oldest questions – concerning God, us, the universe and all the rest of it.

But if the Bible is "dodgy", unreliable and untrustworthy, then the sooner it is popped into the dustbin of history, the better for us all.

Scoffing

As Christian people in the West today, we are becoming quite used to being "on the back foot".

Christian belief is scoffed at in many quarters. The Bible, if it is remembered at all, tends to be regarded as little more than a collection of old-fashioned fairy tales from faraway and from long ago.

As for the Bible having any claim in today's modern world to be taken **seriously**, the polite reaction would be one of, "Oh **please!** – which planet are you living on?".

For various reasons the idea has become deeply rooted in our society that the Bible is "dodgy" and has no place in today's world.

Really? Is that really true? Is the Bible simply "dodgy"? Has the time come to put it quietly into that dustbin?

We are going to take a good, hard look at these issues in this book. The results will encourage us to "sally forth", taking the fight to the opposition – courteously! – as we show that taking the Bible seriously today remains wholly reasonable and sensible.

So let us make a start.

We are ALL believers!

Professor Richard Dawkins is making a name for himself as one of the leading anti-Christian writers of his age. His book "The God Delusion" is a top seller, and has apparently been popular amongst Members of the UK Parliament.

The Professor is virulently anti-Christian, arguing that the Bible is indeed "dodgy" and that any belief in what it tells us is dangerous nonsense. Thus he argues that the sooner such belief is abandoned, the better for all concerned.

(Happily the thin arguments within his book have by now been thoroughly exposed on many sides, not least by some of his own scientific peers, but these replies tend to attract far less publicity than the original book itself).

One of the great myths which has been allowed to prevail these days, fostered in part by men like Dawkins, is that it is only "religious" people who are believers.

Atheists and humanists enjoy dismissing faith in the authority of the Bible as hogwash, while depending for themselves on "reason" and the cold light of objective evidence to justify their rejection of a God.

So this gives them permission to sneer at “belief” from a position, they suppose, of impregnable fact!

But wait a minute! As a Christian I say, “The Bible is trustworthy”. My friend the atheist replies, “The Bible is *not* trustworthy”. Here are two statements which are contradictory – they cannot both be true.

*But notice, above all, that neither statement can be **proved** to the satisfaction of the other side.* Try as I will – and I will try very hard – I will never succeed in *proving* to the atheist that the Bible is trustworthy. And try as he will, also no doubt very hard, he will never succeed in *proving* to me that the Bible is *not* trustworthy.

For the subject matter – the trustworthiness of the Bible or not – is not ultimately in the realm of mathematical proof at all. Try as we will, using objective evidence alone, we will never find *ultimate proof* either way.

Now see where this gets us to.

Faith

It means that whichever view any of us ends up taking on this question of the authority of the Bible, there is an element of ***faith***. To an extent, as a Christian I have to ***believe*** that the Bible is trustworthy; and – just as importantly – to an extent, the atheist has to ***believe*** that the Bible is *not* trustworthy.

Both views are based on belief. Yes, I am a believer. But Yes, so too is the atheist. So too is the humanist. To be human is to be unavoidably in the realm of belief when it comes to these old central questions that have always faced

humanity, such as the trustworthiness of the Bible or even the very existence of God.

So your critic at work, or in the pub, or wherever, is just as much a believer as you are! Or to put it another way: Richard Dawkins is just as much a believer as Billy Graham.

Pointing that out usually has an immediately sobering effect on the opposition! Suddenly it is seen to be a level playing field. Suddenly the opposition is obliged to come up with answers to justify his or her belief – just as we Christians have had to be doing for a very long time.

The Evidence

Once it is acknowledged that both sides of the debate are in the realm of belief, the focus of attention moves on to WHY?

WHY do I believe that the Bible is trustworthy? – it's a fair question. And, Mr Atheist, please tell me WHY you believe that it is not trustworthy? That is an equally fair question.

Now in this book, we shall discover that the Bibles we possess today are indeed *still wholly trustworthy*. This means that our belief in the truths contained within the Bible is based on *very convincing evidence*.

Thus as Christians we can indeed explain WHY we believe that the Bible is true, and therefore that God does indeed exist.

Far from Christian faith obliging us to “leave our brains outside”, we can be sure that our response of faith to what the Bible has to tell us is merely *a sensible further step along the road in the direction in which all the evidence points*.

As we do this we are likely to come across the evidence used by an atheist to justify his or her belief in the rejection of the Bible.

Which side of the great “Is the Bible trustworthy?” debate can lay claim to the strongest support? We shall see.

Without giving any secrets away at the start, suffice it to say that I reckon **an atheist has to have far more faith than we have!**

So for now, be encouraged. **We are all believers.** It is perfectly reasonable to ask an atheist to justify his or her beliefs: WHY do you believe that? What is your evidence?

And as you hear the evidence – assuming any actual evidence is forthcoming – weigh it up for yourself: how convincing is it?

You will be surprised at how often your opponent, probably so quick to dismiss your Christian belief in the authority of the Bible, really struggles to justify his or her own beliefs. Just smile, ask your questions, listen, and weigh up what you hear.

And as you weigh up what is being said, ask yourself what the Lord God has to say about these views in the pages of His Word.

Let us remember – “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom” (Proverbs 1.7) – only the **beginning!** If there is no such fear, true wisdom, as the Lord defines it, cannot even start to take a foothold in the speaker’s life.

These days we are surrounded by loud voices on all sides, bawling out what is purported to be wisdom. Rest assured, if what is being said does not spring from a fear of the Lord, it is **folly** as far as the Lord is concerned - no more, no less.

We have every reason to go along with other things which we are told in the Bible, such as “Be strong in the Lord and in the power of His might!” (Eph 6.10), and, “Rejoice in the Lord always: again I say rejoice” (Phil 4.4).

Yes – thanks be to God - we have every reason to be strong in the Lord, and to rejoice in the Lord. Let’s do it!

Chapter 2

“There are loads of ‘holy books’ in the different world Faiths – what makes the Bible so special? You Christians only call it “God’s Word” because that makes you feel superior to everyone else!”

I am sure you will have come across comments like these in one form or another! The mood of the age in which we live is very keen on bundling all the world Faiths up together, and preferably disposing of the lot of them!

So the notion that one such Faith, the Christian Faith, is somehow unique amongst them all, being the true, authentic revelation of the living God, is even more offensive to modern-day thinking.

As those seeking to be Christ’s “faithful sheep”, we need to be aware of such thinking, and be able to justify our “high view” of Scripture. By that we simply mean that we accept the Bible’s full authority as “the Word of God”.

But just how reliable is the belief that the Bible, alone and uniquely, is **the** Word of God? Frankly, if the Bible is no more than just the jottings of ancient peoples long ago, why on earth should we bother with it today? And why on earth should we give it greater authority than say the Koran or the Hindu Vedas?

To be used with care and courtesy ...

A couple of points need to be emphasised at this point.

First, the arguments we shall be covering in this book concerning the authority of the Bible are being given

primarily for the encouragement and strengthening of Christ's faithful sheep. They will indeed demonstrate that we can be very confident in the authority and authenticity of the Holy Bible as "God's Word". Frankly, the Bible *isn't* dodgy, and never has been.

Sometimes it may be appropriate to use these arguments in discussions with "those that are without" (Colossians 4.5). If that is the case, it is important to remember the need for us always to speak with courtesy when debating such matters with others. It is very easy for us to get hot and flustered, especially if the things we care about deeply are being sneered at and dismissed.

Second, no matter how convincingly we can justify the authority of the Holy Bible, such arguments are very unlikely in themselves to bring about conversions to the Christian Faith! Such conversions are a deep spiritual process, governed of course by the Holy Spirit.

Our words can certainly play their part, in helping to "wrong-foot" the person who assumes belief in the truth of the Bible is only for the kindergarten. Your sensible, courteous arguments for the reasonableness of Christian belief, springing from a life of friendliness and Christian integrity, and backed up by steady prayer behind the scenes, are very powerful tools which the Holy Spirit can graciously use.

But we must avoid the mistake of thinking that by "bashing our opponents" firmly over the head with various arguments, they will instantly place their faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. They won't! – it doesn't work like that.

And so to the Bible itself. Special? Unique? Holy? The Word of God?

As we turn through its many pages, there are two basic questions we need to address:

Question Number One:

How sure can we be that the text displayed before us in “our” Bibles today is close to what was originally written down?

Perhaps over the years mistakes have crept in, so that what we read today in our Bibles bears little resemblance to what was originally written down?

If so, then our Bibles really are dodgy and are best put into that dustbin.

Question Number Two:

Even assuming that our text today is a close fit to the originals, how sure can we be that the originals themselves were trustworthy?

Perhaps the original Bible texts were written down by unscrupulous people pushing their own agendas, and we have just been stuck with those old agendas ever since? If this is the case, then once again I am afraid our Bibles are indeed dodgy, and should be set aside.

These are the two basic questions facing us as we seek to square up to the statement, "a dodgy Bible?". It's time to make a start!

Chapter 3

Question Number One:

How sure can we be that the text displayed before us in “our” Bibles today is close to what was originally written down?

I – The Old Testament

We will start by considering what is now for us the "Old Testament".

It will help at this stage to outline briefly the process of how a biblical text comes to us.

- To start with, there are the original events which happened, we are told, or the original words which were spoken, we are told.
- Then written accounts were made of these events and words; these first accounts are called the “autographs”, and the traditional Jewish and Christian belief is that the writers were inspired by the Holy Spirit in their writings to be accurate and error-free.
- Then written copies were made of the autographs, followed by copies of the copies.
- Then translations have been made from the copies into many different languages.
- So that is how you come to have your own Bible before you in the English language!

So you can see that a long time has passed, cultures are different, languages are different; there has been ample opportunity for many wires to get crossed! Isn't it very likely that the words of your Bible in front of you may actually bear very little resemblance to the original "autographs"?? And if that is the case, we're sunk aren't we??!!

Fear not! We'll plan to tackle the Old Testament to start with, and then the New Testament.

How close is "our" Old Testament wording to the original wording?

The Old Testament Text: Several Ancient Versions

Today we possess several different ancient versions of the Old Testament text. If they agree with each other to a high degree, we can be confident that what we have before us today is an accurate copy of the originals.

1) The oldest section of Old Testament text we possess is the "**Samaritan Pentateuch**", dated about 400 BC, and passed down separately from the main Jewish line of transmission.

2) Then we have the "**Septuagint**", translated by Jewish 70 scribes, about 280 BC, from the Hebrew into Greek. This was for the use of Jewish people who were scattered across the Near and Middle East, and whose first language was no longer Hebrew but Greek. The Septuagint was in use at the time of Jesus' earthly ministry and of the Early Church.

3) Two other texts from the Christian era are the “**Syriac Version**” (approximately AD 200), and the “**Vulgate**”, translated from the Hebrew and Greek into Latin by Jerome (approximately AD 400).

4) The most widely-accepted version is the “**Massoretic Text**”, which was compiled by Jewish scholars around 500 AD; approximately 100 copies of the Massoretic Text exist today.

This is the text regarded by both Jewish and Christian scholars as being the most authoritative. The scholars sorted through and compared all of the manuscripts they already possessed, using numerous “cross-checking” devices. Any variation between one text and another was recorded in the margin. In all, these variations totalled about 1200 – that is ***less than one variation per page of the printed Hebrew Bible***, and not even one of these variations affects the main sense of any doctrine.

5) We also possess large sections of the Old Testament text in other writings, such as the “**Talmud**” (writings compiled by the priests and scribes to explain and apply the Jewish Scriptures), the **New Testament** itself, and some of the works of the Jewish historian **Josephus**.

We can also mention here the “**Dead Sea Scrolls**”, discovered in 1947. These are dated from the time of Christ and earlier, and between them contain virtually all of the Old Testament (the book of Esther is missing). The variations between the Scrolls and the Massoretic Text are insignificant.

So far, so good! We have a good range of ancient texts which are virtually identical to one another. This all points to the closeness of “our” Old Testament text to the originals.

Meticulous Methods

But we haven’t finished yet. There are some other factors which further strengthen our confidence that “our” text today is the same as the originals.

For a start, we must bear in mind that **the Jews held their Scriptures in deep reverence** (and still do of course). They would never contemplate making changes to the text – that would be sacrilege. Deuteronomy 4.2 forbids any alteration to the text – “Ye shall not add unto the word which I command you, neither shall ye diminish ought from it”.

The scrolls were also laid up **in the Holy of Holies!** – far beyond the reach of meddling hands. The scribes and Massorete scholars were **extremely skilled and learned**, and were revered as interpreters of the Holy Scriptures; their whole approach to their task was one of total reverence and meticulous care.

Furthermore, **the many prophets acted as a check** on the reliable stewardship of the true Scriptures; they would quickly prevent any “funny business”.

The Scriptures were also **widely memorised** by the Jewish people (see for example Deuteronomy 6.7), and people took great pride in quoting long sections of Scripture word perfectly. Any tiny mistakes would be quickly pounced upon, no doubt with a certain glee, by the carefully-listening neighbours! (Incidentally it is interesting to note that this

habit of memorising and reciting is still widely practised today – by Muslims quoting the Koran).

So all these pieces of evidence mount up to form a very strong case. The original text was scrupulously cross-checked, guarded, preserved and memorised. We are simply not in the realm of casual changes being made on the backs of envelopes!

Thanks be to God! We can be very sure that “our” Old Testament text today IS very, very close to the originals. Incidentally, the Old Testament stands quite alone among writings of a similar age in being supported by this amount of verifiable evidence.

The Old Testament passes this first challenge with flying colours. But do the writings of the New Testament also pass this test? How close is “our” New Testament to the originals?

We’ll come to that next, and after that we must tackle the really central question: **how *truthful* were the originals??** Was there really a global flood, smoke on Mount Sinai, a crowd of thousands fed by a boy’s packed lunch – and an empty tomb??

Chapter 4

Question Number One:

How sure can we be that the text displayed before us in “our” Bibles today is close to what was originally written down?

II – The New Testament

You will remember that we have set out two basic questions we must tackle concerning the reliability – or otherwise – of the Bible:

1) How close to the original texts is the text we have in front of us today?

2) How trustworthy were the original texts?

We have established that the Old Testament passes the first question with flying colours.

This time we will see how the New Testament gets on. How close is “our” New Testament to the originals?

For the answer to this question to be “Very close indeed”, we need a large number of ancient New Testament manuscripts, presenting the “orthodox” Gospel, from different dates and places, and preferably coming down to us via different routes of “transmission” (that is, the process of preserving, copying and passing down the texts).

If for example we have a text that has come to us via the Alexandrian Church, and another that has come from the Church in Constantinople, and the two texts virtually agree,

we can be confident that we have the wording of the original texts before us.

We need to be cautious though – as always with such matters! We might have scores of identical manuscript portions, all old, all agreeing, but all teaching something that is at variance from the “true” Gospel – such as Jesus being a very good man but not quite divine.

Now this would suggest we have before us a heretical text, such as written and circulated by the Gnostics for example. Just because we have many identical copies of something does not in itself guarantee the authenticity of what it says.

Another area for caution involves the condition of a manuscript. Let us imagine that a full New Testament manuscript was found in practically perfect condition in an obscure monastery library in Arabia (such things do happen!).

At first sight that seems to be a most wonderful find – and it might turn out to be just that. But to start with we must ask ourselves – “Why is it so well preserved??”. Surely an accurate and authentic text is going to be very tatty? – because of all the manhandling it has endured through the centuries?

A manuscript that is grubby, torn and battered has been **used!** Its gleaming counterpart from the monastery has **not been used**, so we are right to be suspicious.

Was it not used because it was known to be inaccurate by the scholars and copyists? It certainly does not automatically go to “the top of the class” until its contents have been thoroughly compared with existing texts.

So we see that the textual scholars entrusted with the task, on behalf of us all, of finding the truest original text need always to be humble, prayerful and Spirit-filled in their labours. We are ultimately in the faithful hands of almighty God. We are in the realms of probability and likelihood rather than of proof and certainty. But fear not – you can be confident that all turns out very well.

The written manuscripts of the origins of the Christian faith – the Gospels, the Acts, the Epistles and the Revelation – are available in far greater variety, age and numbers than are those for any other events or people in ancient history.

We all accept that there was such a person as Julius Caesar for example, who did this, that and the other. But there is far, far more evidence for the truth of the claimed events in the New Testament than there is for Julius Caesar!

We possess today over **5000** manuscript copies of portions of the New Testament in Greek (the language in which they were originally written) – and a further **15000** portions in other languages. This puts these New Testament manuscripts entirely “in a league of their own”. No other ancient texts have anything like these numbers.

For instance we have only ten ancient copies of Caesar’s “Gallic Wars” – and just two of Tacitus’ “Histories”. No-one fusses about the authenticity of those texts – so why should there be any fuss about the authenticity of the New Testament texts, for which we have thousands of copies??!! I sense we are in the realm of hidden agendas, yes?

Even if we had **none** of these authentic NT manuscripts, we could still have pieced together virtually the whole of the

New Testament text from the writings of the “Early Church Fathers”, who were writing and commenting on the New Testament Scriptures between roughly 90 AD and 160 AD.

Now of course there are some discrepancies between these 20,000 manuscripts – it would be rather suspicious if there weren’t! But the great majority of these are trivial, caused by mistakes in copying or by deliberate and obvious alteration.

So the overall picture is encouraging. *We can be very confident indeed that the New Testament text before us in our Bibles of today bears an extremely close resemblance to the original text.*

But it is appropriate at this stage to mention a “textual divergence” which has occurred in the past two hundred years. This does have some significance and we’ll spend a few moments on it now.

The “Textus Receptus”

The 5,000 Greek NT manuscripts we possess support what is termed the “Byzantine textual tradition” (so called because this tradition came from throughout the Greek-speaking world), which in turn became known as the Traditional Text. The best printed copy of this text is called the “Textus Receptus” (the “received text”).

This Textus Receptus was compiled by many scholars from the 1500s onwards.

This was the text used by William Tyndale, by the translators of the King James / “Authorised” Version of 1611, and by other translations of the Reformation period.

The “Critical Text”

The 19th and 20th centuries saw the rise of an alternative text however – the so-called “Critical Text”.

The mood of the age from the early 19th Century onwards was one of “post-Enlightenment”, the Age of Reason, and, after 1859, the age of Darwinism.

All these philosophical approaches meant that Bible scholars now came to the text before them with a rather different attitude from before. This isn't to say that they were all rotters, but the new approach certainly had some effects.

The Bible text was now dissected in minute detail. The text was often assumed to be historically groundless unless there was corroboration from non-Biblical sources. And at times an assumption prevailed that the text before us was a patchwork quilt of myths and stories drawn from many different sources, making it very difficult for us to get back to the original text and to the “real Jesus”.

A new “Critical Text” gradually emerged, pioneered in particular by two British scholars, Professor B. Westcott and Dr F. Hort.

Both men were ordained ministers of the Church of England, and were strong supporters of both the “Oxford Movement” and the Church of Rome. It is not generally known that they also founded various occult clubs!

The Critical Text they pioneered was based mainly upon a small number of Greek manuscripts from the 4th century onwards, including two of the most famous, the “Sinai” and

“Vaticanus” manuscripts. These in turn were based on the “Alexandrian Text” in Egypt, dated around 300 to 400 AD.

This Critical Text was used for the new “Revised Version” of the Bible, published in 1881. This translation began life as an attempt merely to update archaic words found in the Authorised Version, but it quickly became something rather different.

Most subsequent modern translations of the Greek New Testament have been based on this Critical Text - including the New International Version.

Some Problems with the Critical Text

We need to be aware that this Critical Text does have its problems, in particular concerning various omissions.

The prime source of this Text is Alexandria – a city which by 300 AD had become something of a hotbed for various heresies, notably Gnosticism.

It is perhaps not surprising therefore that the changes made in this Text from the better-established Textus Receptus tend to follow a consistent pattern – the downplaying of the two key doctrines of the Trinity and the deity of Jesus Christ.

For example, Mark 16.9-20 is missing from the Alexandrian manuscripts, but is present in other manuscripts of both earlier and later dates.

In Luke 2.33, the Textus Receptus (TR) has: “And Joseph and his mother marvelled at those things which were spoken of him”. The Critical Text (CT) has: “The child’s father and mother marvelled at what was said of him”. Do you spot the

subtle difference?! TR upholds the distinction of role between Joseph and Mary as Jesus' parents in view of the "Virgin Birth", but the CT blurs this distinction.

Another example occurs in I Tim 3.16. TR: "...God was manifest in the flesh ..."; CT: "He appeared in a body", with footnotes mentioning "God" and "in the flesh" being found in some manuscripts.

The name of "Jesus" is omitted from CT an estimated seventy times, and that of "Christ" nearly thirty times.

Furthermore, the Sinai and Vatican texts, the offspring of the Alexandrian Text, disagree with each other more than 3000 times in the Gospels alone!

So it is fair to say that this Critical Text does have something of a bad smell about it!

The "Majority Text"

We will mention briefly here a third textual strand that has emerged in recent years, the "Majority Text".

This is based on the *consensus of the majority of existing Greek manuscripts*, and as such it never actually existed in its entirety as itself!

It is generally closer to the Textus Receptus than to the Critical Text.

Where we have got to?

So the situation regarding today's New Testament text can be summed up like this:

1) In answer to the specific question we have been addressing this time: Yes, we can be quite sure that the text in front of us is very, very close to the original text. What was written down originally is faithfully set before us in our own language – and thanks be to God for that!

2) Our translations today draw on three main textual strands – the Textus Receptus, the Critical Text, and the Majority Text. These agree with one another for an estimated 85% of the time, but the remaining 15% can be significant.

The “safest” strand is clearly the Textus Receptus. It is based on ancient, well-attested manuscripts, and pre-dates the Enlightenment and Darwinism. It has robustly stood the test of time, and very turbulent times they have been too. Battered but unbowed, the Textus Receptus is still standing!

All things being equal, it would therefore be sensible at least to have access to a Textus Receptus-based Bible for your own use, such as the Authorised Version or the New King James Version, even if you like to use, say, the New International Version as your everyday Bible.

The differences between the two texts of TR and CT will not be that frequent or earth-shattering, but at times, those differences will be significant, particularly where the Person and Work of the Lord Jesus Christ are concerned.

Another excellent Bible version worth mentioning here is J P Green’s Interlinear Bible. This comes in four stout volumes (3 OT, 1 NT). The literal meaning of each Hebrew or Greek word is shown beneath its place in the text, with its Strong’s reference number shown above.

This enables you to look up the word in a Strong's Concordance, where you can see the different English words that have been used throughout the Bible to translate this particular word. Doing this exercise for a passage of Scripture is not speedy, but is extremely enlightening! Finally a literal translation is shown in the left column, and in the New Testament, the Authorised Version is shown as well in the right hand column. This Interlinear Bible puts serious Bible study within reach of any of us. It is available from Sovereign Grace Publishers, PO Box 4998, Lafayette, Indiana 47903, USA, or from Amazon (ISBN 1-878442-00-7).

We have now answered both parts of Question Number One, by establishing that *the text in our Bibles today is virtually identical to the originals in both the Old and New Testaments.*

Now we can come on to consider our second question, in its way the more important one:

How trustworthy were the original texts?

If those original texts were "dodgy" from the start, it matters not a jot to us today if our texts are still a close match to the originals: if they were dodgy then, sadly it means that they are just as dodgy now.

Meanwhile, let us continue to "read, mark, learn and inwardly digest" the Scriptures, that by patience and comfort, we may have HOPE!

Chapter 5

Question Number Two:

Even assuming that our text today is a close fit to the originals, how sure can we be that the originals themselves were trustworthy?

I – The Old Testament

How trustworthy were the original texts?

So far we have established that the text we have in front of us today in our Bibles is very close indeed to that of the original Old and New Testament texts.

Now we can examine the trustworthiness, or otherwise, of the original **Old** Testament documents, before carrying out the same examination in the next chapter with regard to the original **New** Testament documents.

The “Canon”

The books found in the Bible make up what is called the “**canon**” of Scripture.

“Canon” literally means “straight edge”, like a ruler, or a plumb line, which was used both in the building trade and in carpet weaving. The canon gave you the perfect straight edge by which you could measure what you were doing and how you were getting on.

The application of the “canon” of Scripture to our own lives is obvious. The Scriptures serve as that perfect straight line by

which our own thoughts and words and deeds are measured. It isn't the canon that is wiggly – it's often us!

The canon of Scripture in the Jewish Bible - what for Christians is the "Old Testament" – consists of "the Law", (Genesis to Deuteronomy), "the Prophets", including the historical books, and the "Writings", the poetical books, notably the Psalms.

"Self-Authenticating"

The process of "canonisation", that is, the process of exactly how these books came to be included in the Old Testament Scriptures, is not known in any detail. What is most likely is that each book was "self-authenticating" from the date when it was written. This means that, over a period of constant use, its content was recognised as being clearly genuine, in accord with known revealed truth, and hence the book was included in the growing canon of Scripture.

Now this "self-authenticating" process may sound a little suspect to modern ears, but is actually a great deal more reliable than it may sound at first sight! – and the reason is this: **It is impossible to make up stories, which are grounded in real places and involving real people, centuries after the supposed events happened.**

The Passover

Let us take the Passover as an example - an annual Feast amongst the Hebrews, held year by year over the centuries, wherever the people happened to be. **Now the keeping of that Feast started somewhere, somehow, at some time.** The Book of Exodus clearly explains that it began when God

told Moses all about the Passover and how it was to be observed by the people (Exodus Chapter 12).

Now assume for a moment that it didn't begin like that at all – and see where that takes us.

It means first of all that the claim made in the Exodus account, that the Passover was instituted by God, is false. It means that the Passover story must have been written much later than the supposed exodus of the people from Egypt. And it means that the writers of the Exodus account – knowing it to be all untrue – concocted the Passover story for reasons best known to themselves.

But do you see the insurmountable problem with that scenario? ***The Passover was already familiar to the people – it had been going on for years!*** But how could this be, if the Passover account is only a later invention?

This line of argument is clearly a non-starter. The fabricators of the Passover story, if that is what they were, not only had to make up all the details about the Passover from their imaginations – ***they also had to get the people to start keeping this wholly-new Feast, while convincing them that it had been going on for centuries.***

No way! This is impossible to achieve. The impossibility of anyone pulling off this trick is a very powerful argument in favour of the authenticity of the Old Testament accounts we possess.

Geography and History

But there are further arguments too. The Old Testament has been found, time and time again, to be extremely accurate in

terms of geography and history, often in the face of scoffing criticism.

A few examples will suffice, from the many that exist.

Liberal critics in the 19th Century dismissed the existence of such peoples as the Hittites and the Edomites – because there was no mention of them in non-biblical sources. They also dismissed the conquest of Canaan, the fall of Jericho, and even David's and Solomon's empires – and so on.

You see the line of argument – “The Bible says such and such, but we can't find any supportive evidence for these claims anywhere else, so the Bible must be wrong!”. But archaeological discoveries have since proven the existence of these peoples and events, as well as many other cities and nations which the critics believed to have never existed.

A renowned biblical archaeologist, Dr Nelson Glueck, who spent much of his working life studying these matters, had this to say: “As a matter of fact, it may be stated categorically that no archaeological discovery has ever controverted a biblical reference. Scores of archaeological findings have been made which confirm in clear outline or in exact detail historical statements in the Bible. And, by the same token, proper evaluation of biblical descriptions has often led to amazing discoveries. They form tesserae in the vast mosaic of ***the Bible's almost incredible correct historical memory***” (Rivers in the Desert, p 31).

Jesus of Nazareth

Then we come on to Jesus' own attitude to the Old Testament Scriptures – the only Bible He had of course.

Here are some references which are worth looking up:

Luke 16.17 / Mark 10. 6-9 / Matthew 23.35 / John 10.35 /
Matthew 24.37-39 / John 8.56-58 / Luke 17. 28, 29, 32 /
John 5.46 / Luke 4.25-27 / Matthew 13.14 / Matthew 24.15 /
Matthew 12. 39-40.

We get the message? Very quickly it becomes clear that Jesus regarded these Scriptures as the very Word of God.

We gather that Jesus believed literally in:

- God's creation and Adam and Eve
- Abel
- Noah and the Flood
- Abraham
- Lot and Lot's wife
- The destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah
- The authorship of Moses
- The divine origin of the Law
- The miracles of Elijah and Elisha
- The story of Jonah

If that is the approach of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ to the Old Testament, what are we waiting for??! The only alternative is to say that nowadays we know more than the Son of God did then. Really? Is that likely? Is any Bible-believing Christian going to be comfortable in claiming that he or she knows more than the Lord Jesus?

Prophecies

It is also worth our mentioning one more string of evidence which points to the authenticity of the Old Testament Scriptures - the fulfilment of prophecies.

The Bible stands quite alone amongst other claimed “sacred writings” in the number of detailed prophecies it contains - and which have been literally fulfilled.

For example, we have over ninety Old Testament prophecies concerning the coming Messiah which are quoted in the New Testament as being fulfilled in Jesus. Each of those prophecies was spoken or written down hundreds of years earlier. But in Jesus, each was literally fulfilled in the smallest detail.

It is impossible for such evidence to be contrived by any human mind. If you doubt this, just try jotting down now some highly-detailed prophecies which you say will come to pass in five hundred years’ time. We will no longer be around to see if you get any of them right, but I am pretty confident of the answer right now!

No. Only a divine mind, with total knowledge of what is to us still the future, and total power to bring that future into being, could do this.

So, to sum up: the evidence we have before us that the original Old Testament writings were trustworthy from the start is very strong indeed. We are not quite in the realm of proof in such matters, but we are in the realm of something very close to it!

There is simply no need for us to be hesitant in our coming to the Old Testament Scriptures, perhaps carrying doubts as to whether or not these writings are authentic. The Old Testament is God’s Word, and we can trust it – just as our Lord Jesus Christ trusted it during the years of His physical presence in our midst. Thanks be to God!

Chapter 6

Question Number Two:

Even assuming that our text today is a close fit to the originals, how sure can we be that the originals themselves were trustworthy?

II – The New Testament

Christian people are used to being “on the back foot” these days. So often the Christian Faith is either ignored or ridiculed, and the notion that Christian truth should be taken into account in the great debates and decisions facing us as nations would be dismissed by many as laughable.

So in this book we have been considering some background to the Bible itself. Is the Bible “dodgy”? Is it trustworthy? Has it been shown up to be false? Can we, as those seeking to be Christ’s “faithful sheep”, really still take it seriously in this day and age – or are we being mere fools, with scared heads stuck firmly in the sand, unable to face the harsh facts of existence in the world today?

These are critical questions! If the Bible really is untrustworthy we are in trouble. and the field will be left clear for the strident militant atheists of the day to march joyfully on.

The Story So Far

We have established that the text we have in front of us today in our Bibles is very close indeed to that of the original Old and New Testament texts.

In our last chapter we considered the trustworthiness of the original **Old** Testament documents, concluding that, once again, we have every reason to be confident that these were, and still are, “God’s Word”.

We complete the exercise this time by carrying out the same examination with regard to the original **New** Testament documents.

Yes, the text before us in “our” New Testament is virtually identical to the original documents – but how do we know we can trust those originals? A multitude fed from a boy’s picnic? Blind men given sight? The resurrection of Jesus from the dead?

Bold claims! - but can we trust them? Perhaps these really are just the exaggerated legends of gullible peasants from two thousand years ago?

Books and Dates

The New Testament begins with accounts of the birth of Jesus of Nazareth in two of the four Gospels, namely Matthew and Luke. The other two Gospels, Mark and John, begin with the ministry of John the Baptist (John having first set the scene with the Prologue concerning the divinity of “the Word made flesh”), in preparation for the ministry of Jesus Himself.

The ministry of John the Baptist lasted for three and a half years, beginning in AD 26, followed by the ministry of Jesus Himself, also lasting three and a half years, from late AD 29 until mid-33 AD.

The Book of Acts tells the story of the Early Church, after AD 33, and the New Testament Epistles were written in the midst of the rapid growth of the Church over the next 30 to 40 years. The final book of the Bible, Revelation, was written down in the last decade of the first century, or perhaps considerably earlier.

Events and Reports

We thus have before us in the 27 books of the New Testament the record of many claimed events and conversations, much doctrinal teaching, and some prophecy concerning the times still to come.

In this chapter we will concentrate particularly on the Gospels, for they really are at the heart of it all, claiming to tell us of the person and work of Jesus Christ.

Obviously the Epistles are slightly different documents, dealing more with the doctrinal and practical implications of Christian faith. The fact is, if the Gospels themselves are sound, then clearly so are the Epistles.

Over the centuries critics of these writings, especially the Gospels, have used various arguments to dismiss their authenticity. If any of these arguments turns out to be genuine, it means that the written records we have before us are of very questionable value.

Nothing Special?

Some would say Jesus was just an ordinary man, being nothing special beyond being a popular teacher of His day – among many other such teachers.

If this is the case, then the Gospel accounts before us today are merely the result of wild exaggeration, of the credulity and gullibility of simple people of long ago. Like the proverbial Topsy, they have just grown with the telling, so that by the time these stories were written down, perhaps some 20 or 30 years after the claimed events, it is no wonder that we are confronted with wonderful miracles every few verses!

Honestly Self-Deluded?

Others argue that Jesus was honestly self-deluded over His claimed Messiahship. This at least would make Him sincere (even though those taking this view about Him have since decided He was mistaken).

If this view is correct, then the writers would have been genuinely, if mistakenly, convinced that what they were writing was true. They thus may deliberately exaggerate things at times, but with the best will in the world – to further the cause of the One they truly believe to be the Son of God.

A Deliberate Hoaxer?

There is another possibility however. Perhaps Jesus was a hoaxer, a con-man who deliberately tricked people into following Him and accepting His Messianic claims, for His own sinister and hidden purposes.

If this is true, then we have before us a collection of deliberately false stories to aid His purposes, whatever those purposes may have been.

If any of these scenarios is correct - exaggeration, self-delusion or a deliberate hoax – it means that there would be

very little of historical reliability within the New Testament documents.

The Gospels may have lots of lovely stories in them, but we could not be sure that any of these things had actually ***happened!*** – and hence all the promises that go alongside them would have to be set aside as having no relevance also.

Our task would thus become one of “sifting through the propaganda”, if we were even bothered to do so, trying to find nuggets of the real original Jesus and His teaching.

But how would we know if and when we had found any of them?

In effect, the New Testament writings before us would be practically worthless – a rather depressing prospect!

Or True?

But the other explanation is that these accounts are simply true – that Jesus is quite genuinely and wonderfully God come to us in human form to carry out His gracious work on our behalf.

If this is the case, we can have confidence in the accounts before us. They were written down, after a period of "oral transmission" when there was no need for written accounts, to preserve these truths and make them available to those who would come after.

This traditional belief holds that the Holy Spirit inspired the various writers, preserving them from error, and yet not

overruling their own personalities in their individual writing styles. We will consider this belief shortly.

We must now examine the evidence before us to try to establish which of these various options is the one most likely to be true.

“Oral Transmission”

The period of “oral transmission”, that is, the time-lapse between the date of the claimed events and the date when the written accounts of those claimed events first appeared, poses a problem for some.

This is a period of perhaps 20 years or more – ample time surely for memories to become muddled or exaggerated.

After all, for us today, we would find it very difficult to write a detailed account of a series of events in, say, 1990. But that is what happened with the Gospels, and we are all expected to accept their authenticity without a murmur!

But wait a minute! - we need to bear in mind a couple of reassuring points on this matter.

“Not in a Corner”

First, most of the major Gospel events took place very much in the public eye. As such, it becomes impossible to “fake” stories about such events, particularly when the great majority of people who were present at those events would still be alive when the first written accounts appeared.

Thus for example, with the appearance of the first written accounts of the “feeding of the five thousand”, people would

instantly reject such a story if they knew, from their first-hand eye-witness experience, *that such an event never happened*.

The fact that the Lord's ministry was forever in the full glare of publicity, and that there were thousands of people still alive to compare the written accounts with their own experiences, is a real safeguard concerning the period of oral transmission.

“Easy Learning”

But there is a second factor here that further strengthens our confidence.

We should bear in mind that many of the people were unlearned – they could neither read nor write.

This fact certainly affected the teaching methods used by the Lord Jesus in His ministry. While debating with the Scribes and Pharisees, He could speak of their studying – or not – the “Law and the Prophets”, for they were capable of doing that for themselves.

But with the “people”, His methods were different – they had to be. See the effectiveness of parables for example. Anyone could remember the story of the sower for instance – even if they didn't understand its message!

Home they would come from the lakeside or hillside – and repeat the latest stories they had heard that day from Jesus of Nazareth.

Or consider the Beatitudes – they are naturally recitative in form. The speaker says “Blessed are the poor in spirit ...” –

and the listeners respond with the answer – “ ... for theirs is the kingdom of heaven!”

Such methods were beautifully appropriate for the Lord’s listeners, and all add up to – “Easy Learning”!

Retentiveness

But again, there is more – what has been termed “the extraordinary retentiveness of the oriental mind”. In part because of the illiteracy of most people, memorising was (and still is) very widespread, with extreme pride being taken in the accuracy of recitation.

(As we mentioned earlier, this practice is of course still found within Islam today, with many Muslims being able to recite the whole of the Koran word-perfect).

This habit of memorising, which has now been largely lost in the West to our detriment, is another guarantee that we do not have to be suspicious about the period of oral transmission.

Rather we can be confident that through this period the Gospel truths were retained and passed on with great accuracy, until the time came for them to be gathered together and written down – for the benefit of people like us.

We should also bear in mind that God the Holy Spirit had a vested interest in seeing that truth was preserved through the period of oral transmission – more of this shortly.

Having overcome the potential problem of the period of oral transmission, let us now move on to consider the New Testament writings themselves.

The New Testament Writers

The authors of what are now the New Testament books were nearly all martyred! And of the original twelve disciples, only John died naturally, in Ephesus, as a very old man at the end of the first century.

Martyrdom

The fact that most of the New Testament writers were willing to give up their lives, often in a very gruesome manner, rather than deny Jesus as Lord and Christ, is immensely strong testimony in itself. This is simply not the behaviour of men who had any doubts at all about the truth of what they were saying and writing.

Discrepancies

The apparent discrepancies within the Gospel accounts (many of which are easily reconcilable anyway), is further evidence of authenticity. After all, if there was some sort of political plot underlying all these stories, surely the plotters would iron out any differences and ensure that the various accounts all tied in nicely with each other?

Inclusions and Exclusions

Another interesting point is what is included, and excluded, about the main characters involved. Why for example, do we have no mention at all of Jesus' appearance, and virtually nothing about His childhood and early working life?

Why do we not hear that Jesus, after His resurrection, appeared triumphantly to His enemies as well as to His

friends? The description of an appearance by the risen Jesus, to Pilate or Herod or Caiaphas for instance, would have been an excellent twist to the (“concocted”) resurrection story. But no, we hear nothing of that.

Then again, we do hear some very surprising things instead. We hear that Peter, leader of the disciples and leader of the Church, ***denied Jesus three times!***

We hear how Jesus gave Peter a devastating rebuke (“Get thee behind me, Satan”, Matthew 16.23)! – and a very public dressing-down on the beach in front of the others (John 21. 15ff) We hear of Peter’s weakness in Antioch in no longer sitting with Gentile believers when Jewish church leaders arrived (Galatians 2.11ff).

A group of political plotters does not parade the frequent failings of their heroes! They talk them up, not down. Yet time and again throughout the New Testament we are presented with ordinary people just like us, sometimes getting it right, and more often than not getting it wrong!

We love Peter! He is just like us. And above all, he is so obviously TRUE!

The “Ring of Truth”

The late J. B. Phillips, a gifted Greek scholar who spent years within the Greek New Testament text, wrote a little book called “The Ring of Truth”.

That was his conclusion after all his translation work. Time and again in the text he would come across little “serendipities” as he called them – tiny, unexpected,

pleasant surprises, impossible to concoct or contrive, which demonstrated the simple truth behind what was written.

Morality

Let us move on to consider the moral nature of the New Testament writings. The level of moral expectation placed upon us in the New Testament is simply beyond us! It is too high. It is unattainable by mere human effort.

“Be ye therefore perfect”, the Lord tells us, “even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect” (Matthew 5.48). But I’m not perfect, and I can’t be! “O wretched man that I am!” cries Paul (Romans 7.24) as he acknowledges this same problem.

No inventor of fables is going to set the bar of the moral high jump so high that no-one can jump over it! Here again are we not simply in the realm of the “ring of truth”?

Jesus of Nazareth ...

And let us now turn to the person and character of the Lord Himself. Does He come over as a con-man or a self-deluded nutcase?

If He is a fake, as C.S. Lewis pointed out, then He must be the very devil incarnate! But that possibility is clearly nonsense when we consider His dealings with both His heavenly Father, and indeed with Satan himself.

There has been no religious leader like Jesus, ever. His teaching is “in a league of its own”. His miracles are unique, remarkable, matter-of-fact, and very well-attested – culminating in the greatest miracle of all, His resurrection from the dead.

He is utterly humble and meek on the one hand, yet totally commanding of every situation in which he finds Himself on the other. “Never man spake like this man” (John 7.46) was the verdict of the officers sent to arrest Jesus – a verdict which says it all.

And yet in the midst of it all, He calmly and repeatedly claims to be Messiah, God Himself!

This man just does not add up - unless all that He has said and done is simply true.

Ever Since ...

We can now briefly look at all that has happened in human history since the birth of the Christian Faith.

There is clearly no denying the obvious fact that Christian belief and conduct have been the spur to so much human achievement down the centuries. ***Something ENORMOUS happened at the start of the first century*** – and the world has never been the same since!

Think of the literally millions of people who have put their faith in Jesus Christ, across the world and down through the ages, seeing their lives gradually transformed in the process into lives of purpose and beauty and fruitfulness in the service of the living God. Are all these people deluded, basing their whole lives on a lie?

The world’s greatest literature and poetry, art, music and architecture, all owe their inspiration to Christian faith. Our schools and universities, hospitals, orphanages and hospices, as well as hundreds of other charitable institutions,

were founded by ordinary Christian men and women expressing their love for God and concern for their neighbour in far-sighted, practical and often very sacrificial ways.

Can we pause and try to imagine for just one moment what this world would be like **without** the Christian Gospel at the heart of its affairs for the past two thousand years?

Yet it all started somewhere!

Is it really convincing to argue that all these wonderful Christian-based achievements have been founded on a lie, a fraud, a tissue of fables? Nonsense! Praise God, that is an obvious **nonsense!**

Inspiration

Let us also now make fuller mention of the traditional Christian belief that the Holy Spirit has been centrally involved throughout the whole process.

His sovereign presence is within the original events, then passes through the period of oral transmission, then covers the writing itself, and finally oversees the stages of copying and subsequent translation; (to say nothing of His continuing work in enlightening our understanding as we come to the Scriptures today!).

Jesus repeatedly describes the Holy Spirit as the “Spirit of truth” (John 14.17 / 15.26 / 16.13), who will guide Jesus’ disciples into all truth (John 16.13). Here is a promise from the Lord Himself, to be accepted and relied upon.

In other words, the formation of the Scriptures which we have before us today has been very much a divine work! As

such, we can trust those Scriptures as being the “very Word of God”. “What Scripture says, God says”, as the old saying goes.

Logic

We can now turn to an argument from logic.

The logic of the situation points us to the conclusion that God **would** ensure a reliable written record of all His dealings with mankind.

Such a record is vital! He is not going to let the knowledge of all that He has done for His creation just wither away with the passing of the generations!

That record **has** to be reliable, true, trustworthy.

And what form, again following a line of logic, would we expect such a record to take?

Notice how infinitely stronger are the credentials of the Bible than “holy books” of other faiths – due in no small part to the sheer number of human authors – around forty in all. Yet the whole Bible ties together – it is clearly one beautiful and entire work in itself, despite the number of human authors, and despite its time-span covering four thousand years.

For any human beings to contrive this state of affairs artificially is clearly and simply ***impossible!***

By contrast we have the Koran and the much more recent Book of Mormon – both of which are claimed to be “God’s final Word”.

The Koran was written down by one man The Book of Mormon was written down by one man being copied from some buried golden plates which were then removed by an angel so they could never be found.

In the light of facts such as these, which of these three, the Bible, the Koran, or the Book of Mormon, wins our vote for having the most credibility and authenticity?

Experience

But alongside all these powerful arguments, let us finish with one of the most telling of them all.

What do we actually find as we try to take “God’s Word” seriously – as we “read, mark, learn and inwardly digest” it? Do we not find that it simply reverberates from start to finish with that “ring of truth”?

“If any man will do his will, he shall know of the doctrine, whether it be of God or whether I speak of myself” (John 7.17). Thus spake Jesus amongst His Jewish accusers in the Temple that day, concerning Himself and His teaching.

We can apply His words equally to the Scriptures themselves: If you really want to know if the Scriptures are genuine, then very quickly you will know!

So let us be of good cheer, despite these dark days! The Bible we have before us **can** be trusted; it is *not* dodgy. The words we read were the words written down originally, and the words written down originally were trustworthy then, and are trustworthy now.

Let us praise God for his providential mercies – His forming of His holy Word, and His preserving of His holy Word. Truly, “thy Word is a lamp to my feet, and a light to my path” (Psalm 119.105).

That is worth remembering, and worth putting into practice.

It is also worth our pointing out these facts, courteously, whenever the Bible is being ridiculed today! The fact is that the Bible we hold in our hands today is, by God's grace, VERY close to the original texts, and those original texts are VERY trustworthy.

The words in the Bibles before us today have been nothing less than God's Words to humanity from the time when they were first written down.

Nothing has changed. The words in the Bibles before us today are **still** God's Words to humanity.

How foolish to ignore these words. How wise to take them to heart and to put them into practice.

"A dodgy Bible? – don't make me laugh!".

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A Dodgy Bible?

**Biblical Authority
in a Sceptical Age**

Oliver Bayley

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