

**MILILANI COMMUNITY CHURCH
ADULT SUNDAY SCHOOL
WHAT THE BIBLE TEACHES
March 2003**

LESSON 1: THE BIBLE: Part Two: CAN WE TRUST THE BIBLE?

OFTEN-ASKED QUESTIONS:

- Isn't the Bible full of contradictions and errors?
- The Bible has been copied and translated so many times – hasn't this process led to errors?
- How can you be sure that the Bible is the same now as when it was written?

THE RELIABILITY OF THE BIBLICAL DOCUMENTS

The reliability of the biblical documents can be demonstrated by combining three tests of reliability employed in general historiography and literary criticism: the bibliographic test, the internal test, and the external test. The first test examines the biblical manuscripts, the second test deals with the claims made by the biblical authors, and the third test looks to outside confirmation of biblical content.

1. THE BIBLIOGRAPHIC TEST. This test examines the transmission of the text of the Old and New Testaments from the original autographs to the present day. The three aspects of this test are the quantity, quality, and time span of the manuscripts.
 - a. Quantity of manuscripts (how many do we have?)
 - (1) OT manuscripts – In the case of the Old Testament there is a small number of Hebrew manuscripts, because the Jewish scribes ceremonially buried imperfect and worn manuscripts. But the existing Hebrew mss. are supplemented by the Dead Sea Scrolls, the Septuagint (third century Greek translation of the OT), the Targums (ancient paraphrases of the OT) as well as the Talmud (teachings and commentaries related to the Hebrew Scriptures)
 - (2) NT manuscripts – The quantity of the New Testament manuscripts is unparalleled in ancient literature. There are over 5,000 Greek manuscripts, about 8,000 Latin manuscripts, and another 1,000 manuscripts in other ancient languages (Syriac, Coptic, etc.) In addition we have tens of thousands of citations of the New Testament by the early church fathers. In contrast, the typical number of existing manuscript copies for any of the works of the Greek and Latin authors such as Plato, Aristotle, Caesar, or Tacitus, ranges from one to 20!
 - b. Quality of manuscripts (How good are they?)
 - (1) Quality of OT manuscripts is excellent. Because of the great reverence the Jewish scribes held toward the Scriptures, they exercised extreme care in making new copies of the Hebrew Bible. The number of letters, words, and lines were counted, and the middle letters of the Pentateuch and the Old Testament were determined. If a single mistake was discovered, the entire manuscript would be destroyed.

- (2) Quality of NT manuscripts is better than the quality of other ancient documents. Because of the thousands of New Testament manuscripts, there are many variant readings, but these variants are actually used by scholars to reconstruct the original readings by determining which variant best explains the others in a given passage. Some of the variant readings got into the mss. because of visual errors in copying or auditory errors when scribes copied mss. that were read aloud, etc. The NT can be regarded as 99.5 per cent pure, and the correct readings for the remaining 0.5 percent can often be ascertained with a fair degree of probability by the practice of textual criticism.
- c. Time span of manuscripts (How far removed are they from originals?)
- (1) Old Testament manuscripts. The earliest Masoretic mss AD 895. This was due to the systematic destruction of worn manuscripts by the Masoretic scribes. The discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls, dating back to 200 BC drastically reduced the time span from the writing of the OT to our earliest copies
- (2) New Testament manuscripts. The time span of NT manuscripts is exceptional. The time span for most of the New Testament is less than 200 years and some books are within 100 years from the date of authorship to the date of our earliest manuscripts. This can be sharply contrasted with the average gap of over 1,000 years between the composition and the earliest copy of the writings of other ancient authors. Sir Frederic G. Kenyon, formerly the head librarian of the British Museum, wrote: "In no other case is the interval of time between the composition of the book and the date of the earliest extant manuscripts so short as in that of the New Testament."

Summary: The OT and NT enjoy far greater manuscript attestation in terms of quantity, quality, and time span than any other ancient documents (see Chart handout comparing NT and other ancient writings).

2. THE INTERNAL TEST. This second test of the reliability of the biblical documents asks, "What claims does the Bible make about itself?" It sounds like we are using the testimony of the Bible to prove that the Bible is true. But we are really examining the truth claims of the various authors of the Bible and allowing them to speak for themselves.
- a. A number of biblical authors claim that their accounts are primary not secondary. That is, most of the Bible was written by men who were eyewitnesses of the events they recorded (John 19:35; 21:24; I John 1:1,3; II Peter 1:16). The Gospels and epistles were written by men intimately acquainted with Jesus Christ. Their writings reveal their integrity and commitment to the truth. They maintained their testimony even through persecution and martyrdom.
- b. All the evidence runs contrary to the claim made by form criticism that the early church distorted the life and teachings of Christ. Most of the NT was written between A.D. 47 and 70, and all of it was complete by the first century. That's not enough time for a myth to be created and propagated.

3. THE EXTERNAL TEST. Because the Scriptures continually refer to historical events, they are verifiable; their accuracy can be checked by external evidence
- a. The historicity of Jesus Christ is well-established by early Roman, Greek, and Jewish sources, and these extra-biblical writings affirm the major details of the New Testament portrait of the Lord
 - b. First century historian Flavius Josephus made specific references to John the Baptist, Jesus Christ, and James. He also gave us many background details about the Herods, the Sadducees and Pharisees, the high priests like Annas and Caiaphas, and the Roman emperors mentioned in the Gospels and Acts.
 - c. Other first and second century writers also mention Christ, such as Roman historians Cornelius Tacitus and Suetonius, the Roman governor Pliny the Younger, and the Greek satirist Lucian. Jesus is also mentioned a number of times in the Jewish Talmud.
 - d. Archeological evidence has provided external confirmation of hundreds of biblical statements, people and events. Higher criticism in the 19th century made many damaging claims that would completely overthrow the integrity of the Bible, but the explosion of archaeological knowledge in the 20th century reversed almost all of these claims.
 - (1) Excavations at Nuzi (1925-41), Mari (discovered in 1933), and Alalakh (1937-39; 1946-49) provide helpful background information that fits well with the Genesis stories and the Patriarchal period. The Nuzi tablets, Mari letters and Ras shamra tablets illustrate patriarchal customs in detail and affirm the antiquity and accuracy of Genesis.
 - (2) Some scholars once claimed that the Mosaic Law could not have been written by Moses, because writing had not been invented in his day. Since that time, however, archaeologists have unearthed thousands of tablets and inscriptions written hundreds of years before Moses and even before Abraham. In fact they now know of six different written languages from or before the time of Moses!
 - (3) The critics once assumed the Bible was wrong because it described the Hittite Empire, which had not been found by archaeologists. But the Hittite capital was discovered in 1906.
 - (4) II Kings 15:29-refers to a king of Assyria named Tiglath Pileser. A generation ago scholars were saying that this king never existed and that the account of the fall of Israel to Assyria was mythology. Now, however, archaeologists have excavated Tiglath Pileser's capital city and can give his history! proven to be a real person of history
 - (5) Moabite Stone— reveals information about the reign of Omri, the sixth king of Israel.
 - (6) Black Obelisk of Shalmaneser III refers to King Jehu of Israel
 - (7) Taylor Prism describes Sennacherib's siege of Jerusalem in time of Hezekiah

- (8) The New Testament has also received plenty of support from archaeology, and many critical attacks on the historicity of the new Testament have been reversed. Most of the geographical details associated with the life of Jesus in the Gospels have been substantiated. This includes places such as the Pool of Siloam, the Pool of Bethesda, Jacob's Well, Bethlehem, Nazareth, Cana, Capernaum, Chorazin, the residence of Pilate in Jerusalem and "the Pavement" in John 19:13.
- (9) In the past critics tried to discredit Luke as an accurate historian, but Luke and Acts have now been substantiated by external evidence, and Luke has been vindicated and proven to be accurate.

CONCLUSION CONCERNING THE RELIABILITY OF THE BIBLE

"The Old and New Testaments pass the bibliographic, internal and external tests like no other ancient books. Most professional archaeologists and historians acknowledge the historicity of the Bible. Yet many liberal theologians still embrace pre-archeological critical theories about the Bible. The evidence strongly supports the accuracy of the Bible in relation to history and culture, but in many cases it has been overlooked or rejected because of philosophical presuppositions that run contrary to the Scriptures. This leads to a double standard: critics approach secular literature with one standard but wrongly use a different standard when they examine the Bible. Those who discard the Bible as historically untrustworthy must realize that the same standard would force them to eliminate almost all ancient literature" (Ken Boa, *I'm Glad You Asked*, 82-83).