

Challenging Assumptions: *Why should I believe what the Bible says?*
Mark DeYmaz • Mosaic Church of Central Arkansas • August 20, 2023

As a college student in the late 1950s, Josh McDowell found himself in the student union one day talking with a small group of committed Christians when the conversation turned to the topic of God.

“Christianity,” he mocked. “That’s for unthinking weaklings, not for intellectuals.”

He turned to one of the students and said: “Tell me, what’s so different about you? What changed your life?”

Without hesitation or embarrassment, she looked him straight in the eye and responded: “Jesus Christ.”

“Jesus Christ?” he clapped backed. “I’m fed up with religion. I’m fed up with church. I’m fed up with the Bible.”

The young girl responded, “I didn’t say religion. I said Jesus Christ.”

Together with the group, then, she challenged Josh (in his own words) “...to make rigorous, intellectual examinations of the claims of Jesus Christ... and He took their challenge seriously, spending months in research and even dropping out of school for a time to study in the historically rich libraries of Europe.

Josh began the challenge convinced that the Christian story could not stand up to scrutiny. He was sure that if he could uncover indisputable evidence that the Bible is unreliable, the entire argument for Jesus and Christianity would crumble.

So, what did he find? Having thoroughly investigated the Bible looking for evidence to refute its credibility, he writes...

“I could come to only one conclusion: If I were to remain intellectually honest, I had to admit that the Old and New Testament documents were some of the most reliable writings in all of antiquity. And if they were reliable, what about this man Jesus, whom I had dismissed as a mere carpenter? I had to admit that Jesus Christ was more than a carpenter. He was all He claimed to be.”

Though his story is more than 60 years old, Josh McDowell’s initial skepticism concerning the Bible remains perhaps even more widespread today.

Two weeks ago, Lawrence addressed the question: ***Why would a good God allow bad things to happen?***

Then last week, Harry answered those that ask, ***Why should we trust Christianity when the church is full of hypocrisy?***

Today, I want to consider the question, ***Why should I believe what the Bible says?*** as we continue our series, *Challenging Assumptions*

In his books, **Evidence That Demands a Verdict**, **More Evidence That Demands a Verdict**, and **More Than a Carpenter**, Josh McDowell shares what he discovered when he asked this question. Similarly, there are many apologists and resources online for those of you interested in a deeper dive than time today will allow... In part, I'll draw from some of these sources this morning.

With that in mind, let me briefly address these seven (7) underlying assumptions associated with the question, *Why should I believe what the Bible says?*

1. **There's nothing special about the Bible, i.e., it's not unique in terms of ancient texts**

The fact is, the Bible is quite unique.

Think about it: Unlike other religious texts typically written or compiled by a single individual or 2-3 others living in close proximity and relationship to one another...

- a. The Bible was written over a period of roughly 2,000 years by 40 different authors from three different continents, who wrote in three different languages.
- b. Shepherds, kings, scholars, fishermen, prophets, a military general, a cupbearer, and a priest all penned portions of Scripture.
- c. These men (because women in the middle eastern context of the Bible were not at that time formally educated or given the privilege of writing) composed their works from palaces, prisons, the wilderness, and places of exile while writing history, laws, poetry, prophecy, proverbs, biographies, and letters
- d. In fact, one of the Bible's most remarkable qualities is the complete unity of the overall message despite having so many different authors writing over many centuries on hundreds of controversial subjects.
- e. Beyond that, F.F. Bruce (one of the most influential biblical scholars of the second half of the twentieth century) writes,
 - i. "In the entire range of Greek and Latin literature, only Homer's Iliad ranks next to the NT in possessing the greatest number of attesting manuscripts from Antiquity."
 - 1) Iliad
 - a) Written: 900 BC
 - b) Earliest Copy: 400 BC
 - c) Time Span: 500 years
 - d) # of copies: 643
 - 2) New Testament
 - a) Written: 40-100 A.D.
 - b) Earliest Copy: 125 A.D.
 - c) Time Span: 25 years
 - d) # of copies: over 24,000
 - ii. He concludes, "There is no body of ancient literature in the world which enjoys such a wealth of good textual attestation as the New Testament."
 - iii. In other words, today scholars have authenticated ancient books on far less textual evidence. So,
 - iv. To deny the Bible's authenticity is to deny the authenticity of every other work of literature from antiquity.

Conclusion: The Bible is unique and fundamentally different from other ancient religious texts.

2. **The Bible can't be from God because men wrote it**

The Bible claims that God revealed truth to man and divinely inspired some to record it.

Think about it... Everyone knows someone or something is out there, behind it all. The question is, "Who is it and how can we know?"

- a. The Bible claims to be a revelation from God (i.e., a supernatural disclosure of something not previously known, understood or realized).
- b. Indeed, if God didn't disclose Himself to us, we could not otherwise know anything about Him
- c. Over 2,600 times OT writers felt compelled to remind readers, "Thus saith the Lord..."
- d. In the New Testament, Peter writes, (2 Peter 1:16-20)
"For we did not follow cleverly devised tales when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of His majesty... So be certain of this: no prophecy was ever made by an act of human will, but men - moved by the Holy Spirit - spoke from God."
- e. Through **revelation**, then, God shared truth and truth about Himself that would have otherwise been unknowable.

Now, theologians speak of three (3) Types of Revelation

- i. **General Revelation** (i.e., what can be seen and discerned about Him through nature)
 - 1) Ps 19:1
"The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of His hands."
 - 2) Romans 1:20
"For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities—His eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse."
- ii. **Special Revelation**
 - 1) Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh (John 1:1-14)
 - 2) The Bible
- iii. **Direct Revelation**
When God communicates directly with someone or a people, as is often recorded in Scripture. He is still speaking to us today.
- f. Through **revelation**, then, God reveals Himself to us... And apart from revelation He could not otherwise be known.
- g. Through **inspiration**, the Holy Spirit moved some to record God's revelation and to accurately reflect truth about God in writing.
 - i. So, Paul tells Timothy...
 - ii. 2 Timothy 3:16
"All Scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness."

Conclusion: God reveals Himself to us in part via the Bible

3. **It's so full of contradictions it can't be trusted**

- a. **Supposed contradictions in the Bible, however, are usually cases where someone misunderstands the genre and/or purpose of a certain passage**
 - i. It often comes from taking the Bible literally when rather we should take it literarily

- ii. The fact is, there are a variety of literary genres in the Bible including...
 - 1) History (i.e., Genesis, Exodus, Numbers)
 - 2) Laws (Leviticus and Deuteronomy)
 - Israel in the Old Testament is a theocratic nation state with laws governing both the secular and spiritual life (think our own constitution, bill of rights, congressional laws, etc.)*
 - 3) Poetry (in various sections)
 - 4) Wisdom Literature (i.e., Proverbs and Ecclesiastes)
 - Train up a child is generally true but not always (Proverbs 22:6)*
 - 5) Prophecy
 - One of the best proofs for the reliability of the Bible (but that's for another day)*
 - 6) Biographies (i.e., Gospels)
 - 7) Letters (i.e., Paul, Peter, John)
- b. In other words, different genres, people, audiences, and purposes; and it's important to keep this in mind when both reading and interpreting Scripture.
- c. For example, a newspaper reporting #s at a concert vs. an IRS reporting document

Conclusion: The Bible does not contradict itself on any doctrinal issue.

4. Even if sincerely written, over time the original texts have been changed

Yet in reality the Bible has been painstakingly transmitted throughout the ages.

- a. In 586 B.C., Jerusalem was captured by the Babylonians. The Temple was looted and then destroyed by fire. The Jews were then exiled. About 70 years later, the Jewish captives returned to Jerusalem from Babylon. According to the Bible, Ezra recovered a copy of the Torah (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy) and read it aloud to the whole nation. From then on, the Jewish scribes solidified the process for creating copies of the Torah and eventually other books in the Old Testament. For example...
 - i. They could only use clean animal skins, both to write on and even to bind manuscripts.
 - ii. Each column of writing could have no less than forty-eight, and no more than sixty lines.
 - iii. They had to verbalize each word aloud while they were writing.
 - iv. Their work had to be reviewed within thirty days, and if as many as three pages required corrections, the entire manuscript had to be redone.
 - v. The letters, words, and paragraphs had to be counted, and the document became invalid if two letters touched each other.
- b. Beginning in the Sixth Century and into the Tenth, some European Jewish scribes continued a similar method for copying manuscripts of the Old Testament in the original Hebrew language.
 - i. Until 1947, the oldest manuscripts of the Old Testament dated back to 895 A.D.
 - ii. In that year, a shepherd boy discovered some scrolls inside a cave West of the Dead Sea. These manuscripts dated between 100 B.C. and 100 A.D.
 - iii. Every book in the Old Testament was represented in this discovery, commonly referred to as the Dead Sea Scrolls, except for the book of Esther.

- iv. Numerous copies of each book was discovered (i.e., 25 copies of Deuteronomy) such to confirm that there were very few discrepancies to Old Testament versions from the Tenth Century.
- c. As for the New Testament, American scholar and longtime professor at Princeton Theological Seminary, Bruce Metzger, writes...
 - i. Whenever something is copied by hand, frailties of human eyesight enter in, particularly if that document is old and some ink has faded.
 - ii. Copying is also long, tedious work. It would take a scribe several months to copy just one Gospel.
 - iii. The earlier copies are generally closer to the wording of the originals. The translators of the 1611 King James Bible, for instance, used Greek and Hebrew manuscripts from the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.
 - iv. Today Bible translators have access to Greek manuscripts from the third and fourth centuries and Hebrew manuscripts from the era of Jesus.
 - v. One such manuscript, the Rylands Papyrus, a torn page with a few verses from John 18, is dated between A.D. 100 and 150.
 - vi. Along the way, most of the changes that were made were accidental, and textual scholars can detect and correct them.
 - 1) Some changes were intentional, but even most of those can be corrected.
 - 2) There are only a few places where scholars debate the original wording, but none of those change Christian beliefs.

Conclusion: The Bible has been accurately transcribed and is the most reliable book of antiquity.

5. It's not accurate where history or science is concerned

The fact is, science, itself, is ever evolving, though today the word is used as if truth is known and settled. Yes, in some cases it is... In others, though, not so much.

- a. For some time, for instance, we've been told that the Universe is 13B years old. Now, we're being told it could be 2x that
- b. At one time, science reasoned the sun and planets revolved around the earth
- c. I can remember in the 1970s being told we were heading for a new Ice Age... Now, they tell us global warming
- d. The Bible never claims to be a book of science
- e. That said, it's remarkably accurate in this regard:
 - i. God said let there be light: i.e., the Big Bang
 - ii. Job writes of evaporation 1000s of years before it's discovered scientifically
 - iii. According to Genesis 19:24, Sodom and Gomorrah were judged by God with "brimstone and fire."
 - 1) Current science has proposed that a "meteoritic airburst" devastated the area in c. 1750-1700 BC, during Abraham's lifetime.
 - 2) The blast was so hot, scientists tell us, that rocks were turned into glass... and so Lot's wife into "a pillar of salt" as at that time a the writer described it.

Conclusion: While not claiming to be a scientific text, continued scientific and archaeological discovery supports the Bible's assertions.

6. It's full of violence and has been used by some Christians historically to justify oppression

Yes, that's a tough one for us to understand or swallow.

- a. As for violence commanded by God, Lawrence spoke to this 2 weeks ago:
 - i. Essentially, His ways are above ours. He is God and we are not.
 - ii. In that sense, it is God's right and prerogative to do what He understands is good in light of His character, will, and intent, even though from our perspective what He does or allows seem bad, unloving, or unjust.
 - iii. Who then are we to question Him?
 - iv. *As Paul writes in Romans 9:20-24*
 - 1) "On the contrary, who are you, you foolish person, who answers back to God? The clay pot will not say to the potter "Why did you make me like this," will it? Or does the potter not have a right over the clay, to make from the same lump one object for honorable use, and another for common use?"
 - 2) "What if God, although willing to demonstrate His wrath and to make His power known, endured with great patience objects of wrath prepared for destruction? And He did so to make known the riches of His glory upon objects of mercy, which He prepared beforehand for glory, namely us, whom He also called, not only from among Jews, but also from among Gentiles."
 - v. That said, in the Old Testament where violence occurs even at the direction of God, we should keep in mind that He is not only the God of love and mercy but also of judgment and wrath.
 - vi. In addition, remember that Israel is a nation fighting for its survival, land, and security, as has every other nation then and now.
 - 1) As a theocratic nation, they would spiritualize it as God's will
 - 2) Has not history proven they are a chosen, remarkable people?
- b. As for some Christians historically to justify even more violence and oppression, the key word is "some" but clearly not all.
- c. Indeed, the same book that was used to justify slavery by some was used by other Christians in England and eventually the US to push for its abolition.

Conclusion: The Bible reveals that there is a God and none of us are Him. He is at once the God of love and mercy but also of judgement and wrath. When people usurp power otherwise rightfully God's alone, the consequences are often unconscionable and innocent people suffer.

7. Even Christians don't agree as to what it teaches

No, sadly, we don't.

- a. That's not on the Bible, however, that's on us.
- b. More specifically, varying interpretations are outcomes of a particular hermeneutic (i.e., the method by which we seek to draw meaning out of the text).

There is at once, for example...

 - i. Allegory
 - ii. Red Letters
 - iii. Historical-Grammatical, as we employ at Mosaic.
- c. Hermeneutic methods are often informed by culture, context and, yes, even sin

Conclusion: Where hermeneutics align Christians find agreement with the Bible and its teaching.

At the end of the day, no amount of evidence, debate, fulfilled prophecy or archeological discovery will be enough to satisfy some who ask, *Why should I believe what the Bible says?*

- As the writer of Hebrews says, "...without faith it is impossible to please God because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him." (Hebrews 11:6)
- So, let me ask:
Do you believe what the Bible says about God, about Jesus, about eternal life?

Sources include:

- Josh McDowell
 - <https://www.cru.org/us/en/how-to-know-god/my-story-a-life-changed/my-story-josh-mcdowell.html>
 - Evidence that Demands a Verdict, pp. 41-43
- Bruce Metzger: <https://www.christianitytoday.com/biblestudies/bible-answers/theology/biblecopiedhand.html>
- Scott Manning: <https://scottmanning.com/content/process-of-copying-the-old-testament-by-jewish-scribes/>
- Tim Chaffey: <https://answersingenesis.org/the-word-of-god/3-unity-of-the-bible>
- Dave Armstrong: <https://www.ncregister.com/blog/archaeological-proofs-of-old-testament-accuracy>
 - See also, <https://www.nature.com/articles/s41598-021-97778-3>
 - See also, Eric Metaxas: <https://www.newsweek.com/archaeology-proving-bible-opinion-1634339>
*"In September 2021, a lengthy, peer-reviewed paper in **Nature Scientific Reports** described the cataclysmic destruction of a Middle Bronze Age city north of the Dead Sea and represented years of research and technical analysis by 21 scientists, who likely never expected to author a paper in one of the world's most prestigious scientific journals that mentioned the destruction of the Biblical city of Sodom. But in the end, the parallels proved impossible to ignore. The article corroborated in extraordinary detail that what happened in Sodom and Gomorrah was a "cosmic airburst/impact event" very similar to what happened in Tunguska, Siberia in 1908, when an asteroid of about 180 feet in diameter entered the Earth's atmosphere at 34,000 MPH and exploded a few miles above that largely uninhabited region. The equivalent of 1,000 Hiroshima bombs, the 1908 blast flattened 80 million trees, and so disturbed the upper atmosphere that for three days people in London could read newspapers at midnight."*