

What is the Bible?

Of all the books that have ever been written, (and there have been an awful lot. I saw an estimate a few months ago of 130m different books), none has been as influential as the Bible. It has bridged generations, nations and cultures. It has changed lives and whole societies. It is truly the most powerful book that has ever been written.

The Bible has been translated into over 2000 languages (in whole or in part) and over 2.5bn copies have been printed. There is not another book on earth which even comes close to it in terms of influence and reach.

In my country (England) and elsewhere the Bible has had a huge influence on the nation as a whole. It has influenced the way society runs and the laws which are used to govern. Much of the infrastructure of my country was built on the truths and values taught in the Bible. And so has much of the language that we use in my country. Many phrases found in the Bible have become part of everyday speech.

But the Bible is also the most attacked book in the history of the world. No other book has been subjected to so many attacks and so many criticisms. All over the world people try and disprove the Bible or they just seek to destroy as many copies of it as they can. In England about 500 years ago it was a criminal offence to own a Bible. People were put in prison for having one. Some were even killed. And the authorities would collect up as many copies as they could and they would burn them.

Again, we say, there is no other book like the Bible. It is truly unique.

The word "Bible" comes from the Latin and Greek words meaning "book". So very simply the Bible is a book. But it is a book like no other.

Within this one book of the Bible we find sixty-six different books. They include books of law, such as Leviticus and Deuteronomy; historical books, such as Ezra and Acts; books of poetry, such as Psalms and Ecclesiastes; books of prophecy, such as Isaiah and Revelation; biographies, such as Matthew and John; and epistles (formal letters) such as Titus and Hebrews.

The Authors

About 40 different human authors contributed to the Bible. We don't know the exact number because it is not always clear who wrote some of the books in the Bible. Some are obvious because they tell us, e.g. the letters of Paul or the Psalms of David. Other books we don't know such as Chronicles or Hebrews.

These writers lived at different times and in different places. It was written over a period of about 1500 years between the year 1400BC and 100AD. The authors were kings, fishermen, priests, government officials, farmers, shepherds, and doctors.

Now if we were all told to write a chapter of a book about something the only thing we could guarantee is that it would not be a good read. There would be nothing that joined it all together. We would all tell completely different stories. We might even contradict each other. I would say something was black and you would say it was white.

But the incredible thing about the Bible is that from all these different authors who lived at different times and in different cultures comes an incredible unity, with common themes woven throughout.

The Bible's unity is due to the fact that, ultimately, it has one Author—God Himself. Paul tells us in 2 Timothy that the Bible is “God-breathed”. The human authors wrote exactly what God wanted them to write, and the result was the perfect and holy Word of God. We will return to think more about this incredible truth in a short time.

The Divisions

The Bible is divided into two main parts: the Old Testament and the New Testament. In summary, the Old Testament is the story of a nation, and the New Testament is the story of a Man. The nation was God's way of bringing the Man—Jesus Christ—into the world.

The Old Testament describes the founding and preservation of the nation of Israel. God promised to use Israel to bless the whole world (Genesis 12:2-3). Once Israel was established as a nation, God raised up a family within that nation through whom the blessing would come: the family of David (Psalm 89:3-4). Then, from the family of David was promised one Man who would bring the promised blessing (Isaiah 11:1-10).

The New Testament details the coming of that promised Man. His name was Jesus, and He fulfilled the prophecies of the Old Testament as He lived a perfect life, died as a perfect Saviour, and rose from the dead as a conquering king. And that leads us on to think about the Bible's central character.

The Central Character

Jesus is the central character in the Bible—the whole book is really about Him. The Old Testament predicts His coming and sets the stage for His entrance into the world. The New Testament describes His coming and His work to bring salvation to our sinful world.

Jesus is more than a historical figure; in fact, He is more than a man. He is God in the flesh, and His coming was the most important event in the history of the world. God Himself became a man in order to give us a clear, understandable picture of who He is and in order to do for us what we could never do for ourselves – to save us from our sin. What is God like? He is like Jesus; Jesus is God in human form (John 1:14, 14:9).

So, for the remainder of our time in this first session I want to deal with the question – “Is the Bible really God's word?”

Our answer to this question will not only determine how we view the Bible and its importance to our lives, but also it will ultimately have an eternal impact on us. If the Bible is truly God's Word, then we should cherish it, study it, obey it, and fully trust it. If the Bible is the Word of God, then to dismiss it is to dismiss God Himself.

The Authority of the Bible

500 years ago in Europe the cause of the gospel was very different to what it is today. Primarily this was down to one simple reason – the Bible was not available to people in a language they could understand. The Bible was only available in Latin. If you went to church it was only ever read in Latin. And more often than not the people who were reading it – the priests – didn't understand Latin – they didn't have a clue what they were reading.

As a consequence the people were ignorant of the gospel – they knew nothing about Jesus death and resurrection. They knew nothing about saving faith given by God as an act of free grace. Rather, they were exposed to the greedy church leaders who exploited their ignorance and told them that the only way to be saved was by giving money to the church and doing penance – by buying their salvation.

But in his grace and mercy God began to work and he raised up some very clever men across Europe who each made it their life's ambition to understand the gospel of grace, to tell others this gospel and, very importantly, to translate the Bible into the language that people could understand. In England God used a man called William Tyndale. In France it was John Calvin and in Germany it was Martin Luther.

Before these men came along everyone believed that the ultimate authority on any matter relating to God was the Pope. He was the head of the church and whatever he decided or declared became binding law. The pope was said to be without error. He was said to be God's representative on earth and his words carried all the authority as if God had spoken them himself.

The problem with this was that different popes disagreed with each other. How two people who can never be wrong can come to different conclusions about something has never been explained, but that was the case.

But the men God raised up had a different outlook on life. They saw that the ultimate authority in the whole of life was not the pope but God's word. When he was on trial for his life Martin Luther said to the emperor who was judging him – "My conscience is captive to the word of God." Rather than listening to the pope he said – "Let the man who wants to hear God speak read the Bible."

The Bible was his authority. It was the Bible that was to settle every issue of life. Were these men right to have such a view of the Bible? And if so, what did they base it on?

Well in having such a view of the Bible these men were in perfect agreement with those who wrote the Bible and with Jesus view of it also. So, what I want us to do in this session of our studies is to see exactly what the authors themselves claimed about what they were writing. And in seeing these claims we will then understand exactly why the Bible is the ultimate authority on which we can build our lives. It is the foundation for everything that we do.

First of all let's turn our attention to the Old Testament.

The prophets who wrote the Old Testament knew that they were governed by the Spirit of God. The role of a prophet was merely to act as God's spokesman. They told the people the message that God had to declare. So, Moses was a prophet as was Samuel, David, Solomon, Nehemiah and Ezra as well those who we usually call the prophets – Isaiah, Jeremiah, Daniel etc.

Nearly 4,000 times in the Old Testament, including nearly 500 times in the first five books of the Bible we read such expressions as "The Lord spoke," or "The Lord commanded," or "The Lord said,".

None of these prophets, none of these spokesmen, spoke on his own authority. This is what Micah has to say about himself in Micah 3vs8 – "But as for me, I am filled with power, with the Spirit of the Lord." Zechariah (in 7vs12) accused the nation of Israel of ignoring – "the words that the Lord Almighty had sent by his Spirit through the earlier prophets."

King David, who was a prophet – a messenger from God, declared about himself in his dying speech in 2 Samuel 23vs2 – “The Spirit of the Lord spoke through me; his word was on my tongue. The God of Israel spoke.”

None of the Old Testament writers ever thought that their message originated in their own minds or with their own ideas. Rather, this was the description they used when they were talking about the false prophets in Ezekiel 13vs2. They prophesied “out of their own imagination.”

We contrast this with what Jeremiah had to say about himself in 1vs9 – “Then the Lord reached out his hand and touched my mouth and said to me, ‘Now I have put my words in your mouth...’” Isaiah said exactly the same in ch.51vs16 – “And I have put my words in your mouth and covered you in the shadow of my hand.”

So, it is absolutely clear that the prophets knew that they received the words of their prophetic ministry directly from God. They were God’s spokesmen. And as such they had to speak God’s words – the words that he gave them. The view of Amos was typical of all the prophets of the Lord – they knew that they were in a special relationship with God. So Amos says in Amos 3vs7&8 – “Surely the sovereign Lord does nothing without revealing his plan to his servants the prophets. The lion has roared – who will not fear? The sovereign Lord has spoken – who can but prophesy?”

It is not surprising then that we repeatedly read these words in the Old Testament – “Hear the word of the Lord.” (Isaiah 1vs10).

It is with all this background in our minds that we read the very solemn warning that God gave Moses in Deuteronomy 4vs2 – “you shall not add to the word that I command you, nor take from it, that you may keep the commandments of the Lord your God that I command you.” God’s word comes from God alone and must not be tampered with.

So we can say about the Old Testament view of itself that every word of it was considered to have God-given authority. This idea is constantly present like strands of cord woven through a piece of cloth. Nowhere is this seen more clearly than in Psalm 119 – the longest Psalm in the Bible. It is 176 verses long and only five of those verses contain no direct reference to the Word of God.

And it is not claiming too much to say that vs.160 is a summary of the Old Testament view of itself – “All your words are true; all your righteous laws are eternal.” As a consequence of this, there was no doubt in the minds of all the Old Testament writers that every word of God was “flawless/perfect”.

This is what we read in Proverbs 30vs5-6 – “Every word of God is flawless; he is a shield to those who take refuge in him. Do not add to his words, or he will rebuke you and prove you a liar.”

The word “flawless” is the same word used in Hebrew to refer to a piece of metal that has been refined in fire to get rid of all the impurities. So what it means here in Proverbs is that God’s word has been tested and proved to be true. Every word of it is perfect and without and therefore wholly reliable.

That is what the Old Testament had to say about itself. The New Testament writers also had a very special view of the Old Testament. You are probably familiar with Paul’s words in 2 Tim 3vs16 that “All Scripture is breathed out by God.” We will be spending a bit of time with this verse later, but it is very

clear in its view of authorship – “All scripture is breathed out by God.” And there can therefore be no higher authority.

Peter gives us a similar perspective in 2 Peter 1vs21 – “For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.” Again, Peter is absolutely explicit. This is not man’s authority, it is God’s. God speaks directly to us.

These words of Peter and Paul were specifically written about the Old Testament. At the time they were writing that was what the Bible consisted of. So we need to ask the question, did they have the same view about the authority of the New Testament? Did they claim for themselves what they claimed about the Old Testament?

The answer is that the New Testament writers claimed to speak and write by the Holy Spirit and with the authority of God.

When Paul wrote to the Christians in Corinth he found it necessary to defend his authority as an apostle against attacks from those who refused to accept his teaching. So Paul sets out the reasons why the church should listen to him and we read in 1 Corinthians 2vs12-13 – “Now we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might understand the things freely given us by God. And we impart this in words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit, interpreting spiritual truths to those who are spiritual.”

Before becoming a Christian, Paul had been in training as a Pharisee and religious leader. He knew the Old Testament as well as any man living. So he would have been well aware that the claim he was making for himself was exactly the same as the Old Testament writers had made about themselves.

In exactly the same way Peter wrote to the early Christians to encourage them and spur them in faithful service to Christ and his basis for doing this is set out in 2 Peter 3vs1-2 – “This is now the second letter that I am writing to you, beloved. In both of them I am stirring up your sincere mind by way of reminder, that you should remember the predictions of the holy prophets and the commandment of the Lord and Saviour through your apostles.”

Peter’s claim about himself and the other apostles was that when they spoke and taught and wrote they were doing so as the mouthpiece of the Lord Jesus Christ himself. Peter is claiming that the words would be no more authoritative if they had been spoken by Jesus himself. He puts the prophets, the apostles and the Lord Jesus in one group together.

Peter is just as explicit in his first letter. He writes to the Christians reminding them that the Old Testament prophets spoke of the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ as God’s appointed messiah. This is what we read in 1 Peter 1vs10-12 – “Concerning this salvation, the prophets who prophesied about the grace that was to be yours searched and inquired carefully, inquiring what person or time the Spirit of Christ in them was indicating when he predicted the sufferings of Christ and the subsequent glories. It was revealed to them that they were serving not themselves but you, in the things that have now been announced to you through those who preached the good news to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven, things into which angels long to look.”

Again Peter is putting himself and the other apostles in the same bracket as the Old Testament prophets. The authority of one was equal to the authority of the other.

So Peter and Paul have made the link between the Old Testament prophets and the apostles. The apostle John (the other great contributor to the New Testament) also makes that link. We read in Revelation 22vs6 – “And he said to me, ‘These words are trustworthy and true. And the Lord, the God of the spirits of the prophets, has sent his angel to show his servants what must soon take place.’”

Consequently the apostles were not shy of asserting the authority of their teaching over the church. In 1 Corinthians 14vs37 Paul made it clear that his words carried with them the authority of Christ himself – “If anyone thinks that he is a prophet, or spiritual, he should acknowledge that the things I am writing to you are a command of the Lord.”

Similarly, he could remind the church in Thessalonica in 1 Thessalonians 4vs2 – “For you know what instructions we gave you through the Lord Jesus.” Earlier in the letter in 1vs13 Paul wrote – “And we also thank God constantly for this, that when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men but as what it really is, the word of God, which is at work in you believers.”

And because Paul was convinced that his teaching carried with it the authority of God, he was not ashamed to claim that his preaching was the standard of truth by which all other preachers had to be measured. In Galatians 1vs6-12 we read – “I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting him who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel— not that there is another one, but there are some who trouble you and want to distort the gospel of Christ. But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to the one we preached to you, let him be accursed. As we have said before, so now I say again: If anyone is preaching to you a gospel contrary to the one you received, let him be accursed. For am I now seeking the approval of man, or of God? Or am I trying to please man? If I were still trying to please man, I would not be a servant of Christ. For I would have you know, brothers, that the gospel that was preached by me is not man's gospel. For I did not receive it from any man, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ.”

Paul claims that anyone preaching contrary to his teaching – even he himself if he ever dared to change the content of the gospel – should be cut off from God. This was because he had not been teaching something made up by men but had received his message by revelation from Jesus Christ.

For this reason obedience to the apostles’ teaching became a condition of fellowship for Christians. In 2 Thessalonians 3vs6 Paul writes – “Now we command you, brothers, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you keep away from any brother who is walking in idleness and not in accord with the teaching that you received from us.”

He then goes on in vs.14 of that chapter – “If anyone does not obey what we say in this letter, take note of that person, and have nothing to do with him, that he may be ashamed.”

In conclusion, it is impossible to read the Bible honestly without coming to the conclusion that what it claims for itself is an authority that nothing else can match. No other writings, no other documents and the views of no other teachers or philosophers are ever referred to in the Bible as carrying the same authority. To the human writers of the Bible from Moses to the Apostle John, there is only one authoritative scripture.

How do we know?

The fact that God gave us the Bible is an evidence and illustration of His love for us. In his word he reveals to us what He is like and how we can have a right relationship with Him. These are things that we could not have known had God not spoken to us in the Bible. Although God's revelation of Himself in the Bible was given progressively over approximately 1500 years, it has always contained everything man needs to know about God in order to have a right relationship with Him. If the Bible is, as it claims to be, truly the Word of God, then it is the final authority for all matters of faith, religious practice, and morals.

The question we must ask ourselves is how can we know that the Bible is what it claims to be and not just a good book? What is unique about the Bible that sets it apart from all other religious books ever written? Is there any evidence that the Bible is truly God's Word?

There are both internal and external evidences that the Bible is truly God's Word. The internal evidences are those things within the Bible that testify of its divine origin over and above the claims it makes about itself. One of the first internal evidences that the Bible is truly God's Word is seen in its unity. Even though it is really sixty-six individual books, written on three continents, in three different languages, over a period of approximately 1500 years, by more than 40 authors who came from many walks of life, the Bible remains one unified book from beginning to end without contradiction. This unity is unique from all other books and is evidence of the divine origin of the words which God moved men to record.

Another of the internal evidences that indicates the Bible is truly God's Word is the prophecies contained within its pages. The Bible contains hundreds of detailed prophecies relating to the future of individual nations including Israel, certain cities, and mankind. Other prophecies concern the coming of One who would be the Messiah, the Saviour of all who would believe in Him.

Unlike the prophecies found in other religious books biblical prophecies are extremely detailed. There are over three hundred prophecies concerning Jesus Christ in the Old Testament. Not only was it foretold where He would be born and His lineage, but also how He would die and that He would rise again. There simply is no logical way to explain the fulfilled prophecies in the Bible other than by divine origin. There is no other religious book with the extent or type of predictive prophecy that the Bible contains.

A third internal evidence of the divine origin of the Bible is its unique authority and power. While this evidence is more subjective than the first two, it is no less a powerful testimony of the divine origin of the Bible. The Bible's authority is unlike any other book ever written. This authority and power are best seen in the way countless lives have been transformed by the supernatural power of God's Word. Drug addicts have been cured by it, homosexuals set free by it, derelicts and deadbeats transformed by it, hardened criminals reformed by it, sinners rebuked by it, and hate turned to love by it. The Bible does possess a dynamic and transforming power that is only possible because it is truly God's Word.

There are also external evidences that indicate the Bible is truly the Word of God. One is the historicity of the Bible. Because the Bible details historical events, its truthfulness and accuracy are subject to verification like any other historical document. Through both archaeological evidences and other writings, the historical accounts of the Bible have been proven time and time again to be accurate and true.

In fact, all the archaeological and manuscript evidence supporting the Bible makes it the best-documented book from the ancient world. The fact that the Bible accurately and truthfully records historically verifiable events is a great indication of its truthfulness when dealing with religious subjects and doctrines and helps substantiate its claim to be the very Word of God.

Another external evidence that the Bible is truly God's Word is the integrity of its human authors. As mentioned earlier, God used men from many walks of life to record His words. In studying the lives of these men, we find them to be honest and sincere. The fact that they were willing to die often excruciating deaths for what they believed testifies that these ordinary yet honest men truly believed God had spoken to them.

The men who wrote the New Testament and many hundreds of other believers (1 Corinthians 15:6) knew the truth of their message because they had seen and spent time with Jesus Christ after He had risen from the dead. Seeing the risen Christ had a tremendous impact on them. They went from hiding in fear to being willing to die for the message God had revealed to them. Their lives and deaths testify to the fact that the Bible truly is God's Word.

A final external evidence that the Bible is truly God's Word is the indestructibility of the Bible. Because of its importance and its claim to be the very Word of God, the Bible has suffered more vicious attacks and attempts to destroy it than any other book in history. From early Roman Emperors like Diocletian, through communist dictators and on to modern-day atheists and agnostics, the Bible has withstood and outlasted all of its attackers and is still today the most widely published book in the world.

There is a very interesting story from the 18th century which illustrates this. The French philosopher Voltaire was very anti-God and anti-Christian. He made very boastful claims in his life including this statement – "One hundred years from my day there will not be a Bible in the earth except one that is looked upon by an antiquarian curiosity-seeker." He said this in 1776. In 1778 he said – "It took twelve men to start Christianity; one will destroy it." He meant himself.

But God had different plans. Not only is it self-evident that what he said has not come true, but in the words of Psalm 2, God looked down from heaven and scoffed. In the very year that Voltaire claimed he would destroy Christianity, God destroyed him – he died. And one hundred years after his death not only was the Bible not defunct but the Geneva Bible Society had purchased his estate for use as their headquarters in Europe in distribute the Bible!

Throughout time, sceptics have regarded the Bible as mythological, but archaeology has confirmed it as historical. Opponents have attacked its teaching as primitive and outdated, but its moral and legal concepts and teachings have had a positive influence on societies and cultures throughout the world. It continues to be attacked by pseudo-science, psychology, and political movements, yet it remains just as true and relevant today as it was when it was first written.

It is a book that has transformed countless lives and cultures throughout the last 2000 years. No matter how its opponents try to attack, destroy, or discredit it, the Bible remains. Its veracity and impact on lives is unmistakable. The accuracy which has been preserved despite every attempt to corrupt, attack, or destroy it is clear testimony to the fact that the Bible is truly God's Word and is supernaturally protected by Him. It should not surprise us that, no matter how the Bible is attacked, it always comes out unchanged and unscathed. After all, Jesus said, "Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will

never pass away” (Mark 13:31). After looking at the evidence, one can say without a doubt that, yes, the Bible is truly God’s Word.

How amazing is that? This is where we go to be instructed and lead and anyone who contradicts it or tries to usurp it or makes it subject to something or someone else must be refuted. They must not be listened to. But positively, let us also be encouraged by the great authority that the Bible has. It is our sword and our tool for service. It leads us, guards us and equips us for all the service that God will ever ask of us.