

Scripture on Trial

The reliability of the New Testament examined

THE BOOK: THE CHALLENGE

‘The Bible’ means literally ‘The Book’; with the implication that it is unique, different from all others having no like or equal. Its very name throws down the gauntlet. A challenge that has been taken up by any who wish to attack the foundations of our faith or simply level it on a par with the world’s other religious writings. It is a challenge that we must take seriously and meet fairly.

The distinctiveness of the Bible is seen in its diversity within similarity, its contrast within harmony. It is not a single book but a library collection spanning some 1600 years (60 generations), by more than 40 authors from every walk of life. Kings, scholars, artisans and peasants, who wrote from three continents (Asia, Africa, Europe), in three languages (Hebrew, Aramaic, Greek). It is written at times of peace and war from a host of locations (e.g. desert, dungeon, palace). The Bible reflects every type of mood (e.g. joy, reflection, despair), and deals with a multitude of controversial subjects. The writings embrace a wide variety of literary types: history, law, poetry, prophecy, teaching, biography, letters and much more.

IS THE TEXT UNIQUE?: CANON

The concept of canon

The claim that the Bible is a collection of documents which are unique, divinely inspired and authoritative, immediately declares that certain writings have been included because they reach a set standard, while all others are rejected. This concept of selection and standard is called ‘canon’. The word ‘canon’ comes from an Akkadian root meaning ‘reed’; cf. Heb ‘*qāneh*’; Gk ‘*kanōn*’; Eng ‘cane’. From this came the figurative sense of a ‘rod’, especially a straight rod used as a rule. This usage is still found in the English language when defining canon as a ‘rule’ or ‘standard’, e.g. the canons of the Church of England. However, a straight rod used as a rule might well be marked in units of length; from this practice ‘*kanōn*’ came to denote a series of such marks and then to be used in a general sense as ‘series’ or ‘list’.

Before this usage in the sense of a list, ‘canon’ was used in a particular way by the church in the phrase ‘the *rule* of faith’ or ‘the *rule* of truth’. These two senses combine in our understanding of the canon of Scripture which is: *the list of books which are acknowledged to be, in a unique sense, the rule of belief and practice.*

The need of canon

Amongst both the Jews and the early Christians two factors determined the need for the construction of the canon:



- **Dispersion:** As communities became increasingly scattered geographically (through conflict, persecution and migration), and distanced by time from the oral tradition and living memory, there was a growing need to know what teaching was authoritative in terms of belief and lifestyle. The canon became a cohesive factor in Jewish and Christian community
- **Dissension:** As the communities came into contact with other ideas, and erroneous teaching developed from within accompanied by their own writings, it was essential to know which documents contained the truth as originally given. The canon became a corrective factor within the Jewish and Christian community.

The principles of canon

The foundation stone of the canon is of course faith; the belief that God has spoken and acted and that this has been authoritatively recorded in certain texts. But the selection of these texts is far from arbitrary and very strict tests and principles were applied:

- **Authoritative:** Was it written by a godly person (preferably an apostle or prophet)? Had it been received, collected, read and appealed to by God's people?
- **Authentic:** Did it speak God's word? Did it harmonise in teaching with other writings accepted? Did its message transform lives?

By contrast the apocryphal books; some 14 linked to the Hebrew scriptures and in excess of 11 linked to the New Testament, were not included as they contained:

- Ideas and practices that do not harmonise with scripture.
- Frequent pseudepigraphic styles out of keeping with scripture.
- A lack of the spiritual prophetic power of canonical books.

While recognised as having interest, and a value in being read, these books never carry the authority of those included in the canon. They are never appealed to in matters of faith or practice.

The formation of canon

The only scriptures the early Christians had were the Hebrew Scriptures (usually in the Greek translation of the Septuagint), which were read in the light of the oral tradition of Jesus' teaching that had been passed on by the apostles. These eventually took written form and were further edited into their final forms, the four documents circulating as 'the Gospel'. Paul's letters also began to be collected and circulated as 'the Apostle'. One Gospel (Luke), had a second volume (Acts), which gave much background to 'the Apostle' and so the documents began to draw together. Around this centre the other New Testament documents, seen to have authority, were added. Our earliest list, dated to 200 CE at the latest (the Muratorian canon) excludes Hebrews, James, 1 & 2 Peter and 3 John but includes the Wisdom of Solomon and the *Apocalypse of Peter*, although it recognises that



the latter is not accepted by all. Finally, it rates the *Shepherd of Hermas* very highly but, due to its recent origin, cannot be regarded as 'among the apostles'. It would appear, therefore, that clear connection to the apostles was an important criterion of canonicity. However, some debate over certain books continued. The decisive turning point came with the arrival of Christendom under Constantine.

Prior to Constantine Christians, and those who considered themselves Christians, certainly had a collection of sacred texts but these varied according to the type of Christianity on offer. For the church at this point was not 'one harmonious whole,' but consisted of various factions, each with its own scriptures and truth claims. In this period there gradually emerged a large international network of Christians who liked to refer to themselves as the 'catholic church.' But at this stage this group, although large, did not command universal assent. For example, Jewish-Christians had their preferred Gospels and anti-Trinitarian Christology; Marcionites were probably the largest group in Asia Minor and northern Syria in the late second century and their scriptures consisted of a severely truncated Gospel of Luke and Paul's letters (excluding the Pastoral Epistles); Gnostics had their own distinctive gospels, and so on. Even the scriptures of the 'catholic church' were not fixed. Eusebius, in his *Ecclesiastical History*, spells out the criteria used by the catholics to evaluate and select scripture:

As I proceed in my history, I shall carefully show with the succession of the apostles what ecclesiastical writers in their times respectively made use of any of the *disputed* writings and what opinions they have expressed, both respecting the *incorporated* and *acknowledged* writings and also what respecting those that were not of this description.¹

The criteria that Eusebius spells out here are:

- Apostolic succession. Bishops of churches where a chain of apostolic succession could be demonstrated were responsible for deciding what were appropriate scriptures.
- Use by previous ecclesiastical writers. For Eusebius this means those belonging to the catholic church. Eusebius would never use this term of Marcionites, Gnostics or Montanists, for example.
- The opinions of these writers on acknowledged and disputed texts.

Using these criteria Eusebius arrives at three categories of sacred text.² First, there are the writings acknowledged as genuine. By this he means that there has been historic, unanimous consensus. In this category he places the four Gospels, Acts, all 13 letters of Paul, Hebrews (probably), 1 John, 1 Peter and 'if proper' Revelation. Second, there are those which are disputed but known and approved by many (but

¹ Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 3.3.3. My emphasis.

² For further details see David L. Dungan, *Constantine's Bible: Politics and the Making of the New Testament* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007), 69-93.



not all). These are: James, Jude, 2 Peter and 2 & 3 John. Third, there are those which are both disputed and 'spurious' (i.e. not known or approved by many). These are: *Acts of Paul*, *Shepherd of Hermas*, *Revelation of Peter*, *Epistle of Barnabas*, *Institutions of the Apostles*, *the Gospel according to the Hebrews* and, 'if it should appear right,' Revelation. Revelation appears in both Eusebius' first and third categories. This is probably due to its widespread acceptance by the earliest ecclesiastical writers on the one hand and increasing scepticism in Eusebius' day of its apostolic authorship on the other.³

So until the time of Eusebius the catholic church operated with a relatively open-ended collection of scriptures at the core of which was a small collection universally acknowledged as genuine.

For our part, we may note especially the "open-ended" nature of his results: a small number of universally acknowledged, genuine writings, followed by another short list of disputed writings awaiting further consideration, and finally a large number of spurious, rejected writings. Like the good philosopher he was, Eusebius left the question of disputed writings at that – open to the ongoing deliberations of fellow scholars and the providence of God.⁴

However, around 331 Constantine ordered Eusebius to produce fifty new bibles for his new churches in Constantinople. The key issue after this edict was which of the disputed books would those bibles contain? For now another new phenomenon emerged under Constantine – imperially authorised bibles. It is only a short time later, in 367, that we have our current listing of 27 New Testament books in Athanasius' Festal Letter, together with the first description of them as 'canon.' Significantly, other listings from around this time contain 26 books (they exclude Revelation – the one book in our current NT that appears in Eusebius' 'disputed and spurious' list).⁵ From then on the old terminology of 'authentic,' 'disputed' and 'spurious' is replaced by the legal terminology of 'canonical' and 'non-canonical.' The first council to endorse the present canon of 27 books was the Synod of Hippo Regius in North Africa in 393. The imperially authorised bibles of 331 thus marked the decisive step towards canonical closure of the New Testament. As David Dungan so eloquently puts it: 'After Constantine's Bible had been produced, and in the tense atmosphere that followed the Council of Nicaea, what bishop would dare use a Bible in his cathedral that differed in content from one used by the bishops in

³ Dionysius, bishop of Alexandria and a contemporary of Eusebius, argued strongly that Revelation was not written by the apostle John but by another John. Eusebius quotes his argument at length in *Ecclesiastical History* 7.24-25.

⁴ Dungan, *Constantine's Bible*, 92-93 His emphasis.

⁵ Cyril of Jerusalem (c. 350); the Synod of Laodicea (c. 363); Gregory of Nazianzus (c. 389).



Constantinople? He would likely be informed upon and investigated. He could lose his office or worse!⁶

The official, imperially authorised, canon of scripture 'closed down what had been a thriving, sometimes heated, and fundamentally beneficial controversy over the authentic writings of the apostles and the correct interpretation of them.'⁷ It was not that crucial decisions were not made prior to Constantine. The catholic church of the second and third centuries was well able to reject Marcionism, Gnosticism and Montanism, for example, without the threat of violent sanctions against those considered heretical.

The role of Constantine in the closure of the canon is completely overlooked in most discussions of the canon (Dungan's book being the obvious exception).⁸ The threat of coercion and violence should make us cautious of any simplistic claims about God's providence at work in the canonical process.

'IS THE TEXT RELIABLE?': TRANSMISSION

Testing the text

The question at issue here is to what extent does the biblical text as we have it now matches the original. This is not a question that only a biblical student has to face but anyone studying literature of a past era.

Literary research has three basic principles in establishing the reliability of the text:-

- Examining the existing manuscripts.
- Questioning the internal sources.
- Listening to witnesses about the text.

These enquiries soon establish whether or not a text is reliable; therefore we must apply them to scripture.

Testing the manuscripts

Not having the original documents, reliability will depend upon the number of copies of manuscripts we have and the interval of time between the original and the copies.

⁶ Dungan, *Constantine's Bible*, 122. Duncan overstates the position as it is clear that other canonical versions persisted for some time. Nevertheless, imperial sanction would have been the decisive step on the way to canonical closure in the way he suggests.

⁷ Ibid., 120

⁸ See also Lloyd K. Pietersen, *Reading the Bible After Christendom* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster); forthcoming.



The time interval between the New Testament authors who wrote towards the end of the first century and the earliest manuscripts is about 250 to 300 years. And there are some fragments like 'John Rylands' (c. 130 CE) and 'Chester Beatty' (c. 200 CE), which close the gap to decades. In the case of equivalent Classical authors the gap is anything from 750 to 1600 years.

The text of these different manuscripts has in fact some 150,000 variations between them. However, this huge number of differences concerns mostly copy errors like spelling the order of words which are easily recognised and put right. There are only about 400 that cause any doubt and about 50 of any great significance. There is no fundamental doctrine that rests on a disputed reading, and the manuscript evidence is so vast that the reading can be restored with little or no dispute (approximately 98.33% accuracy for the New Testament as a whole)..

Testing the sources

Benefit of doubt must always be given to the document itself. There is no right to assume fraud or error unless contradictions or inaccurate facts can be revealed. The burden of proof must always rest with the person who wishes to question the authenticity and validity of the text. Difficulties and unsolved problems are not necessarily errors; we must ask:

- Have we correctly understood the passage?
- Have we understood how the words or numbers are being used?
- Have we all available knowledge on the matter?
- Have we certainty that no future textual or archaeological research can bring answers?

We must remember that many 'unsolvable' problems from the past have been resolved in recent decades.

Eyewitness reports or firsthand information make up the majority of sources. Here were the people who had seen these things happen cf. Lk 1:1-3; 3:1; Jn 19:35; Acts 26:24-26; 2Pt 1:16; 1Jn 1:3. Their own lives and those of the Christian community may be the price of the truth they proclaimed. They were careful to distinguish between their own ideas and those that are sacred (cf. 1Cor 7). If they distorted the truth even their enemies might challenge them, "We are witnesses of these things as you yourselves know" (Acts 2:22).

Oral tradition, that period between the original message and its being written down, has frequently been presented as the period when additions, expansions and therefore error could have entered the text. This is to misunderstand the nature of the oriental mind and its use of oral media:

- Writing and the work of the scribe had been an available skill for millennia; ancient oriental society was not primarily literary but oral. In matters of faith and culture there was



also importance given to the 'living' word; memorised, spoken or sung. Oral tradition had a power which fixed, elevated and gave it authority, especially when the words were seen to have a divine source

- Oral tradition was, however, vulnerable to the death and senility of the memorisers, and the scattering of the community by migration or conquest. While younger memorisers were always eager to replace older ones the oral was soon accompanied by written form; the two running side by side, checking each other, for a considerable time
- Learning by heart, memorising a teacher's actual words, condensing material into short texts, and using notebooks, were all common practice by the time of Jesus. The Rabbinic atmosphere, within which the early church grew, was one of passing on unadulterated truth to future generations. The apostles shared that same concern

Document dating in precise terms is a very difficult problem as there is often too little internal evidence to give us an exact point to fix upon:

- Exactly when the oral eye witness apostolic traditions became crystallised into written form, we cannot be fully certain. How early some of the New Testament letters were written is not clear. It has been suggested that all the New Testament writings could be dated before 70 CE as none appear to look back upon the fall of Jerusalem; this is interesting but doubtful. All are probably written before the close of the first century CE. Some may be as early as 50 CE.

Testing the witnesses

Do other historical documents from close to the period affirm the biblical writings? What are the outside voices that substantiate the accuracy, reliability and authenticity of scripture?

The New Testament finds its witnesses in the historians and writings of the early sub-apostolic age:

- **Josephus (writing c. 80-100 CE):** The writings of this aristocratic Jew who became a Roman citizen mention Jesus, John the Baptist and James the Just and so affirm their historicity from an entirely non-biblical source.
- **Clement of Rome (c. 95 CE):** This prominent and early bishop uses scripture as reliable, authentic and authoritative.



- **Papius (c. 130 CE):** This bishop of Hierapolis knew the apostle John and tells of Mark writing his Gospel based on Peter's preaching, and Matthew writing his 'logia' in Aramaic.
- **Irenaeus (c. 180 CE):** As bishop of Lyons he affirms that the authority of the four Gospels is so well established even the heretics have to accept them, but distort their meaning

Summary

Our discussion shows beyond any shadow of doubt that the biblical text is quite reliable. Whatever a person makes of the message we can be certain that the words as we have them in our hands are substantially as they were for those who had the earliest traditions and texts:

- The mass of manuscripts
- The textual continuity over large periods of time
- The authority governing oral tradition and copying
- The early and important external witnesses

'IS THE TEXT FACTUAL?': HISTORICITY

The stones cry out

Closely linked to the arguments about the trustworthiness of the biblical text in terms of its accuracy in transmission are those which take issue with its trustworthiness in terms of content and historical accuracy. While references in literature which parallel the biblical periods are of great importance, another potentially fruitful source concerning the biblical record is archaeology.

The expectations of archaeology

There is no way in which we can expect archaeology to confirm or enlighten every part of scripture. Every possible site will never be able to be excavated, added to which the particular type of evidence desired quite simply may not be there. However, there are two kinds of evidence which archaeology can uncover which confirms the text of scripture:

- **Specific confirmation:** These are finds which relate directly to a person, place or event referred to in scripture and so affirm the facts directly.
- **General confirmation:** These are finds which relate in broad harmony with the scriptural record without matching particular points precisely; it creates an atmosphere which highlights the general authenticity of scripture.



Archaeology confirming the New Testament

- **Pilate and Caesarea:** In 1961 a fragment of a Latin plaque was discovered in Caesarea speaking of 'Pontius Pilate, Prefect of Judaea' dedicating a building. Prior to this we only had the biblical record about Pilate; even Tacitus, writing much later, probably got his information from Christians.
- **Erastus and Corinth:** Paul writes Romans from Corinth and mentions that the city treasurer was a certain Erastus (cf. Rm 16:23). In 1929 a pavement in Corinth was excavated with the inscription, 'Erastus, curator of public buildings, laid this pavement at his own expense'. It dates from the first century and is likely to be the work of the man Paul mentions.
- **Lycaonia and Iconium:** Luke tells us (Acts 14:6) that Lystra and Derbe were in Lycaonia and Iconium was not. Cicero indicates that Iconium was in Lycaonia so scholars said Luke was wrong. In 1910 William Ramsay found a pillar whose inscription proved Luke right, subsequent discoveries have confirmed this.

On the other hand, archaeological confirmation can be overstated and there are areas where the accounts are probably inaccurate historically. One such case is Luke 2:2 as Quirinius was governor of Syria some time after the birth of Jesus. There was a census under Quirinius in 6 CE as described by Josephus so Luke is accurate about such a census but this cannot be tied in with the birth of Jesus. Although arguments have been made to suggest that the Greek here should be read as 'before Quirinius was governor' these are not convincing. It is more likely that Luke is making a theological point here. Josephus states that the census in 6 CE gave rise to riots under Judas the Galilean and Luke wants to emphasise the contrast between the child born in the midst of an angelic declaration of 'peace' (Luke 2:14) with the violence occasioned by the census.

'IS THE TEXT CONSISTENT?': DISCREPANCIES

The fact of discrepancies

It has always been a favourite attack of the critic of the scripture to proclaim, "Of course the Bible is full of contradictions". One would be quite foolish not to admit that on the face of it they appear to have a very strong case. In fact over 900 discrepancies within the biblical text have been catalogued; places where one scripture appears to contradict another. These claim to affect doctrinal issues, ethics and behaviour, and of course historical statements. Added to these apparent internal discrepancies there are of course the objections which are raised when we try to harmonise biblical statements with external accounts of history (already touched upon), and with modern scientific understanding. There are also those who have philosophical and spiritual objections to its message.



The nature of discrepancies

There is no way in which we can even begin to give a detailed reply to all of the above, but we can examine the nature and origin of the discrepancies in a little more detail:-

- **Different circumstances:** There may be apparent disagreement between texts like, 'God saw everything ... it was very good' (Gen 1:31) and 'The Lord repented he had made humanity' (Gen 4:6). Reading in context they refer to different situations in time and circumstance; in this case separated by the Fall!
- **Different speakers:** The words of scripture are spoken by many people; God, prophets, evildoers, Satan, and by those with particular background and insight. They will obviously make conflicting statements.
- **Different quotations:** The New Testament writers often quote the Hebrew scriptures quite differently, even in reverse form (see Eph 4:8 and Ps 68:18!). Most often this is due to their quoting the LXX or a Rabbinic midrash which was well known at the time.
- **Different perspectives:** Scripture will often speak about a topic (person or object) from quite different standpoints. Human life is like grass (Ps 103), people are little less than God (Ps 8). This apparent contradiction must be held together to get the full biblical truth.
- **Different eye witnesses:** Some accounts, like the death of Judas (Mt 27 and Acts 1) where the evidence seems to be irreconcilable is certainly two descriptions of the same event by different eye witnesses. A common phenomenon in court cases, the differences affirm the truth.
- **Different textual arrangement:** Similar material is often edited out of earlier documents and sources; as in the case of the Former Prophets, Chronicles and the Gospels particularly. This can lead to quite different presentations of the material. The purpose of the author/editor is the key to any conflict in detail.
- **Different time computation:** Dating the rule of kings, a person's age and even the hours of a day may appear to bring conflict between accounts if we are not clear whether the basis of calculation is Jewish, Assyrian, Babylonian or Roman in any given place.
- **Different idiom:** Scripture is full of poetic and oriental idiom with metaphor, hyperbole and exaggerated image as its means of communication. A 'camel through a needle's eye', a 'mountain that skips like a lamb' are more extreme examples of



a basic approach to biblical thought. The western analytical mind questions the truth of such statements and in so doing misses the Truth itself.

- **Different names:** Oriental vocabulary often has a number of different names for a similar object, and will refer to a person or place by different titles. Notice how Psalm 119 uses so many ways to refer to Torah. Israel can be a person, the whole Jewish nation or the northern kingdom (which can also be called 'Ephraim'). One apostle is called Simon, Symeon, Peter, Cephas, Simon Peter, Simon bar-Jona. One person is called Joseph, Barsabus and Justus.
- **Diverse meanings:** In all languages words can on occasion have a spectrum of meaning, either extreme sometimes appearing as opposites. Added to this words can change their meaning due to circumstances and over periods of time. Certain discrepancies can seem to present themselves as a consequence. This is an area of understanding that is constantly being addressed by linguists, and translators.
- **Difficult interpretation:** There are some passages which are a challenge to the reader just in terms of their meaning; 'The sons of God come into the daughters of mortals' (Gen 6), 'baptism for the dead' (1 Cor 15). We lack sufficient information to be able to be certain exactly what these passages mean, though it may be forthcoming in the future.
- **Difficult morality:** Numerous moral objections are made at scripture; such as 'How can a God of love command the slaughter of women and children?', 'How can those who tell lies have God's blessing?'. This is a huge subject and each case must be studied on its own. The answers will usually be found in areas of two contrasting attributes of God working out together, God's ability to use human weakness, understanding of God being limited by the culture and amount of revelation at the time.
- **Difficult manuscripts:** There are of course many errors in the biblical text which are clearly the result of mistakes in copying; this is especially true in the case of numerals and also the fact that some Hebrew consonants look very similar. We have seen that the huge numbers of manuscripts help us to overcome most problems but some do not lend themselves to an easy solution. We have to accept the fact that every manuscript error will not be resolved, but they do not alter the meaning of the whole.

The consequence of discrepancies

Scripture is a challenge to the human mind. Revelation comes out of real life circumstances. It uses many different types of media. It reflects every sort of



emotion. Scripture is not a deliberate puzzle to confuse those who want the truth, but reveals that truth cannot be reduced to a set of propositions but rather embraces the whole gamut of experience and existence. The way in which scripture is written stimulates the human intellect and excites greater enquiry. The seeming contradictions often only open the perspective wider. The discrepancies between texts show that there has been no collusion between authors, yet the harmony of ideas is greater than the difficulties.

Above all scripture is a challenge to the human spirit. It does not ask the reader to blindly accept mindless or irrational statements, but it does test whether they really want to know. The spirit stands tall above letter. If a person wishes to twist the text there is ample opportunity. It checks the integrity of the reader. The words of Jesus are so apt, 'I have come that those who are blind might see, and those that think they can see are made blind' (Jn 9:39).

Summary

It is interesting that while scripture proclaims its own inspiration it does not in fact claim to be without error. It is argued that if it is 'fully inspired' the logical conclusion is that it is without error 'as originally given'.

The Bible presents us with many difficulties at many different levels. They are not all easily resolved. Many one time obstacles have been found to have a solution; not always the one expected. The very solving of certain problems has advanced our understanding of the very nature of the Bible itself. Therefore, we must be humble and sensitive before in the face of real difficulties, but confident and affirmative that scripture has shown time and again that it can be trusted.

THE BOOK: THE CHOICE

The Bible is not a magic book, but it is an amazing book. We can be confident that the text we hold in our hands is substantially that which its writers worked upon. Added to this its story in terms of the history of the times is factual and accurate.

All that remains is to consider its claims and its message. This is the choice to be made. Many of the challenges to scripture are a real attempt to obscure the challenge it makes. If the text is unique, reliable, factual and consistent, is it in fact true?

Even on this matter we do not have to walk blind, because there is a multitude of men and women throughout history who have put its message to the test and the quality of their lives tell all the rest.

The choice has to be made. It has been well said, "It is not what I don't understand about the Bible that is a problem, its what I do understand that disturbs me!"



QUESTIONS

1. If someone said the Bible was full of contradictions how would you reply to them?
2. If someone could prove to you conclusively that there was an error in the Bible, how would it affect you and your faith?

READING & RESOURCES

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