

THE BIBLE: GOSPEL OR GARBAGE?

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Read Luke 1:1-4.

Introduction: gospel or garbage?

The title of this will divide people. Some will be shocked that such a question is even asked. These people, like me, have been brought up to think of the Bible as the Word of God: who would call it garbage? In spite of that, there are plenty of people who have little time for it. Here's how Richard Dawkins wrote about it in *The God Delusion*:

...a chaotically cobbled-together anthology of disjointed documents, composed, revised, translated, distorted and 'improved' by hundreds of anonymous authors, editors and copyists, unknown to us and mostly unknown to each other, spanning nine centuries.

Or what about this, from a Guardian writer in August 2007:

Contrary to popular belief, the Bible is not a good book. I'm not talking in a moral sense and it's not my purpose to discuss its malign social influence, scientific absurdity, historical implausibility and the rather sordid origins of Christian orthodoxy.

And that's not even to mention Dan Brown and his *Da Vinci Code*. Here are the words that he puts in the mouth of his character, Leigh Teabing who is portrayed as some kind of expert in ancient writings.

"The Bible did not arrive by fax from heaven." (Actually, he's right about this!)

"The Bible is a product of man, ... Not of God. The Bible did not fall magically from the clouds. Man created it as a historical record of tumultuous times and it has evolved through countless translations, additions and revisions. History has never had a definitive version of the book."

He goes on to claim that more than 80 gospels were considered for inclusion in the New Testament and that "the Bible, as we know it today, was collated by the pagan Roman emperor, Constantine the Great.

So what's the truth about this? That's what we want to look at. We'll do so by asking four very basic questions about the Bible. Some of these questions will feel for some of you as though you are being taken back to primary school: you've had answers to these questions for a long time. Others of you might still be thinking of the title of this talk and wondering where you will come out. Stay tuned.

1. What is the Bible?
2. Why should we pay any attention to it?
3. Is it reliable?
4. What is its message?

What is the Bible?

We tend to think of the Bible as a book, but it might be more accurate to think of it as a collection, or a library of books. The collection was written by over 40 authors over a

period of approximately 1500 years. It is divided into two main parts: the Old Testament, which is made up of 39 books and the New Testament which is made up of 27 books. The OT looks ahead to the time of Christ; the NT tells his story and the story of the decades immediately after.

Some of the writers were well educated people. Some were peasants. Some books were even written by kings. There are stories of war and of love. There are heroes and cowards. Some people behave nobly and others behave in cowardly and deceitful ways. Heroes turn out to be men with clay feet. Some of the books are primarily history, some are biography, some are poetry; some have visions that might almost make a 21st century reader think she was reading science-fiction. Some of the books are books of detailed records of regulations or lists of people.

But while its individual parts can be so different, together the book presents a common theme. It is like a giant jigsaw puzzle with many differently shaped parts that holds together to tell one great story. It is many stories but it is one story.

Despite what Richard Dawkins says about the many writers and the period of time, part of the fascination of the Bible is the way it actually holds together. The two parts are like a two act play.

I want to say more later about the message of this one great story, but for now I just want you to understand some general observations about the Bible, but also to notice that the Bible's unity in spite of its diversity is something that we should pay attention to.

And that leads me to the second question.

Why should we pay any attention to it?

Let me suggest three reasons.

For one thing the Bible has had a huge influence on our culture.

Here is what someone wrote in a review of a book on the history and influence of the Bible in English.

To attempt a history of the Bible in English is little short of attempting a history of everything the English-speaking peoples have ever been or done. (...) So central has the Bible in English been to the English imagination, at least since the 16th century, that little of the way they have written or thought, or made their political arrangements, conducted their business or governed their families is intelligible outside the context which the Bible provides.

The Bible, at least until the 20th century, was the code-book and encyclopaedia by which life as a whole was to be controlled and where all answers were to be found.

When you think about it, there are many terms and expressions that we use in everyday language that are biblical expressions.

Think about someone "selling his birthright"; or "turning the other cheek". What about someone who is a "Job's comforter"? What about the vision of beating swords into ploughshares? Or turning the other cheek? And have you ever described someone as "the salt of the earth"?

Richard Dawkins, of all people, in his *God Delusion*, includes a long list of phrases or expressions that have been inspired by the Bible. He also mentions someone who has counted over 1300 biblical references in the works of William Shakespeare.

From a simply cultural point of view, it is worth knowing the Bible.

Similarly from a historical point of view. This book is a great survivor. It remains a widely published and widely read book, despite its age. Do you know of any other book of similar age that is so widely circulated in so many languages around the world? I don't imagine that you will take a course here at the university where you will study an older book (especially since Latin has been done away with - you won't come close)!

If you have never read it, there are two good reasons to do so.

But the Bible makes a claim for itself that, if true, would mean we would have to pay attention to it. It claims to be the word of God.

You find this claim expressed in different ways across different parts of the book.

Some of the writers say things like "the word of the Lord came ..."

If you read the first chapter of Jeremiah, for example, you will see what I mean.

You get a similar expression in the prophecy of Ezekiel or of Isaiah or Haggai. These men claimed that their messages did not originate with themselves; they came from God.

When you go to the New Testament you find Jesus discussing marriage in Matthew 19. He quotes directly from the book of Genesis, but he does attribute the statement he quotes to Moses or even just to the book of Genesis.

"Have you not read that he who created them from the beginning made them male and female, and said, 'Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh'?"

Where did these words originate? Not with Moses, or even Adam; in Jesus' view they originated with God.

On the basis of those few references you can see this claim emerging. While it is true that the Bible had human authors - it was not simply written by the finger of God - the claim is that God is the Bible's ultimate author. Human authors wrote the words, but what they were producing was the word of God.

The technical word that Christians often use to describe this is "inspiration". You will hear people say that the Bible is the inspired word of God.

Probably the passage that Christians look to most often when they talk about this is this one, in 2 Timothy 3:14-17:

But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it and how from childhood you have been acquainted with the sacred writings, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be competent, equipped for every good work.

The term "inspiration" comes from an older English translation of that verse which says that Scripture was given by inspiration of God. I am glad that newer translations have moved away from that term because it is confusing in the 21st century.

You might read a newspaper report on a football match and discover that the game turned on the inspired performance of some individual or other. Or you might spend an evening listening to an inspiring symphony concert. The danger is that we start to think that the inspiration of the Bible meant that the writers were really pumped up and at the height of their creative powers when they wrote.

But that is not what we are saying.

For one thing, the point is not that the writers were inspired; it is the Scriptures – the writings of the Bible that were inspired. They were inspired by God. Or, as the modern translations put it, these Scriptures were God-breathed. This is the word of God.

But that ought to raise a question: What role did the human authors have in the composition of the Bible? Were they just like human dictating machines? Did God just ask them to write down what he said to them?

We might think that that must be what happened, but it is not the full picture. In fact, you'll find the process happening in several ways.

- God speaks directly to the writer. Example: creation story.
- Witnesses. Example: Resurrection and Jesus' miracles.
- Copied from others/handed down from eyewitnesses. Example: Luke.
- God speaks directly to the prophets.

God used different means, but the end result was his word.

...God's providential oversight and direction of the life of each author was such that their personalities, their backgrounds and training, their abilities to evaluate events in the world around them, their access to historical data, their judgement with regard to the accuracy of information, and their individual circumstances when they wrote, were all exactly what God wanted them to be, so that when they actually came to the point of putting pen to paper, the words were fully their own words but also fully the words that God wanted them to write, words that God would also claim as his own.

Is it reliable?

But someone might still wonder if what we have in our hands is reliable. After all it is an old book. It was not written in English - certainly not 21st century English. It has been translated many times and before that its manuscripts have been handed down across many generations. In fact, we don't have any of the original manuscripts today. Anything that we have in the original languages is a copy. So what if what was originally written has been changed over the years?

Arguments like this are very popular today.

Think back to the words that Dan Brown puts into the mouth of his character, Leigh Teabing. He reckoned it was a human book that had been put together by Constantine and that it has been revised and added to over the years. If he's right, we would not be wise to trust it.

But there are several things that you need to know about the New Testament.

1. It is the best preserved document of its kind from the ancient world. Two key elements of this are the sheer number of different manuscripts, and the fact that some of them are dated quite close to the writing of the originals. Both of those aspects are very important. The more copies you have, the more likely you are to be able to get an accurate picture of the original. And of course the earlier the date, the closer you get to the original.
2. There are writings that are dated in the second half of the first century - around 160-180 AD. One of them, by an early church leader, talks about 4 gospels; the other, the Muratorian Fragment, refers to Luke as the third book of the gospel.

3. There is evidence that the gospels were written in the first century, in other words in the decades immediately following the events of the life of Jesus. If they had been written 200 years later, when all the eyewitnesses were dead, they could have written legends, they could have made up stories and sayings. To write in the few decades after Jesus was to write in the knowledge that there were people around who could blow the whistle on you if you lied.
4. A renowned 20th century British scholar called FF Bruce reckoned that the NT was substantially complete by around 100 AD.
5. Beyond the gospels you have the writings of Paul which again were just a few years after Jesus' death and resurrection. Paul wrote about the resurrection of Jesus when there were still many witnesses alive. When he wrote that, you could look up a witness and get confirmation of what you read. Notice that there are good reasons to put them all in the first century: in other words, written just a few decades after the death of Jesus. If you want to know the truth about Jesus, and you want to look in some of the earliest Christian records, look at the four gospels (and they were not even the earliest documents to be written in the New Testament.)

I realise that I have just talked here about the New Testament, in particular the gospels and not the Old Testament. However once you start to come to terms with the reliability of the New Testament and its witness to Jesus, you find that a lot of the rest falls into place. You can read what Jesus said about the Old Testament. He quoted from it. He even said that not the slightest because of the confidence that Jesus demonstrated in the Old Testament. Jesus' attitude then becomes a major reason for trusting the Bible.

And in terms of the later parts of the New Testament, they are written by people who were commissioned by Jesus and whose authority was recognised in the church.

So is it reliable? Yes. Are there parts of it that are hard to understand? Yes. Are there great debates about some of the things it teaches? Yes. But we can trust it.

What is its message?

And that takes us to the 4th question. What is its message?

I said earlier that while there are many stories. There are many things that we can learn from the many stories. We can learn what faith in God looks like. We can learn what God himself is like. We can learn about foolish things we should avoid and about wise things we should seek to cultivate. But we need to know that these stories are part of one big story.

It all starts with the story of God making the universe and putting people on Planet Earth. As it continues it unfolds the story of how those people have related to God and how God has related to them: it is the story of human rebellion and sin and God's plan to do something about it – a plan whose central role is occupied by his Son Jesus. Simply put, the Old Testament looks forward to his coming and sets the stage; the New Testament describes and interprets what he did when he came.

The Bible is about Jesus.

That was Jesus' own understanding of it. He said, "The Scriptures bear witness about me." The questions that the Bible verbalises, the hopes that it raises, the pain that it recognises, the longings that it describes are answered in Jesus.

It is about Jesus.

It's important to remember that, and keep that at the centre. Because it is possible to get hung up on all kinds of other issues. Don't let your hang-ups with some of the fringe areas distract you from the central theme.

Conclusion: dynamite.

Let me end this with a statement from Mahatma Gandhi:

You Christians look after a document containing enough dynamite to blow all civilisation to pieces, turn the world upside down, and bring peace to a battle-torn planet. But you treat it as though it is nothing more than a piece of literature.

That's quite a statement to come from someone who was not a professing Christian. Many of you are professing Christians. What are you going to do about it?

We need to leave here with a "so what?" question in our minds. If indeed this book is gospel, and not garbage, what part is it going to have in our lives? If God has spoken in this book, what kind of attention will we give to what he says?

Will you treat it as seriously as your required reading lists? Or do those books get your concentration because there are assignments and exams at the end?

And will you allow it to have authority over your life and behaviour? Actually it's not simply about making the Bible your guidebook for life, though that is not a bad thing: it's about doing what God asks you.

These are years when you have time and mental energy to give yourself to this.