

The Battle for the Bible

One of the things non-Christians often say about Christians is that they are naive to believe the Bible in today's modern world. The Bible is full of myths and legends, written thousands of years ago and now disproved by science and modern knowledge. Why would you follow that ancient out-of-touch book in today's fast moving 21st century enlightened society?

It's as if we are in a Battle for the Bible! Christians are the only ones who believe it. Most of the modern world is against us.

I think it's good from time to time for us to have a look at a basic question like "Why do we believe the Bible is God's Word?", so that we are able to refute those who criticise us, and so we know our faith rests on a solid foundation.

So let's look at the question of "Can we believe the Bible?" I'd like to look at 7 reasons we can be sure it is the Word of God, and something we can confidently base our whole life on.

1. The Unity of the Bible

The Bible isn't really just one book, but a library of 66 different volumes, written by more than 40 authors who lived over a span of 1500 years. These writers lived in 10 countries on 3 continents, and represented 20 different occupations, from farmers and fishermen to statesmen and kings. They wrote in a variety of styles, from history and law to poetry and romance. The subject matter contains many controversial subjects capable of strongly opposing opinions. Yet the book has a remarkable consistency and unity throughout. It is bound together as one whole, with intricate themes interwoven all the way through it.

Imagine taking say half a dozen authors from just one country, New Zealand, and giving them just one controversial subject, such as whether euthanasia should be legalised. How much harmony and agreement would result? But take any subject you like, including difficult matters of morality and ethics, and the Bible contains statements all through it that add up to a harmonious picture. All the way through, it has one consistent central message, and even the minor details are all in alignment. It begins with a garden, a river, a tree of life and an invitation, and ends, many hundreds of pages (and years) later, with a garden, a river, a tree of life and an invitation!

2. Historical reliability

Thousands (not just hundreds!) of archaeological discoveries have verified things written in the Bible. Many of these finds have been catalogued in books such as *The Bible as History*, by Werner Keller. *Halley's Bible Handbook* includes a chapter listing discovery after discovery that corroborates the Bible writings.

Christianity Today publishes a list of the top 10 discoveries every year affirming the Bible's details about events and people.

Some of these findings have really confounded the critics. For example, it used to be claimed that the Hittites mentioned in the Bible never existed -- until the archaeologists found their capital and records in Turkey.

It was also claimed there was no Assyrian king named Sargon as recorded in Isaiah, because this name was not known in any other record. Then Sargon's palace was discovered in Iraq.

Another king who was in doubt was Belshazzar, king of Babylon, named in the book of Daniel. The last king of Babylon was Nabonidus, according to recorded history. But then tablets were found showing that Belshazzar was Nabonidus's son who served as coregent in Babylon.

One of the greatest archaeologists of all time, Sir William Ramsay, set out to prove the books of Luke and Acts were unreliable, but after 30 years of study he concluded that "Luke is a historian of the first rank; not merely are his statements of fact trustworthy...this author should be placed along with the very greatest of historians."

Another great archaeologist, William Albright, stated: "There can be no doubt that archaeology has confirmed the substantial historicity of Old Testament tradition. The excessive skepticism shown toward the Bible... has been progressively discredited. Discovery after discovery has established the accuracy of innumerable details, and has brought increased recognition to the value of the Bible as a source of history."

Nelson Glueck, a renowned Jewish archaeologist, wrote: "It may be stated categorically that no archaeological discovery has ever contradicted a biblical reference."

Not only archaeology, but also the writing of many historians backs up what was written in the Bible. For instance, the famous Jewish historian, Josephus, who was born in 37AD, wrote about "Jesus, a wise man, a doer of wonderful works", and recorded his crucifixion and resurrection.

A number of other non-Christian writers of the first and second centuries also wrote about Christ and the Christians, including Cornelius Tacitus, Plinius Secundus, Suetonius, Eusebius, Papias, Irenaeus and Marcus Aurelius. Thousands of eyewitnesses of Jesus' life were still alive when the New Testament was circulated, but we have no knowledge of anyone refuting the writings as "fairy tales".

If someone wrote a book today saying that New Zealand's former Prime Minister, David Lange had been resurrected after his death, there would be lots of people around to deny it!

3. Scientific Accuracy

Amazingly, the Bible referred to many facts hundreds or even thousands of years before scientists recorded them. For example, the Old Testament, 2000 years ago described the circulation of the atmosphere and the hydrologic water cycles of the weather (Job 36:26-29; Eccl 1:6-7), the suspension of the earth in space (Job 26:7), the spherical shape of the earth (Isa 40:22), the countless number of stars (Gen 15:5), the importance of blood circulation (Lev 17:14), and many ground-breaking principles of good health.

Do you have too many grey hairs? Would you like to do something about it? How about this for a recipe: "To prevent the hair from turning grey, anoint it with the blood of a black calf which has been boiled in oil, or with the fat of a rattlesnake." This recipe comes from the famous *Papyrus Ebers*, a medical book written in Egypt in about 1552 B.C. Other remedies found in the *Papyrus Ebers* include lizards' blood, swine's teeth, putrid meat, stinking fat, moisture from pigs' ears and human excreta.

The biblical writer Moses lived in Egypt at about the time the *Papyrus Ebers* were written, but the principles of health and hygiene he recorded in the Bible have proved to be far ahead of their time, principles that are still valid today!

For example, Moses' writings provide for the careful disposal of human waste underground (Deut 23:13). But in 18th century Europe human excrement was regularly

cast into the streets of cities, giving rise to epidemics of typhoid, cholera and dysentery. One instruction recorded thousands of years earlier in the Bible pointed the way to deliverance from those scourges! The use of other principles of quarantine and sanitation outlined in the Bible also led to the control of the dreaded diseases of leprosy and bubonic plague, which had killed millions of people in Europe.

In the 1840's Dr Ignaz Semmelweis began instructing those in the Vienna hospital where he worked to wash their hands thoroughly after patient examinations. There was a storm of protest at this "nuisance", but the mortality rate at the hospital started reducing immediately. Opponents of his ideas attacked him fiercely, and it was only after his death that it became recognised that he was right! But thousands of years earlier, God had given Moses instructions about cleansing the hands under running water after handling the dead, or infected living patients (Numb 19).

In relatively recent years the medical profession has warned against the build up of cholesterol in our veins since it may cause clogging and a heart attack. A major source of cholesterol is animal fat. Centuries ago, Moses spoke against the eating of fat. (Lev 3:17)

The very first sentence of the Bible says, "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth". It is instructive to compare this statement with the writings of other ancient cultures.

According to the Egyptians, the earth hatched from a winged egg, and men originally emerged from worms found in the slime of the Nile after the annual rains. When the Bible was written the Hindus taught that the world was flat and rested on the back of an elephant. The elephant stood on the back of a great tortoise, and what that rested on they didn't venture to suggest! Later, among the Greek philosophers, it was taught that Atlas, one of the giants, or Titans, who warred with Zeus, was condemned to support the heavens, bearing the world on his neck and shoulders.

It's fascinating to look up "Mythology" on the internet or in an encyclopaedia and read about the way the ancients of all civilisations believed in gods of the sun, moon and stars, the sea god, the forest god, the god of war, and so on. Thor made thunder by throwing a hammer at his enemies, Maui pulled up the "fish" of the North Island when he was in a boat, which became the South Island. The Bible doesn't contain *any* legends like this. Yet many people have called the Bible "mythology"!

4. Preservation and survival

Critics question how the Bible could have been accurately transmitted down through the centuries. Is the Bible which I own and read today the real Bible? Or has it been distorted? How can I believe the Bible if I do not even know if it is accurate?

The Bible was written on perishable material such as papyrus and animal skins. It was copied and recopied hundreds of times to preserve it throughout history, because there weren't any printing presses or computer discs in Old Testament times! But it was transmitted down through the generations in a unique way, and has been preserved much more accurately than any other ancient document.

The scriptures were very important to the Jews—being in effect their national law and constitution—so they guarded them with great care. They had special classes of men who kept tabs on every letter, syllable and word. The Talmudists who preserved the text had rules including the following: "A roll must be written on the skins of clean animals, the length of each column must not extend less than 48 or more than 80 lines, the breadth must consist of 30

letters. No word or letter must be written from memory, the scribe not having looked at the codex before him...Between every consonant the space of a hair or thread must intervene. Should a king address him while writing he must take no notice of him."

There was a complex system of safeguards against scribal slips. They counted the number of times each letter of the alphabet occurs in each book, numbered the verses, words and letters of every book, calculated the middle word and middle letter of each, and so on.

So what we have is very accurate. And also, there are lots of copies, in fact about 25,000 manuscript copies (handwritten prior to the invention of printing) of the New Testament extant today. It is revealing to compare this with other ancient documents. Herodotus, known as "the father of history", wrote in about 450BC, but only 8 manuscripts of his work have survived. Caesar's *Gallic Wars* was written about 50 BC and only 10 manuscripts have survived. So it is with all of the ancient writers; only a handful of copies of their work have survived.

William Shakespeare wrote 37 plays in the 17th century. Not even one original manuscript has survived, and so the missing gaps in the copies of his works were filled in with "educated guesses" of textual scholars. There are differing documents of each of Shakespeare's plays, with items in dispute that materially affect the meanings of the passages involved. But the Bible only has a few disputed textual readings, none of them affecting any doctrines or important details.

But there are a remarkable 25,000 manuscript copies of the New Testament, the oldest dating from around 125 AD, only 50 years after it was written!

The greatest indication of how accurately the Bible has been preserved came in 1947 with the discovery of the Dead Sea scrolls in a cave near Jericho. These scrolls of the Old Testament had been hidden there for nearly 1900 years. Scholars waited with baited breath to see what the results would reveal when they were matched up with the manuscripts that had already been found. Amazingly, they proved to be almost exactly the same, with just minor spelling differences. The Dead Sea scrolls are dramatic evidence that the Bible has been accurately preserved down through the centuries.

No other book has withstood more vicious enemy efforts to stamp it out than the Bible. In AD 303 the Emperor Diocletian issued an edict to stop Christians from worshipping and to destroy their scriptures. All meeting places were destroyed, the property of Christians confiscated, and Bibles burned. Anyone found with a copy of the Bible received a death sentence. Believe it or not, just 25 years later the new Emperor, Constantine, instructed that 50 copies of the scriptures should be prepared at the expense of the Government!

The French literary genius Voltaire, who died in 1778, scoffed that 100 years after his time Christianity would have been swept from existence and the Bible would only exist in museums. Ironically, only 50 years after his death the Geneva Bible Society used his press and house to produce stacks of Bibles!

5. Honesty and character

The Bible is disarmingly candid in describing the lives of its heroes and heroines. It doesn't try to cover up their problems. King David of Israel is recorded as being a murderer, adulterer and liar. Peter, one of Jesus' closest disciples and a leader of the Church, is famous for publicly denying his Lord three times. Discord and troubles in the early churches are openly admitted.

If the Bible writers were trying to encourage people to believe and follow something they had invented, it is very unlikely they would be so open about the problems. And it is difficult to

believe so many of them would have died, often in excruciating agony, for what was just an invention!

The quality and character of the Bible's moral and ethical teaching is another strong evidence of divine inspiration. The Bible has formed the basis for much of our western world's legal system. Whether we read the Ten Commandments, the wisdom of the Proverbs, or Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, there is a clear standard of moral conduct presented that is timeless in its principles.

6. Fulfilled prophecies

Suppose you were asked what you think world conditions will be like 2000 years from now, around the year 4000. Do you reckon you could make a pretty good guess? Will a nuclear war have destroyed everything by then, or will we be living on other planets? Who has a hope of knowing what will be happening at that time? It's hard enough to predict next week's weather, let alone conditions 2000 years away!

Yet 2000 years ago the Bible delivered stunningly accurate predictions of trends and events now occurring worldwide. At a time when the most powerful weapon was a two edged sword or a battering ram, Jesus Christ forecast that mankind would develop the capability to destroy all human life. (Matt 24:22).

He prophesied wars and rumours of wars, famines and earthquakes in different places, and predicted that the Christian gospel would be published all over the world. He said that many people would be hated, persecuted and killed because of him, and that is exactly what has happened and is happening in many places around the world right now. If Jesus was an ordinary human being, that would be a very egotistical claim to make!

But Jesus didn't only *make* prophecies – He *fulfilled* them too! And not just one prophecy, but literally *hundreds* of them!

A prophecy by Micah in about 700 BC predicted Christ would be born in Bethlehem. Isaiah's prophecy of 650-750 BC said he would be born of a virgin. And a prophecy made almost 2000 years before he was born, saying he would come from the tribe of Judah, was right on the button! (Gen 49:8).

Other prophecies said he would enter Jerusalem riding on a colt, he would be sold for 30 pieces of silver, which would be used to buy a potter's field, lots would be cast for his garments, his hands and feet would be pierced, and he would be raised from the dead.

Amazingly, Jesus fulfilled well over 300 Old Testament prophecies. How likely is it that this happened just by chance? Peter Stoner, in the book *Science Speaks*, used the science of probability to determine that the chance of one man fulfilling 48 of the prophecies was calculated at 1 in 10^{157} , an almost infinite number!

It was clearly impossible for Jesus to deliberately go about fulfilling all of these prophecies. Firstly, he would have had to ensure he was born of a virgin! As if that wasn't hard enough, he would have to be sure it happened in Bethlehem, and of the line of David. Then, somehow he would need to engineer his crucifixion and burial in a rich man's tomb!

There are lots of other Bible prophecies we haven't considered yet. A number of prophets accurately foretold the destruction of various cities and the rise and fall of empires. Imagine the difficulty of predicting the destruction of a city such as Auckland, and outlining exactly how and when. This is what a number of Bible prophets did, in the case of ancient cities such as Tyre, Sidon, Samaria, Petra, Nineveh, and Babylon, and it can be shown that the prophecies were fulfilled in remarkable detail.

7. Personal experience.

But the most telling reason Christians believe the Bible is true is that they have practiced what it says, and have found that it works!

One thing the prophet Isaiah said about humanity was that “they do not know the way of peace”(Isa 59:8). This has certainly proved to be an accurate statement over the many centuries since it was written.

The New Testament boldly asserts that “There is none righteous, not even one”. This is also a true statement – we have all fallen short of God’s standards and need forgiveness and help. And the Bible offers solutions to this problem, answers that have worked for millions of Christians. They have experienced the fact that if biblical principles are followed they bring peace of mind, amazing joy and transformation to people’s lives.

The Bible presents a code of excellent spiritual laws, exhorting love, purity, peace, honesty and faith. Millions of Christians have tried to live by these principles, and although no one is able to keep them perfectly, the Bible promises help for those who try to follow them, and people report that this really does happen. Millions of lives have been changed for the better because of the teachings of the Bible. And they have all been changed in very similar ways. Christians who believe in and try to follow the Bible all report that their lives are happier and more meaningful as a result! Thousands of criminals have reformed, drug addicts have been cured, selfish people have become generous – lives have been transformed by the scriptures! The Bible talks about benefits that arise from a personal relationship with God, and for those who have experienced this, no further proof of the Bible is needed!

So these are some of the reasons we can believe with absolute confidence that the Bible is true. Any one of these can stand on its own as a strong argument, but when you add all seven of them together, it makes an extremely powerful case! In the Battle for the Bible, we win! It is hard for the enemy to stand against the huge amount of evidence that this is God’s Word, and we can stake our lives on it!