

Why Believe the Bible?

Is the Bible true from cover to cover? How do we know it's really God's Word? And why are there so many translations?

*We took these and other questions to New Testament professor **Gary Burge** for some straight talk about the Bible.*

interview by Martin Cockroft

What exactly is the Bible?

The Bible is the collected writings of people who knew God over many centuries. But more than that, as Christians we understand that God has spoken through these people.

Some Bible books recite what God has done in people's lives—like 1 and 2 Kings. Other books, like Isaiah, show God speaking directly to us through the voice of a prophet. Isaiah doesn't just reflect on his personal experiences with God. He speaks *for* God, and God actually speaks *through* him. And the New Testament Gospel writers have Jesus speaking directly to us.

How did the Bible come about?

Centuries ago, Jews and Christians had to settle which writings were inspired by God and which weren't. But there were many more writings floating around than we now have in our Bible.

The Jewish community met about A.D. 90 to decide which writings were authoritative. The books of Moses? No question. The great prophets? No debate. But other books were discussed more. The collection of writings that was selected is what we now call the Old Testament.

Christians had a harder time coming up with the New Testament, because early Christianity was an underground movement; Christians couldn't even hold public meetings until the 4th century. But 2nd-century bishops (overseers of groups of churches) were already writing to individual churches saying, "Read these books, don't read those books"—even before there was an "official" New Testament. So, there were already books considered authentic and books considered fraudulent.

How did the church decide which books were authentic and which were frauds?

It boils down to two issues: historical credibility and spiritual benefit.

Historical credibility simply means asking, "Does an apostle—one of the 12 disciples or Paul, for instance—stand behind this writing?" Matthew was an apostle, and he was with Jesus, so his book holds a lot of weight. Mark wasn't an apostle, but he worked with Peter, and Peter was with Jesus; that's why Mark's book holds weight.

Many books claimed "apostolic connection," but some of those claims—like the Gospel of Thomas—were fraudulent. Which brings up the spiritual benefit issue. Wise bishops in the early church examined these writings and asked: "Is Thomas really the author? Does this writing reflect the spiritual and theological commitments of the other books?" With the Gospel of Thomas, the answer was "no" on both counts.

Why are there so many translations of the Bible?

Translators want to reflect the original Greek and Hebrew as accurately as they can, but in a way that communicates clearly. It might be that one Greek word really should be translated as three English words.

Some translations, like the New American Standard (NAS), give an almost one-for-one correspondence between Hebrew and English or Greek and English. You can set a NAS right next to a Greek text and follow along quite closely.

But the New Living Translation, on the other hand, attempts to represent the heart and soul of the original languages, even though the sentence structure might be different from the original.

What does it mean to say the Bible is "true"?

Partly, it means the Bible is factual. It successfully and accurately records historical events.

But truth goes beyond accuracy. Something can be true factually, but have no real significance. I could tell you how many buttons are on the shirt I'm wearing right now, but who cares?

The Bible has real significance. When I say the Bible is true, I'm saying it explains life in a way that is beyond question. The Bible says something profound about human experience.

Does modern science disprove Bible miracles like the crossing of the Red Sea and Jesus' resurrection?

No, although many people are critical of the Bible because it records events that seem fantastic, the stuff of fairy tales. But I think this discussion is less about what the Bible records than about our beliefs concerning the nature of reality.

Most people believe in a God. Most people believe God was involved in the creation of the world. And most people would say God is bigger than the world itself. So why are they skeptical of supernatural events?

If God created the world, doesn't it make sense that he'd be interested in what goes on in the world? And if God is bigger and more powerful than all creation, and he steps into the world, wouldn't people be dazzled by what he does? Fantastic events are possible. Miracles can happen. You can't just disqualify them.

What sets the Bible apart from other great religious writings?

Christians believe the Bible is unique for a number of reasons. The problem is, most of those reasons only work for Christians; they're not very convincing reasons to non-Christians.

Take personal experience, for instance. Throughout the history of the Church, the Bible has had the power to transform lives. But Islam makes the same claim about its scriptures, the Qur'an.

Another "proof" I often hear is, "Jesus fulfilled so many Old Testament prophecies that it couldn't be an accident." If you use that in your high school classroom, you'll get hammered, because skeptics will just rearrange the timeline. The Old Testament prophecies that the Messiah will be born in Bethlehem; non-Christians will say that after

Jesus was born, Matthew added Bethlehem to his book to make sure the prophecy was fulfilled.

Here's something about the Bible that I think holds water with non-Christians: The Bible wasn't put together in secret; it was a very public process. People have been able to closely examine its claims all along, even to this day. And Christians welcome that kind of scrutiny, because we know our Bible can stand up to it.

That's not true of The Book of Mormon. Mormons don't want that kind of scrutiny and historical research. Same thing with the Qur'an. Historical, critical study of the Qur'an is something Islam doesn't want to do. But the Bible is very much an "open book."

Another thing: We have multiple Greek manuscripts for the New Testament. The Bible wasn't written by just one person, like the Book of Mormon, where Joseph Smith claimed to have found the Mormon scriptures on golden tablets that he miraculously translated.

The Bible contains many points of view. Four people tell me the story of Jesus, stories that were open to the public even in that day. People could read the stories and react to them. The life of Christ was evaluated, studied and examined by the people who had lived when Jesus lived, and could verify the accuracy of those stories. And to me, that's a valuable difference.

Is the Bible still the best way to get to know God?

It's still the best way, because human experience is timeless. People who lived in 100 B.C. struggled with the same personal issues we struggle with today. The task of 20th-century teachers and preachers is to look at the struggles of people in Bible times, and make a bridge to modern times.

An example: Substance abuse is a timeless issue. As a teacher today, I need to ask myself, "How might the issue of substance abuse apply to today's world?"

Of course, the issue is as relevant today as ever, even though the Bible does not refer to crack, heroin, pot or a six-pack. How could it? But once I make an allowance for culture and time, the Bible comes alive for me.

Is the Bible really inspired, just because it claims to be? If a person claims to be George Washington, that doesn't make him George Washington, no matter how sincerely he claims it.

But I could investigate him pretty carefully to find out whether or not he's really George Washington. That's really not hard to do.

In a similar way, I can do historical research on the Bible to find out if it's reliable. When Luke talks about sailing a ship from Troas to Neapolis in the Book of Acts, does he know what he's talking about? Yes, he does.

Proving that the Bible is inspired—"God-breathed" is literally what it says in 2 Timothy 3:16—is more difficult. I believe the Bible is inspired. When I read the Bible, I often sense something resonating in my own spirit. That's compelling, and that gives me confidence.

But non-believers may not find that to be true. A skeptic whose heart isn't in the right place probably won't be receptive to the words of the Bible.

The Bible isn't magic. You can't simply read it and expect it to show itself as inspired.

How do you deal with doubts like, "Maybe I only think the Bible is the Word of God because I've spent my whole life in church. Maybe if I opened my eyes, I'd see it's all a sham."

The first thing you need to know is that it's OK to have doubts. The second thing is that you're not alone; many Christians have had the same doubts. The third thing is that there are answers. The Christian leaders around you should be able to help you work through your doubts. And beyond that, there are excellent books that will answer your questions. (See "[Want to Know More?](#)" below.)

Finally, test the Bible for yourself. Ask God to speak to you through his Word. Encounter the Bible on your own. You can't inherit somebody else's experience. You've got to have an authentic experience for yourself.

That's not something you can force, but as you struggle with the Bible, I do believe God will reveal himself. And once he does, you'll have confidence in his Word. It's a part of stepping out of your parents' or grandparents' faith and saying, "This faith is now mine."

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