

What We Believe...About The Bible (Part 1)

II Timothy 3:10-15

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In II Timothy 3:14,15 the Apostle Paul advises his protégé Timothy “[14] But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of, because you know those from whom you learned it, [15] and how from infancy you have known *the holy Scriptures*, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus.” It’s obvious, isn’t it, that Paul is very aware of, and is sure Timothy is very familiar with, a body of religious writings called “the holy Scriptures”. By their time in history, it wasn’t the case that people were somehow writing books that some here and some there thought sounded divine and then a religious council sat down, sifted through them and picked what *they thought* should be considered the “Holy Scriptures”.

The “Holy Scriptures” Paul speaks of were what we refer to today as the OT, and they were called “holy” not because some council labeled them that but because they were recognized commonly by God’s people as having a divine origin and so divine authority, which was to be obeyed.

In our day, many people reject this notion of a divinely authored book called the Bible. Atheists, for example don’t believe God exists and so Scripture is nothing more than fairy tales. Even for many who call themselves Christians, there is a firm suspicion that the Bible is *not* divine, that it is the work of human, fallible authors and that it has been sanctioned by human, fallible religious leaders who have imposed it on the rest of us. For them, the Bible may contain some good principles but it’s filled with errors and contradictions and outmoded ways of thinking. At best, the Bible it’s the creation of unenlightened minds who needed to manufacture a higher being to comfort them in the midst of life’s uncertainties. At worst, the Bible is the product of religious people who have attempted to control and repress others by setting out a system of beliefs which must be obeyed.

You may hear some form of the following: “The Bible is a bunch of fairy tales. It can’t be trusted. It’s unprovable. Wasn’t it just written by a bunch of men? And didn’t a bunch of church leaders just pick and choose what was included in it, and what wasn’t? Doesn’t belief in the Bible all come down to a matter of faith? And so how can anyone say for sure if it’s the Word of God?”

Perhaps you’ve asked those very questions. Admittedly, belief that the Bible is the Word of God does rest on faith. But not blind faith. When you get into an elevator car, you can’t see the cables and other safety mechanisms that keep it from falling. You take it on faith that they’re there and get into the elevator to be carried safely to your floor. You act in faith upon something unseen (the cables and safety devices), perhaps because you’ve seen pictures of cables and braking mechanisms holding up elevator cars. And it’s because you’ve seen pictures of them that you’re willing to trust they’re present with the elevator you’re riding in, too.

In the same way, for a number of reasons we put our faith in the Bible as God’s Word but I would maintain that we have a *reasonable* faith to believe it’s divine rather

than simply a *speculative* faith. In other words, we don't just hope or wish that the Bible is the Word of God but, like our trust in that elevator cable, we have good reason to believe it's so.

Because our time is shortened today due to communion, I want to give attention this morning to just external evidences, facts from outside the Bible itself, that show how the Bible actually came to be formed and why we can have confidence that it is the true Word of God.

I want to start, however, with something Jesus said, recorded in Luke 24:44 "Now He said to them, "These are My words which I spoke to you while I was still with you, that all things which are written about Me in the *Law of Moses* and *the Prophets* and *the Psalms* must be fulfilled". He was referencing what had become by His day a common way of viewing the sacred writings acknowledged by the Jews. What we call the "Old Testament" was seen to have three sections - The "*Law of Moses*" (first five books), the "*Prophets*" (clearly prophetic books like Isaiah & Jeremiah, as well as historical books that showed how prophecies played out, like I & II Samuel and Kings), and "*The Psalms*" (known elsewhere as "The Writings" but called "the Psalms" by Jesus because it was the most prominent book).

Whether or not you grant that Luke 24:44 was actually spoken by Jesus (and I believe it was), nevertheless it shows that an early religious writer (namely, Luke) was aware that there was a body of Hebrew religious documents already in existence and received by God's people.

Why were these writings received as God's Word by His people? It's clear that for the ancient Hebrew people, the gold standard for what was the Word of God was whether or not it was spoken or written by a true prophet who spoke for God. And how could they know if a person was truly a prophet? Deut. 18:21-22 says the test was whether or not what the person predicted came true. In other words, if what the person says comes true, then he is proved to be a prophet. Of course, anyone has a 50/50 chance of being right on any one occasion, but this test requires 100% accuracy every time.

Two questions might arise – first, aren't there books that aren't "prophetic"? True, but people like Moses and David were known as people who spoke for God, and even historical books (which may not be "prophetic" in the usual sense) agree with prophetic principles elsewhere. Second, it might be asked, couldn't there have been many books claiming to be prophetic? The answer is, yes, there were other Hebrew religious writings, but none of them were regarded as divine.

The Jewish historian, Josephus, put it this way: "...it is not the case with us (i.e. with Jews) to have vast numbers of books disagreeing and conflicting with one another. We have but twenty-two, containing the history of all time, books that are justly believed in." Obviously, today we list 39 Old Testament books. It's not that we added more books to the list Josephus had, it's that they counted differently (e.g. what we call the twelve minor prophets at the end of our OT they counted as one book).

Josephus concludes this: “But what faith we have placed in our own writings is evident by our conduct; for though so great an interval of time (i.e. since they were written) has now passed, not a soul has ventured either to add, or to remove, or to alter a syllable. But it is instinctive in all Jews at once from their very birth to regard them as the command of God and to abide by them, and if need be, willingly to die for them.”

No church council picked over a bunch of books and selected a few to be in the Bible. In 90 AD, a Jewish council merely confirmed the books that were already accepted by God’s people as His Word. No new books were added and none were taken away. In fact, it’s because there was such a recognized, definite body of ancient divine writings that the Hebrews consistently *did not* include the several books at the end of the OT in Catholic Bibles, called the Apocrypha.

Before your eyes glaze over, hear me out. What I’m trying to press home is that we have every right to assert that the OT books were *not* the product of over-active imaginations and were *not* regarded as divine because of some church decree. Despite what non-believers assert, we can with some accuracy date many of the writings and determine the accuracy of the prophecies even from non-biblical sources. It’s clear that the OT came into being because it was consistently seen down through the ages to be nothing less than the revelation of God, and this by a people who were very keen on truth and accuracy when it came to whether someone was speaking for God.

Not only that, but they were painstaking when it came to making copies of God’s Word. Jewish scribes called the Masoretes considered copying the sacred texts a holy calling. They were exacting in their work, ensuring that very few mistakes were made. They counted verses, words, and letters used in each book; they calculated the middle words and middle verses of books and of the entire OT – all this in an effort to ensure accuracy between their copy and the one they worked from. Long before the Massoretes, Jewish civil law prescribed the care required for copies of the 5 books of Moses. It said they must use an authentic copy to make another copy from, they cannot write from memory, and the rolls which don’t conform to these rules should be destroyed but certainly should not be used in the synagogue. You can see the care they used to produce copies of God’s Word.

If we can believe the ancient OT was always viewed as God’s Word, we also certainly have enough evidence to believe the same of the NT. The entire NT, which purports to tell us of Christ, His teachings, the good news of salvation through faith in Him, the establishment of His church, and the end of time – all of this was completed by the end of the first century AD. In other words, those who would read the gospels, who would read the Apostle Paul’s letters and the other books of the NT, those readers may well have been eyewitnesses or known eyewitnesses to what was being written about. If the gospels and other books in the NT were mere fantasy, there were plenty of people who could have said, “No. That’s a bunch of hooey! I was there. That didn’t happen.” But the NT writers weren’t afraid of being disproven because what they were writing was true!

And, just as the OT books were accepted because they were written by prophets, in the NT the books were accepted because they were either written by an apostle or

someone close to an apostle. Not only that, but the various NT books gained acceptance through being in harmony with the rest of apostolic teaching and because believers in various parts of God's kingdom found them to ring with God's truth. So much so that already by the mid-2nd century, the NT books were being read alongside OT writings in worship and by the late 390's AD the 27 books we know as the NT were recognized as sacred Scripture. There were a few disputed books here and there but within a short period of time the ones in our Bibles today were recognized as being accepted by God's people as Scripture.

I wish there were time to describe all the incredible ways God has provided His revelation to us and how we can have confidence that what sits on our laps today is His Word. Last week Pastor Drew mentioned a verse John 5:4 that was printed in the KJV but not in the NIV (or other modern translations). How did the modern translations come to feel this verse should not be in the Bible and does this mean we can't be sure we actually have the Word of God? Well, because of the abundance of copies of Scripture we have, some of them going back to the early 100's AD, we can be sure. There are over 5,000 full and partial manuscripts and fragments of varying sizes that cover the whole NT. Unlike the ones used by the KJV translators, we have much earlier material to consult and by checking and cross-checking, today's Bibles are much more accurate. In fact, we have more material than any other ancient work by which to determine the actual text.

One thing you should note, however. No new manuscript discovery has ever changed one central tenet of our faith. Most of the discrepancies between copies are very simple – a difference in spelling, in word order, a word duplicated or omitted, and so on. I had one seminary professor who said that if we put all the discrepancies we've found into one version, not one doctrine of our faith would be changed.

When someone says to you, "The Bible is just fiction written by men" you can say, "Wait a minute. You may not want to believe its message but you are terribly misinformed about how it came to be. Are you aware that not just any religious writing could be considered divine, that people actually had criteria they used to accept these writings as God's Word? That it wasn't just a group of people here or there but it was people in many locations, down through 1000's of years that consistently believed in a certain set of books as Scripture? Are you aware that much of the Bible is demonstrably true, even from historical sources outside of the Bible? And if those parts are true, what makes you pass it all off as fiction?" Don't just meekly buy into false ideas held by the unbelieving culture around us.

Next week we'll delve into the internal testimony of God's Word, what it has to say about itself, what it claims to be.