



Autumn 2017 – **Can we really trust the bible?**
(17 September 2017, Paul Langham)

Reading: **2 Timothy 3:14-16**

Introduction: St Paul left his gospel partner Timothy to lead the church in Ephesus. We join his 2nd letter to Timothy as Paul urges him to remain faithful to Scripture ...

... 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.¹⁶ All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness,¹⁷ so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.

Note – 'PP' refers to the pages of the Power Point Presentation which accompanies this sermon

INTRODUCTION

... what Scripture says about itself:

PP 1 All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness (2 Timothy 3:16)

... and what our world says:

PP 2 *'The New Testament was written hundreds of years after the events it records...'*

PP 3 *'It was changed over the years – what we read now bears no relation to any original...'*

PP 4 *'A small, secret group of powerful men agreed the canon 400 years later ...'*

'Canon' will be defined shortly ...

1 WHY IS THE QUESTION ASKED?

As we shall see, no other ancient text is challenged so strongly as the bible.

1 it's the only one which makes demands of us

2 Scepticism about the supernatural world

David Hume (1711-76). He argued that all objects of human inquiry are either

- relations of ideas (i.e. mathematical statements and definitions) or
- matters of fact (i.e. everything which can be known and tested empirically)

This view has real problems, principally – and fatally – that his statement that 'only analytic or empirical propositions are meaningful' is itself neither an analytic or empirical statement. So, by its own criteria, it is meaningless!

PP 5/7 Richard Lewontin, an evolutionary biologist, and Professor of Zoology and Professor of Biology at Harvard until 1998, was honest enough to write in 1997

It is not that the methods and institutions of science somehow compel us to accept a material explanation of the phenomenal world but on the contrary, that we are forced by our a priori adherence to material causes to create an apparatus of investigation and a set of concepts that produce material explanations, no matter how counter-intuitive, no matter how mystifying to the uninitiated. Moreover, that materialism is an absolute, for we cannot allow a divine foot in the door

2 THE CANON OF SCRIPTURE

PP 8 Define 'canon'

a limited and defined group of writings which are accepted as authoritative within the Christian Church (Alistair McGrath, Christian Theology: An Introduction)

PP 9 NT – 2 Church Councils, at

- Hippo (AD 393)
- Carthage (AD 397)

3 ARE THE BIBLE MANUSCRIPTS RELIABLE?

1 Manuscript evidence

Scholars use two key criteria in assessing the reliability of ancient writings

PP 10

- how near to events they were written
- how many copies still survive

So which ancient text comes top of the reliability table? Let's see!

PP 11 Plato (427-347 BC, Athens)
Less than 10 copies
Oldest copy 1400 years after the events

PP 12 Tacitus (life of Julius Caesar)
100 AD
8 copies
1100 AD (1000 years)

The 2nd place in terms of the two criteria used by scholars

- how near to events they were written
- how many copies still survive

is Homer's Iliad ...

You all know Homer, right?

PP 13 ... No, not him ...

PP 14	him!
PP 15	Homer wrote the Illiad 900 BC 643 copies oldest complete copy dates from C 12 th AD
PP 16	Any ideas, I'll take a wild, wild guess – what's the most reliable text from the ancient world according to the 2 criteria scholars apply?
PP 17	NT 40-100 AD
PP 18	Oldest copies within 30-50 years
PP 19	How many copies?
PP 20	over 24,000
PP 21	5,300 Gk 10,000 Latin 9,300 others
PP 22	Copies have been found on 3 continents of the ancient world: Europe, Asia, Africa ...
PP 23	Many languages
PP 24	5 of the earliest could reconstruct almost the whole NT
PP 25	<i>To be sceptical of the resultant text of the New Testament books is to allow all of classical antiquity to slip into obscurity, for no documents of the ancient period are as well attested bibliographically as the New Testament (John Warwick Montgomery, theologian)</i>

19th & early 20th-C common to suppose that the NT was written centuries after the events it purports to report. People felt it couldn't be trusted. No longer.

John's gospel in particular was held as evidence – couldn't possibly have been written in 1st-C

Rylands Papyrus – John 18. Forced scholars to acknowledge it was written in 1st-C

NB – doesn't prove the truth of what they say, but ...

PP 26 **2 What about The 'Church Fathers'?**

(theologians, bishops and thinkers of the 2nd, 3rd & 4th centuries of the Christian Church)

PP 27	How many verses in NT?
PP 28	7957
PP 29	How many are quoted by the church fathers?
PP 30	all but 20
	If NT vanished tonight, we could reconstruct all but 20 verses from their references – some 86,000 in total.

PP 31 selfie of Clement (the 3rd Bishop of Rome)

PP 32 His Epistle written in AD 95, quotes from

- all 4 gospels
- Acts
- Romans
- 1 Corinthians
- Ephesians
- Titus
- Hebrews
- 1 Peter

3 Internal evidence

Acts ends abruptly with Paul in prison / under house arrest, awaiting trial (AD 62-63)

There is no mention in the entire New Testament of the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70. It is difficult to imagine, say, the writer of Hebrews resisting this!

4 The Dead Sea Scrolls

PP 33 But what about the 'Dead Sea Scrolls?' I hear you cry ...

PP 34 *Surely they disprove the bible?'*

PP 35 Sealed in several clay jars in a cliff on the west side of the Dead Sea about 8 miles south of Jericho. Found by a Bedouin shepherd boy in 1947. The scrolls had lain undisturbed since being placed there in AD 68, 2 years before the destruction of Jerusalem.

PP 36 Photo ...

The scrolls are in fact 40,000 inscribed fragments.

A word about Jewish Scripture and the way it was handed down across the generations

The Talmudists

Worked copying OT texts from AD 270 to AD 500. Intricate regulations to ensure accuracy

PP 37 What's the earliest OT texts prior to those known as DS Scrolls?

PP 38 The Masoretic Text (AD 500 – 900)

PP 39 The Masoretes

PP 40 Photo

Took on the job from AD 500 to 900

PP 41 the number of times each letter of the Hebrew alphabet occurred in each book

PP 42 the middle letter of the Pentateuch (1st 5 books of the bible)

PP 43 the middle letter of the whole OT

This is known as the Masoretic text (and clearly dates many centuries after the original documents). Can the copying be trusted?

One example. One verse had for long years been quoted to discredit the authenticity of Isaiah – 53:9

PP 44

*⁸ By oppression and judgment he was taken away. Yet who of his generation protested? For he was cut off from the land of the living; for the transgression of my people he was punished. ⁹ He was assigned a grave with the wicked, and **with the rich in his death**, though he had done no violence, nor was any deceit in his mouth. ¹⁰ Yet it was the Lord's will to crush him and cause him to suffer, and though the Lord makes his life an offering for sin, he will see his offspring and prolong his days, and the will of the Lord will prosper in his hand. Isaiah 53:8-10*

Surely, it was argued, this must have been written back into the text by Christians, to fit with what Matthew records about the death of Jesus

PP 45

*⁵⁷ As evening approached, there came **a rich man from Arimathea, named Joseph**, who had himself become a disciple of Jesus. ⁵⁸ Going to Pilate, he asked for Jesus' body, and Pilate ordered that it be given to him. ⁵⁹ Joseph took the body, wrapped it in a clean linen cloth, ⁶⁰ and placed it in his own new tomb that he had cut out of the rock. He rolled a big stone in front of the entrance to the tomb and went away. ⁶¹ Mary Magdalene and the other Mary were sitting there opposite the tomb. Matthew 27:57-61*

Among the Dead Sea Scrolls was found a complete copy of Isaiah in Hebrew, dated to around 125 BC.

The significance of this discovery in terms of biblical scholarship is impossible to overstate ...

PP 46 the previous oldest version of Isaiah, in the Masoretic text is dated to AD 916 (Isaiah was written some 800 years BC).

PP 47 The Dead Sea Scrolls copy is some 1000 years older ...

PP 48 Photo

Scholars were astonished when they compared the two. The accuracy was extraordinary for such an ancient text.

PP 49 It is word for word identical with our standard Hebrew bible in 95% of the text. The remaining 5% contains only minor variations.

And Isaiah 53:9 is identical!

PP 50 How many words in the Hebrew of Isaiah 53?

PP 51 166

PP 52 Of those 166 verses, how many letters are in question?

PP 53	17
PP 54	10 of these are a matter of spelling which makes no difference to the sense
PP 55	4 are minor stylistic changes, such as conjunctions
PP 56	the remaining 3 letters comprise the word 'light' which is added in v. 11 and doesn't greatly affect the meaning
PP 57	<i>It is a matter of wonder that through something like a thousand years the text underwent so little alteration (Millar Burrows, Professor Emeritus at Yale, President of the American Schools of Oriental Research, and a leading authority on the Dead Sea Scrolls)</i>
PP 58	Over 40,000 parchments and fragments
PP 59/61	Much work remains to be done, but some scholars believe that other Qumran fragments are copies of New Testament texts. This is disputed by others, but given that the cave was sealed in AD 68, the implications if these fragments do prove to be genuine would be immense.

The point is that statements such as 'The bible's been changed out of all recognition over the years' should not go unchallenged.

PP 62	<i>The recognition of the books of the New Testament as scriptural was overwhelmingly a natural process, not a matter of ecclesiastical regulation. The core of the New Testament was accepted so early that subsequent rulings do no more than recognise the obvious (John Barton, How the Bible came to be)</i>
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Any questions were dealt with openly. There were questions about the authorship of James. But there was sufficient evidence that the writer was either James the son of Zebedee (the brother of John) or James the brother of Jesus himself. Both were apostles in the early church.

The letter of James was included in the Syriac version from early days, and Eusebius makes clear that those who doubted its authenticity were in a minority. The same is true of Hebrews.

The majority of the NT was accepted as genuine and scriptural from the time of writing, and those books which were questioned did not come to final inclusion in or rejection from the canon through the fiat of a group of powerful men – rather, a consensus emerged in the church either recognising or rejecting authority.

Athanasius, the bishop of Alexandria in the 4th-C, made a list of the NT books in AD 367, which is identical to our own.

The key thing to remember is that the church bishops and councils did not choose the canon. Rather, it officially recognised the inspiration of certain books – a recognition which already existed in the minds and hearts of individual believers and churches across the ancient world.

PP 63	<i>When at last a Church Council – the Synod of Hippo in AD 393 – listed the 27 books of the NT, it did not confer on them any authority which they did not already possess, but simply recorded their previously established canonicity (FF Bruce, The books and parchments: How we got our English Bible, 1984)</i>
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Why did these Councils meet and formally recognise the canon? To combat the spread of heresies within and outside the church.

PP 64 Amy Orr-Ewing – Why trust the bible?

PP 65 All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness (2 Timothy 3:16)

Paul Langham, September 2017