

Why believe the Bible?

By Dr. Jim Denison

The question came from nowhere. I was leading a youth Bible study one Wednesday night when a high school freshman asked me, "How do you know the Bible came from God?" The look in his eyes showed how serious he was. His father was a Sunday school teacher and leader in our church, but that wasn't good enough. Nor should it have been.

He wanted to know for himself. He explained his question: "Did the Bible just drop out of heaven? How do you know that someone didn't just sit down a hundred years ago and write the whole thing? Where did it come from?"

That's a good question. A few days later at work, a friend and I got into a discussion about my faith and he asked, "Why do you trust the Bible? After all those centuries of copying, surely you don't think you have what was first written. How can you trust it today?" Another good question.

Maybe you've asked questions like these yourself, or you've tried to answer them for someone else. The fact is, not many Christians know where the Bible came from. The making of God's word is a neglected subject for many, and a real problem for others. So it's important that we learn how God's word came to us, and why we should trust it today.

In a world which considers "truth" to be personal and subjective, "the Bible says" is seldom definitive proof that our beliefs are right. Many consider the Bible to be outdated and irrelevant. Some reading this essay today may wonder why you should treat the Bible as your life authority, not just your Sunday religion. And we all know someone with such a faith issue.

Where did the Bible come from? Why should we believe it to be God's word?

Writing in ancient times

The first step to making the Bible seems obvious: God's word was preserved in writing. However, there's much more to this first step than you might think. In the ancient world writing was an expensive, laborious process. Books had to be written and copied by hand (the first printed book was completed until around AD 1455). The postal systems of the Roman Empire generally were restricted to government use, so the biblical authors had to find special travelers or messengers to carry their writings. Everything about ancient books was different from today, from their languages to the ways they were produced.

What materials were used by the first biblical authors? Paul gives us a clue. The apostle was locked away in a cold, damp Roman prison. When he wrote to Timothy, his young apprentice, he could have asked for anything. Better food, more companions, lawyers to plead his case, the church to rally to his defense. Instead, here is his personal appeal: "When you come, bring the cloak that I left with Carpus at Troas, and my scrolls,

especially the parchments" (2 Timothy 4:13). What were his "scrolls" and "parchments"? Why did they matter so much to history's greatest apostle?

The materials of the Bible

Scrolls were made of papyrus, the most prevalent "paper" in the ancient world. As we noted in the introduction, the papyrus reed grew along the Nile River in Egypt and in other marshy places. It was cut, unrolled, and left to dry in the sun. Strips were laid horizontally, then others overlaid vertically. They were woven and glued together, constituting the most common and inexpensive writing material of the day. These sheets were then sewn or glued together into scrolls.

A more expensive and durable writing material was parchment, named for the region of Pergamum in Asia Minor (modern-day western Turkey) where it was developed. This was manufactured from animal skins, usually sheep or goats (vellum). Parchment was perfected around 200 B.C., but was too heavy and expensive for common use. Like papyrus, it was often rolled into scrolls.

Reeds were used as brushes, with a kind of carbon-liquid glue as ink. Such pen and ink was employed with papyrus and parchment.

The original books of the Bible were apparently all written on papyrus. Since this first "paper" decayed quickly, none of these original writings exist today. The same is true for the writings of Plato, Aristotle, or Julius Caesar. We simply don't have the originals of ancient books, but must rely on copies made through the centuries.

Around A.D. 100, people began cutting scrolls into sheets and stitching them together. The result was the "codex," the ancestor to our "book." Codexes using parchment are the earliest copies of the complete New Testament which we have today.

The scrolls and parchments Paul requested were his Bible and his books. They were the earliest form of the Scriptures we cherish and study today. If you were locked away on death row, would they be your first request?

The languages of the Bible

God's word has come to us in three original languages. Hebrew is the oldest of the three, the language used for most of the Old Testament. It is written from right to left, with no upper or lower cases or vowels. Centuries later, scribes added the vowels (called "points") we have in the Hebrew Bible today.

Aramaic was a descendent of Hebrew. It was the common spoken language of the Jews toward the end of the Old Testament era, and was the typical language of Jesus' culture. It is found in the Old Testament in Ezra 4:8-6:18, where the author draws on documents exchanged by the Persian king and his subjects; 7:12-26, recording a letter from the Persian king to Ezra; and Daniel 2:4-7:28, where the narrative deals with subjects important to Gentiles and was thus written in their language.

Jesus and his disciples could read Hebrew. For instance, Jesus read from the Isaiah scroll, written in Hebrew, before preaching at Nazareth (Luke 4:17-19). However, they typically spoke in Aramaic. We still find Aramaic words in the Gospels—"Abba" for Father (Mark 14:36), and "Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani!" ("My God, my God, why have you forsaken me!", Mark 15:34), for instance.

Greek was the universal written language of the Roman Empire, and thus the language in which the entire New Testament was written. There were two kinds of Greek in the first century—the classical language employed by the cultured, and the "koine" ("common") Greek used by the masses.

A century ago, scholars were confused by the contrast between the Greek of the New Testament and that found in the classical writers. German theologian Richard Rothe went so far as to call New Testament Greek a "language of the Holy Ghost." But then archaeologists began discovering scraps of papyrus and pieces of pottery from the first century, written in the more common language of the people. Shopping lists, personal letters, wills and documents came to light. And their language was strikingly similar to that of the New Testament.

Today scholars rank the New Testament documents on a spectrum relative to "koine" and classical Greek literature. The Gospels are the most "common" in nature, containing so much of Jesus' discourse with the masses and intended for the widest distribution. 1 Peter (recorded by Silvanus from dictation by Peter) and Hebrews are the most classical works in the New Testament. Luke and Acts are somewhere in the middle, employing excellent literary style but recording events using the speech with which they occurred.¹

William Barclay concludes, "It is worthwhile remembering that the New Testament is written in colloquial Greek; it is written in the kind of Greek a man in the street wrote and spoke in the first century...Anything that makes the New Testament sound other than contemporary mistranslates it."²

It is a miracle that God could take on human flesh, that the Creator would enter his Creation. It is no less a miracle that he would give us his revelation in our language. That the Lord of the universe would write a book we could read. But this is precisely what he has done. The wisdom of the ages has been transmitted on papyrus and parchment, in human languages through human instruments. We could not climb up to God, so he climbed down to us.

Getting as close as possible

Now, how can we be sure that we have what he wrote? As we have noted, no original documents for any ancient book exist today. Imagine storing newspaper in the elements

¹ For further discussion of the New Testament as Greek literature see the classic work by F. F. Bruce, *The Books and the Parchments*, rev. ed. (Old Tappan, N.J.: Fleming Revell, 1963) 58-73.

² William Barclay, *A Spiritual Autobiography* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1975) 90.

for a year, much less a century or millennium. In addition, there was no way to distribute the biblical writings apart from hand copying. In the era before movable printing, scribes were the first publishers. How do we know that they copied the Bible accurately?

The work of textual critics

"Textual critics" are scholars who devote themselves to studying copies of ancient literature, seeking to develop a version that is as close to the original as possible. Textual critics work with the manuscripts of Shakespeare, for instance, debating which passages came from the playwright himself, which to attribute to Christopher Marlowe, and so on. Scholars study the copies of works by Plato and Aristotle, seeking to determine which is closest to the originals.

Textual critics do the same hard, crucial work with the Scriptures. They may or may not be people of faith. Their work is scientific and precise, not guided by personal spiritual presuppositions. We can trust their conclusions as the product of objective scholarship.

Textual criticism works best when two circumstances prevail: numerous ancient copies, as close in time to the original writings as possible. The fewer the ancient copies, the less material the scholars have to use. The larger the gap between the original and our earliest copies, the greater margin for undiscoverable error in transmission.

The Bible and other ancient literature

What copies of famous ancient literature do we possess today? Caesar's *Gallic Wars* was composed between 58 and 50 B.C. Our oldest copies of it were made 900 years later; we have only nine or ten good manuscripts. As a result, we have no independent verification for much of Caesar's descriptions except the book itself. And historians debate the degree to which we can trust the copies we possess.

Tacitus was the most famous historian of ancient Rome. His descriptions of first-century life in the Empire are considered the most authoritative histories we have. However, of the 14 books of his *Histories*, only four and one-half survive today. Our earliest copies were made 900 years after the originals.

The *History of Thucydides* was written around 400 B.C. Our earliest complete manuscript dates to 1,300 years later. We have only five or so copies of any work of Aristotle (384-322 B.C.), the earliest of which was made 1,400 years after the originals.

By contrast, our oldest complete New Testament was made just 300 years after the original. The Chester Beatty papyrus contains a section from John 18, and dates to A.D. 130 (just 35 or so years after John's original). We have thousands of other parts of the New Testament in papyrus sections. And the letters of first- and second-century Christians. In fact, we can reconstruct most of the New Testament just from these ancient letters.

No other ancient book comes close to the Bible with regard to the number and quality of manuscript copies in existence today. The sheer weight of evidence is strongly in favor of biblical trustworthiness and authority.

Studying the copies we have

Historians possess more than 5,000 various Greek manuscripts of the New Testament, and more than 10,000 copies in other ancient languages. They classify these copies by age and writing materials, and whether they used upper or lower case letters. They also group manuscripts by the geographic centers where they were produced—Alexandria, Egypt; Caesarea in Palestine; Antioch of Syria; Constantinople; and Rome.

Textual critics consider a number of factors in determining which manuscripts are oldest and closest to the originals. They examine the chronological appearance of the document—its apparent age and the period when it first came into use. They investigate the geographical circulation of the manuscript, the extent of its usage, and the number of times the document was copied, on the assumption that the more widely accepted the document, the more likely it was considered reliable by its audience. They look for agreement between the manuscript and quotations found in the church fathers.

And they investigate the historical "genealogy" of the manuscript's textual tradition. Scholars know that documents originating in Alexandria, for instance, possess certain advantages and flaws. Each geographic center manifests its own techniques and characteristics in copying and transmission.

Unintentional errors³

Much of the work of textual critics consists in identifying the presence of scribal, editorial, and/or translator errors. Scholars have identified four kinds of unintentional errors as most common, and watch for them with special interest.

Some mistakes arose from faulty eyesight—failing to distinguish between similar letters and similar errors. For instance, the Hebrew "y" (*yodh*) looks much like the "w" (*waw*). And the Greek capital letters for epsilon (made as a rounded E) and theta (an oval with a line in the middle) are very similar when handwritten.

"Haplography" occurred when a scribe wrote once what should have been written twice (like "occurence" for "occurrence" or "mapping" for "mapping" in English). "Dittography" occurred when the scribe wrote twice what should be written only once. And "metathesis" resulted from changing the proper order of letters or words.

A second kind of error resulted from faulty hearing, when the scribe made copies from dictation or even pronounced the words to himself as he wrote them. "Homophony"

³ This section follows closely the authoritative work of Bruce M. Metzger, *The Text of the New Testament: Its Transmission, Corruption, and Restoration*, 3d. ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992) 186-206. Examples of the errors here discussed can also be found in Gleason L. Archer, *Encyclopedia of Bible Difficulties* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1982) 33-42.

occurred when the scribe wrote a wrong word which sounded the same as the correct term (like "two" for "to" in English).

A third category of scribal mistakes was errors of the mind. The scribe held a phrase in his memory as he copied it, and sometimes transposed or missed letters or words as a result. Mistakes of this type fall into several categories:

- "Metatheis," when the scribe changed the proper order of letters or words.
- "Fusion," combining the last letter of a word with the first letter of the following word, or combining two words into one.
- "Fission," the improper separation of one word into two.
- "Homoeoteleuton," when a phrase ends in a certain way, a scribe can miss that which follows if the concluding phrase also ends in the same way. When the scribe looked from the original to the copy he was writing, then looked back to the original, his eyes could easily fall on the latter ending and miss that which came in between.
- "Homoearkton," the loss of intervening words if two phrases begin in the same way.

A fourth kind of unintentional error resulted from mistakes in scribal judgment. Words and notes made in the margin of the older copy were sometimes incorporated into the text of the new manuscript. Scribes would occasionally copy across two columns of a text, rather than working down the passage a column at a time.

Intentional changes

At times, scribes tried to "clean up" the text before them by making deliberate changes to the manuscript at hand. If a scribe felt the style of his text could be improved, he would sometimes make grammatical "corrections." Parallel texts in the gospels were often harmonized to agree completely with each other. New Testament quotes of Old Testament texts were "improved" to conform to the Septuagint (the Greek Old Testament).

"Conflation" was a common problem. When a scribe worked from two or more manuscripts and found variant readings, he would sometimes include both in his copy. And some scribes added doctrinal statements according to their convictions. For instance, one amended Luke's statement, "It seemed good also to me to write an orderly account" (Lk. 1:3) to read, "It seemed good also to me and to the Holy Spirit" (following Acts 15:28, "It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us...").

Determining the best manuscripts

We should expect such errors to creep into the handwritten copies of any ancient book. And the more copies we have, the more likely it is that we will find such errors. Watching for such common mistakes is the first step to finding them in a particular text. Then scholars are able to correct these mistakes, developing a text which is as close to the original as possible.

How do textual critics do this work? They follow certain established rules. Here is the procedure for the Old Testament suggested by Ernst Würthwein and followed widely by scholars:

- When the Masoretic Text (MT, the most reliable OT text) has been preserved without a variant, and there are no other manuscripts which differ, we must accept the reading as proper.
- When the MT and other manuscripts support different readings, the MT is to be preferred wherever appropriate.
- When the MT and other manuscripts support different but apparently equally possible or plausible readings, determine which reading is more difficult (see below) or most likely explains the other versions.
- Pay close attention to psychological and/or theological reasons why a particular scribe or school might preserve the text in a particular way.
- When no clear conclusion can be made based on manuscript evidence, suggest a conjectural solution which seems closest to the authorial intention of the text.⁴

In describing the work of New Testament textual criticism, Bruce Metzger outlines the procedures typically followed.⁵ First, consider external evidence. How old is the document? What type does it embody? Next, examine the text itself. In general, when variances occur we are to prefer the more difficult reading.

We assume that the scribe would more likely resolve apparent contradictions within the text. For instance, when we find two versions of a text within Matthew's Gospel, one of which seems less likely to come from Matthew's pen, we should assume that it did.

We are to prefer the shorter reading to the longer, assuming that the scribes would more likely add explanatory phrases than omit portions of the text. We will assume that a version which harmonizes parallel accounts is more likely the product of scribal changes than one which is distinct from the other versions.

In addition, we are to consider:

- The style and vocabulary of the author throughout his work.
- The immediate context.
- Harmony with the usage of the author elsewhere, and in the Gospels.
- The Aramaic background of Jesus' teaching.
- The priority of the Gospel according to Mark (probably the first to be written).
- The influence of the Christian community upon the formulation and transmission of the passage in question.

⁴ Ernst Würthwein, *The Text of the Old Testament*, 4th ed., trans. Erroll F. Rhodes (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1992 [1979]) 116-9.

⁵ Metzger, 207-46.

With these rules in place, textual critics go about the painstaking task of comparing the multiplied thousands of ancient copies of Scripture. And the result: we have a Bible which is trustworthy in every matter of faith and practice.

The Dead Sea Scrolls

As a case in point, consider the Dead Sea Scrolls. Prior to their discovery in the caves at Qumran, the oldest complete copy of the Old Testament known to scholars dated to the tenth century. When a shepherd looking for a lost sheep found the first of the scrolls in 1947, the most dramatic discovery in the history of biblical archaeology and manuscripts resulted. We now possess Old Testament manuscripts dating back to the first century before Christ. The Scrolls contain every book of the Old Testament except Esther. They take us a thousand years closer to the originals.

How close was the Masoretic Text to these documents? In other words, how accurate were the scribes who copied the text for a thousand years? The results are amazing. There is word-for-word accuracy in more than 95 percent of the texts. The variations which remain are the results of obvious scribal errors. For instance, translators of the Revised Standard Version made only 13 changes from the Masoretic Text for Isaiah, none affecting faith and practice.

It is clear that the scribes who transmitted the Bible across the centuries before printing was available did their work with astounding accuracy. Their work, while not perfect, was far closer than the manuscript copyists for any other ancient book. With the help of textual scholars, we today possess an Old Testament which is virtually identical to the originals. And the Greek New Testament we have today is likewise accurate and trustworthy.

So far we've learned how the writings we call the Bible were created, and why the copies we have today are trustworthy. There's far more to the subject, as we'll see. In the meanwhile, let's cut to the bottom line: the best way to discover if you can trust the word of God is to meet its Author.

Years ago a popular magazine printed on its cover, "God is Dead." A reporter asked Billy Graham if it was true. Dr. Graham smiled and replied, "No, he's not dead—I spoke with him this morning." Have you?

How were the biblical books chosen?

One of the popular objections to biblical authority is that the books were chosen in a smoke-filled room for political purposes. For instance, Dan Brown's *The DaVinci Code* asserts that Constantine chose them in his political desire to deify Christ and unify the Roman Empire. The real story is nowhere near that interesting.

Why these books?

The first step toward a "canon" for the Christian Scriptures came about as the result of a crisis. Around AD 140, a wealthy ship-owner named Marcion came to believe that Christians should reject the entirety of the Hebrew Bible as legalism. He adopted Pauline theology so fully that he thought most of the other Christian writings should be ignored. His list of accepted books included ten of Paul's letters (he omitted 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus) and a copy of Luke's gospel which he edited to reflect Pauline emphases.

Orthodox Church leaders acted quickly to affirm all four gospels, and all of Paul's letters. But the crisis showed the need for the church to make a more formal list of accepted Christian Scriptures. Over time, four criteria were developed for accepting a book as inspired.

First, the book must have been written by an apostle or based on his eyewitness testimony. Gnostic writings were gaining more and more attention at this time, reflecting a heretical theology which separated the body from the spirit. Some of the Gnostic "gospels" were purported to be written by apostles such as Thomas and Peter. In response, church leaders quickly adopted the position that a canonical book must be the clear product of an actual apostle, or based on his eyewitness accounts.

Matthew the tax-collector was a disciple of Jesus before he wrote his gospel, as was John. Mark was an early missionary associate of Paul (Acts 13:4-5) and was a spiritual son to Peter (1 Peter 5:13); early Christians believed that he wrote his gospel based on the sermons and experiences Peter related to him.

Luke was a Gentile physician who joined Paul's second missionary journey at Troas (note Acts 16:10, where Luke changes the narrative from "they" to "we"). He wrote his gospel and the book of Acts based on the eyewitness testimony of others (Lk 1:1-4). Paul's letters came from an eyewitness to the risen Christ (cf. Acts 9:1-6), as did the works of James (half-brother of Jesus), Peter, Jude (another half-brother of Jesus), and John.

This criteria alone excluded most of the books suggested for the canon. For instance, Clement of Rome was not an eyewitness of the Lord; even though his letter to the church at Corinth was highly respected, it was not included in the New Testament.

Second, the book must possess merit and authority in its use. Here it was easy to separate those writings which were inspired from those which were not. For instance, *The First Gospel of the Infancy of Jesus Christ* tells of a man changed into a mule by a bewitching spell but converted back to manhood when the infant Christ is put on his back for a ride (7:5-27). In the same book, the boy Jesus causes clay birds and animals to come to life (ch. 15), stretches a throne his father had made too small (ch. 16), and takes the lives of boys who oppose him (19:19-24). It wasn't hard to know that such books did not come from the Holy Spirit.

Third, a book must be accepted by the larger church, not just a particular congregation. Paul's letter to the Ephesians was an early instance of a letter which became "circular" in nature, read by churches across the faith. His other letters soon

acquired such status. In fact, Peter refers to Paul's letter as "Scripture" (2 Pt. 3:16). The oldest non-biblical letters also quote Paul's epistles repeatedly. By at least AD 100, his works were collected together and used in worship and study by the larger church.

The gospels were a different matter. Soon after Jesus' resurrection, many "life of Christ" documents began to appear. Among them was the *Protoevangelion*, purporting to give details regarding the birth of Jesus; two books on his infancy (one claiming falsely to be written by Thomas); and the *Gospel of Nicodemus* (sometimes called the *Acts of Pontius Pilate*). But none actually recorded eyewitness testimony to Jesus, or gained acceptance by the larger Christian movement.

By the mid-second century, only the gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John were accepted universally, as quotations from the Christians of the era make clear. As early as AD 115 Ignatius, bishop of Antioch, referred to the four as "The Gospel." Around 170, an Assyrian Christian named Tatian composed a "harmony" of the Gospels, using only these four. Irenaeus, bishop of Lyons in Gaul around 180, referred to the four Gospels as firmly established in the church.

The rest of the New Testament gained wide use through different processes. Acts was always considered to be part of Luke's record, and thus included immediately after the Gospels. The thirteen letters of Paul were included next, arranged from longest to shortest (not chronologically, as many assume). Hebrews was placed next, as many connected it with Paul. 1 Peter and 1 John were clearly written by the apostles for whom they were named.

The Greek of 2 Peter is different from that of 1 Peter, raising authorship questions for some. But when it came to be understood that 1 Peter was probably written through a secretary and 2 Peter by the apostle himself, this question was resolved. The authorship of 2 and 3 John, James, Jude, and Revelation was eventually settled, and they were accepted and used by the larger church as well.

Last, a book came to be approved by the decision of church leaders. The so-called Muratorian Canon (discovered in 1740 by Italian Cardinal L. A. Muratori) was the first list to convey the larger church's opinion regarding accepted books of the New Testament canon. Compiled around A.D. 200, it represented the usage of the Roman church at the time. The list omits James, 1 and 2 Peter, 3 John, and Hebrews, since its compiler was not sure of their authorship. All were soon included in later canons.

Eusebius, the first church historian, listed in the fourth century the most widely read books in three categories: "recognized," "disputed," and "heretical." He identified as "recognized" the four gospels, Acts, fourteen letters of Paul (Eusebius included Hebrews as Pauline), 1 John and 1 Peter, and Revelation. Among the "disputed" books, he listed as "generally accepted" James, Jude, 2 Peter, and 2 and 3 John (authorship questions remained in the minds of some). And so each of the books of our New Testament had gained general acceptance by this time.

The list we have today was set forth by Athanasius, bishop of Alexandria, in his Easter letter of AD 367:

Again it is not tedious to speak of the [books] of the New Testament. These are, the four Gospels, according to Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. Afterwards, the Acts of the Apostles and Epistles (called Catholic), seven, viz. of James, one; of Peter, two; of John, three; after these, one of Jude. In addition, there are fourteen Epistles of Paul, written in this order. The first, to the Romans; then two to the Corinthians; after these, to the Galatians; next, to the Ephesians; then to the Philippians; next to the Colossians; after these, two to the Thessalonians, and that to the Hebrews; and again, two to Timothy; one to Titus; and lastly, that to Philemon. And besides, the Revelation of John.

These are the foundations of salvation, that they who thirst may be satisfied with the living words they contain. In these alone is proclaimed the doctrine of godliness. Let no man add to these, neither let him take ought from these.⁶

Note that to this point, no official church council had acted on the matter of the New Testament canon. The process was "bottom up" rather than "top down," recognizing the experiences of believers everywhere with the various books of Christian Scripture. No conspiracies or councils were involved.

Finally, the list of Athanasius was approved by church councils meeting at Hippo Regius in 393 and Carthage in 397. These councils did not impose anything new upon the church. Rather, they codified what believers had already come to accept and use as the word of God. By the time the councils approved the 27 books of our New Testament, they had already served as the established companion to the Hebrew Scriptures for generations.

Biblical scholar F. F. Bruce is clear: "What councils did was not to impose something new upon the Christian communities but to codify what was already the general practice of these communities."⁷ Biblical commentator William Barclay agrees: "The Bible and the books of the Bible came to be regarded as the inspired word of God, not because of any decision of any Synod or Council or Committee or Church, but because in them mankind found God. *The supremely important thing is not what men did to these books, but what these books did to men.*"⁸

And so Mr. Brown's assertion in *The DaVinci Code* that Constantine "created" the New Testament is patently false. Constantine had absolutely nothing to do with the formation

⁶ Athanasius, *A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, repr. 1991) 4:552.

⁷ F. F. Bruce, *The New Testament Documents: Are They Reliable?* 5th ed. (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity, 1977) 27.

⁸ William Barclay, *The Making of the Bible* (Edinburgh: The Saint Andrew Press, 1979) x (emphasis his).

of the biblical canon. A cursory glance at the facts exposes this allegation as anti-Christian propaganda and very poor history.

The books of New Testament we read today were compiled over centuries of use by the larger church of Jesus Christ. The God who inspired the Scriptures used his people to gather and preserve them. We have the books God intended us to possess and obey today.

Can we trust what we read?

When Claude Pepper was running for senator from Florida in 1950, one of his opponents attacked him this way: "Are you aware that Claude Pepper is known all over Washington as a shameless extrovert? He also practiced nepotism with his sister-in-law, and has a sister who was once a thespian in wicked New York City. Worst of all, before his marriage he habitually practiced celibacy!" Mr. Pepper lost the election.

Words matter.

A Gutenberg Bible, printed in 1455 in Mainz, Germany, was sold at an auction in 1987 for \$5.39 million, more than twice the previous record price for a printed book. The Bible is indisputably the best-selling book of all time; Christian bookstores sell more than 30,000 each day.

Words about the Bible matter.

As we continue our study of biblical authority, we come to this practical question: what are we to call this book? What words best describe its authority? Which terms should we avoid, and which should we encourage? And why does it all matter?

We'll start our very brief tour within the pages of the Bible itself. Does this book consider itself to be authoritative? Or do those of us who affirm the timeless truth of Scripture misunderstand the book we defend? Critics of the sixteenth century reformers accused them of making a "paper pope" of Scripture. Is our commitment to biblical authority warranted by the Bible itself? What does God's word say about itself?

The Bible on its origin

The Author of this book made the most stupendous claim in all of recorded literature: "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me" (Matthew 28:18). No Caesar, general, or dictator ever thought to claim all authority over the entire universe. If Jesus possesses "all" authority over every dimension of reality, how much authority do you and I have? The words given to us by such a Person obviously become the most significant and authoritative in all the world.

The Bible agrees. It claims to be "inspired" ("breathed into") by its Author: "All Scripture is God-breathed" (2 Timothy 3:16). It claims divine, not human, authorship for its source: "Above all, you must understand that no prophecy of Scripture came about by

the prophet's own interpretation. For prophecy never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit" (2 Peter 1:20-21).

Paul says of his words, "The gospel I preached is not something that man made up. I did not receive it from any man, nor was I taught it; rather, I received it by revelation from Jesus Christ" (Galatians 1:11-12). He made the same statement to the Corinthians: "This is what we speak, not in words taught us by human wisdom but in words taught by the Spirit" (1 Corinthians 2:13).

Scripture claims to possess this divine authority for all time:

- "The grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of our God stands forever" (Isaiah 40:8).
- After quoting this passage, Peter adds, "And this is the word that was preached to you" (1 Pt 1:25).
- Jesus was clear and adamant: "My words will never pass away" (Matthew 24:35).

The Bible claims to be the authoritative word of God on every subject it addresses. It asserts that its truths are objective and eternally relevant. It could not possibly claim a higher authority for itself.

Relating the divine and the human

So we know that the Bible is literally "God's word," given to humans through human agency. How did he use men to get his word to mankind? Here we must consider "theories of inspiration."

First, let's dispense with mistaken approaches. Some consider the Bible to be "inspired" like all great literature—no less and no more. This is the "natural" inspiration theory. Others believe that the Bible was inspired to the same degree as Christian writing, preaching, and teaching today. This is the "general Christian" theory. Still others accept as inspired only certain sections of Scripture. This is the "partial inspiration" approach. The Bible rejects all three by claiming God's special authorship of all the Scriptures (2 Timothy 3:16).

Now let's consider the three most popular theories in church life today. One is the *dictation* approach. By this view, God gave the literal words of Scripture directly to their human writers. The authors functioned something like stenographers. Some of the Bible clearly came to exist in this way (the Ten Commandments, for instance). But we find different vocabularies, writing styles, and goals within the various books. For this reason, the "dictation" theory is not popular with most scholars today.

The *verbal* approach suggests that God inspired the individual words of the Bible while also allowing human personality to be used. This view is usually combined with "plenary," meaning "all." It teaches that God took the initiative in inspiring each of the individual words of Scripture, but he did this in a way which engaged their personalities as well.

A third approach is the *dynamic* theory. Those who hold this view believe that God guided the writers more often than he gave each word to them. In this way their personalities were used, while God's purpose was achieved. This approach, while not insisting on the direct verbal inspiration of each word of the text, still maintains the divine inspiration of the Scriptures. This view affirms that inspiration is verbal not so much in its method as in its result.

Which approach is best? All three contain ideas which should be combined into one concept. We should affirm both the divine and the human elements behind the creation of Scripture, without allowing either to minimize the other.

Sometimes God dictated his words; sometimes he gave the authors his words in very direct ways (dreams and visions, for instance); and sometimes they use their own vocabularies to express the truth he gave them. Perhaps an analogy can clear up this confusion. Many writers, both ancient and modern, have compared the divine/human authorship of Scripture to the divine/human nature of its subject, Jesus Christ. Jesus was fully divine, but fully human as well. We cannot understand this mystery fully, but we can affirm it. In the same way, Scripture can be the very word of God, and yet use the words of men.

All significant spiritual truth requires the acceptance of paradox. God is three and yet one; and the Lord is sovereign while we have free will. Jesus is fully God and fully man; his word retains both the divine and the human as well.

Those closest to the text

The first Christians were convinced of the divine, authoritative nature of Scripture. They were clear on the fact that the Bible is the absolute, authoritative word of God. For instance, Peter cited Old Testament prophets as his authority in his Pentecost address, the first "Christian" sermon. Stephen's defense of the incipient Christian faith was largely a retelling of Israel's history in the biblical narrative (Acts 7). James argued for Gentile inclusion in the Church on the basis of biblical prophetic witness (Amos 9:11, 12; Acts 15:16-18).

Much of Paul's ministry was spent explaining how Jesus fulfilled Old Testament Messianic promises. An early example from his first missionary journey: "From Perga they went on to Pisidian Antioch. On the Sabbath they entered the synagogue and sat down. After reading from the Law and the Prophets, the synagogue rulers sent word to them, saying, 'Brothers, if you have a message of encouragement for the people, please speak'" (Acts 13:14-15). Paul immediately recited the biblical history of his people (vs. 16-22), and showed the people how Jesus fulfilled their Scriptures (vs. 23-31). He then claimed Psalm 2:7 (v. 33), Isaiah 55:3 (v. 34), Psalm 16:10 (v. 34), and Habakkuk 1:5 (v. 41) as warrant for the gospel he proclaimed.

The letters of the New Testament and early Christian history are replete with biblical citations. In fact, if we had only the letters written by second-century Christians we could reconstruct most of the New Testament on the basis of their voluminous quotations.

There is no doubt that the first Christians considered the Bible to be the authoritative revelation and word of God. Critics can say they were right or they were wrong, but they cannot say they were ambiguous. These men and women would rather die than deny the truths they found in God's word. We should feel the same way.

So far we've learned how the Bible was made, its books were chosen, and its words were inspired. All evidence points to a book which is trustworthy in content and reliable in transmission. But its life-changing purpose requires our participation. No literature can change the heart of a person who won't read it. The world's finest art cannot move those who will not view it.

Has God's word changed your life yet today? Will it?

Archaeological evidence for the Bible

We have excellent archaeological data to support the rest of the biblical witness. Here are some examples, listed in the order of their biblical occurrence.⁹

Old Testament discoveries

Archaeologists working with the ruins of Jericho made this astounding discovery in the 1930s: the walls fell outwards. Typically, attackers used poles and rams to push stone walls inward. In this case, they fell down and out, making it easy for the Israelites to climb them and take the city (Joshua 6:20).

In 1993, Israeli archaeologists were sifting through debris as they worked on the ruins of the ancient city of Dan in upper Galilee. What they discovered this day would make the front page of the *New York Times*: an inscription, part of a shattered "stele" (monument) and dated to the ninth century before Christ. It commemorated a military victory by the king of Damascus over the king of Israel and the house of David. And it cited the "House of David" clearly and without question.

This was the first non-biblical artifact proving the existence of the great King of Israel. A year later, two other artifacts were discovered, naming Jehoram, king of Israel, and Ahaziah, king of Judah. Many scholars now believe that the monument relates to the battle in the region recorded in 2 Chronicles 22:5.

Archaeologists have also discovered dramatic evidence of Solomon's amazing wealth and building campaigns. Fortifications at Hazor, Megiddo, and Gezer date to the middle of the tenth century B.C., exactly the time of Solomon's reign. Solomon's "Royal Quarter" has been unearthed in Jerusalem. And part of the Temple he built still stands on the eastern side of the Temple Mount.

⁹ Sources include Jeffrey L. Sheler, *Is the Bible True?* (HarperSanFrancisco, 1999; John Arthur Thompson, *The Bible and Archaeology*, ed. ed. rev. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1982); Merrill F. Unger, *Archaeology and the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1962)

Babylonian chronicles of the destruction of Jerusalem parallel precisely the biblical records of this tragic event. And ruins of Nebuchadnezzar's palace complex have been discovered, proving his existence and significant role in the ancient Middle East.

New Testament evidences

According to Luke 3:1, Lysanias was tetrarch of Abilene during the beginning of John the Baptist's ministry. But no evidence of Lysanias' existence had been discovered, until an inscription was found which records a temple dedication by him. His name, title, and place all agree with Luke's description.

In 1990, workers building a water park two miles south of the Temple Mount inadvertently broke through the ceiling of a hidden burial chamber. Archaeologists found twelve limestone ossuaries inside. One of them, decorated with six-petaled rosettes, contained the bones of a sixty-year-old man. And it bore the inscription *Yehosef bar Qayafa*, "Joseph son of Caiaphas." Historians have identified the remains as those of the high priest of Jesus' execution.

In 1961, excavations at the seaside ruins of Caesarea Maritima unearthed a first-century inscription. Badly damaged, the Latin inscription reads in part, *Tiberieum . . . [Pon]tius Pilatus . . . [Praef]ectus Juda[ea]e*. The inscription confirms the status of Pontius Pilate as the prefect or governor of Judea.

Yhohnn Yehohanan was a crucifixion victim, executed during the Jewish Revolt in A.D. 70. In 1968, his remains were discovered. His legs were fractured, evidence of the typical Roman means by which death was hastened. Nails were driven through his wrists and heels. His death corresponds precisely with the descriptions of Jesus' crucifixions found in the Gospels (cf. John 19:17-32).

Luke describes Paul's ministry in Corinth and this attack: "While Gallio was proconsul of Achaia, the Jews made a united attack on Paul" (Acts 18:12). Gallio ejected Paul's accusers from his court (v. 16) and refused to prosecute Paul. This Gallio is known to be the brother of Seneca, the philosopher, who was himself tutor of Nero. However, critics were skeptical of Luke's claim that Gallio was "proconsul" of Achaia during the time of Paul's ministry there. Then an inscription was discovered at Delphi with this exact title for Gallio; it dates him to A.D. 51, the time Paul was in Corinth.

Erastus is identified in Acts 19:22 as one of Paul's Corinthian co-workers. In excavations in the area of Corinth, we find an inscription which states, "Erastus in return for his aedileship laid the pavement at his own expense."

Fulfilled prophecy

Jeane Dixon made the news after President Kennedy's assassination, when her prediction reported four years earlier in *Parade* magazine was recounted: "As to the 1960 election, Mrs. Dixon thinks it will be dominated by labor and won by a Democrat. But he will be assassinated or die in office, though not necessarily in his first term."

However, in January of 1960 she had claimed, "The symbol of the Presidency is directly over the head of Vice President Nixon." Either he or Democrat John Kennedy had to win the election. Additionally, three of the ten presidents who served in the 20th century had died in office, and two others were critically ill at the end of their term. The odds against her were not as high as we might think.

Further study of psychic claims made in 1975 and observed until 1981 concluded that only six of the 72 predictions were fulfilled in any way. A six percent accuracy rate is not impressive.¹⁰

Does the Bible fulfill its predictions? When it makes prophetic statements regarding the future, do they come to pass? As we consider evidence for biblical authority, we should spend a moment with the fascinating subject of Messianic prophecy and its fulfillment by Jesus Christ. If any book makes promises it does not keep, we are justified in dismissing the rest of its truth claims. But if a book's prophecies rendered centuries earlier are clearly fulfilled in history, we can consider the rest of its claims to be trustworthy as well.

The importance of Messianic prophecy

Jesus appealed repeatedly to Old Testament predictions regarding himself:

- At the beginning of his ministry, he read a Messianic prediction from Isaiah 61, then said to the waiting crowd, "Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing" (Luke 4:21).
- He told his critics, "You diligently study the Scriptures because you think that by them you possess eternal life. These are the Scriptures that testify about me, yet you refuse to come to me to have life...If you believed Moses, you would believe me, for he wrote about me" (John 5:39-40, 46).
- At the Last Supper, he warned his disciples, "It is written: 'And he was numbered with the transgressors'; and I tell you that this must be fulfilled in me. Yes, what is written about me is reaching its fulfillment" (Luke 22:37).
- At his arrest he told the crowd, "This has all taken place that the writings of the prophets might be fulfilled" (Matthew 26:56).
- On Easter Sunday night he said to the two disciples traveling to Emmaus: "How foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Did not the Christ have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?" Then, to explain what he meant, "And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself" (Luke 24:25-26, 27).
- After his resurrection he said to his astonished disciples, "Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms" (Luke 24:44).

10 Norman Geisler and Ron Brooks, *When Skeptics Ask: A Handbook On Christian Evidences* (Wheaton, Illinois: Victor Books, 1990) 91.

New Testament writers made the same appeal, claiming repeatedly that Jesus fulfilled the Old Testament predictions regarding the Messiah:

- At Pentecost, Peter cited prophecies from Joel 2, Psalm 16, and Psalm 110 in claiming that Jesus was the promised Messiah (Acts 2:14-36).
- He later explained Jesus' crucifixion to a crowd at Jerusalem: "This is how God fulfilled what he foretold through all the prophets, saying that his Christ would suffer" (Acts 3:18).
- Peter told Cornelius, "All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name" (Acts 10:43).
- When Paul came to Thessalonica, "As his custom was, [he] went into the synagogue, and on three Sabbath days he reasoned with them from the Scriptures, explaining and proving that the Christ had to suffer and rise from the dead. 'This Jesus I am proclaiming to you is the Christ,' he said" (Acts 17:2-3).
- Paul described his message as "the gospel [God] promised beforehand through his prophets in the Holy Scriptures" (Romans 1:2).
- Paul's message could be summarized: "what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures" (1 Corinthians 15:3-4).

Clearly, if Jesus did not fulfill Old Testament predictions regarding the Messiah, both he and his first followers were deceivers of the worst sort. Their movement depended entirely on the claim that he was the promised Messiah of God. It still does.

Representative Messianic prophecies¹¹

More than 300 times, the Old Testament makes claims or predictions regarding the coming Messiah. Jesus fulfilled every prophecy. Most scholars date Malachi, the last book of the Old Testament, at ca. 400 B.C., demonstrating that these predictions were not made during Jesus' day.

Translators who created the Septuagint, the Greek Old Testament, began their work ca. 250 B.C. At the very least, there were more than two centuries between the last prediction and Jesus' fulfillment.

Listed in order relative to Jesus' earthly life, here are some of the main prophecies to consider:

Prophecy	Old Testament	New Testament
Born of a woman's seed	Gen 3:15	Gal 4:4
Born of a virgin	Is 7:14	Mt 1:18, 24, 25; Lk 1:26-35
Descended from Abraham	Gen 22:18	Mt 1:1; Gal 3:16
Descended from Isaac	Gen 21:12	Lk 3:23, 34; Mt 1:2

¹¹ This discussion follows the treatment by Josh McDowell, *The New Evidence that Demands a Verdict* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1999) 167-94. McDowell's discussion is helpful in that it depends heavily upon Jewish interpretation of the Old Testament sources cited.

Descended from Jacob	Numb 24:17	Lk 3:23, 34
Part of the tribe of Judah	Gen 49:19; Mic. 5:2	Lk 3:23, 33; Mt 1:2
From the family line of Jesse	Is 11:1	Lk 3:23, 32; Mt 1:6
From the house of David	Jer 23:5	Lk 3:23, 31; Mt 1:1
Born at Bethlehem	Mic 5:2	Mt 2:1
Presented with gifts	Ps 72:10	Mt 2:1, 11
Children would die	Jer 31:15	Mt 2:16
Would be anointed by the Spirit	Is 11:2	Mt 3:16, 17
Preceded by a messenger	Is 40:3; Mal 3:1	Mt 3:1, 2
Would minister in Galilee	Is 9:1	Mt 4:12, 13, 17
Would perform miracles	Is 35:5, 6	Mt 9:35
Would teach parables	Ps 78:2	Mt 13:34
Would enter Jerusalem on a donkey	Zech 9:9	Lk 19:35-37
A friend would betray him	Ps 41:9	Mt 10:4
Sold for 30 pieces of silver	Zech 11:12	Mt 26:15
Money thrown in the Lord's house	Zech 11:13	Mt 27:5
Money used for a potter's field	Zech 11:13	Mt 27:7
Forsaken by his disciples	Zech 13:7	Mk 14:50
Accused by false witnesses	Ps 35:11	Mt 26:59, 60
Silent before his accusers	Is 53:7	Mt 27:12
Wounded and bruised	Is 53:5	Mt 27:26
Smitten and spit upon	Is 50:6	Mt 26:67
Mocked	Ps 22:7, 8	Mt 27:29
Hands and feet pierced	Ps 22:16	Lk 23:33
Crucified with thieves	Is 53:12	Mt 27:38
Prayed for his persecutors	Is 53:12	Lk 23:34
Friends stood afar off	Ps 38:11	Lk 23:49
Garments parted and lots cast	Ps 22:18	Jn 19:23, 24
Would suffer thirst	Ps 69:21	Jn 19:28
Gall and vinegar offered	Ps 69:21	Mt 27:34
Would be forsaken by God	Ps 22:1	Mt 27:46
Would commit himself to God	Ps 31:5	Lk 23:46
No bones broken	Ps 34:20	Jn 19:33
His side pierced	Zech 12:10	Jn 19:34
Buried in a wealthy man's tomb	Is 53:9	Mt 27:57-60
Would be raised from the dead	Ps 16:10	Ac 2:31
Would ascend to heaven	Ps 68:18	Ac 1:9
Would be seated at the right hand of God	Ps 110:1	Heb 1:3

What are the chances that one person could fulfill each of these predictions? Many of them were beyond Jesus' human control (such as the soldier's decision to thrust his spear into Jesus' side). Were they coincidental? Mathematician Peter Stoner once calculated the odds of one man's fulfillment of just eight of these predictions: one in 10 to the 17th power (one followed by 17 zeroes).

That number would fill the state of Texas two feet deep in silver dollars. Stoner then considered 48 of the Messianic prophecies, and determined their odds to be one in ten to the 157th power.

Clearly, the Bible keeps its promises. And its central figure is who he claimed to be: the Messiah of God.

The contradictory history of contradictions

Everyone knows that contradictions are bad. If you can find a statement I make in this chapter which disagrees with something I've already said, you'll feel justified in rejecting both. Even though one may be right. Even though they both may be. Why?

We have Aristotle (384-322 B.C.) to thank, or blame. In his desire to compile all knowledge into an organized system, he devised laws of logic as organizational tools. One of them is called the "law of contradiction": A cannot equal B and at the same time not equal B. A fish cannot also be a mammal, if a biologist like Aristotle is going to classify it.

From then to now, we Westerners have adopted Aristotle's law as the basis for determining all truth. If we can find a contradiction in the Bible, we think we have reason to dismiss its veracity. But before we decide we're right, let's think about Aristotle's laws some more.

His approach is necessary in the physical sciences. We want our doctors to diagnose ailments by Aristotelian logic. If your knee is hurting, you don't want your orthopedist to suggest that it might be cancer and torn cartilage, so let's treat it for both and see what happens. You want a non-contradictory medical response.

The trouble with Aristotle's law comes when we apply it outside its intended context. Aristotle wanted to classify all empirical knowledge, and needed his laws of logic to do so. But he didn't use them outside the physical realm. When we apply them in this way, problems quickly emerge.

Relational experience is seldom logical and non-contradictory. It may appear contradictory to claim that you love your children and yet sometimes wish they'd never been born. But if you're a typical parent, both are sometimes true. Jesus claimed to be fully God and fully man; God is three and yet one; the Bible is divinely inspired but humanly written; God knows the future but we have freedom to choose. Inside every essential Christian doctrine there is a paradox, an apparent contradiction.

This is as it should be. If you and I could understand fully the nature of God, either he wouldn't be God or we would be. Mark Twain once remarked that if he could understand everything in the Bible, he wouldn't believe that God wrote it. We should expect paradox and rational tensions within our finite, fallen understanding of the omnipotent God of the universe.

Many of the so-called contradictions in the Bible fit into such spiritual or relational categories. For instance, the Bible teaches that "God is love" (1 John 4:8). Yet it also states clearly, "The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness" (Romans 1:18). And it warns, "For those who are self-seeking and who reject the truth and follow evil, there will be wrath and anger" (Romans 2:8). How can God both love and hate? Don't ask Aristotle. But you can ask any parent.

Not all truth fits into test tubes. My seventh-grade geometry teacher claimed that parallel lines never intersect. But to prove it, he'd have to draw them forever. Black and white are not the only crayons in the box.

Consider the larger context

A second category of apparent contradictions in the Bible results from misunderstanding the intended context of the texts in question. Let's look at some commonly-cited examples, taking them in the order they appear in Scripture.

An eye for an eye and the God of love

A critic asks, "The Old Testament teaches, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' But Jesus told us to turn the other cheek. Which is right?" Both.

We're dealing with the *Lex Talionis*, the oldest law in the world. It appears in the Code of Hammurabi, dated to 2285 B.C. It is found in the Old Testament as well: "If any harm follows, then you shall give life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burn for burn, wound for wound, stripe for stripe" (Exodus 21:23-25).

Before this law, if I wrecked your car you could destroy my house. If I injured your child, you could kill all my children. The original purpose of the law was thus to limit vengeance. Only the one who caused the injury could be punished, not his entire family or tribe. And only to the degree that he has injured another, protecting him from a more powerful enemy. This law did not promote retribution—it limited it.

But the law seems to contradict Jesus' clear teaching in the Sermon on the Mount: "Do not resist an evil person. If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. And if someone wants to sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well. If someone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles. Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you" (Matthew 5:38-42).

In their historical context, Jesus' statements are intended to speak to a very different subject than self-defense and retribution. Each of his examples points to the same principle: stop the cycle of revenge. Don't return slander with slander, gossip with gossip.

His first example relates to your *honor*: "If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also" (v. 39). "Strikes" in the original means to "slap." The right hand was the only one used in public. To slap your right cheek with my right hand was an insult, not a threat to life and limb. Jesus says, Don't slap back. If someone insults you, don't insult them.

Next, Jesus speaks of your *possessions*: "If someone wants to use you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well" (v. 40). Your "tunic" was your undershirt with sleeves; it could be taken in a lawsuit. Your "cloak" could not, for it protected you from the elements. But give it anyway. Don't insist on your rights.

Now he deals with your *time*: "If someone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles" (v. 41). Jesus refers to the power of a Roman soldier to make a Jew carry his military pack for one mile. Carry it two miles. Sacrifice the time, though you don't have to. Do it anyway.

And last, he speaks to your *money*: "Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you" (v. 42). As Augustine reminds us, we are not told to give everything we are asked for, but to give to every person who asks. Even though it is your right not to.

So refuse retribution. Stop the cycle of vengeance. Don't repeat the gossip or slander. Refuse to return insult for insult, pain for pain. It has been noted that an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth is a rapid way to a sightless, toothless world. That's the point of Jesus' teaching, and it in no way contradicts the law in Exodus. The former deals with personal insults, the latter with physical malice. Knowing the context explains the "contradiction."

Nuram, Naphtali and Dan

1 Kings 7:14 states that Hiram, one of the builders of Solomon's temple, came from the tribe of Naphtali. However, 2 Chronicles 2:14 says his mother was from the tribe of Dan. Which tribe was hers?

A number of possibilities exist. She could have been descended from Dan but living in Naphtali, or the reverse. One of her parents could have come from one tribe, the other from the other tribe. There is no reason to assume a contradiction in the accounts.

Abiathar and Ahimelech

In Mark 2, Jesus defends his disciples' decision to eat grain on the Sabbath: "Have you never read what David did when he and his companions were hungry and in need? In the days of Abiathar the high priest, he entered the house of God and ate the consecrated bread" (vs. 25-26). But 1 Samuel 21:1 says that this occurred when Ahimelech, Abiathar's father, was priest. For such kindness to David, Ahimelech and his family were killed by Saul's soldiers. His son Abiathar escaped, and was later made priest (1 Samuel 22:20-23).

This problem is explainable on grammatical terms. "In the days of Abiathar" translates a Greek phrase which says literally "upon Abiathar the high priest." Mark usually uses "upon" (*epi* in Greek) to refer to location rather than time. The phrase is better translated, "at the place where Abiathar was high priest," not "during the time when" he served.¹²

Another "contradiction" involving these two men is also explainable. 2 Samuel 8:16-18 lists King David's officials and includes "Ahimelech son of Abiathar" as priest (v. 17). We know from 1 Samuel 22:20 that Ahimelech was Abiathar's father. But it is possible that Abiathar had a son whom he named for his own father Ahimelech. Remember that Zechariah's family wanted to name his son for his father, until his parents insisted that he be called "John" (Luke 1:59-63). My middle name is my grandfather's first name; one of my sons carries his grandfather's first name as well. Such family traditions are still as common today as in the ancient world.

David's census

2 Samuel 24:1 states, "the anger of the Lord burned against Israel, and he incited David against them, saying, 'Go and take a census of Israel and Judah.'" Then, after David conducted such a census, God responded with judgment and punishment. As a result, 70,000 people died in a plague which an angel brought against the people (v. 15). Why would God punish David and his people for doing what he led the king to do?

To further complicate matters, 1 Chronicles 21:1 records, "Satan rose up against Israel and incited David to take a census of Israel." Now we find Scripture blaming not God but Satan for the census. Again we wonder why God punished the people for something Satan instigated. And we wonder who was behind this apparent sin.

Two facts deserve notice. One: David misused his freedom to conduct the census. His advisers warned him against such an action of prideful self-reliance (2 Samuel 24:3-4). His actions implicated the entire nation, so that judgment came against them all. Disobedience leads to consequences beyond our intention. As someone has noted, sin will always take you farther than you wanted to go, keep you longer than you wanted to stay, and cost you more than you wanted to pay.

Two: the Jewish people saw all that happens as within the providence and permission of God. God does not himself cause us to sin (James 1:13-14). But because Satan must work under the control of the Lord (cf. Job 1:12; 2:6; Ezekiel 3:20; 14:9; Acts 4:28), God permits what Satan does. In this sense, Satan's activity (1 Chronicles) was permitted by the Lord and thus attributed to him (2 Samuel).

As the Jewish people grew in their knowledge of God, the Chronicler (writing 400 years after 2 Samuel) could record Satan's activity in more detail than the people had earlier understood. In the proper historical and theological light, the two accounts do not contradict each other.

¹² For another explanation which locates Jesus' phrase with the biblical text concerning Abiathar rather than his physical circumstances, see Blomberg 193.

Quirinius, governor Syria

Luke 2:2 tells us that the census which led Joseph and Mary to Bethlehem "was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria." However, Jewish and Roman historical records seem to date Quirinius' term in office from A.D. 6-9. Can we reconcile the discrepancy?

Yes. We know from the Roman historian Tacitus (*Annals* 3:48) that Quirinius led military expeditions in the Syrian region a decade earlier. Luke uses "governor" (*hegemoneuo*) in a general sense of leading or ruling, so that he may well have this military office in mind. And some ancient records seem to indicate that Quirinius served two terms in office; the first from 6-4 B.C. and the second from A.D. 6-9. A census occurred during each term (Acts 5:37 refers to the census which took place during Quirinius' second term in office).

It seems unlikely that Luke would make an historical error regarding political leadership at the time of Jesus' birth, given his careful use of eyewitness records (Luke 1:1-4) and the fact that such a mistake would be easily exposed by his contemporaries. But given the general nature of Luke's word "governor," it is easy to see how his narrative correlates with ancient historical records.

In a sermon this Sunday, I could attribute the allied victory in World War II to the "leadership" of Dwight Eisenhower, even though Franklin Roosevelt and Harry Truman were presidents during this time and Eisenhower came to the White House later. If I state that Gen. Eisenhower was "president" in 1945, any who listen to my sermon would quickly correct me. If I call him our "leader," all would understand.

Mark 1, Isaiah and Malachi

Mark 1:2-3 begins the life of Jesus with this citation: "It is written in Isaiah the prophet: 'I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way'--'a voice of one calling in the desert, 'Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.'"" The problem is that the first citation does not come from Isaiah but from Malachi 3:1. Did Mark make a mistake? No.

Mark's second citation is taken directly from Isaiah 40:3, so that the prophecy he cites did in fact come from Isaiah. But what of the first prediction? Isaiah was the first book in the division of the Hebrew Bible known as the Latter Prophets, so that everything from Isaiah to Malachi could be considered to be "in Isaiah."

This kind of attribution was common in ancient literature. For instance, the book of Proverbs begins, "The proverbs of Solomon son of David, king of Israel." Yet Proverbs 30 claims to be "the sayings of Agur son of Jakeh" (v. 1), while Proverbs 31 is the work of "King Lemuel" (v. 1). The larger book is attributed to Solomon, since he is its principal and best-known author. In the same way, the prophecies found in the Latter Prophets all stand "in" or under Isaiah, their first and best-known representative.

The roof and the paralytic

Mark informs us that the friends of a paralyzed man tried to bring him to Jesus, but could not get inside the house crowded with people listening to him teach. So "they made an opening in the roof above Jesus and, after digging through it, lowered the mat the paralyzed man was lying on" (Mark 2:4). Mark describes a typical Palestinian house, made with a flat roof accessible by a ladder. Usually roofing clay was packed and rolled, then covered with branches laid across wooden beams.

However, Luke describes the same event this way: "they went up on the roof and lowered him on his mat through the tiles into the middle of the crowd" (Luke 5:19). Since Gentile houses often used such tiles, could it be that Luke used a description with which he was more familiar? If so, was he in error? Did the friends "dig through" a clay roof, or remove ceiling tiles?

Both. Jesus was teaching in a house large enough to accommodate a crowd which included Pharisees and teachers of the law "from every village of Galilee and from Judea and Jerusalem" (Luke 5:17).

Perhaps this expansive house was owned by a person wealthy enough to afford roof tiles, rather than the cheaper thatched roof which had to be replaced periodically. These tiles would substitute for the branches which were laid on wooden beams across the clay roof. Mark does not state that the friends dug through branches, but only through the roof itself. Luke gives us the added detail that they removed tiles before they dug through the clay roof. There is no reason to conclude that the two accounts contradict one another.

The death of Judas

Here's another supposed contradiction: "Matthew says that Judas hanged himself; the book of Acts says he fell down and died. Which is it?" Matthew's gospel does indeed record Judas's suicide by hanging: "So Judas threw the money into the temple and left. Then he went away and hanged himself. The chief priests picked up the coins and said, 'It is against the law to put this into the treasury, since it is blood money.' So they decided to use the money to buy the potter's field as a burial place for foreigners. That is why it has been called the Field of Blood to this day" (Matthew 27:5-8). In Acts 1 Peter says, "Judas bought a field; there he fell headlong, his body burst open and all his intestines spilled out" (v. 18).

How can the two accounts be reconciled? In several ways. It may be that Judas's body decomposed, so that when the rope broke or was cut, it fell as Peter describes. Or it may be that the Greek word translated "hanged" is actually the word "impaled" (both meanings are possible), so that Peter describes more vividly the way Judas killed himself. Either option is a possible way to explain the apparent contradiction.

The purchase of the field is likewise explainable. "Judas bought a field" (Acts 1:18) can mean that the field was bought with his money, not necessarily that he procured the land personally. We speak in the same way in our church when we tell members that their

offerings paid for a particular ministry or building. "You bought literature for our trip to South Texas," we tell them, even though they did not purchase the materials themselves.

It seems unlikely that Peter would get the details of Judas' death wrong, since it occurred less than six weeks before his comments in Acts 1. He spoke in general terms about an event which was common knowledge; Matthew provided greater detail when he wrote about Judas' death some four decades later.

Angels at Easter

At Jesus' resurrection, when the women came to the empty tomb "two men in clothes that gleamed like lightning stood beside them" (Luke 24:4). John's account agrees: Mary "saw two angels in white, seated where Jesus' body had been, one at the head and the other at the foot" (John 20:12). However, Matthew 28:2-7 records only one angel who rolled back the stone, frightened the guards, and spoke to the women. And Mark tells us that the women found "a young man dressed in a white robe sitting on the right side" of the tomb (16:5).

Were there two angels or one at the resurrection? Yes. In ancient literature, it was common for the spokesman to be described without mentioning those who accompanied him. For instance, in Acts 15 we learn that Silas accompanied Paul on his second missionary journey (v. 40). But then Luke records that "He went through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches" (v. 41), and then "He came to Derbe and then to Lystra" (16:1). Where was Silas? With Paul, though unnamed and unmentioned.

In the same way, one angel could roll aside the stone and speak to the women, while another was present as well. There is no reason to insist that the accounts contradict each other. Additionally, the angels were seated (John 20:12) and standing (Luke 24:4), as they changed their posture during the course of the event.

Such independence of accounts actually strengthens the case for biblical trustworthiness. It is obvious that the writers did not try to coordinate their descriptions. No collusion was at work. Any traffic officer will testify that two people who witness the same automobile accident will tell the story with different details. So long as they agree on the essentials, their testimony will be accepted as trustworthy. In fact, if every detail agrees, the court will wonder if the witnesses coordinated their stories before telling them under oath.

In the same way, we can know that those who recorded the first Easter got the intended meaning and message of the resurrection right. To ask more is to raise a question the text is not intended to answer. We don't play tennis with a football.

Understand the author's intention

A third category of supposed contradictions results from misunderstanding the background behind passages in God's word. When we don't have the full picture, we distort the parts we do see.

It is unfair to any book to ask questions it does not intend to answer. We don't use a cookbook to repair a car, or a poem to mow the lawn. If a biblical writer did not intend chronological, historical, geographic, or scientific precision, it is unfair to criticize him for failing by such standards. A meteorologist can predict the time of tomorrow's "sunrise" without intending to take us back to the Ptolemaic universe in which the sun rotates around the earth.

Let's consider some examples of "contradictions" which are explained by remembering the intention of the biblical authors.

Jesus' temptations

Matthew 4 records Jesus' temptations in this order: turn stones into bread (v. 3), jump from the temple (vs. 5-6), and worship Satan on a mountain (v. 9). Luke 4 records the same temptations, but in a different order: turn stones to bread (v. 3), worship the devil on a mountain (vs. 5-6), and jump from the temple (vs. 9-11).

Aristotelian logic requires that we ask: which order is correct? Which writer is wrong? If one is wrong, maybe they're both wrong. Maybe Satan is mythical. Maybe Jesus' temptations are symbolic. Once we start down the slippery slope of contradiction, where do we stop?

In their intentional context, there is no such contradiction here. Neither Matthew nor Luke claimed to be writing historical chronology, so the order of Jesus' temptations is immaterial to their purpose.

Let's say a staff member asks me what I did today, and I tell him that I taught Men's Bible Study this morning, attended our Thursday prayer meeting, and worked on my sermon for this weekend. Then tonight my wife asks me what I did, and I tell her that I taught Men's Bible Study, worked on my sermon, and attended Thursday prayer meeting. Have I contradicted myself? Only if I promised to state the activities in their proper chronological order each time I recounted the events. If such was not my intention, my retelling of the day is correct in each account.

In the same way, Matthew and Luke contradict each other regarding Jesus' temptations only if each of them stated their intention to record chronological precision. Since they don't, it is clear that the order of the temptations stands outside their intention and thus our criticism.

Copyist errors

The Bible is the product of some fifteen centuries of authorship and another fifteen centuries of handwritten transmission. Not until the Gutenberg Bible was it possible to copy and transmit the Scriptures mechanically; not until this generation was such possible electronically.

As we will see in have seen, the manuscripts for the biblical texts are astoundingly accurate and trustworthy. However, it is inevitable that human hands, copying such a

large text, would make occasional scribal errors. Such problems are far less common with the Bible than with any other ancient literature. And not one affects a single doctrine or faith practice.

Let's look at some "contradictions" which result from copyist errors. 2 Samuel 10 tells us that in conflict with the Aramean army, "David killed seven hundred of their charioteers" (v. 18). When 1 Chronicles 19 records the same event four centuries later, it states that "David killed seven thousand of their charioteers" (v. 18). It would be easy for a scribe to make a mistake by either reducing the 1 Chronicles number or adding to the one recorded in 2 Samuel.

Of course, the two accounts are not technically in contradiction, since 700 is a subset of 7,000. David killed 700 charioteers, if he killed 7,000. But most likely the difference is the result of a copyist mistake. And this mistake changes absolutely nothing about the intended message of the two passages—David led his armies to victory and his nation to peace.

Another example of copyist error is in the well-known 23rd Psalm. The NIV renders the last phrase, "and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever" (v. 6). The Masoretes (scribes who copied the Old Testament) rendered the verb as "I will return," from the Hebrew verb *wesabti*. But the verb *weyasabti* ("remain") was likely the original. The "w" (Hebrew *waw*) and the "y" (Hebrew *yod*) looked so much alike that the Masoretes saw the "y" as a repeated "w" and dropped it, rendering the verb *wesabti*. Because Hebrew scholars believe the original verb was *weyasabti*, they translate the phrase "I will dwell."

Before you decide that these kinds of mistakes in transmission disqualify biblical authority, apply such a test to any other means of communication. A single typographical error in tomorrow's newspaper means that you cannot trust anything it reports. A mistake in tonight's television newscast means that every story is unreliable. My first mistake in typography or syntax disqualifies everything you read in this book.

By such standards no literature or communication medium can be trusted. No phone book or dictionary should be consulted. No doctor should practice medicine, since medical books are not free from error. And no medical practice is immune from mistakes. If a single doctor misdiagnoses a single ailment, none of us should ever consult a physician again.

At issue is the intention of the text. As we have seen, the Bible does not intend to be a book which meets 21st-century standards of scientific, geographic, or historical precision. No ancient book does. And few if any documents in current literature can stand such scrutiny perfectly. But the Bible, as transmitted to us across 35 centuries, retains complete accuracy in all it intends to accomplish. It shows us how to find Jesus (John 20:30-31), and how to be equipped for faith and service in the Kingdom of God (2 Timothy 3:16-17).

The next time someone claims the Bible is full of contradictions, ask him if he has read the Bible. Then ask if it is a contradiction to dismiss a book he hasn't read. Now offer to help him study the Bible and meet its Author. It is a contradiction to me that a holy and perfect God would want me to live in his perfect paradise. I'm glad it's not to him.