

Basic Christianity

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Week Four

Why should I look to the Bible, anyway?

Like newborn babes, long for the pure milk of the word, that by it you may grow in respect to salvation. 1 Peter 2:2

The Bible is the most influential book in human history. It has been foundational to western civilization (law, literature, music, art. . .). It has also been the subject of more intense analysis and criticism than any other book in history. Today, we have lots of questions about the Bible:

- *Why should I believe what it says?* Isn't the Bible just like all other religious books? There are lots of sacred texts in the world. The Bible is just the one that we're influenced by. Is the Bible unique among religious writings?
 - *Isn't the Bible simply the writings of primitive men?* Rudolph Bultmann once said that "nobody who uses an electric light can believe in the New Testament world of demons and spirits." Is the Bible full of errors?
 - *How can I possibly believe what it says in the Bible?* Who could trust that a book so old could be passed through the centuries without serious mistakes. How do we even know what we're reading is what Jesus said? How did we get the Bible?
 - *You know, the Bible means what ever you want it to mean.* Look at how differently people see the same passages. How do we interpret the Bible?
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How is the Bible different from other sacred writings?

All scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness. 2 Timothy 3:16

- The Bible claims to be revelation from God. It's interesting to note that we can put the religious writings of the world into three basic categories:
 1. *Mythology.* The vast majority of the world's religions are based on myth. This is true of nature religions especially. There are stories passed from generation to generation about the origin of the tribal people, the deities that animate nature and so on. There is not even a hint of historical truth.
 2. *Wisdom writings.* Many Asian religions are based on the writings of sages, or wise teachers. Hinduism has a mix of mythology and wisdom writings in the Upanishads. Buddhism is the insights of Siddhartha and those who came after him. Confucianism and Taoism are also based on the insights of Confucius and Lao Tsu. They make no claim to final or absolute truth. They speak of their experiences and understanding.
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3. *Revelation*. The revealed religions are Judaism, Islam and Christianity. In the Jewish, Christian and Moslem scriptures, the claim is that God revealed his message through human authors. They wrote scripture under "divine inspiration." See, for example 1 Corinthians 14:37.

- Old Testament-based. It is interesting to note that the revealed religions are all based on the Old Testament. There is no conflict between the Old Testament and the Christian scripture, the New Testament as we will see. However, the Moslem scripture, the Koran is very much in conflict with the Old Testament. For example, it teaches that Abraham's covenant son was not Isaac but Ishmael. So how could God be so confused? At one point he says Isaac, then centuries later, he says it was Ishmael. What are we to do? The Koran recognizes the authority of the Old Testament. But it says that where it contradicts the Koran, it can be attributed to Satan's work. This is called the doctrine of "abrogation." Of course, the problem is how do we know where Satan has interfered? Was it with the Old Testament, or was it the Koran?

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- Historical. Revealed scripture is historical. That is, in contrast to the non-historical nature of myth, it refers to God's action in history. History is the medium through which God acts. And the truth of the scriptures rests in its historical reliability. We'll talk later about that.

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- Prophecy. The center of revealed scripture is prophecy. Deuteronomy 18:9-22. Isaiah 41:21-23; 42:8,9; 44:6-8. The Old Testament points beyond itself to a salvation that was to come. The New Testament lies concealed in the Old and the Old is made clear in the New. We should note that the prophecies of the Bible are not like other so-called prophecies, like the apocalyptic visions of Nostradamus. These things make no clear historical reference and have no way to interpret their meaning. Biblical prophecy makes clear historical reference and the passages can be interpreted through regular tools of literary interpretation (we'll talk about that later).
 - Consider Isaiah 53, Daniel 9. . .

So clearly, the Bible is not like any other religious book. Those who try to make it out to be mythology (Joseph Campbell, *The Power of Myth*) or essentially like mystical religions (New Age) simply aren't taking into consideration the singularly unique nature of the Bible.

Why should I trust the Bible?

- Perhaps the biggest reason is confirmed *fulfillment of prophecy*. Somehow we've got to draw some conclusions about these extraordinary texts. How do you explain these texts?
- *Continuity of the Bible*. The Bible was written over a 1500 year period by 40 different authors. These authors were from a wide variety of backgrounds, cultures and historical situations. What is remarkable is that they have the same message: the nature of God, human nature and the human dilemma. Perhaps most remarkably, they are different threads that, spun together, paint an extraordinarily unified picture.
 - 1 Peter 1:10-12. Each author knew they were contributing in a unique way to God's plan.

Other religious texts that were written over that long of time show substantial discontinuity. Hindu scriptures are radically different from the Vedic era to the Mahabarata.

- *It's historically reliable.* It is amazing that the Bible has withstood centuries of serious historical scrutiny. Yet, we are unable to find a single instance of clear historical inaccuracy.
 - Many people just assume that the Bible is full of errors. This is not so. But the assumption has been around for the past 100 years. Much of our thinking about the Bible is based on the "historical-critical method." This approach assumes that the Bible is wrong (myth, etc.) unless it can be proven otherwise. So we take the Bible to be myth unless we can corroborate biblical stories with ancient history.
 - Ironically, during the past century archeology has come into its own as a science. Archeologists are able now to give us a clearer picture of the historical reliability of the Old and New Testaments. Things that were once considered to be myth or historical inaccuracy are now acknowledged as fact:
 - E.g.: Ebla and Abraham and Sodom
 - E.g.: Amarna Tablets and Jericho and Canaan in the 15th century BC
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We should also note that there is plenty of contemporary evidence for Jesus outside of the Bible. For example:

- Tacitus, *Annals* 15:44. Jesus died under Pilate as a Roman criminal. His followers believe him to have resurrected from the dead.
 - Pliny the Younger, *Letters* 10:96. Affirms Jesus as a man and comments on the early church.
 - Josephus, *Antiquities* 18:3.2. Records Jesus as an historical figure and states how the Jews thought about him.
 - *Mishnah*. Jews considered Jesus to be a great teacher or a prophet.
 - New Testament was written by careful chroniclers and eyewitnesses of the events they record:
 - 2 Peter 1:16
 - Luke 1:1-4
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- *Alleged contradictions.* One of the most common things I hear people saying is that the Bible is full of contradictions. To be honest, I haven't yet found anyone who could produce one. This does not mean, of course, that there aren't passages that we really need to think through. For example, the best science used to say that the universe was eternal. Yet, the Bible says it was created in six days. Now how can we reconcile that? First, we need to see that science has changed its view based on more current data. But we also need to recognize that the way we read the scripture may not be right. We may need to take a closer look at some passages to see what kinds of interpretations are plausible. The word "day" (yom) means both day and age.

Noted archeologist Nelson Glueck concluded toward the end of his long scholarly career, ". . . in all my archeological investigations, I have never found one artifact of antiquity that contradicts any statement of the word of God."

How did we get the Bible?

- *Canonicity.* You may be aware that there were many things written by the Jews that were not included in the Torah (Old Testament) and many things written by Christians that were not included in the New Testament. So how did we get our Bible? This is the question about canonicity. Canon means measuring stick, or standard of authority.

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- Old Testament canon. Deciding on what should be included in the scripture is based on authorship. Who wrote the document? For the Jews, that was settled by whether or not it was written by a prophet. When it was clearly established that a text was of prophetic origin, it was included in the canon. The Old Testament canon was completed by 200 BC. At that time, Jews translated the Torah from Hebrew to Greek. That translation, called the Septuagint, has the same books that we have in the Old Testament. Other inspirational Jewish writings were not included in the canon, because they did not have prophetic authorship. Jewish historian Josephus makes it clear that there had not been a prophet in Israel since Malachi.
 - Comment on the apocrypha

The final word on the Old Testament canon came in 90 AD at the Council of Jamnia.

- New Testament canon. The criterion for texts to be included in the New Testament was apostolic authorship. Letters written by the witnesses of Jesus' resurrection, or those under their direct supervision were included in the New Testament. When authorship was in question, the text was rejected. Even letters that were orthodox theologically (Hermas, *The Shepherd*) were widely read, but not included in the canon. The Council of Nicea, 325, finally established the New Testament canon.
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- *Transmission of the text*. This is an interesting and important thing to think about. How do we know that the extraordinary prophecies of the Old Testament were not just inserted by Christians? And how do we know that the Bible we have today is the same as when it was written? Until recently, the earliest copy we have of the Old Testament is dated to 1100 AD. That's nearly 1,500 years after the last even recorded in the Old Testament. Surely many mistakes have corrupted the text since then, especially given the primitive means of transcription in the days before the printing press or Xerox machine.
 - E.g.: Telephone game.
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Actually, we have good reason to accept our Bible as a reliable copy of what was originally written.

- Masoretic scribes. These copiers of the Old Testament had techniques that insured that each scroll was identical to the old one. They knew the exact number of words in each book; they knew the middle word in each book. Any error what so ever meant that the scroll was to be burned and the scribe was to start all over.
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- Dead Sea scrolls. Found in 1947, these scrolls contain complete manuscripts of the Old Testament, dated from between 200 BC to 70 AD. There is no significant difference between these texts and the modern ones.
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- We have very early copies of the New Testament letters. Part of the Gospel of John was recovered in Egypt and is dated to 100 AD (Ryland's fragment). Also, early church fathers quoted extensively from the New Testament. This gives us additional data to show that the New Testament has not been corrupted.
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- In assessing the manuscript evidence for the Bible, celebrated archeologist Kathleen Kenyon wrote, "The interval between the date of the original composition and the earliest extant evidence becomes so small as to be negligible, and the last foundation for any doubt that the scriptures have come down to us substantially as they were written has now been removed."
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How do I study the Bible?

Be diligent to present yourself approved to God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed, handling accurately the word of truth. 2 Timothy 2:15

The word of God is living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword, and piercing as far as the division of soul and spirit, of both joints and marrow, and able to judge the thoughts and intents of the heart. Hebrews 4:12

For many of us, reading the Bible is an overwhelming burden. The language and content seem so far from what we're used to reading and thinking about. But there are some basic resources and tools that make studying the Bible exciting and life changing.

- Resources: Select a good study Bible in a modern translation.
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Three axioms of interpretation:

[See the Grammatical Historical Hermeneutics outline by Dennis McCallum and Gary DeLashmutt for more detail]

- *Interpret literally.* Take the normal, everyday meaning of the words. Usually, the text "means what it says and says what it means." But interpreting literally also means that we pay attention to *genre*, or literary styles. The Bible is written in poetry, historical narrative, parable and other literary forms. A literal interpretation must keep these genres in mind.
 - John 15:5. This does not mean that Jesus is a vine.
 - *Interpret historically.* We must ask the question, "what did this mean to the original readers?" Only then can we ask what it means to us. Having an understanding of the historical setting is crucial in determining the meaning of the passage. This is where significant misunderstanding can come in. We tend to read the Bible in light of our own culture, rather than in light of the ancient world.
 - 1 Corinthians 7:26 gives historical context to instructions about marriage, divorce and related issues.
 - *Interpret Critically.* This means that your interpretation must make rational sense.
 - Luke 14:26. "Hate your parents." But how is this consistent with the command of Christ to love your parents, and honor your parents?
 - 1 Thessalonians 5:17. "Pray without ceasing" would make it difficult to survive.
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There are eight principles that are a part of all literary interpretation. They are more specific applications

of the axioms we just discussed.

Eight hermeneutical principles

1. *Interpret in light of the context of the passage.* You may have been told that you can make Bible say anything you want. In one way this is true. If we just lift verses out of their context, we can be very creative. But if we follow this rule, we'll need to be more careful about how we look at particular verses.
 - 1 Peter 3:21. "Baptism now saves you." But what about the rest of the verse?

2. *Interpret in the light of "progressive revelation."* God revealed his will to us over time. We must be aware of the period of time we are dealing with before we conclude the meaning of a passage.
 - Polygamy was openly practiced at points in the Old Testament. However, it is specifically rejected in Matthew 19.
 - Jews were responsible for living under the Law in the Old Testament (Exodus 19:5). Yet Christians are told to not live under the Law (2 Corinthians 3:7; Galatians 5:1-5).

3. *Interpret in harmony with other scriptures.* We can't make our interpretation conflict with what other passages teach.
 - Going back to the 1 Peter 3:21 example, those who teach salvation by baptism need to be aware that it directly contradicts John 1:12; Ephesians 2:8,9; Romans 10:9.

4. *Interpret the unclear in light of the clear.* Every important doctrine is taught clearly and repeatedly in the Bible. There are some odd passages which have an unclear meaning. Always interpret the unclear passages consistently with well established ones. We must also keep in mind that some passages are so vague that the meaning may *never* be known.
 - 1 Corinthians 15:29. "Baptism for the dead."

5. *Interpret the meaning out of the passage, rather than reading into it.* That is what "exegesis" means.
 - Consider Barclay's commentary on Mark 5. Most modern scholars interpret things like demon possession as schizophrenia or epilepsy.

6. *Interpret the spirit, nor merely the letter.* The literal meaning of words can't be separated from the intent of the author.
 - Proverb 15:1. "Gentle words turn away wrath." Yes, but this isn't always true. It is a *general* truth.
 - Proverb 22:6. "Train your child in the ways of the Lord and he will not depart from the path." Again, this does not mean that kids can't rebel. It just means that a parent has a lot of influence over their children.

7. *Emphasize what the Bible emphasizes.* This is where so many groups and people go wrong. The importance of a passage is gauged in terms of what is emphasized by the rest of scripture. Lots of people have gotten carried away by the charismatic gifts. Yet the Bible doesn't seem all that concerned about it. In fact, most of the biblical instruction has to do with chronic misuse of the gifts.

8. *Interpret with dependence on the Holy Spirit.*
 - 1 John 2:27. The Bible is more than an academic book. It is God's word, and we need the

illumination of the Holy Spirit to teach us not only the meaning of the passage, but what God is saying to us personally through it. That's what Hebrews 4:12 is getting at also. Tragically, many great theologians and Bible scholars know a great deal about the text, but very little of the author.