

The History of the Bibleⁱ

The best-selling book on the New York Times best-sellers list recently was a novel called "The Shack" which purports to be a work of Christian fiction. A few years ago, it was Rick Warren's "40 Days of Purpose." I find it remarkable that Christian books can top best-seller lists, but I guess, in America at least, Christians are a large and powerful group within the culture.

A few years before that was Dan Brown's "The Da Vinci Code," a work of non-Christian, even anti-Christian fiction that pretended to be factual. He sold 57 million copies. Raold Dahl sold 13 million copies of "Charlie and the Chocolate Factory." CS Lewis sold 150 million "Chronicles of Narnia." JK Rowling has sold 400 million of the "Harry Potter" series. Even "Where's Wally" has sold 46 million copies.

Staggering numbers, but there is one that tops the best-seller lists every year, but never gets mentioned *because* it tops the list every year. That of course, is the Bible. Total world-wide sales of the Bible amount to something like *6 billion* copies.

The history of the Bible is a fascinating story in its own right.

- **How** did the writings of a small, puny race such as the Jews become the most influential book in the history of mankind?
- **How** does a book written in an insignificant corner of the world spread out across the whole world, even into the rugged mountains of Papua New Guinea and the dense jungles of South America and the wild, wind-swept plains of Outer Mongolia?
- **How** does a book mostly written in an ancient, obscure language come to be translated into more than 2,000 different languages and dialects before the year 2000?
- **How** does a book that was written by 40 different authors, some of whom are unknown, over a period of 1,500 years come to be compiled into the single collection of writings that we call the Bible?
- **How** does a book, some of which was written 3,500 years ago, the most recent nearly 2,000 years ago, survive the consistent, systematic and brutal attacks it, and its followers, has faced in all those years, let alone increase in its spread and its influence?

There is no book like this anywhere in the world. Other religions have their sacred writings, some very ancient, but no other book, to my knowledge, makes claims to be the authoritative, infallible Word of the only true God likes this book claims.

General Revelation

According to the Bible, creation reveals to every person the existence of God. And it reveals it so clearly that ignorance is no excuse for not believing in God.

For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse. Rom 1:19-20

Christianity is a religion of revelation. It is founded from the very beginning on God revealing Himself to man. It holds this in common with Judaism, which gave birth to it. But this makes it distinct from every other religion. God has revealed to man His character, His ways, His requirements. There is a certain, but limited, amount that can be known about God from an observation of the created world. Theologically, this is called "General Revelation."

Let's consider some of what creation tells us about God. The earth and the universe show His awesome power in creating all things from nothing and sustaining them on a moment-by-moment basis. Any being powerful enough to achieve that task must be supremely powerful. They also reveal something of His divine nature, His wisdom, His faithfulness, His consistency, and His graciousness, in the reliability of the "Laws of Nature."

How do the Laws of Nature reveal God's faithfulness and graciousness? For example, we can observe that gravity works consistently to pull objects in towards the Earth, not randomly ceasing to operate so that we all get flung into outer space without warning. We know the Sun will rise in the morning, and set in the evening; that a day is 24 hours long, and a year is 365 days. We know that summer gives way to autumn, then winter, spring, and summer again, every year, never failing, even during times of global warming. We set our clocks by it, plan our vacations, plant our vegetable patch secure in the knowledge that the years will roll by with this consistent pattern. These things become so familiar to us that we take them for granted.

We know that time ticks away steadily, at a regular pace, not speeding up one moment and slowing down the next. Were that to happen, not only would our clocks be wrong all the time, but our machinery and equipment would either not work at all, or be dangerous to operate. Imagine driving down the road with your engine sitting on a steady 3,000 revolutions per minute and suddenly finding that the minute was twice as long, therefore you travel at half the speed, or half as long, therefore doubling your speed in an instant. Electrical equipment wouldn't work; even the seasons would be thrown into chaos making it impossible to grow your fruit and vegetables. And your 75 year life expectancy could flash by in a week, or last 1,000 years.

Special Revelation

So, something about God can be known from creation, but creation tells us little or nothing that reveals our sinful and guilty condition, our separation from God, and the means of resolving this problem. For that we need something more than "General Revelation," we need "Special Revelation."

*Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world.
Heb 1:1-2*

God has chosen to communicate with mankind to reveal Himself to us. Even the way He did this reveals something to us about God's character and His ways. He chose certain men to be recipients of His thoughts, and of His grace. Jesus said,

*"No longer do I call you servants, for the servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for **all that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you. You did not choose me, but I chose you...**" Job 15:15-16*

Initially He did this by speaking directly to certain people, such as Noah, Abraham, Moses, Samuel, Isaiah, Jeremiah and others. Some of these wrote down their conversations with God, and the records were eventually compiled into what we now know as the Old Testament. This was originally written mostly in Hebrew, the language of the people to whom it was initially directed.

Why did God choose people from such a small, insignificant race as the Hebrews? Surely, if God had something important to say, He would speak to important members of the most powerful or populous races to ensure His message would get out further and faster? He could have, but He has a greater purpose in all this, and that is to show His power and to reveal His glory.

For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men. For consider your calling, brothers: not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God. 1Co 1:25-29

It is just like God to choose weak, insignificant people to work through, because that then reveals His mighty power, and mere mortals have nothing to get proud about. Christianity, from the very beginning has been counter-cultural, and counter-intuitive. It works in ways that don't seem to make sense to human thinking, and in fact is the exact opposite in many cases to how we would normally choose to do things.

After Jesus came and lived and died and rose again, others recorded these events and conversations, which we now call the New Testament. The NT was written in Greek; not the Greek of the universities and the academics, but the Greek of the common people, the language used in the market place, known as *koine* Greek. It was the language used throughout the known world at the time. Virtually everyone spoke or understood two languages, their native tongue and Greek.

This is an important point for us to be aware of. It says something to us about God's intention of making His Word accessible and understandable to anyone, not just to the academics and clergymen and theologians. Those of us who were brought up on the King James Version may be inclined to think that the Bible was written in high and lofty language, and that anything less than the beauty and majesty of the KJV is dishonouring to God. But in fact, God is much more concerned with ensuring His Word is available to anyone and everyone, than He is to preserve a style of language.

So then, this communication from God has been recorded from the earliest days in the languages spoken by the people to whom God was communicating. These documents were then compiled into what we now know as the Bible, and translated into local languages.

Timeline

1450BC	Moses writes the 10 Commandments
500BC	Old Testament writings collected and compiled
285BC	Septuagint (Greek) translation of OT
4BC-30AD	Jesus Christ
100AD	New Testament writings complete
315AD	OT and NT writings compiled as the Bible
382AD	Vulgate (Latin) translation of Bible
670AD	Caedmon paraphrases portions of Scripture into Old English
735AD	Venerable Bede translates gospel of John into Old English
8235AD	Vespasian translates Psalms into Old English
1000AD	Aelfric translates Pentateuch into Old English
1250	Chapter divisions added to Bible
1320	Rolle translates Psalms into Middle English
1384	John Wycliffe produces first English translation

Copying Methodology

This Book is an ancient book, and it makes no excuses for that fact, and it does not apologise for it. But if it dates back 3,500 years, what confidence could we have that it is accurate? Surely errors must have crept in over all those years? The short answer to that question is “No.” The longer answer is that the scribes who used to copy the writings held them in such high esteem that they would tolerate no errors or alterations, and had systems and processes in place to ensure accuracy.

For 3,000 years, the Scriptures were laboriously copied by hand. The Jewish scribes were extremely particular to ensure accuracy in the copies. Many languages have numbers associated with letters. The easiest way to explain this is probably with Roman numerals: I = 1, V = 5, X = 10, L = 50, C = 100, D = 500, M = 1,000. Thus the English word MIX would equal 1,009 (1,000 + 10 - 1). Latin, Greek and Hebrew all conform to this pattern.

When copying a page of Scripture, the scribe would write the first word, then add up its value and compare it to the value of the original. At the end of each line, he would do the same with the whole line. At the end of each paragraph, and the end of each page, he would count up the values of the letters to ensure the copy matched the original exactly. If he found an error, he would destroy the page and start again. It may have taken him a whole day to copy a single page, but if it wasn't correct, it got destroyed and he started again. As you can imagine, this would be a very time-consuming and laborious task. But it tells us at least three things:

1. Even though we no longer have the original writings of Moses and the Prophets and the Apostles, we can have confidence that the copies of ancient manuscripts that our English Bibles are translated from are accurate.
2. That the Word of God was held in such high esteem that that no errors could be tolerated; near enough was not good enough.

3. Since God has taken steps to ensure the accurate transmission of His Word, we can have confidence when we read and study and preach it that it will perform the transforming work in us that it is designed to do. God said through the prophet Isaiah, *"For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven and do not return there but water the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it."* (Isa 55:10). At least part of that work is to conform us to the image of Christ.

Archaeological Significance

Interestingly, the Bible has been used by archaeologists for nearly 200 years to locate sites of archaeological significance. Historical details that were long scoffed at as fable or fantasy have been proven accurate. The race of the Hittites is a classic example. For many years the Bible record of this race as a rich and powerful people was considered evidence of the inaccuracy of the Bible. That was until archaeologists discovered in the 19th Century that there was a tribe of people called the Hittites, who ruled a vast area with an iron fist. This and many more records and prophecies have stood the test of time, and shown the Word of God to be reliable and trustworthy.

Scientific Significance

The Bible is often criticised for being scientifically inaccurate, and this is considered proof that it is not true. The reality is, though, that the Bible never claims to be, nor attempts to be, a scientific document, but it does reveal scientific information in its earliest writings that were not discovered until the last 100 years.

- Those of us who hold that the Bible is accurate and trustworthy are sometimes mocked as believing that the earth is flat, like they used to believe in the Dark Ages. In fact, if the Word was freely available in the Dark Ages, people would have realised that the earth *is* round. Isaiah (40:22) referred to the circle of the earth 750 years before Christ. And the book of Job (22:14) talked about the dome of the sky 2,000 years before Christ. So, who knew the earth was round 3,000 years ago? The Bible.
- When Abraham looked up to the sky, he could count about 3,000 stars if he tried hard enough. God promised him descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky. Big deal! 3,000 descendants could be as little as 3 generations given the tendency to large families in that culture. Who knew that there were really billions of stars in the sky, invisible to the naked eye? The Bible.
- Who could have guessed that 150 years after Darwin proposed his Theory of Evolution that there would still be more evidence for Creation than for evolution? The Bible.

While this isn't the time or place for a class on apologetics, I must remind you that we can have confidence, as did Jesus, that the Bible is accurate and without error.

Inspiration and Interpretation

But, even though the Scriptures may have meaning and interest and be useful for the casual reader, and can be shown to be historically, geographically and scientifically accurate, the real meaning can't be grasped by human understanding. Without the help and guidance of the Holy Spirit, they don't reveal their depth and their true meaning.

*Paul wrote "...no one comprehends the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God. Now we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might understand the things freely given us by God. And we impart this in words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit, interpreting spiritual truths to those who are spiritual. The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and **he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned**" 1Co 2:11-14.*

Conclusion

The primary purpose of the Bible is not to give us rules for living, or hints on how to raise our children, or resources for archaeological digs, although it is very good for all of these things. The primary purpose of the Bible is to reveal Jesus Christ to us. Its purpose is to teach us the things beyond what we can learn about God from creation, so that we may turn from our sin, believe in Him, and be saved.

This Bible tells us the things we need to know about God and His relationship to mankind that we can't learn from the general revelation of nature and creation. It talks to us about the holiness of God. It tells us of our own sinfulness, our rebellion, and our alienation from God. It reveals to us that we are all, at heart, murderers, adulterers, liars, thieves. It shows us a standard of living that God requires of us, but that is impossible for us to achieve. It pronounces the just verdict of death that we deserve as punishment for not meeting that standard. But it doesn't leave us there. The Bible reveals that there is an answer to the dilemma we face. It reveals that there is a way to have a clean heart and conscience before God.

Job 5:39-40 You study the Scriptures, because you think that in them you will find eternal life. And these very Scriptures speak about me! Yet you are not willing to come to me in order to have life.

This is where we find the solution to sin. It is found in the death that Jesus Christ suffered, on behalf of us, to absorb the fury of God's wrath against mankind. And His death has turned away for *all time* God's wrath from those who will believe in His Son. There remains only mercy and blessing and eternal security for those who will believe. There is no sin so bad that it is not covered over and washed away by this amazing event that we call the Cross and the free offer of forgiveness and life that results from it, if you will believe.

You will find many interesting things in the Bible, but by far the most important "discovery" you can make is to discover Jesus Christ. I suppose there will always be people who know more *about* the Bible than most of us Christians do, but the question is not one of knowledge, but one of relationship. Do you know this Jesus Christ that it tells us about? Have you ever had that life-changing encounter with Him that absolutely transforms your life, your thinking, your desires, your motivation, and your reason for living? If you have, then give thanks to God, now and every moment of your life for His grace towards you, and have complete confidence in Him and the work He is doing in your life. If you haven't, then God's offer is still on the table for you to take up. Don't hesitate for too long, because He won't extend the offer forever. It has a "use-by" date on it, and no one knows when that "use-by" date expires. If you don't take it up today, it may not be there tomorrow.

Paul wrote to the Corinthian church "*Examine yourselves, to see whether you are in the faith. Test yourselves. Or do you not realize this about yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you?--unless indeed*

you fail to meet the test!" (2Co 13:5). This is wise advice for us all. If you have examined yourself, and found that you pass the test, let me encourage you that you can have confidence in this Book. Rather than being a reason to doubt it, the antiquity of this Book is all the more reason to trust it. It has stood the test of time, and has never been found wanting. The truths contained in it are timeless, and as relevant in the 21st Century as they were in the 1st Century, or 1000 years before Christ.

There are principles and methods we can use to gain the correct understanding and interpretation of it, which will be dealt with in following chapters, but the bottom line is: "*God is not man, that he should lie, or a son of man, that he should change his mind. Has he said, and will he not do it? Or has he spoken, and will he not fulfil it?*" (Num 23:19) and "*Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away*" (Mat 24:35).

God is faithful to His Word. It can be relied upon, believed, trusted, and acted on. Let me encourage you to treasure this Word like no other possession. Other books can be good, and interesting, and helpful. But no other book *really matters*. No other book is *precious*. Should you lose your job, your house, your friends, your family, your freedom but still have a single copy of this Word, and a friendship with Jesus Christ, you have more than enough.

ⁱ By Ian Gould, preached at City Edge Church, Melbourne, 03/08/08