

The
Word

Understanding &
Trusting the Bible in an
Age of Skepticism

by Craig A. Smith, Ph.D.

Shepherd Project Press

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Why The Bible Matters So Much

The Bible Under Fire

I grew up in a good Christian home where the Bible was always respected. Whatever else I may have known, at an early age I at least knew that the Bible was Important. You could almost hear the capital letters when people in our church talked about the Bible or the Scriptures or the Word or what my grandparents sometimes called the Good Book.

I also knew where the Bible came from: it came from God; that's why we called it God's Word, after all. I honestly don't know that I ever encountered anyone who expressed genuine doubt about that idea until I got to college.

My first exposure to radically different views of what the Bible is and how we got it came in my freshman honors English colloquium at Kent State University.

I remember that I was pretty nervous on that first day of class. See, I had chosen to go to a secular (i.e. non-Christian) university and lots of people had warned me that the professors there would be out to get me since I was a Christian. They told me that the university faculty would do their best to make me lose my faith in what I had been taught growing up. So, as you can imagine, I entered that first class with a fair amount of trepidation.

The professor wasn't there yet, but a teaching assistant was handing out the syllabi for the class, so I shuffled up and got one, then retreated to a seat somewhere near the back. I started skimming through the class expectations and the reading list

for the year. I remember that one book in particular caught my attention. It was a simple, one-word title: *John*. Could it be?

It was! We were going to be reading the Gospel of John in my college English class! I cannot tell you how relieved I was. Here I had been getting myself all psyched up to withstand these vicious anti-Christian attacks when in reality we were going to be doing Bible study right there in class! I immediately relaxed.

It didn't take long, however, before I was all kinds of tense again. Yes, we were studying the Gospel of John, but not in any way I had ever heard of before. This was what the professor called "critical" study, which apparently meant that we were supposed to do at least three key things:

1. Begin with the assumption that nothing the book said could possibly be true. Only when there was overwhelming historical evidence for a particular claim should we ever admit the possibility that it might have gotten a few insignificant facts right.
2. Assume that the book was a deliberate attempt to obscure the truth. In other words, you should probably start by assuming that the opposite of whatever the book said was actually true.
3. Assume that anyone who believed the book was at the very least extremely naïve and probably a little bit intellectually challenged.

Now, as we'll see shortly, none of these things have any place in real "critical" studies which have, in fact, provided some very helpful insights into our understanding of the Bible. At the time, however, I didn't know that. This was my first introduction to what often passes for "scholarly" study of the Bible, and it was absolutely devastating.

There were a lot of students in that class who came in Christian and went out...well, less-Christian at the very least. Who could blame them? When you've got an obviously bright and well-respected professor telling you day in and day out that the Bible is filled with contradictions, inaccuracies and primitive mythologies, how are you supposed to respond? It's not like we had ever heard any of this stuff before. And the professor had an explanation for our ignorance: it was because we had grown up in church where we'd been brainwashed to accept whatever the leadership told us without any thought at all.

I'd be lying if I didn't admit that I was deeply troubled by that experience. I remember a lot of days where I left class all knotted up inside, wondering if this guy was right: was the Bible really just a collection of myths told by power-hungry men who wanted to exert their control over the masses? Had I been fed a pack of lies by my church and my parents? I honestly didn't know.

So, I did the only thing I could think to do: I started doing my own research. It became my habit to go from class to the library where I read books about the Bible. Some of those books were sort of anti-Bible and some of them were more pro-Bible, but over the course of that first year in college, I came to a rather startling conclusion: my English professor really had no idea what he was talking about. Of course, the more Christian scholars were all gung-ho about defending the

historical accuracy of the Bible, but my research made it clear that they had very good reasons for doing so: there is solid evidence that the historical claims in the Bible are accurate. What's more, it turned out that some of my professor's "critical" conclusions about the Gospel of John and the Bible weren't accepted even by very obviously non-Christian scholars. In other words, what I had been fed in that class was a minority opinion with a very clear negative bias – a bias that didn't really square well with the facts.

I wish I could go back and re-take that class, knowing what I know now. If only I had gone into that class knowing the facts. I could have interrupted some of the professor's tirades with simple questions: but what about *this* fact? How about *this* evidence?

While I might not have changed the professor's mind, I might have decreased the casualties. I'm sure that some of the students who left that class with their faith in tatters would have been encouraged and strengthened by my knowledge.

But, unfortunately, I didn't know then what I know now. I walked into that class completely unprepared. Not only did I not know the answers...I didn't even know that the *questions* were out there.

I don't want that to happen to you, and that's why I've written this book. It's my hope that this book will be a resource to you, not only shaping the way you think about the Bible, but also serving as a place to go back to time and again to find answers to the kinds of questions that you will face about the Word of God.

Chances are, these are questions that you're more familiar with than I was. It's not that my childhood was sheltered; it's just that the kinds of questions I encountered in college simply

weren't being asked much outside of certain kinds of academic settings.

That's really not true anymore. "Critical" biblical studies have gone mainstream. Scholars with opinions very much like my English professor's are everywhere now. They're interviewed by *Newsweek* magazine every time Easter and Christmas roll around. The Discovery Channel consults with them whenever some new piece of archaeological evidence is unearthed. Massive bestselling books like *The Da Vinci Code* have popularized these ideas. Walk into any good-sized bookstore and you'll find whole racks of material dedicated to a new industry that has arisen: call it revisionist history or speculative bibliology or, probably more accurately, Bible-bashing.

My point is simply this: any Christian who hasn't completely withdrawn from our culture will encounter tough questions about what the Bible is, where it came from and what we're supposed to think about it. No one who is serious about living out their Christian faith with authenticity and relevancy in the modern world can afford not to have answers to these kinds of questions.

The Bible Is Crucial

Why is the Bible so important? After all, if you didn't have a Bible, you could still have faith, couldn't you? Of course. Lots of people over the years have come to believe and trust in Jesus without ever having access to a copy of the Bible. So why is the Bible so important to Christianity?

The answer is that the heart of Christian faith is Jesus of Nazareth and almost everything we know about Jesus comes from the Bible. We have a few other documents from the 1st

century when Jesus lived that talk about Jesus,¹ but not very many. This is to be expected. While Jesus was the most important man who has ever lived, he was born to poor parents in a relatively obscure part of the ancient world. In those days, the only people who had much written about them were great kings and emperors. Of course, over the centuries, more has been written about Jesus than probably anyone else, but when he first arrived on the scene, the nature of his arrival ensured that only a small group of people would recognize his significance. Given this fact, the amount of extra-biblical² attention given to Jesus is actually quite striking. The fact remains, however, that most of what we know about Jesus comes from the Bible.

If the Bible is not a reliable account of Jesus, then the Christian faith is on very shaky ground. The heart of Christianity is the historical claim that the Son of God became a human being, lived in first century Palestine, was crucified under the direction of a Roman governor named Pontius Pilate, and rose from the dead three days after his burial. If that didn't actually happen, the Christian faith is totally useless. In fact, the Apostle Paul, writing to the Christian church in the Greek city of Corinth, said this:

“...if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith.”

¹ We'll look at a few of these later in this book.

² This just means evidence of Jesus from outside the Bible itself, usually from writers working within the first 100 years or so of Jesus' ministry.

(1 Corinthians 15:14)

Christianity is not about the blind-leap-into-the-dark kind of faith – it’s about trusting in something that you have good reason to believe on the basis of the evidence.

But where does the evidence for who Jesus really was come from? Mostly, it comes from the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John in the Bible, so you can see why knowing whether or not we can trust what the Bible says is so important.

In some ways, the reliability of the Gospels is what is most important, but we can’t simply focus on the Gospels and ignore the rest of the Christian Scriptures. The Bible is not simply a collection of texts that are largely unrelated to one another. No, the Bible as a whole is the story of God showing Himself to humanity. No one part of Scripture can be completely isolated from the other parts. There are threads throughout the Bible that weave between the different books. The Gospels that are so important for our understanding of Jesus build upon things in Old Testament books like Genesis, the Psalms, Isaiah and lots more. The other writings of the New Testament are equally dependent on the books of the Old Testament.

So, if the Bible is unreliable at any point, the truth of the whole of Scripture becomes uncertain. Similarly, if we misunderstand, ignore or undervalue any part of Scripture, we are likely to misunderstand or miss important issues in other parts. The question isn’t if *this* or *that* part of the Bible can be trusted. The question is if the Bible as a whole can be trusted.

Make no mistake about it: while Christianity is bigger than the Bible, Christianity is absolutely dependent on the Bible. Yes, a Christian might tell someone the story of Jesus and they might believe without ever picking up a Bible, but where did

that Christian get the facts about Jesus to share in the first place? Most likely, from the Bible.

It is possible, of course, that one Christian could simply get the story of Jesus from another Christian, who got it from another, who got it from another, and so on, all the way back to the first followers of Jesus who saw it all first-hand. If that were the case, then Christianity wouldn't be dependent on the Bible, would it? No, it wouldn't, but there's an important question we need to ask: if what we know about Jesus were passed from one person to another for thousands of years, what is the likelihood that the story would remain unchanged? Anyone who has ever played the Telephone Game³ can answer that one: pretty unlikely.

If the story of Jesus were passed person to person over the centuries, it would be impossible to know whether or not the story was still trustworthy. The only way to know for sure if the story had remained accurate over the years would be to have a written copy of the initial story to compare it against. And that's precisely what the Bible is: a written copy of the

³ If you're not familiar with the Telephone Game, it goes like this: a bunch of people line up and then the first person in the line writes down a short message and whispers it to the second person, who then whispers it to the next person in line, and so on. When the whispered message finally gets to the last person in line, they tell the group what they heard and this is compared to the original message. Without fail, what the last person heard and what the first person wrote down are very different. In many cases, the beginning and ending messages seem to be almost completely unrelated to each other. "Let's go over to the coffee house to try out their new mocha shake this afternoon" has become "Purple monkeys have a midnight roost in the Poconos."

story or stories from the people who saw them first-hand.⁴ The existence of the Bible gives us the ability to make sure that what we believe about Jesus is based on the facts and not on rumors.

Christianity makes some pretty bold claims: it says that the only way to God is through trusting in His son, Jesus:

Jesus answered, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me."

(John 14:6)

Christianity also says that the confirmation of this claim is the fact that Jesus died and rose from the dead three days later.

Christianity is a very exclusive faith in that it says the only way to be right with God is to trust in these core truths. Christianity doesn't really allow you to hedge your bets by mixing beliefs and practices from a bunch of different religions. It says that these core truths and these core truths alone can save us. In that sense, Christianity asks a lot from its followers: we must either trust in the Christian version of reality completely or abandon it entirely. If the Christian version of reality is true, then there is no reason not to trust it completely. On the other hand, if the Christian version of reality is wrong, there is no reason not to abandon it entirely.

At the end of the day, our understanding of what the Christian version of reality actually is – and our decision of

⁴ This is a little over-simplified, of course. Not all the accounts in the Bible are from eye-witnesses, but most of them are. We'll explore this topic in more detail in a bit.

whether or not to trust it – depends on the Bible. This is why Christianity is more than simply a trust in Jesus; it is also a trust in his Word.

What Is The Bible?

Depending on who you ask, there are a lot of different opinions about the Bible. To some, it is the revelation of God Himself, while to others it is a collection of myths. Some trust absolutely in it, while others trust nothing in it. Some see the Bible as a great work of literature, worthy of respect regardless of what you happen to think about its religious claims. Others see the Bible as nothing more than the superstitious ramblings of ignorant primitives.

Most of the various views of the Bible fit into one of three broad categories:

1. The Word of God
2. The word of God & men
3. The word of men

View # 1: The Bible Is The Word Of God

For those whose view of the Bible fits into the first category, the Bible is understood to be revelation direct from God. It contains accurate information about God because it came from God, and God is both all-knowing and incapable of lying (Hebrews 6:18). While human beings were obviously involved in the writing of the

Scripture, their work was guided and superintended⁵ by God so that the results would be precisely what He wanted them to be. Therefore, the Bible contains no errors of any kind and can be trusted in all matters to which it speaks.

View # 2: The Bible Is The Word Of God & Men

For those whose view of the Bible fits into the second category, the Bible may be a helpful source for learning some things about God, but it cannot be trusted absolutely because it is often the work of human beings who can – and frequently do – make mistakes. This view doesn't deny that God exists or that He has acted in history. This view is simply skeptical about the Bible being a completely accurate account of the things that God has done. In other words, whereas the first view says “the Bible *is* the Word of God,” this view says “the Bible *contains* the words of God (or at least some of them).” In this view, God has done things in history and human beings have recalled them as best as they are able and have written down their recollections in the Bible. Because humans make mistakes, their memory of God's

⁵ This is a word we'll look at more closely in just a bit.

revelations and their understanding of His purposes are prone to error and cannot, therefore, be fully trusted.

View # 3: The Bible Is The Word Of Men

For those whose view of the Bible fits into the third category, the Bible is nothing more than the invention of human beings. In theory, this view may still allow for the existence of a God who acts in human history, but in practice, this view is essentially atheistic. It assumes that God, if He exists, is largely a passive observer of human history. Consequently, stories of miracles or prophecies or things like that must be the invention of human beings. Why would human beings make up such stories? Opinions vary. Some believe that the authors of the Bible were simply ignorant of scientific principles and so they labeled everything they didn't understand a "miracle." Others believe that the authors of the Bible were trying to set themselves up in positions of power and used stories of miracles and of God's wrath to control the masses of people under their control. In any event, this view believes that the Bible not only cannot be trusted – it should not be trusted. In fact, many people whose view of the Bible fits into this category would very much like to see the Bible removed from modern culture almost entirely.

To be fair, most who view the Bible as nothing more than the invention of men tend to feel the same way about *all* religious writings. Their dislike of religion is not focused only on Christianity or its Scripture. For instance, well-known atheist Christopher Hitchens writes that all religion is:

*"violent, irrational, intolerant, allied to racism and tribalism and bigotry, invested in ignorance and hostile to free inquiry, contemptuous of women and coercive toward children."*⁶

However, since Christianity has historically been the predominant religious faith of the Western world, most of the attacks on religion have been focused there.

While settling the question of what the Bible is requires answering such critiques, we will save a more thorough response for a later chapter. For now it might be helpful to ask a rather simple question: what would we expect to find in the Bible if each of these three broad views of it were correct?

⁶ Christopher Hitchens, *God Is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything* (New York: Twelve Books, 2007), 56.

What If The Bible Were The Word Of Men?

If the Bible were nothing more than the word of men, we would naturally expect to find at least two things:

1. Contractions
2. Errors

Let's deal with each of these.

1. Contradictions

Since the Bible was written over hundreds of years by a wide variety of individuals, we would expect their accounts of God to vary substantially. In fact, it would be nearly inconceivable that their accounts of who God is and what He is like would not contradict each other at various points.

Of course, this is precisely what many critics of the Bible claim to find in it, but on closer examination, their claims fall apart. For instance, one of the most common claims of contradiction involves the character of God in the Old Testament vs. the New Testament. In the O.T., so the claim goes, God is a violent, angry deity who is always quick to bring His wrath down upon the objects of His displeasure.

Atheist Richard Dawkins describes the “O.T. God” this way:

“The God of the Old Testament is arguably the most unpleasant character in all fiction: jealous and proud of it; a petty, unjust, unforgiving control-freak; a vindictive, bloodthirsty ethnic cleanser; a misogynistic, homophobic, racist, infanticidal, genocidal, filicidal, pestilential, megalomaniacal, sadomasochistic, capriciously malevolent bully.”⁷

Whew! I’m not even sure what all those words mean, but they sound pretty awful, don’t they? Who would want to worship a God like that? But what Dawkins completely ignores is the fact that the O.T. contains some of the most powerful expressions of God’s love:

In your unfailing love you will lead the people you have redeemed. In your strength you

⁷ Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (London: Bantam Books, 2006), 31.

will guide them to your holy dwelling.

(Exodus 15:13)

And he passed in front of Moses, proclaiming, "The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin."

(Exodus 34:6-7)

Accompanied by trumpets, cymbals and other instruments, they raised their voices in praise to the LORD and sang: "He is good; his love endures forever."

(2 Chronicles 5:13)

They refused to listen and failed to remember the miracles you performed among them. They became stiff-necked and in their rebellion appointed a leader in order to return to their slavery. But you are a forgiving God, gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in

*love. Therefore you did not
desert them...*

(Nehemiah 9:17)

*Turn, O LORD, and deliver me;
save me because of your
unfailing love.*

(Psalm 6:4)

*Surely goodness and love will
follow me all the days of my life,
and I will dwell in the house of
the LORD forever.*

(Psalm 23:6)

This is just a small sampling. Even a quick search for the English word “love” in the O.T. reveals hundreds of verses which speak of God’s love. Of course there are plenty of verses which speak of God’s wrath poured out on the wicked, but these are a necessary component of genuine love. Can you imagine a father who said that he loved his child but didn’t defend that child against cruelty and wickedness? As a father myself, I can tell you that I would strike out decisively against anyone who tried to kill or molest my children. If I was unwilling to respond in this way, how could I say that my love for my children was genuine? When we read of God’s wrath brought to bear against the nations who were persecuting His people, we are

really only seeing one facet of God's love. We tend to focus on the people who received God's wrath and feel bad for them, rather than looking at the evil they committed against God's people.

In any event, references to "love" outweigh references to "wrath" by almost two-to-one in the O.T.⁸ Does it make sense, therefore, to speak of the "Old Testament God" as a deity of anger and wrath? I don't think so.

Furthermore, the idea that the New Testament presents only a peaceful, almost grandfatherly God simply ignores the evidence. There are plenty of references to God's wrath in the N.T.:

Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God's wrath remains on him.

(John 3:36)

The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness...

⁸ This search limited to the English words. However, including other terms from the original Hebrew produces similar results.

(Romans 1:18)

*Do not take revenge, my friends,
but leave room for God's wrath,
for it is written: "It is mine to
avenge; I will repay," says the
Lord.*

(Romans 12:19)

*Let no one deceive you with
empty words, for because of
such things God's wrath comes
on those who are disobedient.*

(Ephesians 5:6)

*...in their effort to keep us from
speaking to the Gentiles so that
they may be saved. In this way
they always heap up their sins
to the limit. The wrath of God
has come upon them at last.*

(1 Thessalonians 2:16)

*Then one of the four living
creatures gave to the seven
angels seven golden bowls filled
with the wrath of God, who lives
for ever and ever.*

(Revelation 15:7)

The idea that the O.T. contradicts the N.T. because it shows two different kinds of God is simply nonsense. In both parts of the Bible we see a God who loves His children, but also a God who is fiercely protective of them and a God who does not tolerate wickedness. There is no contradiction here.

When the Bible is read carefully and according to reasonable standards of interpretation, the vast majority of suggested “contradictions” simply disappear.

Here’s another example of a “contradiction” you might hear about: what was the wording on the plaque they put up over Jesus’ head on the cross? Each of the four Gospels has slightly different wordings:

*THIS IS JESUS, THE KING OF
THE JEWS.*

(Matthew 27:37)

THE KING OF THE JEWS.

(Mark 15:26)

*THIS IS THE KING OF THE
JEWS.*

(Luke 23:38)

*JESUS OF NAZARETH, THE
KING OF THE JEWS.*

(John 19:19)

Even with an excessively critical attitude it is difficult to see how this is a “contradiction.” All four Gospels record the charge that Jesus was thought to be the “King of the Jews” and certainly there is no contradiction about who this supposed “King” was; it was Jesus. However, both Mark and Luke left out the words “Jesus” and Matthew, Mark and Luke all left out the word “Nazareth.” In reality, the full wording of the plaque was probably: THIS IS JESUS OF NAZARETH, THE KING OF THE JEWS.

Various authors left out bits of the whole message for some reason, quite possibly due to the fact that papyrus was quite expensive and so things that were not considered essential to getting the point across were not given valuable space on the scrolls. But does one author omitting a bit of information that another includes constitute a contradiction? It does not.

We’ll look at a few more of these claims of contradiction later in the book, but for now, let me just say this: if the Bible were merely the words of men, we would expect contradictions to appear all throughout it. And yet, this is not what we find. Instead, though written over hundreds of years by different authors from radically different backgrounds, the Bible

presents an astoundingly unified picture of God, His nature and His activities. This is not what we would expect to find from a merely human book.

2. Inaccuracies

Human beings make mistakes. So, if the Bible were merely the product of human effort, we would expect to find inaccuracies. In fact, given the period of time that the Bible covers, and the fact that the authors had no access to modern record-keeping or research tools, we would expect to find a great many such inaccuracies. But do we?

The historical accuracy of the Bible has been a source of consistent frustration to its critics over the years. In fact, where the data necessary for verifying the accuracy of the Bible has been available, the biblical claims have been shown to be accurate without exception.

Now, this doesn't mean that every claim in the Bible has been shown to be accurate. In many cases, the Bible makes claims that we simply don't have any data available by which to verify the accuracy of the Bible one way or the other. But where such data is available, the Bible has always been shown to be accurate. In fact, many of the cases which have been advanced as evidence of inaccuracy in the Bible

have turned out to confirm the opposite: that the Bible was right all along.

For instance, the Bible speaks consistently of David as the greatest of the Israelite kings, but for many years, David was thought to be a myth. Critics pointed to the lack of evidence for David as a real historical person as proof that the Bible contained a serious inaccuracy. But in recent years, several archaeological discoveries have made it increasingly certain that David was a real historical king. Chief among these discoveries is a 9th-century B.C. Aramaen stele⁹ containing a reference to the “house of David.”¹⁰ In even more recent news, it appears that an archaeologist names Eliat Mazar has uncovered David’s palace outside of Jerusalem by paying attention to some subtle references in the Bible.¹¹

⁹ What, you don’t know what a stele is? Weird. I thought that was basic Sunday-school stuff. Ok, a stele is a slab of stone or wood, put up for a funeral or to commemorate some other kind of important occasion.

¹⁰ Avraham Biran and Joseph Naveh, “An Aramaic Stele Fragment from Tel Dan,” *Israel Exploration Journal* 43 (1993), 81-98.

¹¹ Eilat Mazar, “Did I Find King David’s Palace?”, *Biblical Archaeology Review* 32:1 (2006), 16-27, 70.

This sort of pattern has been repeated over and over again through the centuries: what critical scholars dismissed as historical inaccuracy and even pure myth in the Bible has been shown by new evidence to be completely accurate. Again, this does not mean that every claim of the Bible has been proven because of archaeological evidence. However, when the Bible has been verified, every time such verification is possible (given the available evidence), does it make sense to continue to adopt a highly skeptical attitude towards its claims?

If the Bible were merely the product of human invention, we would expect to find many inaccuracies, but the opposite is true: we have yet to find a single confirmed inaccuracy. Time and again, charges of biblical inaccuracy have fallen apart in the light of new evidence that confirms the Bible's claims. We'll look at a few more of these challenges as we work through other issues here in this book.

If the Bible was merely the word of men, we would know what to expect, yet those expectations are not met by what we actually find in the Bible. Therefore, the idea that the Bible is only the word of men does not seem to be borne out by the evidence.

What If The Bible Were The Word Of Men and God?

If the Bible were the word of men and God, we would expect that it would have both human elements and divine elements. In other words, we would expect that it would have both a *natural* and a *supernatural* character.

Now, in some sense, this is exactly what we find in the Bible, but not in quite the way we mean it in this category. If by “natural” we only meant that it shows evidence that God used real human beings to write the Bible and that their individual personalities, gifts and talents can be discerned in the stuff they wrote, then we certainly do find evidence of this in the Bible. But that’s not how we’re using “natural” here. Here, by “natural,” we mean what we discussed above: filled with contradictions and inaccuracies. In that sense, as we just saw, the Bible does not appear to be the word of men.

Typically, when people say that the Bible is the word of God and the word of men, they mean that human beings were just writing down what they remembered of God’s miracles, prophecies and activities in history, and that their accounts will be flawed because human beings make mistakes.

I remember a church leader once telling me that he believed that the Bible was the “Word of God” but not the “words of God.” What this man meant was that he believed God had really been involved in human history and that the

Bible described real supernatural events, but that the biblical accounts could not be trusted because they had been written down by human beings who made mistakes. However, since these supposed mistakes (contradictions, inaccuracies) never seem to stand up to the light of evidence, I don't think this view is true. Instead of being partly right and partly wrong, the Bible seems to be right every single time, which is quite difficult to explain if it is really the work of human beings to a significant degree. Therefore, the idea that the Bible is the Word of God and the word (or words) of men doesn't seem like the best option to me.

What If The Bible Were The Word Of God?

If the Bible were the Word of God, there are several things we would expect it to be:

1. Accurate
2. Consistent
3. Supernatural
4. Life-Changing
5. Lasting
6. Incomprehensible (at least a little bit)

1. Accurate

Since an all-powerful, all-knowing being wouldn't make mistakes, we would expect anything God produced to be accurate, down to the last detail. As discussed above, the Bible passes the test of historical accuracy. Sometimes it does it in ways that are quite spectacular. For instance, a recent study has tabulated the popularity of Jewish names in first century Palestine and discovered that the frequency of names outside the Bible almost perfectly matches the frequency of those same names in the Gospels. An example would be the name *Simon* which was the most popular name for Jewish males in Palestine in the 1st century and it is the most frequently-occurring name in the New Testament as well.¹² Since there is no evidence whatsoever that anyone in the ancient world was interested in following such things as the popularity of various names, the only way to account for this is to assume that the New Testament was simply accurately reporting the names of actual people from that time period.

2. Consistent

¹² Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company), 70.

Even though human authors were used to write Scripture, if God was ultimately responsible for the text of the Bible, we would expect to find that the various authors – in spite of radically different backgrounds and experiences – would produce different works that were remarkably consistent in their revelation of who God is. As discussed above, this is precisely what we find in the Bible.

3. Supernatural

If God were responsible for the Bible, we would expect it to contain things that are inexplicable from a purely human perspective. In other words, we would expect it to reveal things that could not be known apart from supernatural revelation. One doesn't have to look very hard to find precisely this.

One of the most obvious indications of the supernatural origin of the Bible is the presence of predictive prophecy. For instance, the book of Daniel, most likely written about 500 years before Jesus was born, predicted his entry into Jerusalem down to the day.¹³ The prophet Micah predicted Jesus' birth in the relatively

¹³ Robert Anderson, *The Coming Prince* (New York: Cosimo Classics, 2007 reprint), 127-128, 221.

obscure city of Bethlehem at least 400 years before it happened.¹⁴ Jesus predicted the destruction of Jerusalem in detail some 40 years before it happened.¹⁵ The Bible is filled with so many detailed examples of predictive prophecy that critical scholars are often forced to argue that these passages must have been written after the events took place, even though this goes against the evidence. Some skeptics will argue, for instance, that the book of Daniel, which contains detailed prophecies about the Messiah, fulfilled by Jesus, must have been written after Jesus' death. However, we know for a fact that the book of Daniel was already in circulation among the Jews hundreds of years before Jesus was born. Furthermore, the Dead Sea Scrolls have confirmed that the book of Daniel was not altered by people after Jesus' day.¹⁶

Detailed, predictive prophecy written long before the events they foretold actually happened is precisely the sort of evidence of

¹⁴ Micah 5:2.

¹⁵ Mat. 24:2.

¹⁶ Sometimes skeptics will try to argue that, while the book of Daniel was in circulation before Jesus, the passages that so clearly predicted his ministry must have been added later. This is what the Dead Sea Scrolls have disproven.

supernatural origins that we would expect to find if, in fact, the Bible came from God.

4. Life-Changing

If the Bible came from God, we would expect to find that it was somehow more than just a dry recitation of past events. We would expect that it would have the power to change the lives of people who read it. In fact, that is precisely what the Bible itself claims:

For the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart.

(Hebrews 4:12)¹⁷

¹⁷ It should be noted here that the phrase “word of God” as used here by the author of the book of Hebrews is not exactly the same thing as the Bible. Here, the “word of God” refers to anything God has said, whether it is recorded in Scripture or not. However, since the authors of Scripture thought of the Bible as having been given by God, this description of the power of the “word of God” applies to the Bible also.

But is it true? Does the Bible have this transformative power? Countless people through the ages have reported that their experience with the Bible confirms that it does have this power. In fact, there are numerous well-documented cases of people who set out to disprove the Bible and yet found that their interactions with the Bible actually persuaded them to become Christians.¹⁸

5. Lasting

If the Bible is the word of God, we would expect it to have relevance beyond the period in which it was composed. In other words, wouldn't we expect something that God produced to have an impact that transcends any one historical period?

The fact that the Bible remains the bestselling book in the world argues persuasively that it does, in fact, have precisely this kind of staying power.

And let's face it: the enduring popularity of the Bible is difficult to explain from a purely natural perspective. After all, the subjects it addresses, the culture it records and the language it uses are all quite far removed from modern

¹⁸ The founder of Harvard School of Law, Simon Greenleaf is one famous example, as is the contemporary evangelist/apologist Josh McDowell.

life. Because of this, the Bible is not always easy to understand. And yet, people all over the world continue to turn to the Bible for instruction and encouragement. Why is this? Perhaps it is because in the Bible they encounter a God who transcends our particular moment in history, a God who will never go out of style.

6. Incomprehensible (at least a little)

The thing about God is that He's almost certainly going to be so much more than we can fully comprehend with our limited minds. How can we expect to fully wrap our brains around a being that has always existed when our own existence is such a tiny blip on the radar of time? If the Bible is really from God and really describes God accurately, shouldn't we expect to find some things in there that aren't quite within our ability to grasp?

It's important that you understand that I'm not talking here about contradictions. We should never try to explain-away the charge of contradictions in the Bible by just crying "God is supposed to be incomprehensible!" For example, suppose my daughter were to tell me that she was going to her friend Rachel's house, and I later found out she actually went to Amanda's house. While I could say "pre-adolescent girls are supposed to be confusing!" and write it off as a mystery, that wouldn't be

very good parenting. This would appear (at least initially) to be a clear example of a contradiction and would need to be investigated. But this example is a different sort of thing from saying that some aspects of God's nature are incomprehensible.

For instance, though the Bible never actually uses the word "Trinity," it clearly teaches several things about God. First, it teaches that there is only one God.¹⁹ Second, it teaches that there is a plurality of persons within this one God: Father, Son and Spirit.²⁰ Third, it teaches that each of these "persons" is fully God in every respect.²¹ This is a good example of a

¹⁹ Deuteronomy 6:4: *Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one.*

²⁰ Matthew 28:19 is one example: *Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.*

²¹ This is a bit more complicated, and since this really isn't a book about the Trinity we won't go into great detail here. One piece of evidence for this claim is the fact that different references to the persons of the Trinity in the Bible mix the order of the names around so that sometimes the Father is first, sometimes the Son is first and sometimes the Spirit is first. In Greek, the order of the names in such a list is a way of indicating their importance. The fact that the Bible mixes them around indicates that they are all equally important.

teaching in the Bible that is incomprehensible without being contradictory. If the Bible said that there was one God and that the Father, Son and Spirit were each gods, then that would be a contradiction. If the Bible said that the Father, Son and Spirit were all God but that the Son and the Spirit had not always existed, this would be a contradiction. As it is, the doctrine of the Trinity is not contradictory – but it is beyond our ability to fully grasp.

Maybe there will come a time that God will be able to explain His existence as a Trinity to us in a way that we'll fully comprehend, but I doubt it. I suspect that understanding the Trinity fully requires a mind that is infinite, and that will never be true of human beings. In that sense, the doctrine of the Trinity may be beyond our ability to comprehend both in this life and in the life to come.

Other examples of things in the Bible which are incomprehensible without being contradictory include the fact that Jesus is fully God and fully man, and the question of God's sovereignty vs. human responsibility. To say that these things are incomprehensible is not to say that they shouldn't be investigated thoroughly or that we shouldn't make sure our thinking on such things fits within the parameters established by Scripture. To say that they are incomprehensible is really only to say that we cannot *fully* comprehend them. But to

say that we can't comprehend something *fully* doesn't mean that we can't comprehend it *rightly in part*.

On the contrary, the presence in Scripture of descriptions of God which go beyond our ability to fully comprehend, but which still correspond to the laws of logic that God has given us, is evidence that the contents of the Bible are not merely the product of human invention.

In short, the Bible possesses all the attributes we would expect to be true of a book written by God. This does not, of course, *prove* that the Bible is the Word of God, but it ought to make us think very carefully before dismissing it.

On the whole, it seems we are on more solid ground saying that the Bible is the Word of God than in saying that it is the word of men.