

TheForum – Straight answers to straight questions

Isn't the Bible just a bunch of made-up stories?

Handout

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[0 : 0 0] Welcome, everybody. Welcome to the forum, where we spend one hour discussing some of the big questions of life and the Christian response to them. For those who don't know me, my name is Mark Jackson. I'm Assistant Minister of Grace Church Dulwich, an Anglican Church which meets here on Sunday mornings. Now, in many ways, the question we're looking at today on the Bible is one many of us have been looking forward to and actually asking. So we've had three forums so far, and the first one, one on suffering, and when we looked at Jesus's great hope and he offers us in the face of suffering, a lot of discussions around tables ended up being, well, that's assuming the Bible is true. And we saw the same thing when we looked at Jesus' claim to be God from John's Gospel. That's assuming the Bible is true. Last time, we looked at hell and Jesus' great love in rescuing us. Again, some of the comebacks, some of the discussion, but that's assuming that the Bible is true. So I don't think I need to persuade you of the vital importance of the question before us. Either the Bible is true and God has revealed himself to us beyond all reasonable doubts, or the Bible is just a bunch of made-up stories and Christians are living a lie. So which one is it? That's our question. You can see it on the front of the handout. Isn't the Bible just a bunch of made-up stories?

As usual, we'll split our time into three parts. You can see it there on the front of the handout. Have you all got one? Great. So in part one, we'll look at the reliability of the copies of the Bible we have today.

So can we trust that they've been handed down to us accurately? In part two, we'll then look at the contents of the Bible. Can we trust what the Bible actually says? Then briefly, in part three, we'll be asked a question of ourselves.

Let me say as well that like previous forums, each part will consist of some speaking from me, followed by discussion around our tables, and we want discussions to be as open as possible.

So if you've got a question, please ask it. If you disagree with anything, do let your table leader know. This is a forum. Let's discuss in the discussion times. Good. Well, let's start with part one. And if you turn to the inside of the handouts.

[2 : 5 2] Can we trust the copies of the Bible we have today? That is to say, is this John's Gospel, for example, which I have here in my hands, which you can see on your tables, the John's Gospels that we've been using throughout our forums, is this Gospel the same Gospel that John originally wrote down?

So if you've ever played a game of Chinese whispers, you'll know how easy it is not to pass on information correctly. And people often say the same thing about the Bible.

I mean, after all, 2,000 years is a really long time. Surely there have been some copying errors along the way as it's passed from one generation to the next.

Or perhaps something's got lost in translation. Or perhaps, you know, one of the copyists had a bit of artistic license and then spruced it up a bit. People often say, you know, it isn't the Bible like a big game of Chinese whispers.

What started out was someone writing something nice about Jesus. Jesus is a nice bloke, couldn't sleep in an inn. 2,000 years later, it's become Jesus is the Christ who saves us from sin. Or something like that.

[4 : 08] Now, is that what happened? Is the Bible just a case of Chinese whispers? Well, I want us to have a look at the facts. And you might want to just look down at that table in part one of the handouts.

Because there are three questions that historians ask when assessing the reliability of copies of ancient documents. They ask how old are the copies.

Obviously, the older the better, because the closer they are to the original. They ask how much time has elapsed between the original document and the copies in existence.

And then three, they ask how many copies have been found. And the more copies, the better. So let's just look at that at the table. You can see in that first column a list of famous ancient documents.

And historians have no problem with the authenticity of the first three. And then moving from left to right in the columns, we have the date of the original document. Then the date of the oldest surviving copy.

[5 : 13] You take those first two columns, minus them, you get the time gap between the original and the copy. And then the last column gives the number of copies in existence today. So, take for example Caesar's Gaelic War, the second one down there.

It was originally written, historians estimate, between 58 and 50 BC. We don't have the original copy, which you might not be surprised to know.

It's quite normal for the original copy to have been lost. But we do have surviving copies. And for Caesar's Gaelic War, the first one we have is from AD 825. Which means the gap between the original and the oldest surviving copy is 875 years.

And the number of copies in existence from that time is 10. Now, as I say, these are normal average figures. Historians accept the validity of Caesar's Gaelic War.

Now, by comparison, let's now have a look at the New Testament, the bottom row there. New Testament estimated to be written between 40 and 100 AD.

[6 : 18] The oldest surviving copy we have is from AD 350. And if you go to the British Museum just off Russell Square, you can see it. The whole New Testament, they've got it there.

A copy from AD 350. That means, therefore, that the gap between the original and the oldest surviving copy is 310 years. Substantially less than Caesar's Gaelic War.

500 years less. But what is most sort of impressive is the number of copies that we have of the New Testament from AD 350.

I've left it as a question mark in the table. I'm not going to ask for you to say, but you can have a think in your minds. Based on the fact that the Peloponnesian War, we've got 73 copies. Caesar's Gaelic War is 10.

Tacitus' Histories is 2. Do you know how many copies of the New Testament we have from AD 350? We have 14,000. 14,000 copies.

[7 : 19] 5,000 in Greek. 8,000 in Latin. 1,000 in other languages. Compared to the other documents at the time, the gap, which is one of the key questions between the original and the copy, is relatively small.

310 years might sound a lot to us. It's not in this field. And we have 14,000 copies. Now, you may be suspicious that I've just deliberately selected documents that make out the New Testament to be particularly, look at it in a good light.

So let me give you a couple of quotes from the experts in this field of ancient documents. First, the great textual scholar Professor Hort, he said this, In the variety and fullness of the evidence on which it rests, the text of the New Testament stands absolutely and unapproachably alone among the ancient prose writings.

Now, Sir Frederick Kenyon, he was the former director of the British Museum. It's a bit of a longer quote, this one. The interval then between the dates of original composition and the earliest extant evidence becomes so small as to be in fact 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. Both the authenticity and the general integrity of the books of the New Testament may be regarded as finally established.

[9 : 01] In other words, we can trust the copies of the Bible we have today. The New Testament is not a product of Chinese whispers.

In fact, the New Testament and John's Gospel that we've been using here at the forums is 99% identical to what was originally written. Now, why do I say 99, not 100?

Just turn with me to page 24 of the blue John's Gospels on your table. Page 24. And just look up on the top left there.

And you read this little excerpt in parentheses saying, the earliest manuscripts do not include John chapter 7, 53 to 8, 11.

In other words, that little section that just comes next, those 12 verses about the women caught in adultery, it might have been in the original, it might not. At this stage, we don't know. And the translators are right up front about it.

[10 : 07] I'm not trying to hide anything. Out of the whole of John's Gospel, this is the only bit in doubt. And it doesn't impact any of the major teachings of the Christian message.

About Jesus being God, saving us from sin, our need to believe in him. The things we've been looking at, at the forum. Based then on the facts of history, the copies that we have, the time gap, the number of copies we have, we can be sure that 99% of the New Testament is identical to what was originally written down.

We can trust the copies of the Bible we have today. Let's pause there and we'll have our first discussion.

Ten minutes to just discuss any of that. Round your tables and I'll call us back. Let me break in there and we'll move on to part two of the handouts.

Can we trust the contents of the Bible? Because it's one thing to trust that the copies that we have today are accurate.

[11 : 30] It's quite another thing to trust the contents of what's actually written in the Bible. So people don't have a problem believing in Caesar's Gaelic war because, well, there's nothing particularly out of the ordinary in it.

But you read of Jesus walking on water, feeding the 5,000, Jesus rising from the dead, claiming to be God.

Now, that's not something you see every day. And it sounds, as you read it for the first time, more like a work of fiction than of real life. So there's the question.

How can we trust the content of the Bible? Turn with me to page 60 of the Blue John's Gospels, where towards the end, John gives his purpose in writing.

Page 60, top left, and let me read verse 30 and 31. Now, Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book.

[12 : 48] But these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.

In other words, John's purpose is not to write a work of fiction. Now, that might seem obvious, but let's just put it out there.

That this book is not in the mould of, let's say, the Chronicles of Narnia, or Lord of the Rings. As far as John is concerned, he is writing down facts.

These aren't myths. Not sort of parables all about Jesus. He's writing specific facts about Jesus. Now, he calls them signs.

And he says in those verses I just read out, that he includes these signs with the specific and serious purpose of demonstrating that Jesus is the Son of God.

[13 : 46] So that we, the readers, now would believe that and have life, eternal life, in his name. In other words, in John's mind, this is a matter of life and death.

This is serious. It's not silly. He's writing as fact, not as fiction. Now, of course, John could have been mistaken, could have been deluded.

He could have been writing what he thought was fact, but is in fact fiction. But that is why John goes out of his way to highlight his own eyewitness credentials.

And throughout the Gospel, just continues to name specific people, by name, specific places, gives the timing of events. So you don't need to turn there now.

Chapter 1, John says, I saw Jesus. I heard him. He names John the Baptist, Philip, Nathanael, Nazareth. In chapter 2, he speaks about a wedding in Cana. He speaks about Jesus in the temple at Passover.

[14 : 57] Real people, real places, real times. Chapter 3, Nicodemus, one of the Pharisees. Specific, the town of Samaria, chapter 4. Women at the well, chapter 5, Cana in Galilee.

It goes on. And John is making the point, as he would have written it down. Look, if you don't believe me, ask these people. Here are the names.

This is where it took place. These are the places. This is when it took place. Here are the times. Ask them. And people could have very easily said, look, no, that's just not true.

I'm Nicodemus. Jesus never said that to me. I'm Lazarus. No, I wasn't brought back from the dead. Don't be ridiculous. It would have been very easy for people to say, John is just writing nonsense.

Don't listen to him. Chuck it in the bin. But they didn't. John's gospel is written as fact, and it is backed up with the evidence of real, named people, places, and times.

[16 : 04] Nor, by the way, is this the testimony of just one person. We also have Matthew, Mark, Luke's gospel as well.

All writing about Jesus Christ, saying the same things about his miraculous life, his death for our sins, his resurrection from the dead. And actually, if you take a step back and you take the Bible as a whole, you have a collection of 66 books written by 40 different authors, writing in three different languages, Hebrew, Aramaic, Greek, writing on three different continents, Africa, Europe, Asia, all doing this over a period of 1,500 years.

And from start to finish, from Genesis to Revelation, there is one unifying, consistent message that Jesus is God's King, the Son of God, the Saviour of the world, the Saviour you and I need.

John's gospel then, as we read it, as we can see, is written as fact. But it is backed up by the evidence of named people, times, places, it is corroborated by others, and is totally consistent with the whole message of the Bible across languages, countries, 1,500 years.

Now, it would simply be impossible for this to be fabricated, made up a conspiracy. And just to come at it from a different angle, maybe, I don't know, thinking psychologically, I don't know, what would John gain from writing his gospel unless it were true?

[17 : 57] Think of these three facts. Several of the apostles died for the Christian message. Why would John face the risk of dying for a lie?

Two, by the time the gospels were written, the first Christians had faced 30 years of opposition. Loss of houses, imprisonment, death.

Yet when they wrote it down, 30 years later, after all this opposition, they did not back down in their message. No attempt was made to make the message more believable. It was said at the time, back then, that the idea of God becoming man, getting crucified for our sins, and rising from the dead was absolutely ridiculous.

A scandal to the Jews, how could God become man? Foolishness to the Greeks with all their rational, intelligent thinking. And yet John stuck to this message.

Why? And three, even if John wanted to keep a movement going after the tragic death of its leader, why then, for example, in chapter 20, does he say that the first people to see Jesus risen from the dead were women?

[19 : 21] When back then, Jewish law did not accept the testimony of women in court? It doesn't make sense.

It doesn't make sense unless John is just writing down what happened, what he saw, reporting it as he is, as an eyewitness. Now, don't get me wrong here.

The contents of John's gospel are out of the ordinary. We all realise that. These things don't normally happen. But please don't think, you know, that John doesn't realise that as well.

John, who is writing this, knows fully well that people don't normally walk on water or feed 5,000 with a few loaves of bread and fish. Don't come back from the dead.

But that's the point, because here before his very eyes was someone doing these very unordinary things. John saw it. John heard it.

[20 : 29] And that's why John wrote his gospel. So that you and I could read about these amazing events today and see for ourselves that Jesus is the Son of God who does offer life in his name if we believe in him.

Let's pause there again, turn again to our discussions. I'll draw us back in 10 minutes. Amen. Let me break into discussions again.

And we'll move on to part three. Can we trust ourselves? There's much more, if we had time, that I'd like to say about the reliability of the Bible.

There's one quote from an archaeological expert that says that no archaeological discovery has ever contradicted a biblical reference. I would love to speak more about the 300-plus prophecies about Jesus from the Old Testament.

Jesus fulfills every single one perfectly, including the place of his birth. I mean, how do you fake that one? I'd love to spend some more time on Jesus' own attitude to the Bible and the Old Testament as well as the infallible Word of God.

[21 : 54] But as I say, time's against us. If you would like to go into greater detail on that and people that do address it, let me recommend two books. The first is The Truth About Jesus by Paul Barnett.

The Truth About Jesus by Paul Barnett. And the other, The New Testament Documents, Are They Reliable? by F.F. Bruce.

New Testament Documents, Are They Reliable? F.F. Bruce. These are my copies. You can borrow them if you want, or Amazon.co.uk. I have both of them.

For now, though, I'd like us to use the rest of our time to ask a question about our own trustworthiness.

You see, it's all very well asking, can we trust the Bible? But interestingly, the question the Bible asks of us, Jesus asks of us, is can we trust ourselves?

[22 : 52] Turn with me to page 9 and verses 19 and 20 of chapter 3. So page 9, top right, this is Jesus speaking.

He says, and this is the judgment, or verdict. The light has come into the world. That's him, Jesus. But people loved the darkness rather than the light, because their deeds were evil.

For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his deeds should be exposed. I suppose one of the assumptions we make when we come to the Bible is that we think of ourselves as neutral observers, who can carefully weigh up the evidence and follow wherever it leads.

But interestingly, in those verses I've just read out, Jesus describes us in different terms. He says we're not neutral, but biased. And biased against him.

Jesus says that we like to be in charge of our lives, prefer to be in charge of our lives. We love our moral independence. That's what he means by darkness.

[24 : 21] But if God is real, if God made us and is in charge of us, then we should be living his way, doing what his says, letting God be in charge of our lives.

And so in that sense, we have a vested interest in the Bible not being true. So we can continue to live our lives the way we want.

And so Jesus puts it to us, you know, can you trust yourself? Can you trust yourself to follow the evidence? No matter where it points. Now, let me be clear.

That's not to say that we shouldn't look into the evidence of the Bible. Do so. That's why we've put on today. That's why I've recommended those two books. But for all our talk of manuscript documents and the number of copies and the time gap between the original and the motives for John writing or not writing his gospel, at the end of the day, the best thing you can do to test the reliability of the Bible is simply to read it and read John's gospel for yourself.

That's why we say these John's gospels are for you to take away, to read, to put it to the test. The Bible actually claims to be self-authenticating. The Bible claims that as you read it, God speaks to you.

[25 : 44] The Bible claims that as you read it, put it into action, God changes you. And so as I say, the ultimate test is actually to read it. Put the Bible to the test.

Read it. Ask God to speak to you. Ask God to move you from this distrust to trust. Reading the Bible is the best test of all. Let's turn again to our final time to discussions.

Let me break into discussions one final time. Brilliant.

Well, the aim this afternoon has been to discuss the Christian response to the question, isn't the Bible just a bunch of made-up stories? And we saw from the manuscript evidence that we can trust the copies of the Bible today.

We looked at the reasons, secondary, for why we can actually trust the contents of the Bible. And then we were left with a question mark as to whether we can trust ourselves.

[26 : 47] And actually the challenge to read the Bible for ourselves and to put it to the test. Might be you want to discuss this some more, some heartily discussions I see in some of the tables.

So do stay around and chat some more. Do feel free to speak to me if you'd like to. Our next forum, you can see on the cards, is on Sunday the 7th of February.

And we'll be looking at what Jesus has to say about hypocrisy. The question there being, why is there so much hypocrisy in the church? Until then, thanks very much for joining in the discussions.

Thanks very much for coming. And I look forward to seeing you all next time. Thank you.