



Is the Bible a Written Relic?

Tim Suddarth – March 14, 2010

For his whole life, Harry Potter thought well of his Father. As he discovered more about his parents and learned that they died trying to keep him safe he began to want to know more and more about them. He came to believe that his father was a man of honor and integrity and trust, in short a good man. The clip we watched was the first moment that Harry glimpsed a side of James Potter he would have sworn didn't exist. Snape's memory shows a bully who picked on others in order to get a laugh from his friends. Harry had known who his father was but he didn't really know who his father was.

In a similar way many of us have known the Bible for a long time. We might've memorized parts of it when we were little or read other parts on our own. But how many of us know very much about how the Bible actually came to be in the form we have it today. I think there is a lot about the Bible that we don't know and a lot that we should know.

First we need to start with the idea of communication. We live in a world that is in many ways driven by an obsession with communication, from cell phones to email to websites to text messages to physical, hard-copy mail to verbal communication to television, radio, advertising, marketing. There are innumerable ways that people communicate and are communicated to and the thirst for that kind of communication and relationship comes from the fact that we are made in the image and likeness of God. And it really comes down to this fact that God is a community of Father, Jesus and Holy Spirit and that God has within his own essence and nature, communication the Father, Son and spirit although they are one god are three persons and they speak to one another. And as a result of us being made in the image and likeness of God, we hear from God who speaks to us, we speak to God in prayer, we speak to each other, we build relationships around communication.

All of this is connected to the big church-y doctrine label of revelation. That ours is a God who speaks. And so we'll start by answering a number of questions on the doctrine of revelation.

What is revelation?

Revelation is by definition God's means by which he has chosen to reveal himself, to speak to us. One of the things we see in the opening pages of Genesis is in Genesis, chapter 1 we read no less than ten times, quote "God said" end quote. The God of the bible is a God who speaks and continues to be a God who speak. And so the reason we need revelation is because God is creator and we are created and the distance between us is great. If God didn't practice some means of self-disclosure, speaking to us and reveling to us what he has done, we would not know. We'd be left with nothing more than speculation. And speculation is the human effort to guess what God is like or what God wants us to believe or how God wants us to behave. But no one is born with a clear comprehension of who God is. So, in an effort to know about God, we'd end up on the treadmill of more and more than Rob Bell talked to us about at the beginning of the semester.

Revelation is far more helpful and reliable than speculation because it isn't cavewoman guessing what to do to appease God, it's God speaking and telling us who he is. He tells us what he desires, he tells us how to have a relationship with him. He speaks to us and invites us to speak to him through prayer.

The Bible speaks of 2 broad categories of revelation. The first is general revelation, the second is special revelation. General revelation is general in that it is available to all people in all times, all places, all cultures, all circumstances and that it is general in that it does reveal a great deal about God, it doesn't give us the specific name of God or what God has done. General revelation is about revealing that God exists.

There are three kinds of general revelation

1 – Creation

Rom. 1:19-21: 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.

What can be known about God can be known Creation itself is evidence of a creator, is evidence of God

Psalm 19:1-2: The heavens declare the glory of God, and the sky above proclaims his handiwork. Day to day pours out speech, and night to night reveals knowledge.

2 – Providence

God not only made the world, but God continues to rule over it and is at work in creation

Acts 14:17: Yet he did not leave himself without witness, for he did good by giving you rains from heaven and fruitful seasons, satisfying your hearts with food and gladness.

The fact that there are seasons reveals something of the love and goodness of God, that water falls from the sky to enable us to grow crops to feed ourselves and to continue our life on the earth are all ways that reveal aspects of God. So general revelation includes not only God creating the world, but God providentially ruling over the world that he has made, and also through the (3 – Conscience) that God has implanted in every person he created in his image and likeness. Whereas creation is an external witness that in some general ways reveals God to us, so also our conscience is an internal witness that likewise reveals to us something of the goodness and holiness and justice of God. Paul says it this way:

Romans 2:14a & 15: When Gentiles who do not have the law, by nature do what the law requires...show that the work of the law is written on their hearts, while their conscience also bears witness, and their conflicting thoughts accuse or even excuse them

Every human being, whether or not they are a Christian does experience general revelation through the inward conviction of their conscience. Anyone who has ever not done something because that inwardly just knew it was wrong. Anyone who has ever done something they knew was wrong and then felt bad about it. Anyone who has ever apologized or anyone who has ever appealed to a greater moral standard. That's not right. You shouldn't do that. That's wrong. That's unacceptable. All of these statements are appealing to conscience, the inward belief that certain things are right and certain things are wrong. That God has created us in his image and likeness with an innate sense of justice and a sense of rightness.

That's why people, Christian or not, will appeal to conscience, they'll appeal to some universal law. You shouldn't take advantage of those who are poor. You shouldn't be one who rapes or murders or steals or kills. The question is, why? Because something in us knows that these things are wrong, because of conscience.

These are three ways that the Bible speaks of revelation in a general sense.

1 – Creation

2 – Providence

3 – Conscience

That is general revelation available to all people. In addition to that some people receive what theologians call special revelation, special meaning that the information about god is clearer in special revelation than in general revelation. Also that it is revealed to a smaller number of people than in general revelation. Special revelation goes to an individual, a group or a certain number of people. I'll give you three kinds of special revelation:

1 – Supernatural occurrences, the miraculous.

For example, surrounding the birth of Jesus, his father Joseph had a prophetic dream telling him not to divorce Mary, but that she had been faithful and he should stick by her. Another example is Mary herself when the angel Gabriel came and told her she would become pregnant with Jesus.

It is very unusual, very rare, very special, but God can and does work in these very special ways. I know and have known a handful of people who have had prophetic dreams or moments of supernatural insight, where God tells them about people and circumstances in the future that ultimately come to pass just like God said. I have had a small number of experiences like this myself. As far as I know I've never been visited by an Angel, but I believe that these kind of supernatural ways that God specially reveals himself to his people.

2 – Another example of special revelation, the second category is Jesus. Jesus Christ is eternally God and came into human history. The Bible in John 1:1 calls Jesus the word of God, so God speaks to us through the person, the ministry and the life of Jesus. Hebrews 1 says that in previous times God would speak to us through a proxy like prophets or angels, but he has chosen to speak to us most clearly through Jesus.

3 – The final kind of special revelation is The Scriptures it says in

2 Timothy 3:16: All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness

So special revelation includes:

- The supernatural
- Jesus
- The Scriptures

The Scriptures are God-breathed, that is, God literally worked through the human authors to speak to us. That being said, special revelation is really about the teaching and learning of the Scriptures. This brings us to the next question:

What are the Scriptures?

The New Testament speaks of the Old Testament as Scripture, which means "writing." The word bible comes from the Greek word for book. This is a little misleading though as the Bible

is actually a whole library of books. The Bible actually contains sixty-six separate books. Thirty-nine books are in the Old Testament, which is a record of time from God creating the world and Adam and Eve up until the coming of Jesus Christ into human history. The twenty-seven books of the New Testament begin with the four gospels, which record the life, death, burial, resurrection, and return to heaven of Jesus, and then proceed to instructions to various Christians and Christian churches about how to think and live in light of who Jesus is and what he has done. In this way, the Bible is really more of a library of books rather than a single book. However, there is unity and continuity between the various books of the Bible and their Old Testament and New Testament groupings. This point is illustrated by the fact that the New Testament has roughly three hundred explicit Old Testament quotations, as well as upwards of four thousand Old Testament allusions. In many ways, the Old Testament is a series of promises that God makes and the New Testament is the record of the fulfillment of those promises.

For these, and many other reasons, the Bible is the bestselling book of all time, and is now available in nearly three thousand languages. However, when you pick up a Bible, while its content will be the same as the ancient version, there are a few differences. The Old Testament was written on papyrus – a form of paper made out of reeds; the New Testament was written on parchments (prepared animal skins). A lecturer at the University of Paris created the Bible's chapter divisions in the early 1200s, which accounts for our current 1,189 chapter divisions. Its current 31,173 verse divisions were not fully developed until 1551, in an effort to provide addresses (not unlike those on our homes) that would help us find particular sections.

Roughly three-quarters of the Christian Bible is the Old Testament. The Old Testament has 929 chapters and 23,214 verses. The New Testament has 260 chapters and 7,959 verses. In the Old Testament, the longest book is Psalms and the shortest book is Obadiah. In the New Testament, the longest book is Acts and the shortest book is 3 John.

Who wrote the Bible?

God wrote Scripture in concert with human authors whom he inspired to perfectly record his words. Very simply, this means that God the Holy Spirit inspired not just the thoughts and words of Scripture.

Going back to 2 Timothy, scripture itself claims to be God-breathed or inspired:

2 Timothy. 3:16-17: All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be competent, equipped for every good work”

Peter says,

“no prophecy of Scripture comes from someone’s own interpretation. For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit” (2 Pet. 1:20-21).

Christians believe that Scripture is our highest authority, or metaphorical Supreme Court, by which all other lesser authorities are tested. Practically, this means that things we learn from any “lesser courts” like reason, tradition, or culture have to be compared to and come under the highest court of divinely inspired Scripture. During the Protestant Reformation, the slogan *sola scriptura* became popular to summarize this conviction; it means Scripture alone is our highest authority.

What is the canon of Scripture?

One of my seminary professors, Wayne Grudem, uses the following definition: “The canon of Scripture is the list of all the books that belong in the Bible”. When we speak of the “canon of Scripture,” we are referring to those books that the church has recognized as the authoritative Word of God.

It is unclear exactly when what we now recognize as the thirty-nine books of the Old Testament were clearly recognized as a closed canon. Most scholars think the recognition of the Old Testament canon was probably a gradual process. And the Bible itself testifies to the historical development of the Old Testament.

The earliest collection of written words was the Ten Commandments, which God himself wrote on two stone tablets. (Ex. 32:16) The collection of authoritative words from God grew in size throughout the time of Israel’s history. Moses wrote additional works: Deuteronomy (Deut. 31:24-26), also the first 4 books of the Bible. Then the book of Joshua tells us that he added to the “words in the book of the law of God.” Others in Israel, usually those who filled the office of prophet, wrote additional words from God and chronicled the continuing story of God’s interaction with the Jewish people. The content of the Old Testament canon continued to grow until approximately 435 BC with the completion of Malachi. The subsequent history of the Jewish people was recorded in other writings, but they were not considered worthy to be included with the Scriptures. We’ll come back to these books, commonly called the Apocrypha in a moment.

What does Jesus say about the Scriptures?

Jesus summarized the Old Testament Scripture as existing in three parts: the Law, Prophets, and Psalms

Then he said to them, “These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you, I that everything written about me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled.” Luke 24:44.

He accepted the Old Testament canon as it exists today. As a rabbi, Jesus was an authoritative teacher of scripture, so his words had weight to his Jewish listeners. His public ministry even began with him reading from the Old Testament book of Isaiah and stating that his ministry was to fulfill the Old Testament promises about his coming (Luke 4:16-21).

Following his return to heaven, Jesus’ students wrote the remaining books of Scripture and likewise upheld Scripture as God’s unique, perfect, authoritative, helpful, and powerful revelation to humanity. Jesus and his apostles time after time quoted from a distinctive body of authoritative writings. They designated them as “the Scripture” (John 7:38; Acts 8:32; Romans 4:3), “the Scriptures” (Matthew 21:42; John 5:39; Acts 17:11), “the holy Scriptures” (Romans 1:2), “the sacred writings” (2 Timothy 3:15) and so forth. They often introduced their quotations with “it is written,” that is, it stands firmly written.

Furthermore, the New Testament authors quote the Old Testament roughly three hundred times. The New Testament writers were convinced that the Old Testament is sacred Scripture. Even a cursory reading of the gospels would leave you with the idea that the Jewish religious leaders and Jesus never agreed on anything, and you wouldn’t be far from the truth. So I think it’s remarkable that there is no record of any dispute between Jesus and the Jewish religious leaders over what books were part of the Old Testament.

What about the Apocrypha?

Thus the writings of the Apocrypha should not be regarded as part of Scripture:

- (1) they do not claim for themselves the same authority;
- (2) they were never accepted by the Jews as Scripture.
- (3) they were not considered Scripture by Jesus and the NT authors; Neither Jesus nor NT authors ever cite any of the Apocrypha as having divine authority.
- (4) they contain teachings inconsistent with the rest of the Bible.

The early church was of a mixed opinion on the issue, although most of the evidence is decidedly against viewing the Apocrypha as Scripture as the earliest Christian list of Old Testament books (AD 170) by Melito of Sardis does not include the Apocrypha. The Roman Catholic Church did not officially declare the Apocrypha (excluding 1 and 2 Esdras and the Prayer of Manasseh) to be part of the canon until 1546 at the Council of Trent.

The New Testament Canon

The New Testament canon begins with the writings of the apostles, who were given the ability from the Holy Spirit to recall and interpret accurately the words and deeds of Jesus.

John 14:26: “But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you.”

Furthermore those who have the office of apostle in the early church claim an authority equal to that of the Old Testament prophets.

2 Peter 3:2: “You should remember the predictions of the holy prophets and the commandment of the Lord and Savior through your apostles.”

The concept we have today of a completed Bible was formulated early in the history of the church. By the end of the second century all but seven books (Hebrews, 2 and 3 John, 2 Peter, Jude, James, and Revelation) were recognized as apostolic, and by the end of the fourth century all twenty-seven books in our present canon were recognized by all the churches.

What were the criteria for Books being Included?

There were three primary criteria used by the church in discussing which books should be :

1. Conformity to “the rule of faith.”

Did the book in question contain teachings consistent with the rest of the scriptures?

2. Apostolicity.

Was the writer of the book an apostle or did the writer of the book have immediate contact with the apostles? We have most of the New Testament in the canon because of direct authorship by the apostles.

Mark, Luke, Acts

All three were commonly acknowledged very early, because of the respective authors’ close association with an apostle. Church fathers tell us that Mark was Peter’s interpreter when he was in Rome and that he Roman Christians asked Mark to write down all of the stories the Peter used to tell about Jesus. For a while it was actually called The Memories of Peter before becoming known as the Gospel of Mark. Luke traveled with Paul during his missionary journeys chronicling them for the book that would become The Acts of the Apostles and Paul himself quotes from Luke’s gospel and calls it scripture in

1 Timothy 5:18: For the Scripture says, “You shall not muzzle an ox when it treads out the grain,” and, “The laborer deserves his wages.”

Jude

Accepted based on the fact that he was brothers with James and that his oldest brother was a little-known Rabbi named Jesus.

Hebrews

Acceptance was urged by many in the church because they thought Paul wrote it. Others disputed this idea and ultimately it was accepted on its own intrinsic qualities. It's a very well-crafted sermon and the author was brilliant.

3. Wide-spread Acceptance.

For a book to be considered part of the canon it must have had widespread and continuous acceptance and usage by churches everywhere. The fact that essentially the whole church came to recognize the same twenty-seven books as canonical is remarkable when it is remembered that the result was not contrived. All that the several churches throughout the Empire could do was to witness to their own experience with the documents and share whatever knowledge they might have about their origin and character. When you think about the diversity in cultural backgrounds and in orientation to the essentials of the Christian faith within the churches, their common agreement about which books belonged to the New Testament serves to suggest that this final decision did not originate solely at the human level, but was clearly directed by God.

As I said at the beginning, we live in a world that is driven by communication. Through god's revelation we have the chance not to guess, not to speculate, but to actually know what the God of the universe wants to communicate to us. What a chance. What an opportunity. What a responsibility.

1 Peter 3:15: But in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect

How do we have a defense when asked? By knowing where our faith comes from and by knowing that the Bible is trustworthy.

* Much of this message is taken from or inspired by *Doctrine: What Christians Should Believe* by Mark Driscoll & Gerry Breshears and course notes from Wayne Grudem's Theology 501 course at Phoenix Seminary.