

"*God Speaks* clearly and concisely presents the message of the Bible in a way that all readers will enjoy and benefit from. We recommend [it] with enthusiasm!"

— Mark Burnett and Roma Downey
Producers of *The Bible* miniseries and *The Son of God* film

GOD

What He Says

SPEAKS

What He Means

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What Is the Bible, Really?

MOST PEOPLE WHO DISMISS the Bible as an old, irrelevant book—little more than a collection of religious opinions from a bygone era—either haven't read it or haven't understood it. In most cases, they are reacting to comments and ideas they have heard from other people who haven't read the Bible with understanding. I even know someone who bases his opinion of what the Bible teaches on what he sees on the television cartoon *The Simpsons*! That would be funny if it weren't so sad.

In this book, I will give you a solid, easy-to-understand guide to the Bible. I begin with the basics, so that you will get the big picture of what the Bible really *is*. In the next chapter we will look at some important, specific issues, so that you will get a much better idea of what the Bible really *says*. When you discover what it is and what it says, you will see why this "old book" is so important.

What is the Bible? The word *Bible* means *book*. At first glance that seems obvious. Of course it is a book. But is it? In reality the Bible is a small but very important library made up of (at least) sixty-six books—thirty-nine in the Old Testament (the first part of the Bible) and twenty-seven in the New Testament (the second part of

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the Bible). Roman Catholics, Greek Orthodox, and other Eastern Christians include in the Old Testament several other books called the Apocrypha, so their book count is higher.¹ In all, there were some forty authors who contributed to the Bible over the course of about fifteen hundred years.

The Old Testament is the Jewish Bible (sometimes called the Hebrew Bible, because it is written in the Hebrew language). The New Testament is the part that Christians—followers of Jesus—wrote. Although some early Christians thought the New Testament alone was sufficient as the Bible of the Church, the great majority of Christian leaders disagreed, believing that the Church's Bible should consist of *both* the Old Testament and the New Testament.

It was the right decision because the Old Testament provides the context and framework for understanding the New Testament. In other words, the New Testament wouldn't make sense to us without the Old Testament.

The Old Testament tells the story of God's good creation, what went wrong, and how God set in motion a plan to set things right again. Perhaps the most famous couple is Adam and Eve, who are depicted as the first human beings. They are also the most controversial. Many conservative literalists read the story of Adam and Eve and their children (Genesis 1–4) the way they read history. Taking the same literalistic approach to the creation story as a whole, some conservative readers believe it is necessary to reject the findings of science, claiming, instead, that planet Earth is only six or seven thousand years old.

But many Christian scholars and scientists believe that the early chapters of Genesis represent metaphor or parable. The story of creation intends to teach that the world is not the result of

blind chance but rather the result of design and intention. So also humanity. However old the earth is, at some point and in some way God created human beings. The ancient stories of Genesis do not represent modern science (which to ancient people would have been incomprehensible) but the great truths that the world is not an accident and that humans are much more than sophisticated animals. Genesis also teaches that the problems humans face are largely brought upon themselves. The story of the fall of Adam and Eve teaches that humanity is inclined to go its own way, often to its own hurt.

The fallenness of humanity, however, does not mean that humans cannot be good or moral. Indeed they can. After all, Genesis teaches that God created humans in his own image (Genesis 1:26). This means that humans are both intelligent and moral. As a result, all humans have a moral code, in which all of us agree that some things are wrong and other things are right. Nevertheless, because we struggle to find our way morally and ethically and because we often choose to ignore God, we harm ourselves in one way or another.

As bad as this sounds, God has not given up on humanity. In response to humanity's fall, God has set in motion a plan to redeem and restore. The plan begins with God choosing an elderly couple, Abraham and Sarah, who miraculously have a son in their old age and become a family. This family becomes a people. This people becomes a nation—the nation of Israel. From Israel rise prophets, priests, and kings. The voices of these prophets, the ministry of these priests, and the rule of these kings create a framework through which we understand the New Testament.

The unfinished story of hope in the Old Testament reaches its climax in the pages of the New Testament, beginning with the

miraculous birth of another son—God's Son, Jesus, in whom the whole story of the Old Testament finds its fulfillment. Jesus' life without sin; his ministry of miracles; his passion and death; and his resurrection, ascension, and promised reign are all properly understood in the light of the story of Abraham's descendants and the covenant family God created—a family of which, through Jesus, we all may become part.

What we call the Old Testament was Jesus' Bible. He respected it and accepted its authority. Without the Old Testament we would not effectively understand the message of Jesus. Make no mistake about it: the Old Testament is a vital part of the Bible.

The Old Testament, The First Part of the Bible

Some of the Old Testament books date to about 1000 BC (and portions of the oldest books could be earlier). Most of the books range from about 450 BC to 800 BC. The most recent is the book of Daniel, which is usually dated around 165 BC (although the stories in Daniel are probably much older). If you include the books of the Apocrypha, then some are more recent, dating to the first century BC.²

The Old Testament is made up of the books of Moses (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy), a number of historical narratives (such as Joshua, Judges, 1–2 Samuel, 1–2 Kings), prophets (Isaiah, Jeremiah, etc.) and poetic writings (Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and the like). The historical narratives are sometimes called the "Former Prophets" and the books of Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and the twelve Minor Prophets (Hosea–Malachi) are called the "Latter Prophets." First and Second Chronicles and the book of Daniel are included in a category called the "Writings."

How these various writings are arranged varies somewhat from tradition to tradition.³

Most of the Old Testament books were written in Hebrew. Half of the book of Daniel and a few portions of other books were written in Aramaic, a language that is close to Hebrew. The people of Israel spoke Hebrew. After the Babylonians conquered Israel in the sixth century BC, many Jews spoke Aramaic, which is why two of the later books (Daniel and Nehemiah) have bits of Aramaic text.

In antiquity the Old Testament was translated into Greek and Latin. The Greek Orthodox Church uses the Greek version, while for centuries the Roman Catholic Church used the Latin version. The Eastern Orthodox Church reads a Syriac version of the Bible. (Syriac is a later form of Aramaic.) Most Christians, of course, read the Old Testament in their native language, whether English, French, German, Spanish, or whatever. Almost all of these modern language translations are based on the original languages of the Old Testament.

No other book has influenced Western culture more than the Old Testament. Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, Noah and the Flood, Moses and the Ten Commandments, Samson and Delilah, David and Goliath, David and Bathsheba, Daniel and the lions, and many other characters and stories have left a lasting impression in art, film, literature, and popular culture. It may be a very old collection of writings, but the Old Testament's influence is still strongly felt today.

The New Testament, The Second Part of the Bible

The New Testament books date from about AD 50 to AD 100. The New Testament is made up of four Gospels (Matthew, Mark,

Luke, and John), which provide accounts of the life, teaching, and activities of Jesus Christ; a historical narrative called the book of Acts, which describes the first generation or so of the early Church (from Jesus in AD 30 to Paul's journey to Rome in AD 62); several letters (many of them by Paul); and the Apocalypse, or book of Revelation.⁴ Whereas most of the Old Testament books are written in Hebrew, the New Testament books are written in Greek.

The New Testament has also impacted our culture in major ways. We speak of a "good Samaritan" who renders assistance to someone in need. We refer to a "prodigal" who has seen the error of his ways. People speak of "turning the other cheek" and the

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Golden Rule's admonition that we do to others what we expect them to do to us. Most of us have heard the Lord's Prayer ("Our Father, who is in heaven . . .") or at least some of the Beatitudes ("Blessed are the poor in spirit . . ."). All these expressions and themes come from the teaching of Jesus. One of the best-known chapters in the New Testament is 1 Corinthians 13, a pas-

sage on love often read at weddings: "Love is patient and kind. . . . Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things."

The teaching of Jesus and his disciples inspired movements that called for the end of slavery, equality for women, and the establishment of schools, hospitals, orphanages, and countless charities dedicated to assisting the poor and vulnerable. Characters, events, and themes from the New Testament are widely reflected in art and literature.

Together, the Old and New Testaments make up the Bible, the

most important library of ancient books ever assembled. But it is not enough simply to have a Bible. We need to read it and understand it.

Interpreting Scripture

Learning how to interpret Scripture is important and rewarding. Everyone needs a little help too. You will learn how to interpret Scripture, step by step, in chapter 10 of this book. You will also find many helpful resources listed under "For Further Reading." I can't emphasize enough the importance of proper, informed interpretation. If we don't examine carefully a passage of Scripture in matters of context, culture, and the meaning of key words, we risk misunderstanding the text. Not only will we miss out on what the text is saying, but we might even come up with something false and misleading. As I often tell my students, "To invent heresy or create a cult, all you need is a Bible and no context." Every cult is based on the Bible wrongly understood. Sound biblical interpretation is extremely important.⁵

Perhaps you agree that the Bible is important and that interpreting it correctly is important. But can we trust the manuscripts on which the Bible is based? You might be asking, "How do we know that the Bible has been transmitted accurately over the years? Have mistakes been made? Have people changed the text of the Bible?"

Reliability of the Ancient Manuscripts

In recent years some skeptics have asserted that the old manuscripts on which our modern Bible translations are based are riddled with errors and are completely unreliable.⁶ According to these skeptics

we don't know what the original writers of the books in the Bible actually wrote.

This skepticism is as unwarranted as it is extreme. Let me explain. Prior to the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls⁷ (in the 1940s and 1950s), our oldest complete copy of the Old Testament (known as the Leningrad Codex) dated to about AD 1000. Another extensive but incomplete copy of the Old Testament dates to about AD 950. Apart from a few small fragments here and there, this was all we had to go on.

If our oldest complete copy of the Hebrew text of the Old Testament dates no earlier than AD 1000, then there is a gap of fifteen hundred years or more between the original writings and our oldest manuscript copies. Pointing this out, some skeptics suggested that the text of Scripture had probably been altered so that the text in AD 1000 is much different from what the original author wrote long ago.

This skepticism, however, has fallen on hard times. Thanks to the Dead Sea Scrolls, we now have portions (in some cases almost the entire text) of thirty-eight of the thirty-nine books of the Old Testament (Esther is the only missing book). In these scrolls we find that the *text is the same* as the text in the much later manuscripts that Bible translators for centuries relied upon. In other words, the text in the Bibles that you and I have today is *the same* as the text people were reading two thousand years ago. This came as quite a surprise to the skeptics.

The Dead Sea Scrolls take us a thousand years closer to the originals—that is, from AD 1000 back to the time of Jesus and even earlier. Let's consider the book of Isaiah for example. Isaiah finished writing his book of prophecy around 700 BC. Prior to the discovery

of the Dead Sea Scrolls, there was a seventeen-century gap between Isaiah's original writing (700 BC) and our oldest copy of his book (AD 1000). Now, thanks to the discovery of the Great Isaiah Scroll from Cave 1, which dates to about 200 BC, we have gone back in time about twelve centuries. We are no longer seventeen centuries removed from the writing of Isaiah the prophet; we are only five centuries removed. Yet the text of Isaiah is the same. I suspect if we moved even further back in time thanks to more discoveries, the text would still be the same. The burden of proof now rests heavily on skeptics who claim without any evidence that the text of the Bible has been changed.

Some might object by saying that five centuries is a big gap. "Changes probably took place during this period of time," they suspect. Why should we assume that? If no changes took place over twelve hundred years, from 200 BC to 1000 AD, then why should we assume that changes took place between the original writing and 200 BC? Besides, historians often work with manuscripts that date anywhere from five hundred to one thousand years after they were composed. Examples include the work of Greek historians such as Thucydides and Herodotus and important Roman writers and historians such as Julius Caesar and Tacitus. Today's historians use copies of these Greek and Roman writings that date hundreds of years after the ancient authors wrote them, yet they reasonably assume that these manuscripts, which are relatively few in number, are reliable.

True, some of the scribes who made copies of biblical manuscripts did make mistakes. All books in antiquity were written by hand, letter by letter and word by word. The printing press

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wasn't invented until the fifteenth century. All scribes made mistakes when they copied books, whether secular or religious (and most errors were caught and corrected when the manuscript was proofread). Because we have thousands of manuscripts of the Bible, we therefore have thousands of copyist errors. But most of these errors are either corrected in the manuscripts (by the copyist himself or by a later corrector) or are easily identified because we have many other manuscripts that do not have the same errors. Through careful comparison of manuscripts scholars can identify the mistakes and determine the correct readings.

Let me say more about the New Testament manuscripts. We have today access to approximately fifty-eight hundred Greek manuscripts of the New Testament that predate the printing press. Of these, about fifty date before the year AD 300, a few date to the second century, and one—a small fragment of the Gospel of Mark—might even date to the first century. Compared to the manuscripts of classical Greece and Rome, the New Testament evidence is substantial. Not only do we have old Greek manuscripts, but we also have many old translations of the New Testament. We have at least ten thousand Latin manuscripts and another five thousand manuscripts in other languages. The New Testament manuscripts are old, numerous, and reliable. There is no literature from antiquity that rivals this remarkable record of preservation. There is no justification for the skepticism expressed from time to time in popular media and sometimes by scholars who should know better.⁸

There is even more evidence that boosts our confidence in the accuracy and reliability of the biblical manuscripts, especially relating to the New Testament. Thanks to the large number of ancient manuscripts recovered from Egypt (a half million pages of text from

Oxyrhynchus alone), we have today a lot of information about how in late antiquity books were produced, copied, studied, and circulated. One of the most amazing things we have learned is how long books were in use before being discarded. Some fifty-three libraries from antiquity have been recovered more or less intact. Of these, six yielded important chronological information. We have learned that books in antiquity remained in use anywhere from one hundred fifty years to four hundred years. The evidence from the Dead Sea Scrolls is similar. Many Bible scrolls had been in use for at least two hundred years before the community center at Qumran, near the Dead Sea, was destroyed by the Romans in the first century AD. Some of our best-preserved Greek Christian Bibles, which date to the fourth and fifth centuries AD, were in use for four hundred to six hundred years before being retired. This remarkable longevity really should not surprise us, for books in antiquity were very expensive.

This intriguing evidence suggests that the original New Testament writings (which scholars call *autographs*) were in circulation for a long time, being read, studied, and copied before being discarded or destroyed. Even if we assume only the minimum longevity (one hundred fifty years), this means that many of the original New Testament books would still have been in circulation at the beginning of the third century. Indeed, writing at the end of the second century, Latin church father Tertullian claims that several of Paul's original letters were still available for inspection in the cities to which they had been sent. Manuscript evidence uncovered in the last century suggests that Tertullian knew what he was talking about.⁹

Significantly, this discovery confirms that we have in our

possession today several large chunks of the Greek New Testament that date to the beginning of the third century. This means that when these copies were made, *the original writings were still available for study, comparison, and copying*. This important observation gives us every reason to believe that the text of the Greek New Testament, on which our modern language translations are based, reflects the text of the original writings of the New Testament authors. There is no legitimate basis for the idea that the books of the New Testament we have today are different in any significant way from the originals.

Historical and Factual Truth

Some skeptics will agree with everything that I have said thus far. "Yes, maybe the manuscripts are quite good and the text is well preserved," they concede. "But is there evidence that the stories they tell are true?" That is a fair question—and one you may be asking as well. After all, even if we are confident that our New Testament text is the same as the original writings, how do we know if the stories are factual? How do we know that they are not based on lies and legends? Is there any evidence *outside the Bible* that confirms the truthfulness of these stories?

As a matter of fact, substantial evidence supports the truthfulness of the stories narrated in the New Testament Gospels and book of Acts. This evidence falls into two general categories.

First, the Gospels and Acts are full of material that agrees with other sources, such as the writings of first-century Jewish historian Josephus. The New Testament speaks about real people (e.g., Roman governors like Pontius Pilate and Felix and Jewish high priests like Caiaphas and Annas), real customs (e.g., Passover, purity, Sabbath),

and real political parties (e.g., Pharisees and Sadducees). What Josephus says about these people, purposes, and traditions agrees with the Gospels and Acts.¹⁰

Second, the New Testament Gospels and Acts agree with the archaeological, geographical, and topographical realities of the land of Israel in the first century AD. This is what historians call *verisimilitude*, a Latin word that means "true to reality." This is why historians and archaeologists make extensive use of the Gospels and book of Acts. Again and again, archaeological discoveries cohere with and sometimes dramatically confirm the narratives of the New Testament. (See the examples in chapter 12.) This would not be the case if the narratives talked about fictional characters and fictional events.

Further evidence for the truthfulness of the New Testament Gospels is found in the internal consistency of the story. The Roman crucifixion of Jesus of Nazareth for claiming to be the king of the Jews is rightly regarded as a solid fact of history. We must then ask, "Why was Jesus crucified as a royal pretender?" Had he simply been a moral teacher, a teller of parables meant to encourage greater faith in God, he would not have been viewed as a threat. A better explanation is the one that the Gospels provide (and the rest of the New Testament writings presuppose): Jesus proclaimed the coming kingdom of God and claimed to be Israel's anointed King. He was not a mere spiritual teacher whose message was misunderstood.

Also, we must ask, "Why did large crowds follow Jesus?" Most historians agree that crowds followed Jesus not simply because he was a compelling teacher but because he healed people. Had Jesus simply been a teacher who attempted to heal but failed, why would anyone follow him around listening to his teaching? Crowds

surrounded and pressed Jesus, hoping to touch him, because they knew he in fact could heal.¹¹ Jesus was so successful at healing that other healers began to invoke his name in their attempts to heal people (Mark 9:38–40). This is astonishing and, I believe, unprecedented in the history of Israel. Jesus was so good at healing that his critics, who would have gladly denied Jesus' ability to heal, had no recourse but to claim that Jesus was in league with the devil. They couldn't deny the healings; they could only attribute them to a dark source in their attempt to discredit Jesus.

A man who was known as a powerful healer, who drew large crowds, who spoke of the approaching kingdom of God, and who dared to criticize the rulers of his day was a man to be feared by those who did not want the status quo threatened. This portrait of Jesus from the New Testament Gospels makes good sense and matches the evidence found in other sources (such as the first-century Jewish historian Josephus) and in materials recovered through archaeological excavations.

Summing Up and Looking Ahead

The Bible is a small library of books. These books are arranged in two parts: the Old Testament and the New Testament. The first part was written by Israelites (or Jews) and the second part was written by followers of Jesus, most of whom were Jews also. This second part, the New Testament, regards the first part as authoritative and presupposes its story and teachings. In fact, without the Old Testament the New Testament could not be fully understood.

There is significant and substantial evidence that both the Hebrew Old Testament and the Greek New Testament have been well preserved down through the centuries. We have many old

manuscripts, both in the original languages and in early translations, which make it possible for scholars to confirm the original text. From archaeology and from other ancient sources we can confirm much of the history recounted in the Bible, giving us good reason to believe that the Bible is not only well preserved but also reliable.

In the next chapter we will look more closely at the individual books that make up the Bible. We will in greater depth inquire into what the Bible really says.

Why Does This Matter to Me?

- ❖ The Bible may be a very old collection of writings, but many of its stories are confirmed by archaeology and historical sources. We have very old copies of the Bible, and careful study has shown that the text of the Bible has been well preserved. This matters because it gives us the assurance that the Scripture is reliable, accurate, and trustworthy.
- ❖ The Bible's teaching has dramatically shaped the West and other parts of the world. Though old, the message of the Bible continues to be a force for positive progress everywhere it is read and heard. Many things in your life and mine today have been shaped—and will continue to be shaped—by the foundation of the Bible.
- ❖ There is no other book like the Bible. The question of God is the ultimate question. The Bible is the ultimate source. Why would anyone not read it and not carefully consider its message?