Discussions with My Friend: An Introduction to the Gospel of Jesus Christ By David Stewart

Chapter 29: The Bible: Inerrant, Mythical, or Inspired Scripture 'As Far as it is Translated Correctly?'

The Bible is a book of scripture that details God's dealings with man and contains many of God's words, covenants, and laws. However, the Bible is often misunderstood by unbelievers who reject the entire account over alleged discrepancies, by believers who it to be an inerrant account containing all of God's words, and by nominal adherents who acknowledge its inspiration but fail to apply its teachings. By studying the history of the Bible, we can better understand the role of this inspired book and evaluate the claims made about it by different groups.

Many modern readers are inclined to reject the Bible because of fabulous or miraculous elements. While recognizing that ancient conceptions of the universe and ideas of record-keeping differed from the modern discipline of history, the candor, accuracy, and historicity of the Biblical record compares favorably with other ancient sources. The Sumerian Kings List, for instance, lists legendary reigns for early kings lasting up to a quarter of a million years. Egyptian and Assyrian monuments extol rulers in laudatory terms and present propaganda which has been falsified by other evidence; the chronicles would suggest that the kings never lost a battle or made a poor policy decision. For example, monuments claim that the Egyptian pharaoh Ramesses won a great victory at the Battle of Kadesh, yet other evidence testifies that battle was, at best, a stalemate, and at worst, a devastating loss from which Ramesses barely escaped with his life that ended Egyptian ambitions of expansion into Syria and Anatolia. Our knowledge even of the early Republican era of Rome is so steeped in myth, legend, and tradition that modern scholars are uncertain. We find specific histories in the Bible with corroborated details many centuries before the founding of Rome, and the vast majority of the books of the Old Testament had been written before Herodotus -- hailed by modern scholars as the "father of history" -- took his hand to papyrus in the fifth century BC. Even after the time of Christ, classical writings were still steeped in a mythical worldview. The Roman writer Tacitus writing in the late first or early second century AD concludes his account on Germany: "What further accounts we have are fabulous: as that the Hellusians and Oxiones have the countenances and aspect of men, with the bodies and limbs of savage beasts. This, as a thing about which I have no certain information, I shall leave untouched." Even much earlier Biblical accounts compare favorably to the fabulous claims of many late Greek and Roman sources.

Some biblical events can be corroborated in contemporary records. Other histories cannot be corroborated, such as the plagues that came upon Egypt during the time of the Exodus. However, such omissions are consistent with the character of the Egyptian chronicles which generally avoid mention of losses or political embarrassments and only rarely mention natural disasters. Another example is the reported smiting of Assyrians in the time of Sennacharib. Some difficulties have been noted regarding the transmission of large numbers in the Old Testament, and it is not clear in every case that the cited numbers have come down perfectly from the original.[1] Assyrian records such as the Prism of Sennacharib report in glowing terms the king's military victories, while avoiding any mention of defeats. With such policies of selective reporting, we should not expect to find

mention of Israelite victories in the records of surrounding nations for whom royal chronicles were as much a matter of political propaganda as historical fact. The claim of critics that Biblical stories are falsified because of a lack of corroboration in contemporary records is a naive argument from ignorance which uncritically accepts non-Biblical sources as objective and comprehensive: an argument long ago put to rest by abundant scholarship.

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If anything, the oneness sidedness do we consistently find in the record-keeping of surrounding nations highlights the remarkable candor of the biblical record for its time in reporting defeats as well as victories, iniquity as well as righteousness, and suffering along with prosperity. The Biblical authors candidly acknowledged missteps of rulers and commoners alike, and prophets did not hesitate to admonish kings. This is not to say that the historical record of the Bible does not carry with it a certain perspective or that it fully represents all sides of every issue, but the meticulous efforts to chronicle the bad as well as the good speak to a degree of fair-mindedness and balance not found in contemporary ancient records. Although the Bible contains many concepts and writing devices of the time, the Bible is not a generic record to which the methods of other ancient authors can be indiscriminately extrapolated, as it also contains many unique features not readily explained by diffusion from neighboring cultures.

After the Apostles
A review of the history of the Bible's transmission and compilation provides helpful context for assessing competing claims about the text. The Bible in its present form was not compiled for several centuries after the death of the apostles. The earliest known papyrus, Rylands P52, is dated to approximately 140 AD but contains only fragments of five verses of John. The first complete manuscripts of the New Testament (Sinaiticus and Vaticanus) date from the fourth century, and all early New Testament manuscripts are in Greek rather than the language of the Jews of Palestine.

At the end of the second century AD, only the Gospels of Matthew and Mark were completely accepted as canonical.[2] The third century apologist Origen classified writings into three categories: the uncontested (the four gospels and 13 Pauline epistles), the doubtful (2 Peter, Hebrews, James, Jude, and 2 and 3 John), and the rejected. Eusubius (330 AD) categorized writings as accepted, disputed, or rejected. Discrepancies existed in the writings accepted as genuine by various church authorities, and the authenticity of the Revelation of John continued to be disputed. The first agreement upon 27 books of the New Testament is seen at the Synod of Laodicea (363 AD) and the Synod of Carthage (397 AD). In 367 AD, Athanasius lists only the 27 writings as canonical in his Easter letter. Many prominent Christians disagreed. A universal consensus regarding the "canonical books" of the Bible was never achieved, and the biblical canons of the world's oldest Christian religions -- the Roman Catholic, Coptic Orthodox, Ethiopic Orthodox, Greek Orthodox, Syrian Orthodox, and Armenian Apostolic Churches -- are all different.[3] Debate over the canon of scripture erupted again with the Protestant Reformation. Even today, the authenticity of some books, such as the second epistle of Peter and the Revelation of John, continues to be widely debated by Biblical scholars.

Historical sources and textual analysis provide evidence of some tampering with the New Testament text during a period of nearly three centuries between the death of the apostles and the first agreement on the scriptural canon. Differences are found among some copyists.[4] In the third century, the Christian apologist Origen complains that "nowadays, as is evident, there is a great diversity between the various manuscripts, either through the negligence of certain copyists, or the perverse audacity shown by some in correcting the text, or through the fault of those who, playing the part of correctors, lengthen or shorten it as they please."[5],[6] Jerome told Pope Damasus of the "numerous errors" which had arisen in the texts through attempted harmonizing. In 1707, John Mill of Oxford listed 30,000 variants in the different New Testament texts, and in the early twentieth century, Hermann von Soden listed 45,000 variants in New Testament texts. Professor Tishendorf, the discoverer of the fourth-century Codex Sinaiticus which contains all of the New Testament, noted that it had been altered by at least three different scribes.[7] French Bible scholar and textual critic Leon Vaganay stated that among different Bible manuscripts, "some say 150,000 [variants], others would say nearer 250,000, but ... the fact is that it would be difficult to find a sentence, even part of a sentence, for which the rendering is consistent in every single manuscript."[8] He continued:

> "During the centuries prior to the date of the oldest extent manuscripts, the books of the New Testament were copied much more frequently and consequently were subject to many more changes. Another negative factor is that, in the beginning at least copying was generally carried out by amateur scribes whose skill did not match their enthusiasm. Finally, and most importantly, there are a great many places in the manuscripts of the New Testament (unlike those of more ordinary literature) where the alterations are deliberate and where it is not always easy to see what was the intention behind them."

Such data demonstrate that the present-day Bible is not and cannot be an "inerrant copy" of the original writings. There are evidences of deliberate forgeries, such as the Johannine Comma present in the King James Version but absent in early Greek manuscripts, which was inserted into later Latin texts in an attempt to provide support for the non-biblical doctrine of the Trinity.[9] Christian New Testament Professor Daniel Wallace noted that the English King James version of the Bible alone has incorporated "more than 100,000 changes" since its translation in 1611.[10]

The etymology of the word Bible itself discredits modern notions of the Bible as a single, indivisible, and complete book. The Greek word ?? ??????, from which the word Bible is derived, means "the books." Over time, the neuter plural came to be regarded as a feminine singular. The order of the books in the New Testament was arbitrary. The placement of The Revelation of John at the end of the New Testament reflects not chronological order, but its status as a disputed work in the Western church for many centuries. Both the passage itself and history demonstrate that when John wrote his warning to those who would "add unto" or "take away from" his book of prophecy,[11] he was referring to the Book of Revelation itself, and was not precluding revelation or scripture beyond the present-day Bible as some claim. In the New Testament, the scriptures as a whole are always referred to in the New Testament as ?? ?????? (ta biblia) -- "the books." Yet in this passage, John uses the word tou bibliou, a form of the diminutive noun used to refer only to single books, meaning literally "of the booklet." The Gospel of John is believed to have been written after the Revelation of John, and the Bible did not exist in its present form until centuries after John recorded this account.

Alterations and deletions had arisen in the Old Testament scriptural record even before the time of Christ. The Inspired Joseph

Smith Translation of the Bible records that Christ condemned the Pharisees for their modification of holy scripture: "Woe unto you, lawyers! for ye have taken away the key of knowledge, the fulness of the scriptures; ye enter not in yourselves into the kingdom; and those who were entering in, ye hindered."[12] We know that the Bible is incomplete because many books cited as authoritative by Biblical prophets cannot be found in any of today's Bible versions[13] and prophecies known to Biblical writers are missing from our record.[14] The concept of the Bible as a single, inerrant book containing all of God's words is modern, artificial, and non-scriptural, and did not exist until many centuries after the death of the original authors.

The Forbidden Scriptures
Even after the canon of "orthodox" scripture had been decreed, access to scripture continued to be heavily restricted. The Council of Trent declared that "translations of the New Testament made by authors of the first class of this list shall be permitted to no one, since great danger and little usefulness usually results to readers from their perusal ... Since it is clear from experience that if the Sacred Books are permitted everywhere and without discrimination in the vernacular, there will by reason of the boldness of men arise therefrom more harm than good ..."[15] Even though "the Inquisition's archive was almost entirely burned on Pope Paul IV's death in 1559," Inquisition-era archives show that the Bible was once on the infamous Index of Forbidden Books that Catholics were forbidden to read or possess.[16] Reuters reports that "translations of the holy book ended up on the bonfires along with other 'heretical' works because the Church, whose official language was Latin, was suspicious of allowing the faithful access to sacred texts without ecclesiastical guidance." One might wonder how it was possible for man to "live by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God"[17] when the average person had only second-hand access to scripture filtered through the local priest, often presented in a language unintelligible to the hearer. One priest with whom Tyndale spoke about translating the Bible stated: "We had better be without God's laws than the pope's."[18] Tyndale was hanged and then burned at the stake in 1535 for translating the Bible into English. Access to scriptures continued to be restricted by the Catholic church and was won finally only by the blood of countless martyrs.

Is the Bible Infallible?
The earliest surviving Bible manuscripts are dated centuries after the original authors, wide variations exist among surviving manuscripts, the question of which scriptural writings are canonical took centuries to define and is still disputed among Christianity's oldest denominations, and the church was almost the exclusive "guardian" of scriptural records until the sixteenth century. **Modern Bible scholars almost universally acknowledge that claims of an inerrant bible are indefensible,**[19] **and a**ny regular reader of the Bible will inevitably encounter some inconsistencies. In spite of non-Biblical denominational tenets that the Bible is complete and inerrant, only 22% of Episcopalians, 26% of Catholics, 34% of Lutherans, 38% of Methodists, and 40% of Presbyterians in the United States believe that the Bible is totally accurate.[20] Nonetheless, many modern Christians still accept notions of Biblical infallibility.

After passing through many hands, some with questionable motives, the Bible has come down to us with many differences among manuscripts and some internal discrepancies. Hundreds of Bible contradictions and errors, both real and perceived, have been cited by varying sources. To name a very few, did David destroy 700 chariots[21] or 7000 chariots?[22] Did Jesus baptize others,[23] or did he not?[24] Does God tempt man[25] or not?[26] Did Judas die by hanging himself[27] or by falling headlong,[28] and was the potter's field purchased by Judas or the priests with the betrayal money? Which genealogy of Jesus is correct, that of Matthew[29] or Luke?[30] If "no man hath seen God at any time,"[31] why do the scriptures record that Jacob,[32] Moses[33] and the seventy Elders of Israel,[34] Isaiah,[35] Stephen,[36] and many others saw Him?

Which Bible?
Gary Amirault, a Protestant minister, wrote:

> "If you say, 'I believe in the Bible,' then you are faced with the question of 'which Bible?' ... Nearly all Christian Bibles rely on the Jewish Masoretic Hebrew text for translating the Old Testament into current languages. How was it possible for the translators to produce an 'inerrant' Bible, when the 'guardians of the so called 'inerrant' Hebrew text', did not know the meaning of many words and passages? Unfortunately, the problem does not lie with the Jews lack of understanding of their own language, but with a false doctrine perpetuated by fundamentalists for many years. The Doctrine of Biblical Inerrancy ... They say the 66 books of the present King James Bible are inerrant, but they don't tell you it lacks 14 entire books which were in the original King James of 1611. They don't tell you the King James Bible has been changed many times in the last 350 years and there have been thousands of corrections!"[37]

In a different essay, Amirault observed:

> "One of the greatest disservices ever rendered me as a Christian has been being given books, articles, audio tapes, etc. stating that the Bible is 'inerrant.' I have read and heard many messages assuring me that 'the Bible' is inerrant. Some of these sources qualify that to mean that the original autographs [texts written or supervised by the author] are inerrant, but considering the fact that we do not have any of the original autographs, the point of them being inerrant is rather moot. After all, how do they know they were inerrant since no one in any recent generations has ever seen them ..."[38]

The fact that so many translations of the Bible exist (over eighty in English alone) suggest that none of them are particularly satisfactory. It seems almost unbelievable that critics attack Joseph Smith's Inspired Translation of the Bible -- which corrects many glaring errors and contradictions in the King James Version[39] -- while maintaining that the Bible is "inerrant" and that the dozens of widely differing Bible translations have no substantial difference.

So Far as it is Translated Correctly
Latter-day Saints believe that the Bible is the word of God, to the extent that it is translated correctly. The Book of Mormon testifies to the importance and truth of the Bible,[40] not in the sense of absolute inerrancy of today's versions, but that the original records were true. Latter-day Saints study the Bible and love its teachings. Modern revelation to the prophet Joseph Smith has confirmed the authenticity of scripture disputed by modern scholars, including the Revelation of John, the epistles of St. Peter, and others. Latter day Saints believe that the Song of Solomon, a graphic love song in the Old Testament, is not inspired scripture. The Lord told the Prophet Joseph Smith that the Apocrypha "is mostly translated correctly," but contains "many interpolations by the hands of men," and those "enlightened by the Holy Spirit shall obtain benefit therefrom, and whoso

receiveth not by the Spirit, cannot be benefited."[41]

The description of the Bible's history given in the Book of Mormon is fully consistent with the historical evidence that has come forth. The Book of Mormon prophet Nephi recorded a vision of the history of the Bible:

> "The book that thou beholdest is a record of the Jews, which contains the covenants of the Lord, which he hath made unto the house of Israel; and it also containeth many of the prophecies of the holy prophets ... they contain the covenants of the Lord, which he hath made unto the house of Israel; wherefore, they are of great worth unto the Gentiles. And the angel of the Lord said unto me: Thou hast beheld that the book proceeded forth from the mouth of a Jew; and when it proceeded forth from the mouth of a Jew it contained the fulness of the gospel of the Lord, of whom the twelve apostles bear record; and they bear record according to the truth which is in the Lamb of God. Therefore, these things go forth from the Jews in purity unto the Gentiles, according to the truth which is in God ... Wherefore, thou seest that after the book hath gone forth through the hands of the great and abominable church, that there are many plain and precious things taken away from the book, which is the book of the Lamb of God."[42]

The angel stated: "and also many covenants of the Lord have they taken away ... And after these plain and precious things were taken away it goeth forth unto all the nations of the Gentiles ... and after it goeth forth unto all the nations of the Gentiles ... because of the many plain and precious things which have been taken out of the book, which were plain unto the understanding of the children of men, according to the plainness which is in the Lamb of God -- because of these things which are taken away out of the gospel of the Lamb, an exceedingly great many do stumble, yea, insomuch that Satan hath great power over them." [43] The angel continued: "at the time they proceeded out of the mouth of the Jew, or, at the time the book proceeded out of the mouth of the Jew, the things which were written were plain and pure, and most precious and easy to the understanding of all men."[44]

Because of the many "plain and precious" truths that were taken out of the Bible, even when the text of a Bible passage is agreed upon, understanding it correctly can still be difficult. As a young boy, Joseph Smith noted that the different Christian denominations "understood the same passages of scripture so differently as to destroy all confidence in settling the question by an appeal to the Bible."[45] A correct understanding of Biblical teachings can be gained only through study, prayer, and the aid of the Holy Spirit. The Lord has also given us the Book of Mormon, a record of the teachings of inspired prophets and the Savior himself, which was preserved through the centuries and brought forth through the power of God in the modern era. The Book of Mormon helps to establish the truth of the Bible, restores many "plain and precious truths," and teaches the pure doctrine of Christ on basic topics that have long been disputed among Christian denominations.

Theological recognition of the Bible's inspiration as well as some difficulties in the transmission and translation[46] from the Church's inception puts Latter-day Saints in a stronger, more rational, and more consistent position than churches that claim Biblical inerrancy and completeness while many of their own members reject historically, logically, and scripturally untenable claims. **Due to difficulties with the Biblical text as well as wide disagreements among different faiths regarding how various passages are to be interpreted, many doctrinal disagreements among Christians have been insoluble on the basis of the text alone, contributing to the continued fragmentation of Christianity into more than 30,000 denominations rather than the unified faith of "one Lord, one faith, one baptism"**[47] **spoken of in scripture. With recognition of the need for ongoing revelation through living prophets, Latter-day Saints have a consistent mechanism for maintaining unity, receiving clarification, and adapting to new challenges that is absent from other Christian groups without any mechanism for receiving authoritative contemporary divine guidance. Interestingly, research demonstrates that Latter-day Saints hold views more consistent with scripture than members of many faiths which claim Biblical inerrancy, even when assessed from an Evangelical or Born-again doctrinal perspective.**[48]

Meaning and Purpose of the Bible

Many modern scholars recognize that the Greek word diatheke (???????), translated as testament in the title of the New Testament (????? ???????) and Old Testament, is better translated as covenant. The Old and New Testaments are not simply collections of inspiring stories and teachings, but rather represent a two-way agreement between God and His people. This meaning of the original is better conveyed in some Eastern translations, such as Russian (????? ????? = "New Covenant"), Hungarian (ujsovetseg = "New Covenant"), Czech (novy zakon = "New Law"), Ukrainian (????? ????? ="New Covenant"), and others. Although modern scholars have increasingly come to recognize the meaning of ??????? as a covenant or two-way agreement and not merely a testament, this substantial insight was offered in the Joseph Smith Translation of the Bible in the 1830s, which replaced "testament" with "covenant" in many passages of the King James Version at a time when the discipline of textual criticism was not well developed, and long before later literal translation like Young's (1898) and Green's (1985). The central value of the Bible is found in its teaching of principles and covenants that help us to understand our duty to God and the conditions of salvation.

Today we have a tremendous opportunity to study the Bible that was historically forbidden to many. There is little value in dogmatic debate over whether King David destroyed 700 or 7000 chariots or how Judas died, but the application of Biblical teachings in our lives is of central importance. We can learn gospel principles from each story and teaching in the Bible. Some serve as examples, while others serve as warnings. Understanding the history and limitations of the modern Bible and the confusion of the Christian world over basic doctrines of the Savior can help us to appreciate the need for ongoing revelation of Christ's word to modern prophets and apostles today just as just as Christ directed His church in ancient times.

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[3] Ruger, Hans Peter. "The Extent of the Old Testament Canon", in The Apocrypha in Ecumenical Perspective. The place of the late writings of the Old Testament among the biblical writings and their significance in the eastern and western church traditions, ed., Siegfried Meurer, translated by Paul Ellingworth. United Bible Societies Monograph Series No. 6 (United Bible Societies, Reading, UK; New York 1991): 151-160.
[4] for example, Acts 2:17 in the Western text
[5] Origen, in Matthew 15.14.
[6] Metzger, B.M. The Text of the New Testament: Its Transmission, Corruption and Restoration, second edition. New York and Oxford University Press 1968.
[7] "Biblical Literature." Encyclopaedia Britannica. Chicago. 2003 CD-ROM.
[8] Vaganay, Leon, An Introduction to New Testament Textual Criticism, second edition revised and updated by Christian-Bernard Amphoux, translated into English by Jenny Heimerdinger; English edition amplified and updated by Amphoux and Heimerdinger (Cambridge University Press). The original was published in France 1934); French update revised by Vaganay and Amphoux in 1986; English translation 1991.
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[11] Revelation 22:18-19
[12] JST Luke 11:53
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[14] Matthew 2:23
[15] "Ten rules concerning prohibited books drawn up by the fathers chosen by the Council of Trent and approved by Pope Pius."
[16] Webber, Jude. "Vatican Archives reveal Bible was once banned book." Reuters News, 22 January 1988.
[17] Matthew 4:4
[18] Stokes, G. The Lives of the British Reformers from Wickliff to Foxe. London, 1873.
[19] Bart D. Ehrman, Jesus, Interrupted: Revealing the Hidden Contradictions in the Bible, HarperOne, New York, 2009. pg. 1-99
[20] Barna, George. "Religious Beliefs Vary Widely By Denomination." Barna Research Group. 25 June 2001. www.barna.org/cgi-bin/PagePressRelease.asp?PressReleaseID=92&Reference=B.
[21] 2 Samuel 10:18
[22] 1 Chronicles 19:18
[23] John 3:22
[24] John 4:2
[25] Genesis 22:1
[26] James 1:13
[27] Matthew 27:5-7
[28] Acts 1:18
[29] Matthew 1:1-17
[30] Luke 3:23-38
[31] John 1:18
[32] Genesis 32:30
[33] Deuteronomy 34:10
[34] Exodus 24:9-11
[35] Isaiah 6:5
[36] Acts 7:56
[37] Amirault, Gary. "Bible translations that do not teach Eternal Torment" http://www.tentmaker.org/books/GatesOfHell.html. 13 April 2003.
[38] Amirault, Gary. "The Myth of the Inerrant Bible" http://www.tentmaker.org/lists/BibleStudyTips.html. 13 April 2003.
[39] for examples, see 1 Samuel 16:14-16, 2 Chronicles 18:22, Jeremiah 26:13, James 1:2, etc.
[40] see 1 Nephi 13:40
[41] Doctrine and Covenants 91:1-6
[42] 1 Nephi 13:23-25, 27
[43] 1 Nephi 13:26,28-29
[44] 1 Nephi 14:23
[45] Smith, Joseph. Testimony of the Prophet Joseph Smith, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City.
[46] Articles of Faith 8
[47] Ephesians 4:5
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