

Notes

¹I would like to express thanks to John Dodge, one of our graduate students, for his critical input into this discussion, and for a very useful set of bibliographical references.

²C. S. Lewis, *Screwtape Letters* (New York: Macmillan, 1961), pp. 97-99.

Recommended Reading

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Chapter 5 The Reliability of the Scriptural Documents

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I am part of the faculty of the humanities division of the College of Letters and Science. The humanities are concerned with art, architecture, history, philosophy and literature, among other things. Since literature is one of the humanistic concerns, and since I work with literature, it seems appropriate that I should speak about the Bible, the fundamental literature—in terms of pervasive influence—of western civilization.

More specifically, I want to discuss the historical reliability of the scriptural documents because in our contemporary society there is a widely held viewpoint, a dogma if you will, that the Bible is irrelevant to the needs of humanity.

Secular Dogma

Today's secular dogma about the unreliability of the Bible appears in three basic forms: in modern critical scholarship, in atheistic humanism and among indifferent individuals.

Modern critical biblical scholarship. The late eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries saw the rise of a modern critical study of the Bible. At the heart of such scholarship is the idea that the Bible can be approached as an essentially human document from the ancient past and can be treated to the same critical methods of study as those used on the ancient classics of Greece and Rome. That means that literary scholars would attempt to apply the methodology of science to the biblical documents. We do not have the time nor is it our purpose here to review the history of modern critical biblical scholarship. What I want to note is that the scholar who uses this approach treats the Bible as an ancient artifact to be studied and analyzed as an academic exercise. Supposedly, the Bible is to be studied in a detached, objective manner. It is seen as an interesting but ancient religious document with little or no contemporary relevance.

The Bible, in that view, is regarded as the word of human writers but not as the Word of God—for everyone knows that there is no place for God in our wonderful, modern world, where the happiness and fulfillment of every individual is assured because of the inherent benevolence of human nature!

Atheistic humanism. Another manifestation of the secular dogma sees the Bible as a dangerous document, because it is in opposition to what certain individuals believe is best for human beings. Perhaps the outstanding representative of that “humanist” viewpoint is Madalyn Murray O’Hair. As an atheist, O’Hair does not believe in the existence of God. In her 1972 book, *The Atheist Viewpoint*, she states her belief that “Jesus Christ was either a man or a myth.” She goes on to affirm that “As history and science both deny that the stories told of him can be true, we stand on firm ground in asserting the myth theory.”¹

O’Hair quotes with enthusiasm the words of another atheist, Patrick Campbell. He states that “There is not a tittle [a biblical allusion] of evidence that such a man as

Moses ever lived, yet these historically worthless books are actually the literary foundation of Christianity. The critical study of the Bible has hopelessly shattered the authority for the study of Jesus Christ no less than for the account of Moses. The Higher Criticism has demonstrated that the Gospels were written long after the supposed time of Christ. These conflicting and false Gospel stories, concerning which nobody knows who wrote a single line, or how often they were subsequently rewritten, tell the all-too-recognizable pagan fable of a man or a God whose father was a Holy Ghost and whose mother was a Virgin, a man who performed miracles, cast devils out of fellow beings, and even raised the dead.”²

Campbell goes on to deride the miracles of healing recorded in the Gospels and closes by stating, “Be that all as it may, the story of the crucifixion in itself is sufficient to deny the miracles Jesus is said to have performed and to deny that he was God.”³

O’Hair concludes her questioning of the proofs of the historicity of Jesus with the statement that “Jesus, like all gods of old, is gone, and there is no evidence or reason for supposing that he was ever any more of a reality than his countless predecessors.”⁴

Of a similar stuff are the words of a certain Robert F. Bartley, who published a book in 1979 entitled *The Star-studded Hoax of Christianity with its Allied Gods*. He maintains that Jesus Christ is a myth who never existed because he was never born. Therefore, the Lord Jesus Christ is one of the greatest hoaxes ever foisted upon civilization. “The solution of the supposed birth of Jesus Christ begins with Paul, because history never heard the name of Jesus Christ until Paul came along to write about it. Paul was the inventor of Jesus Christ and Christianity.”⁵

In another section of his book Bartley states that Moses could have written only in cuneiform, since, he says, the alphabet “as we know it was invented by the Phoenicians

about B.C. 1000, or approximately 500 years after the death of Moses.”⁶

What these statements point out, apart from the ignorance of the individuals who made them concerning historical facts, is that the secular world view has eliminated God and the Bible as a myth.

Indifferent individuals. The third manifestation of the secular dogma is probably the most insidious. It is the millions of people, many of them professing to be religious, both Christians and Jews, who ignore the Bible. We meet them, some of them among faculty, students and administrators here on the campus everyday.

As pertains to the Bible, then, the secular world has eliminated God so that the Bible is viewed as an antiquated curio or collection of dangerous myths—or is simply not noticed at all. The Christian alternative to those secular dogmas is that *the biblical documents are reliable*. We can take the Bible seriously.

Why Respect the Bible?

The Bible is worthy of serious and respectful attention because of its antiquity, remarkable survival, historicity and contemporaneity.

The special nature of the Bible's antiquity: its homogeneity. Of all of the literatures that have come down to us from the past, the Bible represents the oldest homogeneous collection. There are older literatures; for example, we have extant materials from the ancient Sumerians, the earliest of civilizations. Sumerian literary materials date to approximately 2500 B.C., a millennium after that civilization began to develop. We also have literary materials from the ancient Egyptians, Babylonians, Assyrians, Hittites and Canaanites. These are all older literatures than what we have in the Bible, but we have them only piecemeal. They are not homogeneous.

It is true that in the Bible we have a diversity of literary

materials. Yet it is also true that the Bible from beginning to end is permeated by a basic unity about the nature of God and the nature of man. The Bible possesses remarkable homogeneity.

And we should recall there that the Bible is the literature of a people who were never great and powerful. The great empires have come and gone, and their literatures have come down to us by happenstance, while the spiritual heirs of ancient Israel have survived the ebb and flow of history, as has the literature which we have in the Bible.

I believe that the unity of the Bible is due to the world view of the writers, a world view that was unique in its time, an extraordinary break with past religious traditions. The mindset of the various hands that participated in the writing of the biblical literature focused on the realities of human existence in a believable, rational way. Further, that focus lasted not just for a single generation but continued across at least a millennium of time. Thus, despite the diversity of authorship, the varied backgrounds of the writers, the variety of purposes which they pursued in their writing and the different periods in which each of them worked, the Bible exhibits a unique homogeneity in comparison to the other literatures of the ancient world.

The Bible's remarkable survival. We ought to treat the Bible with more than average respect also because it is the oldest continuously surviving body of ancient literature.

On the shelves of my library, and available to you on the shelves of the libraries of this university, are collections and translations of the other ancient literatures I have mentioned. They can be read in English translation. They have survived in part by chance. They have been recovered to a large degree by accident; they did not survive purposefully. The Bible, on the other hand, has been preserved continuously, not by accident, but purposefully.

Could we use here a modern, scientific explanation for that phenomenon? Could it not be an example of “the sur-

vival of the fittest”?

On the other hand, no other collection of ancient literature has suffered such intense efforts to stamp it out. Over 2,200 years ago a Syrian king determined to eliminate Judaism from his realm, which included the area of ancient Palestine. A contemporary account of the effort is recorded in 1 Maccabees. The writer reports that “All scrolls of the law which were found were torn up and burnt. Anyone discovered in possession of a Book of the Covenant, or conforming to the law, was put to death by the king’s sentence” (1:56-57).

In another instance, during the reign of the emperor Diocletian (A.D. 303-305), Christians were forbidden to gather together, and an imperial edict was published everywhere ordering that “churches be razed to the ground, that Scriptures be destroyed by fire.” No wonder devout Christians and Jews have earned the title, “the People of the Book.”

The Bible has survived its attackers. In our own time the regimes of communist states by and large view the Bible as a threat to their countries’ stability. They hamper the widespread dissemination of the Bible among their citizens. I have on my desk a note that the Russians arrested Joseph Bondarenko on May 9, 1978. He had been an active preacher and Christian leader. Before his arrest he called attention to the tremendous need for Bibles in Russia. Fifty million people in Russia would like to have a Bible, but no bookstores will stock it. It is still revolutionary literature because it provides a radical alternative to communist orthodoxy. It is one of the most difficult books to acquire in communist countries, which are known for their use of the printing press for propagandistic publications.

The Bible’s remarkable historicity. We ought to take the Bible seriously because its essential historicity has been established.

The framework of ancient history, in fact, is based on the

biblical evidence, modified and embellished by other non-biblical evidence that continues to be recovered in archaeological excavations in the lands of the Bible.

With the development of modern archaeological research, some extraordinary discoveries have been made that indicate the historical authenticity of the Bible. In giving the following examples that support the essential historicity of particular items in the Bible, I am primarily concerned with the Hebrew Bible, the Old Testament. I have chosen to do that not because the historicity of the New Testament documents is questionable; on the contrary, they are more firmly established as authentically historical than any other ancient documents from the classical world. For a clear presentation of the information supporting the historicity of the New Testament texts, consult F. F. Bruce’s *The New Testament Documents: Are They Reliable?* First published in 1943, when Bruce was just beginning his distinguished career, the fifth edition, thoroughly revised, was published in January 1960. Now recently retired from his post as Rylands professor of biblical criticism and exegesis at the University of Manchester in England, he has published an essay in a recent issue of *Christianity Today* entitled “Are the New Testament Documents Still Reliable?”⁷ The answer is yes.

Professor Bruce notes that archaeological research continues to provide pieces of evidence bearing on the New Testament record. An example is the 1961 discovery at Caesarea Maritima of a stone bearing the name of Pontius Pilate. This is the only extant inscriptional reference to Pilate.

Also at Caesarea in 1962 a fragmentary Hebrew inscription was discovered. It is engraved on a marble tablet, and lists the twenty-four priestly courses (compare 1 Chron. 24:3-19), with a note of the places in Galilee where the members of each course lived after the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem by the Romans in A.D. 70.

The eighteenth course, Happpizez (1 Chron. 24:15), is

known for a considerable period of time, but more recent discoveries have further authenticated the historical memory of the Bible. Consider the recent discoveries at Tell Mardikh in Syria. That site contains the ruins of an ancient city called Ebla. Since 1973 Italian archaeologists have been recovering cuneiform texts that go back to the Sargonic period or earlier, about 2400-2250 B.C. Over 20,000 tablets have been found thus far. About 20 per cent of the tablets are in a language which has been called paleo-Canaanite, with strong affinities to later Hebrew and Phoenician. Among those tablets are economic texts that include the names of places within Syria/Palestine, with which the Eblaites carried on trade. Those tablets antedate the Old Testament patriarch Abraham by at least 500 years.

In Genesis 14 we have an account of a group of cities that were located in the region of the Dead Sea. Five cities are mentioned: Sodom, Gomorrah, Admah, Zeboiim and Zoar. Because of certain peculiarities in the fourteenth chapter of Genesis, many scholars have considered the existence of these cities as mythical. Early indications are that the towns are not only mentioned in the texts from Ebla, but are listed in the exact order of the Bible. If that reading of the texts is verified, it would again point to the amazing historical accuracy of the Bible—since the traditions about Abraham were not written down for centuries after his existence, yet the names of these cities would be proven to be authentic on the basis of extrabiblical evidence.

In Numbers 22—24, Balaam, a non-Israelite prophet, was ordered by the king of Moab in Transjordan to curse the invading Israelites. Instead, through God's intervention, Balaam blessed them. In 1967, at Tell Deir-'Alla in Jordan, curses of Balaam from other situations were found inscribed on a stele which the archaeologists date to the sixth century B.C.

Recent discoveries also confirm the conservation and conservatism with which the texts were transmitted. The

Dead Sea scrolls from Qumran indicate that the process of transmission was much more complicated than was previously supposed; we find at least three somewhat variant text types in those manuscripts. But at the same time we have a complete copy of the book of Isaiah which is a thousand years older than the previously known oldest copy, and the two are practically identical.

In the middle of the nineteenth century, Count Constantine Tischendorf discovered in St. Catherine's monastery at the foot of Mount Sinai an ancient biblical manuscript, now called Codex Sinaiticus. It was written in the fourth century of this era and stands second only to Codex Vaticanus in age and importance. Those two codices are the chief sources for the New Testament text today, although there are thousands of fragments of other manuscripts for use in comparative studies. According to a 1977 report in the *Biblical Archaeologist*, additional pages of what appear to be missing pages from Codex Sinaiticus have been found at St. Catherine.⁹ Other early manuscripts are included in the discovery, although it will be some time before we can know the exact nature of that find.

I do not want to give the false impression that no problems exist in the correlation of data derived from archaeological research with data in the Bible. Yet such problems lie more in the area of the inexactness of archaeology and in the area of interpretation than in the material provided by the biblical documents. One of the great archaeologists and biblical scholars of our time has emphasized the essential historicity of the biblical documents. W. F. Albright was a professor at Johns Hopkins University until his retirement. He died early in the last decade. In his work *History, Archaeology and Christian Humanism* he states:

We have already seen that archaeological evidence throws its weight squarely against the aberrations of evolutionary historicism as found in most modern literary and historical criticism of the Old and New Testaments.

Yet such critical analyses and even critical excesses have been useful in drawing attention to historical details or phases of development which might otherwise have remained undetected. After the criticism of the last century we can no longer treat Biblical history as naively as was once possible, though we now recognize the substantial historicity of the entire Scriptural tradition from the Patriarchs to the end of the New Testament period.¹⁰

Contemporaneity. The Bible is paradoxically both an ancient and a very modern book. It speaks of the past, but it also speaks to the present (when it is allowed to speak), because it speaks to the basic problems that now and always have confronted human beings: Who am I? What am I? and What is my destiny?

The Bible has in the past provided an authentic word by which men and women who looked to it could find the answers to life's meaning and purpose. That is the Christian alternative today. I want to close by referring to the latent value that the Bible possesses for fulfilling the purposes of this university.

We might ponder for a moment that the humanities were the reason for the development of universities, and despite the emphasis on science in this university, the concerns of the humanities still infuse the reason for the existence of this institution, and others like it, to a remarkable degree. Have you ever wondered what the purposes of a university are? Well, a committee of distinguished faculty on this campus pondered our purpose a few years ago. They were attempting to address that question because it had been raised by the board of regents. The results of their efforts were published and were endorsed by the University Faculty Assembly on April 15, 1970. The document states that: "the primary purpose of a University is to provide an environment in which faculty and students can discover, examine critically, preserve, and transmit the knowledge, wisdom, and values that will help ensure the survival of the

present and future generations with improvement in the quality of life."¹¹

Other purposes are mentioned: "(1) to provide students with optimum opportunity from the heritage of the past, for gaining experience in the use of their intelligent and creative capacities, and for developing themselves as concerned, responsible, humane citizens; (2) to extend the frontiers of knowledge through research; and (3) to provide society with objective information and with imaginative approaches to the solutions of problems which can serve as a basis for sound decision-making in all areas."

You will notice in the above statement some concern for such matters as "values," "improvement in the quality of life," a concern for "learning from the heritage of the past" and for individual development "as concerned, responsible, humane citizens." The professors who worked out that statement of purpose believed that faculty and students should be future oriented and that their joint efforts would provide not only knowledge and skills but also social values because much of the leadership for the next generation comes out of the university. In fact, they said that "the University has an obligation to examine and to preserve the value judgments that can *elevate the condition of the society on which it depends.*"¹² The future-oriented search for truth should explicitly recognize the need to transmit not only knowledge but also meaningful value judgment to succeeding generations.

The committee enthusiastically quoted the words of the then Secretary of Health, Education and Welfare, John W. Gardner, who had written that

Young people do not assimilate the values of their group by learning the words (truth, justice, etc.) and their definitions. They learn these in intensely personal transactions with their immediate families or associates. They learn them in the routines and crises of living, but they also learn them through songs, stories, drama and

games. They do not learn ethical principles; they emulate ethical (or unethical) people. They do not analyze or list the attributes. That is why young people need models, both in their imaginative life and in their environment, *models of what man at his best can be*.¹³

The point of all this is to state that the committee, who spoke for the faculty and the regents, had a proper interest in the humanistic concerns of values, of elevating the condition of society, of the development of individuals into concerned, responsible, humane citizens.

The secular dogma under which this institution operates is that there is no God. But there is no hope in man. The literature we read, the movies we see and national TV all assail us with proof that human beings are immoral, selfish and inherently bent on taking advantage of others.

The Christian alternative is the biblical view that there is a purpose and a power outside ourselves. Since that is true, it is possible for us to become what we have the potential to become but not the power. We can be renewed by the renewing of our minds when we cooperate with "the God who is there." Through him we can find meaning and purpose and fulfillment here and now, plus a rich destiny beyond this life. The Bible is the reliable source on which the Christian alternative is based. It speaks of the eternal Creator in whom we live and move and have our being.

Notes

¹Madalyn Murray O'Hair, *What on Earth Is an Atheist?* The Atheist Viewpoint, vol. 2 (New York: Arno Press and The New York Times, 1972), pp. 245-46.

²Ibid.

³Ibid.

⁴Ibid., p. 249.

⁵Robert F. Bartley, *The Starstudded Hoax of Christianity with its Allied Gods* (Toledo: Robert F. Bartley, 1969), p. 21.

⁶Ibid., p. 234.

⁷F. F. Bruce, "Are the New Testament Documents Still Reliable?" *Christianity Today* (20 Oct. 1978), pp. 28-33.

⁸British Museum No. 91032. Taylor Prism.

⁹*Biblical Archaeologist* (March 1978), pp. 29ff.

¹⁰W. F. Albright, *History, Archaeology and Christian Humanism* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1964), p. 56.

¹¹UW—Madison Faculty Document 279.

¹²Ibid. (italics mine).

¹³John W. Gardner, *Self-Renewal: The Individual and the Innovative Society* (New York: Harper and Row, 1963), p. 124 (italics mine).

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