



Can I trust the Bible?

14 May 2017

Introduction:

An Atheist's Creed

- I believe in the primacy of science, 1
to provide a framework for life, a reason for being.
- I believe in the total adequacy of evolution 2
by natural selection to produce the visible world,
to enable the beauty and complexity of nature.
- I believe in what I can see, what I can touch, 3
in the tangible, the physical, the realistic,
in the absolute arbitration of hard scientific evidence.
- I believe in the goodness of humankind, 4
in the evolution of man,
in the evolving capacity to conquer war, famine, disease,
to evolve to perfection, through the power of intellect and reason.
- I believe in me, 5
in my innate ability, in my mind,
in my own ability to solve my problems,
in my own moral standards.
- I believe I only remain in the world as a fading trace, 6
as a memory of my friends, as web pages traced on the Internet,
a Googled ego, as fading books in a library,
as rusting artefacts, buried, discovered,
as a look in the eyes of my children.
- I believe in the finality of death, the rotting of the body, 7
ashes to ashes, dust to dust, star's atoms returned to space.
- I believe in nothing. 8

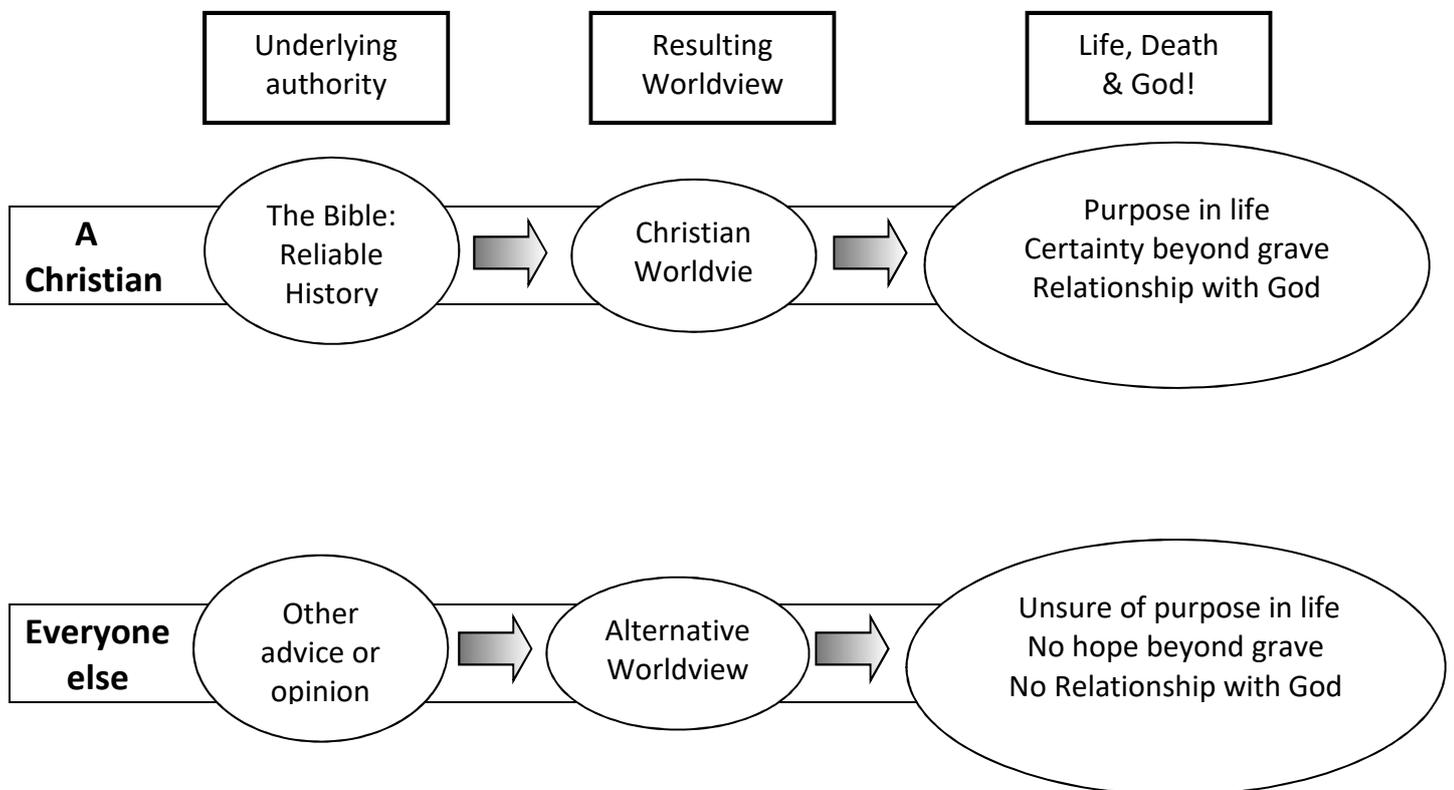
Today: The proposition – the bible is not a collection of made-up stories, but is reliable history. It can be trusted.

Objection: *“Such a factual defence is depressing – part of the intrigue of Christianity is the mystery and the faith that is required!”* (local lawyer, a few years ago)

Response: This reveals a failure to grasp what is at stake: Life; death & God!

Because if the bible is reliable history – then it changes everything! I can make sense of this world, find out what my purpose is – and get to know God personally.

Worldview – everyone has one: what you believe about what matters: Life, Death, God.

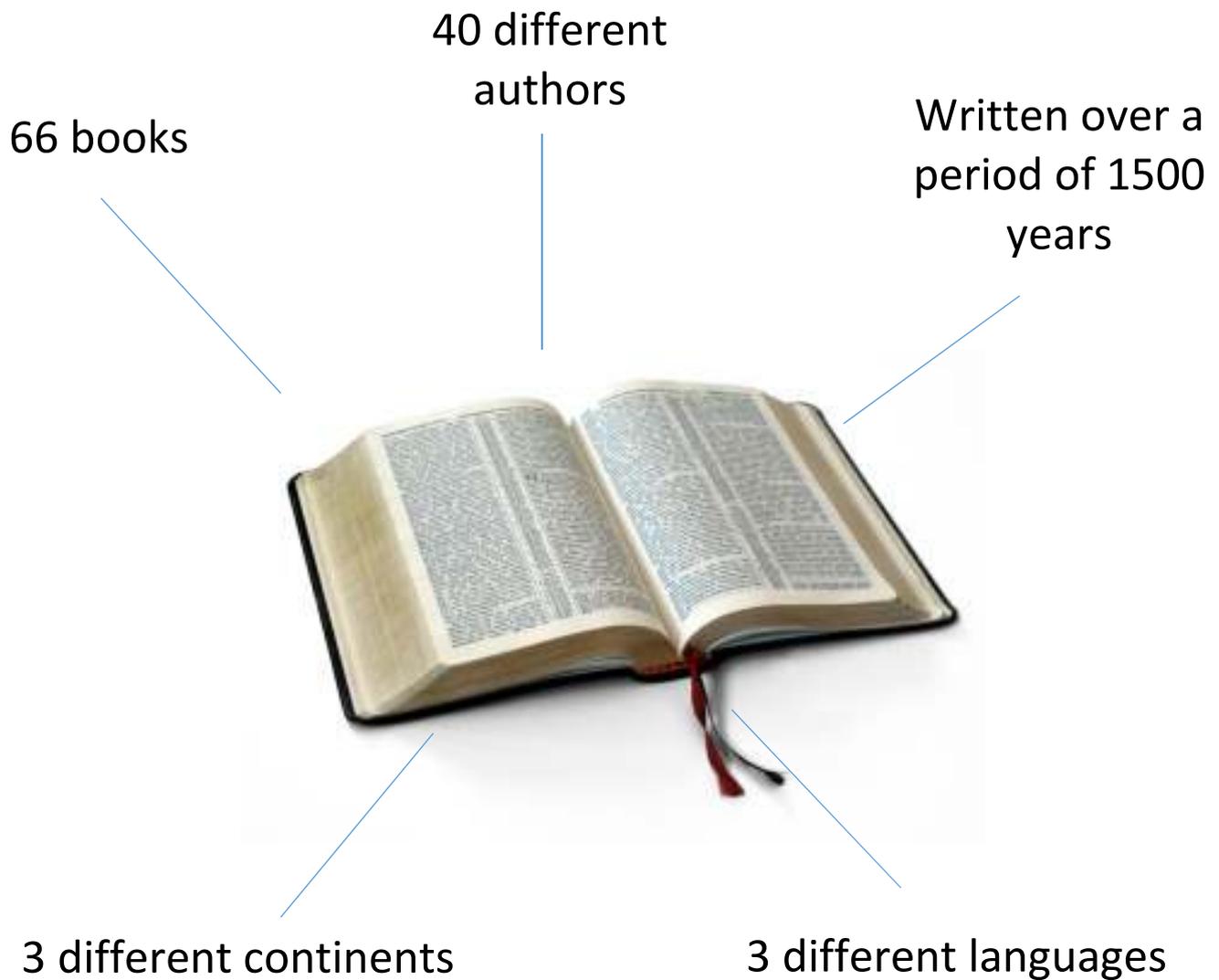


A unique claim! How possible?

The Bible:

A) Divine authorship

B) Human authorship



And yet it shows:

- Common storyline:
- Common message:
- Personal challenge:

So what about other religions?

Christianity stands in contrast to other world religions:

“Unlike the Hindu Upanishads which focus on the believer’s merger with the life force Brahman, or the Buddhist Tripitaka which emphasises the extinguishment of self and suffering, or the Islamic Quran which centres on the nature and practice of submission to God, the New Testament revolves around a series of events said to have occurred in Palestine between 5 BC and AD 30.”

John Dickson, *The Christ Files* (Blue bottle books, 2006)

.....SO: Is the bible reliable and trustworthy history?

2 questions:

1. Is the bible reliable history?
2. Has that history been accurately preserved?

If yes to both – then this book changes everything!

1. Is the bible reliable history?

a) Some would say NO.....

Dawkins:

‘The fact that something is written down is persuasive to people not used to asking questions like: ‘Who wrote it, and when?’ ‘How did they know what to write?’ ‘Did they, in their time, really mean what we, in our time, understand them to be saying?’ ‘Were they unbiased observers, or did they have an agenda that coloured their writing?’ Ever since the nineteenth century, scholarly theologians have made an overwhelming case that the gospels are not reliable accounts of what happened in the history of the real world. All were written long after the death of Jesus, and also after the epistles of Paul, which mention almost none of the alleged facts of Jesus’ life.’

‘Nobody knows who the four evangelists were, but they almost certainly never met Jesus personally. Much of what they wrote was in no sense an honest attempt at history... it is even possible to mount a serious, though not widely supported, historical case that Jesus never lived at all.’

'Although Jesus probably existed, reputable biblical scholars do not in general regard the New Testament (and obviously not the Old Testament) as a reliable record of what actually happened in history, and I shall not consider the Bible further as evidence for any kind of deity.'

Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, pages 92-97

b) But what does the New Testament say about itself?

i) Some of the New Testament was recorded by eyewitnesses:

¹ That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we looked upon and have touched with our hands, concerning the word of life - ² the life was made manifest, and we have seen it, and testify to it and proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and was made manifest to us - ³ that which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you, so that you too may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ.

1 John chapter 1, verses 1-3

- **NOT:** as Christopher Hitchens: "Hearsay upon hearsay upon hearsay"

- **BUT:** reliable testimony emerging from & verified by the eyewitness community

ii) The rest of the New Testament came from those who had personal access to eyewitness evidence:

¹ Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile a narrative of the things that have been accomplished among us, ² just as those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word have delivered them to us, ³ it seemed good to me also, having followed all things closely for some time past, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, ⁴ that you may have certainty concerning the things you have been taught.

The Gospel of Luke chapter 1, verses 1-4

- **NOT:** fiction

- **BUT:** an orderly account with a clear purpose: to produce conviction.

c) What did non-Christian historians say about the New Testament?

i) Non-Christian Roman historians:

'Christians derived their name from a man called Christ, who, during the reign of Emperor Tiberius had been executed by sentence of the procurator Pontius Pilate. The deadly superstition, thus checked for a moment, broke out afresh not only in Judea, the first source of the evil, but also in the City of Rome, where all things hideous and shameful from every part of the world meet and become popular.'

Cornelius Tacitus (AD 56-120), *Annals*, Book 15.44

'The sum total of their guilt or error was no more than the following. They had met regularly before dawn on a determined day, and sung antiphonally a hymn to Christ as to a god. They also took an oath not for any crime, but to keep from theft, robbery and adultery, and not to break any promise.'

Pliny the Younger (AD 61-113), *Book 10, letter 96*.

'[Christ is] the one whom they still worship today, the man in Palestine who was crucified because he brought this new form of initiation into the world ... Moreover, that first lawgiver of theirs persuaded them that they are all brothers the moment they transgress and deny the Greek gods and begin worshipping that crucified sophist and living by his laws.'

Lucian of Samosata, *The Death of Peregrinus* 11-13

ii) Non-Christian Jewish historians:

'At this time there appeared Jesus, a wise man. For he was a doer of startling deeds, a teacher of people who received the truth with pleasure. And he gained a following both among many Jews and among many of Greek origin. He was perhaps the Messiah-Christ. And when Pilate, because of an accusation made by the leading men among us, condemned him to the cross, those who had loved him previously did not cease to do so. For they reported that he had appeared to them three days after his crucifixion and that he was alive. And up until this very day the tribe of Christians, named after him, has not died out.'

Flavius Josephus (AD 37-100), *Jewish Antiquities* 18.63-64

'On the eve of the Passover Jesus was hanged (on a cross). For forty days before the execution took place, a herald went forth and cried, 'He is going forth to be stoned because he has practised sorcery and enticed and led Israel astray. Anyone who can say anything in his favour, let him come forward and plead on his behalf.' But since nothing was brought forward in his favour, he was hanged on the eve of Passover.

Talmud (*baraita Sanhedrin 43a-b*), written AD 100-200

Summary of non-Christian sources that refer to Jesus of Nazareth:

Piecing together all the non-Christian sources about Jesus, the following New Testament facts are confirmed:

- the name 'Jesus'
- the place & time-frame of his public ministry (Palestine during Pontius Pilate's governorship, AD 26-36)
- the name of his mother, Mary
- the ambiguous nature of his birth
- the name of one of his brothers (James)
- his fame as a teacher
- his fame as a miracle-worker / sorcerer
- the fact that people labelled him as 'Messiah / Christ'
- the fact that some considered Jesus to be 'kingly'
- the time and manner of his execution (crucifixion around Passover-time)
- the involvement of both the Roman & Jewish leadership in his death
- the coincidence of an eclipse at the time of his crucifixion
- the report of Jesus' appearances to his followers after his death
- the flourishing of a movement that worshipped Jesus after his death

John Dickson, *The Christ Files* (Blue bottle books, 2006)

Conclusion:

'[The writings of Matthew, Mark and Luke] should all be dated to about AD 60 plus or minus a few years. All this makes it inherently probable that these writers were able to record reliable history... A study of the conservative nature of ancient oral tradition – prodigious feats of memory coupled with a flexibility in passing on the tradition within fixed limits – reinforces our belief in this ability...'

A careful analysis of the genres of Matthew, Mark, Luke, John and Acts suggests that their writers were not only able to provide trustworthy history, but that they were intending to do so.

The limited external evidence from non-Christian writers, later Christian writers, and Archaeology ... almost always confirms that, where they can be tested, the Evangelists did record accurate historical information.

... All of the above evidence is adequate to place the burden of proof on the shoulders of anyone who would deny the trustworthiness of untestable data.'

Prof Craig L Blomberg, *The Historical Reliability of the New Testament*

'An ancient historian has no problem seeing the phenomenon of Jesus as an historical one. His many surprising aspects only help anchor him in history. Myth or legend would have created a more predictable figure. The writings that sprang up about Jesus also reveal to us a movement of thought and an experience of life so unusual that something much more substantial than the imagination is needed to explain it.'

E A Judge, Emeritus Professor of History, and Director of the Ancient History Documentary Research Centre, Macquarie University.

2. Has that history been accurately preserved?

a) Some would say NO....

'Ever since the nineteenth century, scholarly theologians have made an overwhelming case that the gospels are not reliable accounts of what happened in the history of the real world. All were written long after the death of Jesus, and also after the epistles of Paul, which mention almost none of the alleged facts of Jesus' life. All were then copied and recopied, through many different 'Chinese Whispers generations' by fallible scribes who, in any case, had their own religious agendas.'

Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, p 93

b) So how do other ancient historical writings compare?:

i) The number of manuscripts:

Work	Number of Surviving manuscripts
Pliny the Younger (history)	7
Plato (Tetralogies)	7
Caesar (Gallic Wars)	10
Tacitus (Annals)	20
Aristotle	49
Sophocles	193
Demosthenes	200
Homer (Iliad)	643
New Testament	24000 (5300 in Greek)

ii) the time interval between the date a text was written and our earliest manuscript:

Author	Date written	Earliest copy	Time gap (years)
Pliny	61-113AD	850AD	750
Caesar	100-44BC	900AD	1000
Plato	427-347BC	900AD	1200
Aristotle	384-322BC	1100AD	1400

By contrast, 'the oldest [NT manuscript] is a scrap of papyrus (p⁵²) containing John 18.31-33, 37-38, dating from AD 125-130, no more than forty years after John's gospel was most probably written. More than thirty papyri date from the late second through early third centuries, including some which contain good chunks of entire books and two of which cover most of the gospels and Acts (p⁴⁵) or the letters of Paul (p⁴⁶). Four very reliable and nearly complete New Testaments date from the fourth and fifth centuries (α, β, γ, δ).'

Prof Craig L Blomberg, *The Historical Reliability of the New Testament*

iii) The physical quality of the manuscripts

'All kinds of minor variations distinguish these [24000] manuscripts from one another, but the vast majority of these variations have to do with changes in spelling, grammar, and style, or accidental omissions or duplications of words or phrases. Only about 400 (less than one per page of English translation) have any significant bearing on the meaning of the passage, and most of these are noted in the footnotes or margins of modern translations and editions of Scripture. The only textual variants which affect more than a sentence or two (and most affect only individual words or phrases) are John 7.53-8.11 and Mark 16.9-20. Neither of these passages is very likely to be what John or Mark originally wrote... But overall, 97-99% of the New Testament can be reconstructed beyond any reasonable doubt, and no Christian doctrine is founded solely or even primarily on textually disputed passages.'

Prof Craig L Blomberg, *The Historical Reliability of the New Testament*

Conclusion:

‘Scholars of almost every theological stripe attest to the profound care with which the NT books were copied in the Greek language, and later translated and preserved in Syriac, Coptic, Latin and a variety of other European and Middle Eastern languages.’

Prof Craig L Blomberg, *The Historical Reliability of the New Testament*

‘The interval then between the dates of the original composition and the earliest extant evidence becomes so small as to be in fact negligible, and the last foundation for any doubt that the Scriptures have come down to us substantially as they were written has now been removed. Both the authenticity and general integrity of the books of the New Testament may be regarded as finally established.’

Sir Frederick Kenyon, *The Bible and Archaeology*
(former Director & Principal Librarian of the British Museum)

Final words: the beginning of a new ‘creed’ – a new worldview?

John’s Gospel (ESV bible 20:30-31)

³⁰ Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; ³¹ but these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.

Please take a free copy of John’s Gospel!

Books

- **The Bible**
- Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses* (Eerdmans, 2006)
- Barry Cooper, *Can I really trust the Bible?* (Good Book Company, 2014)
- Craig Blomberg, *The Historical Reliability of the Gospels* (IVP, 1987)
- John Dickson, *The Christ Files* (Blue bottle books, 2006)
- Amy Orr-Ewing, *Why Trust the Bible?* (IVP, 2005)
- Lee Strobel, *The Case for Christ* (Zondervan, 1998)
- Lee Strobel, *The Case for the Real Jesus* (Zondervan, 2007)



Rylands Library Papyrus P52

Fragment of John's gospel: dated 125-130AD

P⁵² contains words from the account of Jesus' trial before Pilate, John 18:31-33 on the front and John 18:37-38 on the back.