

## ***How the Bible Came to Us - #21***

### ***Reason and Scripture***

1. The beginning of world exploration in the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries and the Enlightenment in Europe in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries led to a new way of looking at Scripture.
2. As people began to understand more clearly the size and diversity of our world, they realized that the biblical world was only a very small part of the whole.
3. Years and years of religious wars in Europe caused people to reject—or at least be critical of—virtually anything religious. That eventually led people to think that true religion could be summed up merely as one living a good moral life.
4. Whereas Augustine back in the late 4<sup>th</sup> and early 5<sup>th</sup> centuries had tried to encompass all of world history into the biblical setting, people during the Enlightenment realized that there were ancient cultures in other parts of the world that were just as old as Jewish culture that are not even mentioned in the Bible.
5. The rise of the scientific method led people to begin thinking that virtually anything that was important could be studied using the scientific method. Human reason and investigation became the standard by which all things were judged.
6. That began to cast doubt on “revelation” and certainly on anything “miraculous” which could not be reproduced and tested. Over time, the Bible came to be considered by many as simply a historical record of a certain limited portion of this world. Instead of God being the standard which human beings were seeking to discover, it was assumed that everything of real value could be discovered simply by careful human inquiry.
7. *Novum Organum*, the famous book by Francis Bacon (1561-1626), clearly spelled out the idea that only things which can be tested and proved scientifically can be regarded as reliable or verifiable truth.
8. That raised a question about how one can verify *historical* truth. The Bible began to be evaluated not on the basis of its revelation from or about God, but rather, merely as a historical record.
9. Baruch Spinoza (1632-1677), a Dutch, Jewish scholar, developed the premise that we need to separate meaning and truth. The Bible might have great meaning for people, but is it true? Truth would have to be verified from external sources. Did what we read in the Bible actually happen?
10. Emanuel Kant in Germany also suggested that the Bible must be tested by human reason.
11. Voltaire, especially in his famous book *Candide*, did everything he could possibly do to ridicule religion and even predicted that within a period of about 10 years, the Bible and religion would be totally destroyed. He wanted “to crush the detestable thing called Christianity.”
12. About the same time, Deism arose in England. Deists believe that God created all things in the beginning; that He set everything in motion and then went on a long vacation—leaving things to work out however they would following certain set laws. Lord Herbert of Cherboung, the father of Deism, somewhat summarized the arguments of Deism into five steps:
  - 1) Every religion believes in some form of deity.

- 2) As human beings, we are required to reverence that deity.
  - 3) Reverence for our Creator and Maker requires all human beings to act morally as a form of worship of that deity.
  - 4) We should repent of our sins and abandoned them.
  - 5) Eventually, this Deity will bring all things into judgment. At that time there will be punishment or reward—either in this life or in a future life—for each person.
13. Perhaps the most important aspect of Herbert's arguments were that they could be understood purely on the basis of human thinking and reason. It did not require any "revelation."
  14. Other authors repeatedly emphasized the point that the real essence of Christianity is to guide us into simple moral living.
  15. How has all of this thinking impacted the reading and understanding of Scripture? For many educated Christians in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries, the basis for understanding Scripture is what has come to be called the *historical-critical method*. To be more precise, it is not a method but a certain paradigm, perspective, model, or even a framework for reading Scripture. It is a result of: 1) The "thinking" methods which we have described above, 2) Protestant theological perspectives, and 3) Scientific methods. **The final conclusion is that the Bible is only worthwhile insofar as it accurately reports the truth of history.**
  16. That led to every portion of Scripture being pulled apart and examined based on human reason. In 1835, David Strauss wrote a book entitled *The Life of Jesus Critically Examined*. His approach was as follows: We can only really examine the life of Jesus historically based on testable, verifiable events. The historian cannot test miraculous events. History cannot deal with such things as the miraculous birth of Jesus, any of His so-called miracles such as walking on water, His transfiguration, or even His resurrection from the dead. Those miraculous events are outside the perspective of historical analysis. Christians would, in general, agree with those points. But, in effect, what Strauss was saying was that because they cannot be tested and can only be accepted by faith, they are, therefore, not reliable "truth." The implication is that based on my logic, I judge God and the Bible!
  17. In some ways the Protestant approach to Scripture aided and abetted the approach advocated by Strauss. Protestants had tried to do away with the allegorical interpretations which were so favored by the Catholic Church. Protestants wanted to take Scripture very literally. Those using the so-called *historical-critical method* want to take that approach to its ultimate conclusion, rejecting anything which cannot be proven historically. Church tradition—and especially the Roman Catholic and Jewish emphasis of following God's directions for one's life—went "out the window."
  18. Another aspect of that thinking is the search for the "original." The earliest possible documents are regarded as being closer to the actual events. Therefore, later church developments, interpretations, and meanings developed from those interpretations are not considered as important or as reliable.
  19. Science also played a part in all of that. The question was raised about authorship. Why did the different authors write what they wrote? The emphasis was on the human authorship of Scripture, and thus, basically rejecting the idea that it was in any way a revelation from God. In general, in the early years, Christians welcomed the search for a better understanding of the

historical backgrounds of Scripture. The better we understand the context in which something was written, the better we can understand it. However, it soon became apparent that the desire to understand the historical background was a kind of “Trojan horse” for Christianity. The Bible was no longer regarded as the supreme revelation of truth from God but simply a historical document to be investigated, to be divided up, and to be analyzed. “Higher critics” began to place their opinions over and above the truths of Scripture. A wider and wider gulf developed between the church’s Bible and the scholar’s Bible.

20. In order to illustrate this point, let us consider three main examples of the use of the *historical-critical method* and how they have impacted modern religious history and interpretation.

**A) *Look first at the history of ancient Israel.*** Using the *historical-critical method*, the study of the books of Moses becomes not biblical history or some revelation from God about truth. Instead, the biblical record is tested—by comparing it with archaeological discoveries and other bits of ancient history and documents from other societies of the time—to see if it, in fact, is a correct historical record. If the biblical record can be verified from external sources, it is generally accepted. If no verification can be found or has not been found yet for a given biblical bit of information, then that biblical information is held in question or even doubted. As a result, scholars have generally fallen into two camps: “biblical minimalists” and “biblical maximalists.” The biblical minimalists generally take the approach that nothing in the Bible should be believed unless it can be verified from external sources. Biblical maximalists believe that everything in the Bible should be accepted as historically accurate unless it can be specifically disproven from external sources.

But since so much of the biblical story is beyond the possibility of confirming from archaeological sources, scholars began to take a different approach to the text itself. Their question was no longer: Is this material true or reliable? Instead, their question was, what was the author’s motive or intention when he wrote it? So, the book of Genesis became not an account of God’s miraculous creation of this earth and the subsequent events, but rather, a hodgepodge of legends reported by people with different interests and goals in mind.

The book of Isaiah which falls naturally into three different sections is divided up, in their opinion, not just into three parts written by Isaiah; but rather, the book of Isaiah is divided into sections written by three different authors who wrote it in three different time periods. In their opinion, anything like prophecy or a miracle, of course, is impossible, so it must be explained away by suggesting authorship by later authors.

That leads to many other problems in the biblical text. If the stories of Adam and Eve and even of Abraham are only legends, then what do we do with the accounts of Jesus and others who referred to them as examples? If the exodus from Egypt never happened, and if, in fact, the children of Israel never lived in Egypt, then what do we do with the whole book of Exodus? And what do we do with all the references to God as Liberator throughout the rest of Scripture? If there was no creation week, then how do we explain the Sabbath?

**B) *But what about early church history and the New Testament?*** Since the authors of the New Testament were telling an exciting story about their Lord and Savior and since they expected Him to return very soon, they did not think that it was necessary to provide a lot of confirmatory historical details. For the first 300 years after they lived, powerful forces were at play to do everything possible to destroy any record of their activity. Thus, if one rejects the biblical account itself unless it can be verified from external sources, almost nothing is left.

- C) ***The most contentious and explosive issue of all comes when we talk about the “historical Jesus.”*** Very little of His story can be positively confirmed from extra-biblical sources. Furthermore, so much of his life was connected with miracles and strange or unusual events that if one takes the approach that those must be discarded, then almost nothing is left. The virgin birth must be dismissed. Miracles such as His walking on water, His healing many people, and even His resurrection from the dead have to be done away with. What one is left with is the story of an interesting character who taught some moral lessons and impacted the lives of a number of people in the 1<sup>st</sup> century.
21. There have been three major quests in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries to try to rediscover the truth of the “historical Jesus.” They have come to incredibly diverse conclusions. The fact that they started out with the same basic evidence and have come to such diverse conclusions is pretty good evidence that their methodology does not work! Their real goal seems to have been to find some kind of “usable” Jesus for the 20<sup>th</sup> or 21<sup>st</sup> centuries.
  22. Thomas Jefferson went through his Bible and removed all the parts he considered to be dogmatic or miraculous, even superstitious. What he was left with was a simple, moral teacher, Jesus of Nazareth.
  23. We must recognize that the biblical account was never intended to be simply a historical document. It was an account written by various authors who were prepared to die for the fact that the One they loved had lived an incredible life, died and rose again, and is now in heaven waiting to come back and take them home with Him.
  24. So, we must ask ourselves at this point: Do we take the Bible, tear it into pieces, evaluate the independent pieces historically, and then try to reconstruct them into some kind of meaningful history? Or do we take it as a religious document, as a document whose authors were witnesses to great and eternal truths and inspired by God? What kind of Christian church will we end up with if we take these two different approaches?

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