

Can I really trust the Bible?

And other questions about Scripture,
truth, and how God speaks



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Contents

Introduction	5
1 Does the Bible claim to be God's word? <i>The world, the word, and what Jesus thought of the Bible</i>	9
2 Does the Bible claim to be God's word? <i>The word, the Word, and the rightness of writing</i>	25
3 Does the Bible seem to be God's word? <i>Consistency, conspiracies and corruptions</i>	37
4 Does the Bible seem to be God's word? <i>Canon, contradictions and criticisms</i>	49
5 Does the Bible prove to be God's word? <i>Tasting, seeing, and the sweetness of Scripture</i>	67

For Graham Cooper

Introduction

The Bible is full of wonderful stories. Like, amazing stories. And there's lots of wisdom in it. But some of it is very weird... And most of it is very outdated."

New Delhi, India, 1991. As he spoke, he smiled at me in a patient, good-natured way, the way someone might smile at a two-year-old trying to access voicemail on an iPhone.

"Then there are the miracles, which you have to take with a *B-I-G* pinch of salt. Plus obviously it's been corrupted over time as it's been passed on. So I just think people should take what's helpful, and not get so hung up on it."

When the conversation began, I would've described myself as a Christian. Midway through, I was reeling. Now that it was over, I knew I wasn't a Christian at all.



Here was one of the most intelligent, likeable people I'd ever met. And he'd reached the conclusion that intelligent, likeable people just did not trust the Bible.

At breakfast the next morning, I was told there'd been an earthquake during the night. Apparently, I'd slept right through it. But those questions ... I was still shaking from those questions. *Can you really trust the Bible? Can you be absolutely sure of this book you're building your life on? Can you know for certain that it actually is God's word? How can you know?*

Perhaps you remember Winnie-the-Pooh, the honey-obsessed bear who lived in Ashdown Forest. He faced a similar question. Here he is, staring at a jar, and wondering if he can be sure of what's inside:

It had HUNNY written on it, but, just to make sure, he took off the paper cover and looked at it, and it looked just like honey. "But you never can tell," said Pooh. "I remember my uncle saying once that he had seen cheese just this colour." So he put his tongue in, and took a large lick. "Yes," he said, "it is. No doubt about that."

Pooh may have been a simple bear in profound danger of early-onset diabetes, but what if we were to approach the Bible in the same way he approached the honey? Like this:


1. Does the Bible *claim to be* God's word? What does it say on the outside of the jar? Does the Bible have anything to say about itself?

2. Does the Bible *seem to be* God's word? What does it look like when we "take off the cover" and peer inside? Does the Bible look like something only God could have written?
3. Does the Bible *prove to be* God's word? What does it taste like? Can we know, in our own personal experience, that the Bible really is God's word?

Over the next five chapters, I'll try to answer those three questions. Whether you're a Christian or not, I pray it'll be helpful. And if by any chance you're the young man from New Delhi: thank you, my friend. I hope we meet again.

Does the Bible claim to be God's word?

The world, the word, and what Jesus thought of the Bible



Imagine a sun-bleached, tropical shore. We're standing there, enjoying the view. Suddenly, a man in a tuxedo staggers out of the surf and stops in front of us.

"Where do you think he's come from?" I ask.

"No idea", you reply.

"Maybe he's a holidaymaker who's fallen off a cruise liner", I suggest.

"Maybe he's like, a really well-dressed pirate?" you also suggest. (We both laugh at this point.)

"Huh", we both shrug. "Guess we'll never know."

And off we both go, leaving tuxedo man dripping onto the sand.

Was it odd that it never occurred to either of us to ask the man himself where he was from? He might lie, of course. But if he's standing there right in front of us,



ready to speak, wouldn't it be rude—and even a little foolish—to ignore what he has to say?

So in that spirit, before we start guessing what the Bible is and where it's come from, let's ask the Bible itself: *What do you claim to be?*

What does the Old Testament claim to be?

Open a Bible about halfway through.

You should find yourself in the middle of a collection of songs called “Psalms”. Psalm 19 describes two ways in which God speaks to us: firstly through his world, and secondly through his word.

First of all, the world:

The heavens declare the glory of God;
the skies proclaim the work of his hands.
Day after day they pour forth speech;
night after night they reveal knowledge.
They have no speech, they use no words;
no sound is heard from them.
Yet their voice goes out into all the earth,
their words to the ends of the world.

*Psalm 19 v 1-4*¹

The writer is telling us that God “speaks” to the world, through the world. The beautiful things he has made “declare” his glory—his greatness, his kindness, his cre-

1 All Bible quotations are from the New International Version unless otherwise noted. (Why so many versions? More on this later.) If you're unfamiliar with Bible references, the number before the “v” is the chapter, and the number after is the verse. So “Psalm 19 v 1-4” means the book of Psalms, chapter 19, verses 1 to 4.

ativity, his provision for each one of us. The grandeur of the sky and the stars have a way of drawing our eyes upwards, towards something—or someone—beyond them. Mute as they are, they are communicating something to “all the earth ... to the ends of the world”. By the fact of their existence, they constantly sing: *There is a Maker! He is powerful and beautiful and good. He created you, just as he created us. He sustains you—day after day—just as he sustains us.*

Look at the next two verses. Notice that the sun also tells us about God:

In the heavens God has pitched a tent for the sun.

It is like a bridegroom coming out of his chamber,

like a champion rejoicing to run his course.

It rises at one end of the heavens

and makes its circuit to the other;

nothing is deprived of its warmth.

Psalm 19 v 5-6

The sun rising is “like a bridegroom coming out of his chamber”, like a man emerging from his bedroom the morning after his wedding night. He’s having trouble suppressing the enormous smile on his face. He is filled with joy, he is glowing, he is radiating warmth. This, too, communicates something about God’s life-giving goodness. Every time the sun rises, and “makes its circuit” across the sky—like a triumphant athlete enjoying a lap of honour—it is sharing with us the joy, the

generosity, the warmth of our Creator. I am like this, the sun seems to say, because my Creator is like this.

Just as a painting reveals the qualities of a painter, God's world speaks powerfully of him. Even if we were to burn all the Bibles, and drown all the preachers, the psalmist says that God would still make his beauty known through the skies, the stars and the sun. And this, incidentally, is why the Bible doesn't try to prove the existence of a Creator. It's just assumed to be as unmissable as the colossal flaming globe hanging over our heads.

The world is not enough

But there's only so much a star can say. A painting may be wonderful, but what it tells me about the artist is limited. I'd need to read her autobiography to get to know what she's really like.

At the risk of over-simplifying, that is what the Bible claims to be: God's autobiography. It is the way we get to know him. The world doesn't tell us enough. We need the word.

Now, that's not to say the Bible contains everything there is to know about God. Not even close. But it does claim to reveal all we *need* to know about our Creator, and all we need to know in order to live lives pleasing to him. This is what theologians call the "sufficiency" of Scripture. One Bible writer puts it like this:

the Holy Scriptures ... are able to make you
wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus.
All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for

teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be *thoroughly* equipped for every good work.

2 Timothy 3 v 15-17¹

The Bible gives us what we need to know if we're to experience the highest, deepest, widest, most satisfying joy in life: God himself.

That's why, in the next few verses of Psalm 19, our focus moves from the world to the word:

The law of the LORD [God's word] is perfect,
refreshing the soul.

The statutes of the LORD are trustworthy,
making wise the simple.

The precepts of the LORD are right,
giving joy to the heart.

The commands of the LORD are radiant,
giving light to the eyes.

The fear of the LORD is pure,
enduring forever.

The decrees of the LORD are firm,
and all of them are righteous.

They are more precious than gold,
than much pure gold;

they are sweeter than honey,
than honey from the honeycomb.

Psalm 19 v 7-10

Did you see it? Again and again, the writer draws atten-

¹ My emphasis. From now on, all *italics* in Bible quotations are my own.

tion to the fact that the Scriptures are from God. They're not just laws or statutes or precepts or commands or decrees; they're "the law of the LORD ... the statutes of the LORD ... the precepts of the LORD ... the commands of the LORD ... the decrees of the LORD". The claim of Psalm 19 is that the Old Testament was created by God, just as surely as he created the world.

Dig deeper into the Bible, and you'll find that it closely connects the life-giving power of God's spoken word with the life-giving power of his written word. For example, Genesis 1 describes every atom of the universe, including humanity itself, being created and ordered with symphonic precision by God's *spoken* words. Each new act of creation is preceded by the significant phrase: "And God *said*...", just to make it clear that it is God's *word* that brings everything into being.

Then, just as God's *spoken* word brought light into being in Genesis 1 v 3, so, as we've just seen in Psalm 19, his *written* word is described as "giving light to the eyes". As the psalm implies, God's written word is no less powerful or life-giving than his spoken word. If this is true, then when we read God's word, or hear it preached, we should read or listen with trembling and anticipation. The fierce power that summoned and sustains the universe is about to be unleashed again in our hearing.

Theologian Francis Schaeffer sums it up: the Old Testament sees itself as "the written record of the words of God as they were given by God, and as they were recorded by men who were specially designated and commanded by God to this work." This written record "was

preserved by the Jewish people and accepted by them as authoritative.” The New Testament writers agree. For example, the Apostle Paul describes the Old Testament as “the very words of God” (Romans 3 v 2). “Apostle”, by the way, means one of those who had been a personal eyewitness of Jesus’ resurrection, and had been specifically commissioned and empowered by Christ to tell others what they had seen.

In fact, in the first five books of the Old Testament alone, you’ll see phrases like “God said” about 700 times. There are nearly 4,000 such claims in the Old Testament as a whole. At the very least, then, both Old and New Testaments claim that the Old Testament is “the word of God”.

And that’s the way Jesus saw it too.

Jesus’ claims about the Old Testament

Jessica is 24, well educated, and a Christian. She doesn’t read her Bible that much, but then life is “pretty busy”. She’s excited, she says, about being a follower of Christ, but is much less excited about reading a book written thousands of years ago and thousands of miles away.

Jesus is 30. He is the uneducated son of a wood-worker, born in a hick town in first century Palestine. He also claims to be the eternal Son of God, the second person of the Trinity, and the promised Messiah who has come from God to rescue his people from slavery to sin, Satan and death. Everywhere he goes, he is besieged by crowds who hang on his words, and cry out to be healed. He, too, is pretty busy. But unlike Jessica, he is completely captivated by God’s word.

