

**Mr. Roby: We are resuming our study of biblical theology today by looking at external evidence that corroborates the Bible's claim to be the Word of God. So, Dr. Spencer, where do you want to begin?**

Dr. Spencer: Before we take a look at any of the specific evidence, I want to emphasize that the fundamental reason we believe the Bible to be the infallible Word of God is that it tells that it is. As we spoke about in Session 4, everyone has some ultimate standard, by which they evaluate everything else, and as Christians our standard must be the Word of God. We must not shy away from the fact that circular reasoning is inescapable in justifying your ultimate standard.

With that said, however, since the Bible is *in fact* true, the evidence we find in our world having to do with science, history, and ourselves, must corroborate what the Bible teaches. In other words, all of the data we encounter, all of the facts we discover—when properly understood and interpreted—cannot contradict the Bible, for God is the author of both. If we think that a given scientific or historical “fact” falsifies the Bible, then we must conclude that either our science is wrong and/or our interpretation of the Bible is wrong. But, if someone tells you that science or history have proven the Bible wrong, challenge them. Don't be intimidated, because they are wrong. Christians should never shy away from pursuing science and history, they cannot prove that the Word of God is false.

In addition, since God is the author of both creation and the Bible—and since the Bible is vital to man's salvation—we would expect God to have placed a good deal of obvious evidence in creation that backs up the Bible's propositional statements, and that is exactly what we find, and exactly what Paul tells us in Romans 1 when he says that the people are without excuse.

We can only touch on some of the evidence here, but there are other good sources to look at. For example, Dr. Stephen Meyer has put together a good series of lectures on evidence for the Bible called *Is the Bible Reliable?* That series is available from Focus on the Family.<sup>1</sup> There are also a number of good books and websites that contain information about biblical archaeology, which has produced a massive amount of evidence in the past couple of centuries.

**Mr. Roby: OK, so what do you consider to be some of the best evidence?**

Dr. Spencer: The first, and most important, piece of evidence I would cite is the Bible itself. The Bible itself is, without any doubt, the greatest archaeological document we have in our possession by far. And it is its own best evidence.

**Mr. Roby: Let me stop you there for a moment. What do you mean by saying the Bible is an archaeological document?**

Dr. Spencer: I mean that it is itself an archaeological artifact. It was written at the same time as many of the different artifacts that have been dug up and recovered in the near east during the past 150 to 200 years of archaeological discovery. But it has been miraculously preserved through time, so that what we have in our hands today, in our own language, is a faithful replica

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<sup>1</sup> *Is the Bible Reliable? Building the historical case*, Dr. Stephen Meyer, The Truth Project, Focus on the Family

of those ancient documents. We should treasure the Word of God first, of course, because it is the very Word of God. But, we should also treasure it as the most extensive and accurate record we have of at least a portion of ancient human history.

The Bible is unique. It comprises 66 books, written by at least 40 authors from vastly different backgrounds and all walks of life, over roughly 1,500 years, covering a myriad of topics, and yet it is perfectly consistent in all that it teaches. Of all the books we have from antiquity, the Bible also stands alone in our ability to say that we know, with a very high degree of certainty, what the original manuscripts said. We do not, of course, have any of the original manuscripts anymore, but we know what they said, which cannot be said with anywhere near the same confidence for any other book from antiquity.

**Mr. Roby: How can we know for sure what the original manuscripts said?**

Dr. Spencer: We can know with great confidence for at least three reasons. First, speaking about the New Testament, we have vastly more extant copies and portions of copies than we have for any other book from antiquity, and the earliest extant copies are much earlier, this is sometimes called the bibliographical test.<sup>2</sup> For example, if you look at Homer's Illiad, which is the best attested non-biblical book from antiquity by far, we currently have about 1,800 extant manuscripts, which means copies, or partial copies, made by hand before the printing press. The earliest of these copies is from 400 BC, which is 400 years after Homer composed the poem.

With the New Testament, there are more than ten times that number of manuscripts. Now, admittedly, most of those are not in the original Greek, but about 5,800 of them are. Many of these early manuscripts are also small portions of material, rather than full books. But, the bottom line is that even non-Christian scholars will admit that the New Testament is the best attested book from antiquity by far. But, the bibliographical test is just one small piece of evidence, so I don't want to dwell on it too much.

**Mr. Roby: What about the Old Testament?**

Dr. Spencer: That is my second point, and it is quite dramatic. We don't have nearly as many extant manuscript fragments for the Old Testament, although we still have quite a few, but in one major way we have something much better; we have compelling proof that Jewish scribes preserved the integrity of the text to an almost unimaginable degree. Prior to 1947, the oldest complete Old Testament manuscript was from about 1000 AD. And, it was a common argument prior to that time, that if we were to find a manuscript that was much older it would be significantly different. That claim was made because that is what is seen with other ancient documents; errors get made every time a document is copied and after centuries those errors accumulate and become quite significant. But, in 1947 the Dead Sea Scrolls were found and they changed everything.

The Dead Sea Scrolls came from a Jewish sect that lived on the western shore of the Dead Sea around the time of Christ. The scrolls that have been found contain at least portions of every

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<sup>2</sup> See J. McDowell & C. Jones, *The Bibliographical Test*, updated 8/13/14, available from <https://www.josh.org/wp-content/uploads/Bibliographical-Test-Update-08.13.14.pdf>

book of the Old Testament except for the book of Esther, and most notably, they contain a complete copy of the book of Isaiah. The amazing thing about them however, is that when they are compared with the Hebrew Old Testament from about 1000 AD, there are *no* significant differences! This is truly astounding and is, I think, great evidence that God has seen to it that his Word has been preserved for his people.

**Mr. Roby: And this is what we would expect isn't it?**

Dr. Spencer: Yes, absolutely. Since the word of God is essential for salvation, it stands to reason that God would preserve his Word for his people. And the simple fact is that there is abundant evidence that the Bible has been preserved in a way that is simply unmatched by any other ancient document.

**Mr. Roby: The Dead Sea Scrolls are amazing confirmation for the Old Testament, but what about the New Testament?**

Dr. Spencer: A similar statement is true about the Greek New Testament; although there are differences in the many extant manuscripts, the differences are almost always extremely minor, and the few substantive differences that exist do not in any way effect any doctrine of Christianity.

**Mr. Roby: Very well. You mentioned a third reason for our confidence that we know what the original text said, what is that?**

The third reason is the science of textual criticism. This science is used on other ancient documents as well, so it is not unique to the Bible. But it is a set of methodologies that allow people to reconstruct from a number different fragments, which have slight variations in them, what the original document must have said. I'm certainly no expert on this topic, and it wouldn't be something to go into great detail about here anyway, but E.J. Young provides a marvelous example of how this can work in his book *Thy Word is Truth*.<sup>3</sup> He says to consider a schoolteacher who writes a letter to the President of the United States. To her great joy, she receives a personal reply. It is a treasure which she must share with her pupils and so she dictates the letter to them and collects these assignments, which gives her 30 imperfect copies of the letter. Then, she loses the original letter. The question is, can she reconstruct it from the 30 imperfect copies? And the answer, of course, is yes. With a very high degree of certainty she can reconstruct the original letter. The different copies will contain spelling errors, missing or added words and so on, but these errors will be different in the different copies, so by comparing the 30 copies she can surely correct these errors and arrive at a very good copy of the original.

When this technique is applied to the Bible, we are able to reconstruct with very high confidence what the original documents, which are called the autographs, said. And, unlike most ancient documents, we don't have to fill in holes where there is material missing. When you combine our many different manuscripts, we have complete copies of the entire Old and New Testaments.

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<sup>3</sup> E.J. Young, *Thy Word is Truth*, the Banner of Truth Trust, 2012, pg. 57

Mr. Roby: OK, I think that is pretty convincing evidence that we know what the autographs said. What external evidence do we have to corroborate that what these autographs say is true?

Dr. Spencer: There are many pieces of evidence. The Bible tells us a great deal about ancient cultures, and whenever any of the details are found in other sources, we find that the Bible is correct. For example, place names, the common names of people, the political conditions and so on are all accurate. This may not sound amazing unless you stop and think about it for a moment.

So, picture yourself, for example, wanting to write a novel set in 14<sup>th</sup> century France. You would have to do a lot of research to know what names were common, how much things cost, what towns were there, what they were called and so on. All of these details matter. But, now imagine someone trying to write the Old Testament a few hundred years before the time of Christ – and I pick that time because some scholars, called minimalists, have argued that is what happened. A person writing at that time would not have any access to the kind of documentary and archaeological information we have now, so they would have no way of getting these details right. You have to remember that prior to the printing press, which was invented in 1440, the only way to get a copy of a book was to copy it by hand. So, people didn't have anything even remotely like the kind of access to documents from the past and from all over the world that we have now. Also, archaeology was unknown at that time. So, the somewhat counter-intuitive truth is that we have vastly more information available about these ancient cultures today, than would have been available to someone a few hundred years before Christ. It is simply irrational to believe that someone writing at that time could have produced a book with the scope of treatment and accuracy in details that the Bible has. The only reasonable explanation is that the books that make up the Bible come from the times and places they claim to come from, and that God inspired the writers so that what they wrote is infallible.

Mr. Roby: Can you give us some specific examples of these details?

Dr. Spencer: Absolutely. When Joseph's brothers sold him as a slave, we read in Genesis 37:28 that the price was 20 shekels of silver. This would have been the early part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century B.C. The code of Hammurabi, which dates from the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century B.C., was discovered on a 7½ foot tall stone in 1901. Parts of it have also been found on clay tablets, and it says that if a man kills another man's slave he must pay one-third of mina.<sup>4</sup> A mina was worth 50 shekels, so one-third of mina is 16⅔ shekels, very close to the price listed in Genesis. It is interesting to note that the prices given at other points in the Old Testament also agree with the prices we know from extra-biblical sources. For example, in Exodus 21:32, we read that if a bull gores someone's male or female slave, the bull's owner must pay 30 shekels of silver in restitution, which agrees with the price known from extra-biblical sources during the time of Moses.<sup>5</sup> It is impossible for me to imagine that someone writing these documents a few hundred years before the time of Christ could possibly have gotten such details right.

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<sup>4</sup> See law number 252;

<http://mcadams.posc.mu.edu/txt/ah/Assyria/Hammurabi.html#Hammurabi.Law.252>

<sup>5</sup> Kenneth A. Kitchen, *The Patriarchal Age: Myth or History?*, Biblical Archeological Review, March/April, 1995

Mr. Roby: that does seem pretty unlikely. What other evidence do we have?

Dr. Spencer: The form of treaties and covenants is another powerful piece of evidence. This is a complicated subject and we certainly can't go into a lot of details here, but the forms of treaties and covenants changed radically from the 3<sup>rd</sup> millennium B.C. to the 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium B.C., and again from there to the 1<sup>st</sup> millennium B.C. We know about these treaties and covenants from a number of extra-biblical sources. So, we can compare these treaty and covenant forms with the ones we find in the Bible.

For instance, the Bible gives examples from the time of the patriarchs, which is early 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium B.C., which are completely consistent with the forms in use at that time. In Genesis Chapters 21 and 26, for example, Abraham and his Son Isaac both make separate treaties with Abimelech and the form of these treaties agrees with the form for early 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium B.C. treaties known from extra-biblical sources.

Also, the covenant God makes with his people through Moses at Mount Sinai, which we read about in Exodus Chapters 20–31, and 34–35, agrees perfectly with the seven-fold structure of Hittite imperial treaties from the 14<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries B.C.<sup>6</sup> This information would not have been available to someone trying to write such an account a few hundred years before Christ, so it is again impossible for me to imagine how such a writer could have gotten it right.

Mr. Roby: That is, again, pretty compelling evidence. And I'm looking forward to hearing more evidence next time, but it looks like we are out of time for today.

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid