

Why Should I Trust My Life to a 3000-Year-Old Book?

I have a modest goal today and it's not necessarily to give you knock-down-drag-out arguments for the reliability of the Bible. I know that in the past, people have talked about how the Bible came to be, how we can trust that what we have today is the same as the original authors intended. For instance, we have thousands of fragments of Biblical writings, some of them dated to within a decade of the original writing, etc.

While I think there's a place for it, I'm not going to do that today because what I've found is that most of people's problems with the Bible today go far beyond whether the Bible we have today is the same Bible they had back then. The problems people have with the Bible today have more to do with why we would live our lives according to a book that was written before we even realized the earth revolves around the sun.

So, people say, *"Well, we like teachings like 'don't judge lest you be judged' and we like the stuff about justice, but we can't accept the whole Bible because there are too many things in it that are outdated and even offensive to modern sensibilities."* We like some of it, but it can't really be "God's Word."

So, what I want to do today is to clear up some misconceptions about what the Bible is and talk about why I think today, even in our postmodern society, it's plausible for the Bible to be the authority in our lives.

Let me start by talking about *what the Bible is*. I know you've heard cute sayings like "the Bible is God's love letter to us," or they use the acronym, Basic Instructions Before Leave Earth. Those are cute, but, "no." I think a concise way to say it is that *the Bible is the human story inspired by God, handed down through generations that teaches us to see the world as it is*. Let's walk through those four elements.

First, *it's the human story*. Now, that's not how a lot of people think about the Bible. Many people think about the Bible first and foremost as a book of rules—mostly rules about sex, but also about other things. Other people talk about it as the instruction manual for life. Other people think about the Bible as a nice book of fairy tales, while others look at it as a violent, misogynistic diatribe. There was even a writer from GQ magazine who wrote an article that said the Bible is the most overrated book in history.

While the Bible has rules, it's not a rule-book. It has instructions, but it's not just an instruction book. The Bible, at its heart is story. Not a fairy tale, but the history of God relationship with the human race.

As Christians we say we *live* according to the Bible. It's our authority. So, people might say, *"If the Bible is a story, how is a story authoritative?"* If it's our authority, it should just be commands. How can a story be an authority? Well, let me say it like this...

Luke 10 says, **"²⁵On one occasion an expert in the law stood up to test Jesus. "Teacher," he asked, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?"**

²⁶"What is written in the Law?" he replied. "How do you read it?"

27 He answered, “‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind’ and, ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’”

28 “You have answered correctly,” Jesus replied. “Do this and you will live.”

29 But he wanted to justify himself, so he asked Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?”

Jesus doesn't answer him with more explanation, he tells the story of the Good Samaritan. A man was walking from Jerusalem to Jericho when he was attacked by a band of thieves and left for dead. Two religious men came along and walked over to the other side to avoid him, but a third man—a hated Samaritan came by and nursed his wounds, brought him to an inn and paid his medical bills.

The story begs him to see himself in the story. *If I lay dying on the side of the road, what would I want?* Story gets to the heart of how we should live. Stories are often more powerful than propositions or rules, especially if they're true. Here's why.

Stories tell us who we are. In our society today, we see ourselves as individuals and we think we build our identity by looking inside ourselves. But I don't believe it's possible to overestimate how much our family, race, or nationality shapes us. It tells us who we are. I'm a Kleinsasser and that history shapes who I am, how I think about life, and how I do things. I'm shaped by the story of my race. It impacts how I experience life, what I love and what I'm afraid of. That's why when people don't know their story, they often feel like they don't have an identity. Why do adopted children have such a longing to know their biological parents? They want to know who they are.

The Christian story claims to be the human story and the foundation of that story is the Bible. It tells us who God is. It tells us where we came from. It tells us that we were created in the Image of God and therefore have incalculable worth. It tells us that we are prone to sin, but that when we do sin, God pursues us. And it tells us that God took on flesh, died for us and rose again so to give us a glimpse of our future.

That story extends out to the future and it says that there will come a day when we'll have to give an account of what we've done with this life, but also that someday God will renew our broken world and make right everything that was wrong. If we believe that story is true—it can't help but impact how we live our lives. That's authority.

Now, there are other stories, too. Probably the most common today is secular humanism. Secular humanists boast that they don't rely on a book or take the word of authorities to tell us who we are. Their foundation is *science*.

But science isn't just a set of propositions. Science tells its own story. If the beginning of the Biblical story is, *“In the beginning, God created the heaven and earth,”* secular humanist begins with Carl Sagan's famous line, *“The Cosmos is all that is or was or ever will be.”* Which, of course, isn't observable or even a scientific statement.

That story is that the blind forces of evolution cooked up a primordial soup that resulted in a single-celled organism that over time became more complex. Eventually, it mutated and developed the ability to move around, eat, and reproduce. Later, it developed something like arms and legs and was able to come out of the soup and walk around on land. Through a mechanism called Natural Selection, the organisms continued to become more complex and evolved into different types of animals, many becoming more complex eventually developing consciousness—language, religion and morality.

Now, don't misunderstand me. I'm not saying the Bible and science are opposed to each other. I don't believe that's the case as all. I think there's much about the Bible and science that work together to help us see the world clearly. Science is an effective tool to help us to understand the natural world. It just doesn't work as the foundation of an overarching story.

If the cosmos is all there is, then what gives life meaning? Even if evolution can theoretically tell us how morality came about, it can't tell us why anyone should be obligated to love their neighbor? It can tell us that bad things happen, but it can't tell us why we have this strange feeling that this isn't the way things are supposed to be.

Now, I don't think most people are conscious of these stories in everyday life. Most people just want to be comfortable, make decent money, eat good food, and have fulfilling relationships. But most people take the bits and pieces of the stories we like, regardless of whether they actually fit together.

For instance, people today really like the idea of a *loving* God (which, by the way is an idea they we got from the Bible). We especially like the idea of a god who loves me just the way I am. But we don't realize, that we can't have a god who always approves of me *and* a god of justice. The reason is that I'm not the only person in the world.

You see, if someone approaches me on the street, takes all my money and beats me within an inch of my life, would it be loving if god said to my attacker, "*Don't worry, I love you just the way you are. Just, you do you?*" That wouldn't be love for me and it wouldn't be justice for him. We can't just pick and choose the parts of the story we want to believe. We need to have an authoritative story that shows us who we are and what the world is and how we should live in it. The Bible is that kind of story. //

Second, *it's inspired by God*. The Apostle Paul in 2 Timothy 3:16 says it this way, "**¹⁶All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, ¹⁷so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.**" It uses the phrase God-breathed.

Now, that doesn't mean that the Bible was dropped out of the sky or dictated directly to the various authors—at least not most of them. But Christians believe that God guided the *writing, preservation* and *collection* of all the books of the Bible. It's a mysterious mix of divine truth and insight expressed through human hands.

But I know some people will say, "*Well, the human thing I buy, but it can't be divine because of its outdated science and primitive morality that we just can't believe anymore.*" People are very quick to jump on this. They read something that seems just wrong and they give up on the Bible and say, "See, I told you Christianity can't be right!" But I want you to see how Pastor Tim Keller responds. He says when we come across teachings that offend us, before we write it off, we should consider three things.

First, *consider that the Bible might not teach what you think it teaches*. He uses two examples from Scripture, polygamy and primogeniture, which were both institutions that were universal in ancient cultures.

Of course, polygamy is the practice of having more than one wife, which of course makes the man the center of everything and really privileges men and we can't accept that today. But, he points out that if you really read Scripture, while the Old Testament talks about polygamy, in every generation

polygamy is always a complete disaster in every way. You don't find stories of a healthy polygamous family in the Bible. Even though it talks about it, it's never advocated as the ideal.

Primogeniture is the practice where the firstborn son gets the inheritance and the seat of honor—he essentially rules over the rest of the family simply because of birth order. And we say that's just not fair!

But again if you look closely, the Bible doesn't teach primogeniture because in every story in Genesis, for instance, God never favors the oldest son, he always favors the younger—Able over Cain, Isaac over Ishmael, Jacob over Esau. The Bible overturns, not supports those patriarchal institutions. So, before you rush to judgment, consider that it might not say what you think it says.

Second, he says consider that *you might misunderstand what the Bible is teaching because of your cultural blinders*. In our small group, we're studying the book of 1 Timothy and some of the women in our group, after reading chapter 2, came to small group and they were utterly offended. Here's why, listen to the passage.

“¹¹A woman should learn in quietness and full submission. ¹²I do not permit a woman to teach or to assume authority over a man; she must be quiet. ¹³For Adam was formed first, then Eve. ¹⁴And Adam was not the one deceived; it was the woman who was deceived and became a sinner. ¹⁵But women will be saved through childbearing—if they continue in faith, love and holiness with propriety.”

Many of the women were appalled and ready to throw their Bible out the window. The men were like, “Preach it!” But this is one of those cases where when you don't understand the cultural context, you won't understand the passage. I'll try to explain it quickly because I brought it up and now we have women who are ready to walk out.

Now, first of all, we know there must be another explanation beside sexism because Paul does train women to be teachers in other places. But in Roman society in Paul's day it was very rare for a woman to be educated. In Jewish society, women weren't allowed to even learn the Torah. So, when Paul says he doesn't allow the women to be teachers, it wasn't because they were *women*, it was because they were uneducated. There are some other cultural things that were at play, too, but we don't have time to go into them today.

But some people might object that Paul justifies his position by pointing to Eve in Genesis and he *seems* to say that since Eve sinned first, women would be punished by patriarchy. But if you read the Genesis story, you'll see that Eve was created *after* God gave the instructions not to eat from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. She was deceived because she was not taught well.

But what about women being saved through child-bearing? That part is true. No, actually that's also a reference to Genesis, this time in Genesis 3 which describes the fall, where God says this to the serpent, **“¹⁵And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel.”**

What in the world is Paul talking about? Well, the woman's offspring is Jesus. It's a prophesy about Christ defeating Satan. And of course, it was woman—Mary—who gave birth to Jesus, so Paul isn't talking about individual women giving birth, he's talking about the female role in salvation. Now, I know it seems weird to us and it can be confusing, but the reason is because we have cultural blinders.

The third thing Keller says to consider is that *you may be getting offended by some Biblical teaching because of an unexamined assumption that your cultural understanding is superior.*

We live in a society that almost always believes that newer is better. This is the unexamined mindset of our culture. In fact, we idolize youth culture so much that, while other cultures revere and look to the older generation for wisdom, we tend to discard their wisdom as out of touch. When people question whether a societal change is good, we're quick to tell them they're on the "wrong side of history."

Inevitably, there will be passages of Scripture that people in our culture will read and have trouble with and others that will be fine. But if you go to another culture, they'll be fine with the one we have trouble with and will have trouble with ones we think is fine. Why should we assume our culture is right and other cultures are wrong?

For instance, our individualistic culture thinks the Bible's view of sex is repressive and unhealthy and dangerous, but we like the passages about forgiving our enemies. Other cultures, like in the Middle East, will be fine with the passages about sex (probably not strict enough), but the Bible's teaching on forgiving your enemies is scandalous. That's crazy! If you live that way, people will eat you alive!

Is it possible that we're offended isn't because the Bible is outdated, but because we lack perspective. This is what C.S. Lewis called "chronological snobbery" or we might call it culturally snobbery. Why should our cultural sensibilities trump everyone else's? Why should you disbelieve the Bible because it offends your culture?

This is actually the advantage of a book that's 3000-year old, that was written over the course of 1500 years in a number of different cultures. Maybe it just has a perspective that we don't have when we assume that everything in our culture is progress. Maybe—just maybe—the Bible has something to say to us, not despite its ancient roots, but *because* of them.

If the Bible was really God-breathed and not the product of one culture, wouldn't you think it would have some things that would resonate with every culture and some things that would offend every culture. The Bible is an equal opportunity offender. When the Old Testament was written, it was offensive to the Jews it was written to. The New Testament was offensive to the Jews, Greeks and Romans at certain points.

So, when we reject it the Bible because we're offended, we have to ask ourselves, where did that belief come from anyway? Usually, it's not from some universal human truth. For of us, it's probably pop culture or the latest poll. Maybe, Oprah or a movie or Facebook. Where will they be 3000-years from now? Do we really want to put our everlasting faith in them? Is it possible that the reason some parts of the Bible offend you is *because* it's God-breathed, not despite it. //

So, the Bible is the human story, inspired by God...*Third, handed down through generations...*One problem people have with the Bible is they think that we just have to take it on authority, but we know that you can't believe something just because some authority says it's true. Rather than blindly trusting some authority, shouldn't we rather live based on some observable proof? Trust in the Bible based on *faith* in authorities, but we believe science based on proof. Well, that's a gross oversimplification.

Michael Polanyi, who died in 1976, was a chemist who turned philosopher when he realized that his colleagues in the sciences were making grand claims that science can explain everything simply by observing evidence. Polanyi said this is a misunderstanding of what really happens. Let me put it this way.

Have you ever looked through a telescope and mathematically calculated the movement of the planets around the sun? Have you ever observed that light behaves like particles and waves? Have you ever witnessed the splitting of an atom? Do you believe these things? Me too. Why do you believe it? You take it on authority.

Polanyi said that science works the same way. No scientist has directly observed more than a tiny fraction of everything there is to know in his field. So, for the rest, he has to rely on the authority of approved scientists who have seen things they haven't. He said that science isn't a method, but a group of skilled people who trust each other.

We live in a society that tells us we can trust *scientific* authority, but we can't trust religious authority. Scientists are objective, theologians are pushing an agenda. So, today people watch Neil Degrasse Tyson videos and take what he says as gospel truth. People believe him because he's a scientist and they take it on his authority. They don't realize that he's promoting a certain way of seeing the world.

Now, I'm not saying trusting authority is illegitimate. We can't avoid it. What I'm saying is that you can't say that science is based on proof and religion is based on blind authority. We all rely on authority who pass down truth from generation to generation. The question is which authorities should we trust? //

So, the Bible is the human story, inspired by God, passed down through generations... and finally...*it teaches us to see the world as it really is*. Again, this is where the Bible and science are similar. They're both a way of seeing the world. Both the Bible and science teaches how to look at facts.

You've probably seen this or something like it before. [duck-rabbit pic] What do you see here? Do you see a duck or a rabbit? Some of you can switch back and forth easily. Some will look at it and say, "Where do you see the duck?" Now, we're all looking at the exact same thing but we're seeing something different.

Here's how it works in science. A medical doctor and a patient might look at the same X-ray, but they see different things. In fact, it might seem to the patient that the doctor is seeing things that aren't there until she shows the patient how to look at the X-ray. Reading an x-ray isn't natural, a medical student has to be taught how to look at it in order to see it as it really is.

In this analogy, the Bible isn't the X-ray, it's the radiology professor. The Bible isn't something we look at, it's something we look *through* in order to see the world from God's perspective.

You see, unlike the photo of the duck or rabbit, the claim of Christianity is that there is a right and a wrong way to see the world. My point today was not that the Bible is the right way and science is the wrong way, but science fits into the worldview of the Bible. It's a way we can understand the natural world. But the Bible is the God-revealed, cohesive over-arching story that shows us how to navigate the world.

It's how we understand our place in the world. It's the foundation for things like human dignity, morality, and justice. And it ultimately shows us who God is by showing us Jesus. What I tried to do today isn't to convince you that it's true, but to convince you why it really is plausible to trust your life to a 3000-year-old book. But to really know, you have to step into it and begin to view the world through the Bible.