



Light  
*of the*  
Word

HOW  
KNOWING  
THE HISTORY  
OF THE BIBLE  
ILLUMINATES  
OUR FAITH

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# 1

## The Scriptures and Salvation

HAVE YOU EVER ASKED GOD POINT-BLANK, “Is the Bible truly your Word?” This is one of the most important questions we can ask our Lord, and he will answer those who sincerely ask because that’s just who he is. He is a God of clarity and a God of revelation. His answer might not come in a euphoric epiphany or an emotional experience, but his answer will come to those who sincerely ask.

I asked God that question after that fateful revelation in 2007 about my hidden unbelief. God initially led me in the form of inquisitiveness. A million other questions suddenly surfaced, questions I had never voiced before. Who wrote these individual books? When were they written? How do we know they are still in their original form? Who decided that these books would be compiled into one big book called the Bible? Are there other writings that didn’t make the cut? Who translated them into other languages? The questions went on and on.

I realized that I had suppressed these questions mainly out of fear. I was afraid to ask these questions because I didn’t want other Christians to think I was questioning the inerrancy of God’s Word.<sup>1</sup> I was afraid to voice my unbelief. I was a Bible study leader

and a respected member of the church by this point. I felt like I had a lot to lose by sharing my confusion and doubts. I was also afraid to ask these questions because they could prove my doubts about the truth of God's Word. It's one thing to disbelieve the veracity of Scripture based on cursory knowledge, but what if a thorough examination led to hard and undeniable *proof* that God's Word was a total fabrication? Then my faith would come tumbling down like a house of cards.

But it dawned on me that God *wanted* me to ask these questions. These questions did not offend or unsettle him. He invited and aroused these questions so I would know his Word better. So I would know *him* better.

### ***EVEN SPIRITUAL GIANTS HAVE DOUBTS***

Let's say that a person professed faith in Christ and then learned that a book in the Bible (for example, Esther) never mentions God directly throughout the whole book. And let's say this person doubts if Esther has a rightful place in the Bible, and then this person dies without resolving this query. Does this person get to spend eternity with Jesus? Absolutely. This person's salvation has been secured, even if they had doubts about the rightful place of Esther (or any other book) in the Bible. Now, did this person miss out on understanding more fully God's sovereignty and love for his people through the lives of Esther, Mordecai, Haman, and Xerxes? Absolutely, as well. But edification is separate from salvation.

This scenario was true of Martin Luther, the great sixteenth-century Reformer, with the book of James. Luther wanted to remove James from the Bible because he felt that it was "really an epistle of straw . . . for it has nothing of the nature of the

Gospel about it” and believed that the “epistle of James gives us much trouble.” Luther was so frustrated with James that he called the author “Jimmy”! In Luther’s own words, he stated, “I almost feel like throwing Jimmy into the stove.”<sup>2</sup> I am generally hesitant to disagree with Luther, but I must part ways with him on this one.<sup>3</sup> I believe that the epistle of James highlights the gospel of Jesus with a nuance like none other. My main point is that few would doubt that Martin Luther is in God’s presence at this very moment.

I want to reiterate this point because this book should never cause anyone to doubt one’s salvation. If you have accepted Jesus as Lord and Savior, there is nothing, not even a limited knowledge of the Scriptures, that negates your salvation. Even if someone only believes the basic parts of the gospel, and then disregards many other parts of Scripture, this person’s salvation is no less secure.<sup>4</sup>

Yet you might doubt the veracity of certain parts of Scripture; and perhaps doubt and confusion have set in in other areas of your life as well. It could be a fractured relationship, mounting bills, health concerns, or a relational rift that might make you wonder how your salvation intersects with the daily grind. You thought accepting Christ would solve your problems, but Jesus seems rather far off. You hear that he loves you, and you desperately want to believe this is true. But if you’re honest, your soul feels cold. If your life seems confusing, imbalanced, or lacking in hope, God wants you to turn to his Word.

But why would you turn to his Word unless you know that it’s truly from him? It can be a vicious cycle of grasping and hoping, doubting and wondering, and pondering how our relationship with Jesus can seem stunted in daily living. If so, the best place to

run is to the Scriptures—even if you’re unsure of its veracity. Read it, meditate on it, examine it, and pray it. Also *engage* with it, asking God to grant you the knowledge and faith to understand his Word. He will meet you on those pages and orchestrate divine appointments and thoughts to bring you to the truth of his Word. The Word of God promises what no other book can promise, because the Bible is God offering his own heart to us.

### ***THE CANON***

If we’re honest, though, the Bible can be a daunting read. There are names that are very hard to pronounce, some stories leave us scratching our heads, and the historical divide between now and then can seem sizable. Names such as Shelumiel and Zurishaddai, tales such as Lot’s wife turning into a pillar of salt, and historical actors such as pharaohs and prophets are a few examples. But this is when the craft of history can skillfully bridge the distance between times and cultures.

History can seem like entering time travel and landing in a foreign and unrelatable land. But knowing the history of the Bible is a powerful avenue to accepting God’s Word as truth. One way to offset the divide is to start from the present and work backward when possible. Reverse chronological order allows us to begin together here in the twenty-first century, and then travel backward collectively. Reverse chronological order can also make the distant past not seem so distant. For example, two thousand years seems like a considerable divide, but the same period might seem more accessible when measured in life spans. If the average life span is seventy years, then thirty life spans (or even fewer, since lifespans generally overlap) covers two thousand years, bringing us back to the days of Jesus.<sup>5</sup>

History is also a helpful lens to analyze the claim that the books of the Bible are inspired by God. For Christians, the word *canon* is used to denote this claim. This means that the Bible we hold in our hands today is composed of the actual books that God inspired. Christians today can be certain that the Bible received from the Israelites in the Old Testament and Christians in the early church is truly God's Word. We believe with confidence that the books identified as authoritative and inspired were correctly received and accepted in these communities.<sup>6</sup>

So what does the term *canon* mean today? It's not a widely used term in common (meaning non-church, non-academic, or non-theological) language. You might know of a person with that name, or the company so named that makes printers, cameras, and such. Or the word might make you think of weaponry used for warfare way back when (that *cannon* has two n's). But when we use the word *canon* associated with the Protestant Bible, it refers to the sixty-six books of the Old and New Testaments, and *only those books*, as God's Word.<sup>7</sup> A mid-twentieth-century biblical scholar defined *canon* as writings "acknowledged by the Church as documents of the divine revelation."<sup>8</sup> In essence, these are the words God "breathed" into existence.<sup>9</sup>

The first time *canon* was used to denote divine revelation was in AD 367 by Athanasius, who held the important position as bishop of Alexandria.<sup>10</sup> In his annual letter circulated to his churches, Athanasius stated that "it seemed good to me . . . to set before you the books included in the Canon, and handed down, and accredited as Divine." Referencing the Old and New Testaments, Athanasius wanted to make sure that these books alone were counted as "divinely inspired Scripture" and not to "mix them up" with "the books termed apocryphal."<sup>11</sup> The books in the canon,

then, are not words fabricated from human minds, but they are revelations from the eternal God. God selected human agents to convey his thoughts in writing, but they were conduits of these thoughts rather than the originators.

Further, the Latin and Greek etymologies of the word *canon* refer to a straight rod that could be a measuring stick. The extrapolation from this term can add a dual meaning, where canon also implies the absolute standard (or rule) from which all other standards should be measured. This means that in our post-(post-) modern world, the Bible claims that there is absolute truth and all other truths must bow and submit to the truth proclaimed in the Scriptures. There is no picking and choosing—the *entire* Bible and its teachings on money, forgiveness, homosexuality, divorce, and all other topics are accepted as the ultimate truth and authority.<sup>12</sup> All this to say, a twenty-first-century Protestant Christian is referring to the thirty-nine books in the Old Testament and twenty-seven in the New Testament when using the term *canon*.

When such a sizable claim is made in the realm of spiritual matters, people rightfully look to spiritual proof to authenticate the pronouncement. Golden tablets sent from celestial beings sure would be nice right about now to substantiate the divine nature of the Word. For Christians, however, there is no such tale. Instead, we must look at the messy nature of canonicity, while marveling at God’s sovereign, divine, and expert hand in creating the Word. How can we bridge the messy with the marveling? One powerful method is by fusing history and theology—and praying that both types of information transform into faith.

Even if history proves that Jesus lived and died, historian Scot McKnight notes that “the historical method cannot prove . . . that Jesus died for our sins and was raised for our justification.”<sup>13</sup> That



is, even if historical evidence proves that Jesus died on a Roman cross, history alone cannot prove *why* Jesus hung on that cross. That's where theology comes in. Borrowing words from theologian Kevin Vanhoozer, "History alone cannot answer the question of what the canon finally is; theology alone can do that."<sup>14</sup> Discerning which books are actually considered divine in origin requires that historical information is distilled through a theological framework. A correct understanding of God's nature, attributes, and personality are a part of this quest of discernment. History and theology working in tandem help build our faith in Jesus who was sent to redeem us.

### ***EXPERIENCING AND INVESTIGATING THE SCRIPTURES***

Salvation is a mysterious thing, and the moment of salvation can be anything but a definable moment. There are the dramatic stories of conversion, but there are also those who grew up in Christian homes and somewhere along the way their parents' faith became their own. Although our Savior is always the same, our salvation stories are personal and nuanced. The same can be said of our relationship with the Scriptures.

My brother's story drives home this point. Henry, who is now a criminal prosecutor, previously found himself on the wrong side of the law. He made some poor choices as a teenager and ended up in jail. At a very low moment in his life, sitting in solitary confinement, he looked around his cell and saw a lone piece of literature: the Gospel of John. He wasn't a follower of Jesus, but desperation made him pick up this book. As he read, he felt a divine presence enter the room and into his soul. His reading of the Word made him believe in the possibility of God's

existence—in the possibility that the divine and carnal intersect, that hope can be found in the most unexpected places.

This type of experiential interaction with the Word is certainly a gateway into knowing Jesus more, whether as Savior or the Word. Start there, whichever verse the Lord speaks to you. Hang on to that verse or passage for dear life, and then ask him to speak more through his Word. Along the way, continue to attend church, listen to sermons, join a Bible study, and read books that point to the formation and elucidation of Scripture.

My own journey, combining these elements, took many years. A pivotal moment came when I experienced the power of the Scriptures in a life-altering way. This was the year that Josephine, my daughter, was born, which turned out to be the hardest year of my life. A few months after giving birth I was diagnosed with a condition called a “petrous apex mucocele” that had gotten out of hand, and I lost hearing in my right ear and feeling on the right side of my face. My surgeon told me that I would eventually lose all hearing and all feeling if left untreated. After the diagnosis, I started having panic attacks, where even in broad daylight and open spaces I felt like I was drowning. Then I started feeling dizzy and blurry in my vision, and I went through more scans and tests than I can remember.

I was extremely fortunate to have a compassionate and skilled doctor who spent hours talking with me about all the options available. Doug and Julie, my pastor and his wife at our church in Woodland, California, walked alongside us every step, offering an incredible amount of prayer and counseling. Brian, my husband, was nothing short of heroic. But it was God’s Word that broke through the madness.

One evening, I came across Scripture reminding me of God's love and sovereignty. Those words felt like lightning entering my soul, and I wept and laughed in unison. In that moment, I felt a divine joy, sustaining peace, and deep cleansing of my soul that can't be fully explained in human vernacular. It felt like a light had dawned in pitch darkness.

I savored the words and meditated on them, praying them over my soul. Those verses ushered me to meditate on God's character and how much he loves me and is so worthy of being trusted. And eventually my fears about my surgery and all the what-ifs slowly receded.

Each fear based on a what-if was replaced with God's holy presence and promise. What if I can't take care of my newborn? *God loves Josephine more than I do and will care for her regardless.* What if the surgery is a failure and I lose all hearing and feeling on that side? *God formed me in my mother's womb, continues to sustain my every breath, and is mindful of my frame.* What if I don't survive the surgery because of some accident? *God knows the exact moment of my last breath on this planet, and nothing can thwart his best and loving plans for my life. He is sovereign, he is good, and he is so very much in love with me.*

Soon after that experience, I asked God, "How did all this come together? And how did your Word become what it is?" I heard nothing right away, but soon after, a friend recommended that I read New Testament scholar F. F. Bruce's *The Canon of Scripture*.<sup>15</sup> I had started digging around for answers for over a year at this point, but Bruce's book was like none other. From defining the term *canon*, to covering the compilation of both the Old and New Testaments, Bruce's book served as a textbook of sorts. From there, God stoked a love for his Word, both in content and canonicity.

God's Word entered my soul like lightning. But this moment was not singular. It sparked a lifetime of delving into the Scriptures, where newfound discoveries awakened greater love for the Bible. But it has also brought me to deeper wrestling with Scripture, where certain verses have left me confused or certain parables remain enigmatic. I explore the hard questions, not in order to believe that the Bible is truly God's Word, but because I already believe by faith and reason that it is.

### ***CIRCULAR REASONING***

In college I had a lab partner in biology class who was an atheist, but we often talked about God. I was a new Christian, and I just couldn't help bringing up Jesus from time to time. He was so actively working in my life that it was difficult not to talk about him. One day my lab partner, James, said, "Where are you getting all this stuff about Jesus?" and I replied, "The Bible." He then said, "How do you know it's true?" And I told him that the Bible declares that it is the Word of God. I pulled out my pocket Bible and pointed to John 1:1. He then asked me, "Can you prove that it's the Bible without referencing the Bible?" And I told him, "Hmm, well, uh . . . let me get back to you on that."

I wish I could contact James now and share with him what I've learned since. Yes, there is much evidence that the Bible is God's Word. Yes, you can make this claim without referencing the Bible. It takes faith to believe the reality of this claim, but it also takes faith to disbelieve it. Rejecting a claim needs a framework and rational basis, too, and it takes faith to discount the truth of the Scriptures. I hope that professing Christians, as well as atheists like James, will discover the evidence outside of Scripture that the Bible is indeed what it claims to be: God's Word to humanity.

Christians have been taught that faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God, as stated in Romans 10:17. Many powerful verses throughout the Bible attest to its own veracity, and I believe every one of them (for example, Deuteronomy 8:3; Psalm 18:30; Psalm 19:7; Matthew 4:4; John 1:1; Ephesians 6:17; 2 Timothy 3:16; Hebrews 4:12; 2 Peter 3:16). But citing its own claim can seem, at best, circular reasoning, and, at worst, fraudulent. There are many well-respected theologians who would disagree with me on this point. For example, theologian and authors Norman L. Geisler and William E. Nix believe that using the Bible to validate its own assertion for holy status is not circular reasoning and any such charges are “unfounded.”<sup>16</sup> Many good books already exist using Scripture to validate Scripture, and there is a place and need for such dialogue. This book, however, aims to use mainly nonbiblical sources to prove why Scripture should be accepted as God’s Word.

Using Scripture to validate Scripture can seem like a version of, “We can prove that Zeus exists because Hermes believed in Zeus’s existence.” This does not mean, however, that Scripture will be excluded in our discussion in what it *self-proclaims*. The Bible claims to be God’s Word, and it is vital that we examine these assertions. We’ll also assess the Scriptures alongside historical evidence and theological and rational dialogue.

I respect James’s question and these challenges because they are rational and important assertions. The Christian faith is making a gigantic ask of its followers to base their entire lives on words written centuries past. There are easy parts to believe—such as loving our neighbor and serving the poor—but what about the passages about not judging others and forgiving those who have hurt us? The Bible is not a buffet where we can pick and choose

various parts to conform to our taste. It must *all* be true; otherwise the claim of canonicity in sum total cannot be made.

Faith comes by hearing God's Word, and there is no doubt about that. As you read about canonicity, my prayer is that you would continue to study and consume the Scriptures voraciously. May our investigation into the compilation of God's Word be coupled with his actual Word. May the Lord open our hearts and minds to the truth of the Word as we delve further. We cannot trust and live out the Scriptures apart from the Holy Spirit, so to the living God we ask,

*Holy Spirit,*

*We need you. And we invite you to take charge of this journey. May the words in this book point to the Scriptures. And may the Scriptures illuminate our hearts and minds to your eternal love. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.*

### **QUESTIONS TO PONDER**

1. Where are you currently on the journey from the first to the second confession?
2. What has your relationship with the Bible been like?

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