

## **Urban Legends – Part 8**

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## Urban Legends<sup>1</sup> How We Got Our Bible

You know what an urban legend is, right? An urban legend is a commonly circulated myth, that gets repeated throughout the culture and history as common knowledge, but which isn't true,<sup>2</sup> but it gets repeated enough that people begin to believe it is true. Now, I can't tell you if Bigfoot or the Loch Ness monster or UFOs are real, and you won't ever catch me preaching about those things. But the reason we are doing this series is because we do want to correct some of the urban legends that are floating around about some passages of Scriptures, and even some of the urban legends or myths about church history.

And that's what we're going to do today – we are going to look at one of those legends, or at least misunderstandings, about something in church history. Today we are going to look at *how we got our Bible*.

I think this is important because the reality, as opposed to the myth, gives us a much deeper appreciation for God's Word, and also a deeper appreciation for the way the Holy Spirit works in and through the church then and now. Does that sound okay?

So to start with, what are...

### The Legends

...around how we got our Bible today? Most Christians would agree that the Bible is divinely inspired, but they've never stopped to consider what that means and how that happened. So for many people, they believe that the Bible sort of descended on some sparkling clouds out of heaven, handed down to us. Or maybe they think they were golden tablets that were discovered and dug up, perfectly preserved for us. Some people wouldn't buy into those notions, but instead think that God somehow possessed the Bible authors, so the writers turned into some sort of human typewriter zombie. Or, some think, that if nothing else, God paced the floor around

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<sup>1</sup> Sources for this series/sermon:

David A. Croteau and Gary E. Yates *Urban Legends of the Old Testament* (B&H Academic, Nashville TN 2019)

David A. Croteau *Urban Legends of the New Testament* (B&H Academic, Nashville, TN 2015)

Michael Svigel and John Adair *Urban Legends of Church History* (B&H Academic, Nashville, TN 2020)

Eric J. Bargerhuff, *The Most Misused Verses in the Bible* (Bethany House Publishing, Bloomington, Minn., 2012)

Robert Jamieson, A. R. Fausset, and David Brown, *Commentary Critical and Explanatory on the Whole Bible*, vol. 1 (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1997)

John D. Barry et al., *Faithlife Study Bible* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2012, 2016)

Lee Strobel, *The Case for Christianity* (Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2014)

David Daniels, *Inspiration*, <https://www.preachingtoday.com/sermons/sermons/2010/june/txtmsg1.html>

<sup>2</sup> David A. Croteau, *Urban Legends of the New Testament*, xiii.

each writer, dictating the Bible verbatim while the authors furiously chiseled the words into stone, or quickly scribbled with their feathers and ink onto parchment.

As dramatic as those legends might seem, none of them are accurate. On the other hand, some skeptics think that someone at some point in history made up the Scriptures and passed them off as divinely inspired. But when you learn the real story, you realize that none of those things are true, and in fact, can *only* be inspired by God for us.

So let me walk us through...

## **The Reality**

...of how we got our Bible. That way we can better understand the power of God's Word and be able to directly apply what we've learned to our spiritual lives.

So to begin with, we need to talk about the...

### **- Inspiration**

...of the Bible. The Apostle Peter gives us some insight into this when God spoke through him to us about this. Would you mind standing with me as I read it? Thank you:

For we did not follow cleverly devised stories when we told you about the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ in power, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty... We also have the prophetic message as something completely reliable, and you will do well to pay attention to it, as to a light shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts. Above all, you must understand that no prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet's own interpretation of things. For prophecy never had its origin in the human will, but prophets, though human, spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit. (2 Peter 1:16-21, niv)

Thank you for standing – you can be seated. There are some key clues in there – eyewitnesses, which we will talk about in a bit, and you'll notice that Peter uses this phrase, "The words of the prophets" or "prophecy of Scripture." Peter is talking about the Old Testament Scriptures, but if he were writing today, he would be talking about our Old and New Testaments, the Scriptures that we hold in our hands."<sup>3</sup>

He's making the point that it is God's Word. For sure, he's talking about the accuracy of the Old Testament prophecies, especially when they speak of Jesus the Christ. That, in itself, makes the point that Scripture is divinely inspired.

Josh and Sean McDowell quote a university mathematician in their book, *Evidence That Demands a Verdict*: We find that the chance that *any* man to have lived and

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<sup>3</sup> Daniels, *ibid*

fulfilled just eight prophecies is 1 in  $10^{17}$  (1 in 100,000,000,000,000,000). But more than that, the probability of one person fulfilling 48 prophecies about Jesus (which there are): 1 in  $10^{157}$ . In other words, it is impossible; and yet Jesus fulfilled all of well over 50 prophecies about himself! The statistical probability alone is enough to lead us to conclude that the Bible is divinely inspired.

But we need to realize that when we talk about the inspiration of the Bible, we are talking about the Bible's *origin*—where the Bible came from. If I write a book, I am that book's author, and that book contains my intellectual property. It contains my stuff. The stuff that used to be up in my head is now put inside of that book. That book represents something of who I am, right? But when I come to the Bible and look on the front cover, there's no author's name on it. It doesn't say, "The Holy Bible, written by God." When I open up the back flap of my Bible, there's not a studio-posed head shot picture of God with information about where he likes to vacation or other books he's written. None of that information is given.

And yet Peter tells us in this passage, without apology, that the Bible—this book that you hold in your hand today whether printed or digital or audio—this Bible is what one author rightly calls "God's intellectual property." It comes from God. And, in fact, three times Peter makes mention of this in this passage. In verse 16, he basically says, "What we brought to you was not men's fables, men's ideas. We didn't craft myths in order to teach you spiritual truth. That's not what Scripture is." In verse 20, Peter says that Scripture never came about by the prophet's or the writer's own interpretation, or by their own ideas. Men throughout history were not trying to promote their own agendas. They were not motivated by their own internal source. And then he says in verse 21 that "prophecy or Scripture never had its origin in the will of men." The Bible did not begin with human beings, he says. The Scriptures began in the heart of God.

The Bible is God's intellectual property. And when we talk about the origin of Scripture, what we're really talking about is the theological idea called *inspiration*, the inspiration of the Scriptures. Now, in today's world there are a variety of things that inspire us. You could listen to a Mozart opera, look at a Monet painting, or listen to a sermon or speech by Dr. Martin Luther King. You could be inspired. When we talk about inspiration in today's culture, we're talking about how we feel when we read, see, or receive something, right? We feel inspired. But when we talk about the inspiration of Scripture, we're not primarily talking about how *we* feel when we read the Bible; we're talking about *where* the Bible began and the actual content of the Bible—how the Bible came to us. And what we learn is that the Bible was *spirited* or *breathed out*. It was *inspired* by God to human beings.<sup>4</sup>

One author writes, "What Peter describes is a divine-human partnership in which God initiates and guides the process of communicating the exact message he wants to reveal. He does this through chosen prophets and apostles who accurately record that message, but in ways that reflect their own unique personalities."<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Daniels, *ibid*

<sup>5</sup> Strobel, *ibid*

There's a very important Scripture that can help us understand this. It goes hand in hand with our passage in 2 Peter. It's found in 2 Timothy chapter three. Listen to what Paul says:

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 3:16-17, niv)

That's a really good visual picture – that the Scriptures we hold in our hands are God-breathed. The Greek word that Paul uses here is a word that means *God-spirited*. It was breathed out of God, into the writer and then into us. Which means more than simply God authored the word or that he wrote or dictated the word. God-spirited means that Scripture came from *within* God. It reflects God's language; it contains God's *life*. Think about this phrase in light of a couple of passages of Scripture: in The Genesis account of creation, we are told that God “breathed into Adam’s nostrils the breath of life and the man became a living being.” (2:7). Then, in the Gospels we see Jesus breathing on the disciples the breath of the Spirit of God and saying, “be filled with the Holy Spirit.” (John 20:22). In both cases, the image and nature of God is being breathed into people. That’s the same image we get when Paul tells us that Scripture is God-breathed. *The image and nature of God is in the words*. The Bible is God’s intellectual property and his life, his breath, and his Spirit.

So inspiration is important to understand when we talk about the Word of God. Got it?

But then that raises the question of...

## - Transmission

...in other words, how do we know that the words we have today are true to the original words when God inspired the authors to write them? If inspiration tells us *who* the author of Scripture is, then transmission tells us *how* the author delivered that message to us.

First of all, like we said earlier, God spoke to and through the unique personalities, experiences, and cultural contexts of each author. That’s why the Bible, in the Old and New Testaments, was written over a period of 1500 to 2000 years, and God spoke through roughly 35 different people to record it, in three different languages – Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek. And yet through it all, it tells the consistent overarching narrative of God’s desire and plan to be in a saving relationship with us.

Now, the Old Testament has gone through a proving process many centuries before we received our New Testament, but what about the New Testament? Since our faith is based on God’s Word to us in the New Testament, how can we be sure that it was transmitted to us well?

Remember how Peter described himself and the others in that verse we read earlier? He said “We were ??? of his majesty” ... do you remember? He said we were

“eyewitnesses” of his majesty. What we have are eyewitness accounts. All scholars agree that the Gospel of Mark was written no later than in the 70s AD, Matthew and Luke in the 80s AD, and John in the 90s AD. Remember, Jesus was executed sometime between 30-33AD.

In fact, when we look at the book of Acts, also written by Luke, it is very possible that he wrote it even earlier than the 80s. Here’s why: if you read the end of the book of Acts, Paul is still alive. That means it was written no later than 62AD. Remember, Luke wrote his Gospel after Mark did; Mark was the earliest Gospel written, so that means that more accurately, it was written down sometime in the 50s or 60s AD – *less than 20 years from Jesus’ crucifixion and resurrection!* One historian says that, when we’re talking about history, that is like an immediate news flash! And it’s not just the four Gospels; the New Testament letters were also written by eyewitnesses, and the earliest manuscripts that we have are within 100 years of the originals.

You might think that’s a long time – within a century of the actual events, but again, historically speaking, it’s a news flash. Let’s just compare the New Testament manuscripts with other historical documents.

For instance, the earliest known manuscripts that we have for Aristotle’s writings is within 1400 years of when he wrote the original. The earliest copies of Plato are within 1200 years of the original. The earliest copy of Homer’s *Illiad* is within 500 years of the original. There isn’t a literary scholar in the world that questions the accuracy of *those* documents, and the closest of those that we have are five hundred years to one thousand four hundred years of the originals. So what about the New Testament? *The copies we have are within a hundred years – in some cases, even within one generation!* And of those historical documents I mentioned, in many cases we only have one copy known to be in existence. But with the Gospels and the New Testament, we have *hundreds* of copies from that same era. Historically speaking, these are eyewitness accounts.

So all of the New Testament was first written within the lifetimes of the eyewitnesses of the life of Jesus, which would have including hostile eyewitnesses – there were plenty of people at that time who could have refuted and proven it if the Gospels were lying.

Not to mention that if the Gospels were a lie, then *all* of the eyewitnesses were willing to be executed – martyred – for a lie.

One author points out that one of the greatest classical historians, A. N. Sherwin-White of Oxford University, (determined) the rate at which legend developed in the ancient world. He said that it would take more than two generations of time for a legend to develop and wipe out a solid core of historical truth.

Now, think about modern events that happened about thirty to sixty years ago. The presidency of Ronald Reagan, the assassination of President Kennedy, the Vietnam War, even the Korean War—there are plenty of eyewitnesses around today who

have detailed memories of these. How much more would the writers of the gospels remember the words and deeds of the one they knew to be God's Son?<sup>6</sup>

I could go on and on, but I think I've proven that God has miraculously preserved our Scriptures for us from the very beginning.

The next thing we need to know is something called...

### **- Canonization**

...or the finalization of what's in our New Testament. How did we get what we have, and not other writings?

In the early days of the church, the Apostles realized that they needed to cover more territory. So they wrote down the accounts of Jesus, and made copies, and sent them out to be circulated between all the churches, where they would be read, studied, discussed and prayed over in order to encourage their faith and help them become more like Jesus. Then the letters were written to certain churches (which is why they are named after those churches), but then those letters would also be copied and circulated among the churches. This includes the book of Revelation. But as the church began to be persecuted and scattered more, and as the Apostles grew older and many were becoming martyred, the church began to gather and preserve the manuscripts, like I told you about earlier. But at the same time, there were other letters and so-called Gospels that were being circulated among the churches, spreading false teachings. If you read the letters of Peter, Paul, and John closely, you'll see that they are warning the church against these false teachings. Well, within a couple generations, the church realized that they needed to canonize, or certify, which ones were accurate, and which were not. So the early church basically had three criteria. First, all the books required "apostolic authority." They had to either have been written by the apostles, or by immediate followers of the apostles.

The second criteria was what they called "the rule of faith." This means that the writings had to be congruent with or consistent with the basic Christian tradition and accepted doctrine in the Church.

Finally, it had to have continuous acceptance and usage by the Church at large. Amazingly, even though there were many false gospels and letters, and even though the churches were scattered over most of the known world at that time, they were able to agree on what we have today as the New Testament.

So if you come across a book like this: *The Lost Books of the Bible*, know this: these were not lost. These were rejected. These are filled with false teachings, or at the least were unnecessary. The reason we have the Bible we have and not others is because the others didn't pass the tests. These were not lost" – they were thrown in the trash!

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<sup>6</sup> Strobel, *ibid*

But then, can we be sure today that we have an accurate

### **- Translation**

Yes we can – for all the reasons I just gave you. The New Testament is rooted in eyewitness testimony close to the lifetime of Jesus, and also, they are corroborated in key places by history and archeology, and they square with other biblical teachings. By the way, I would not put my faith in a bible that can't be corroborated by history and archeology.

Let me give you a bit more detail: I told you we have many copies of the earliest manuscripts. We have them in Greek, and also in Latin, Coptic, Syriac, Armenian, Georgian, and other early languages. Altogether, we have 25,000-30,000 handwritten copies of the New Testament within the first two centuries that we can cross-check with one another to make sure the translations we have are accurate.

And notice, too, how God has used the church to validate, preserve, and confirm his Word. He still does that today. We have so many Bible scholars involved in all of our major translations today that they are checked and cross-checked by scholars of all denominations, making sure that what is published and translated is accurate.

Aren't you glad your Bible didn't descend on a shiny cloud and wasn't dug up on some golden tablets? The New Testament has stood the test of time! Someone once said, "The Bible is the anvil upon which the nations and opinions of men are smashed." The Bible has stood the test of time and withstood all attacks.

So what is...

### **The Application**

Well, first, we can safely conclude that the inspiration, transmission, canonization, and translation of the Bible is...

### **- Plenary and Inerrant**

Those are theological words, but they mean that the Bible in its entirety reveals *without error* the will of God concerning all things necessary to our salvation. *(repeat)* It contains what God wants us to know about himself and how he can save us and give us new life.

And because of all the things we just said, it means...

### **- You can trust His Word.**

Think about it – God went through all of this so that in your hands you could have an accurate and complete revelation of who God is and what he can and will do in and



through your life. *(repeat)* And he did all of that *just for you*. You can trust what he tells you. God tells us in Hebrews 4:12 that:

“The word of God is alive and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart.” (Hebrews 4:12)

Remember, it is God-breathed or God-spirited; it is alive with God! You can trust it.

Now, let me give you a cheat code about the Bible. You know what a cheat code is, right? When you are playing a video game, a cheat code is a secret code of certain numbers or pressing certain buttons that unlocks the levels of the game for you, so that you don't have to do all the work of figuring it out. So I'm about to give you the cheat code of the Bible. The Apostle Paul wrote to the Colossians that:

“The mystery that has been kept hidden for ages and generations, but is now disclosed to the Lord's people.” (Colossians 1:26, niv).

Here it is: all...

### **- The Scriptures point to Jesus.**

When Jesus wrangled with the religious leaders, and they kept quoting Scripture to prove themselves right and to try to make Jesus wrong, Jesus said this to them:

“You search the Scriptures because you think they give you eternal life. But the Scriptures point to me!” (John 5:39, nlt)

So that's why he could teach his disciples:

He said to them, “This is what I told you while I was still with you: Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms.”

Then he opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures. He told them, “This is what is written: The Messiah will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and repentance for the forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. (Luke 24:44-47, niv)

All of the Scriptures point to Jesus!

So don't miss the forest for the trees, or in this case, don't miss the forest for the man who was crucified on a tree – all the Scriptures point to JESUS. That's because...

### **- Jesus is THE Word.**

John's Gospel begins with remarkable similarity to the book of Genesis – the account of the creation of all things. Both books start out saying, “In the beginning...” In Genesis, it says in verse 3, “and God said” and there was light. In verse 6, “And God said” and there was waters. In verse 9, “And God said” and there was dry land. In verse 11 “And God said” and there was vegetation. In verse 14 “And God said” and

there were stars and sun and moon. In verse 20 “And God said” and there were living creatures in the sea. In verse 24, “And God said,” and there were living creatures on the land. And then in verse 26 “and God said” and he created mankind in his image.

In the Beginning, God spoke words, and everything, including us, came into being.

Now, in John we are told this (watch for the similarities):

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it. (John 1:1-5, niv)

John is describing the living embodiment of all the creative, life-giving force of God: Jesus is the Word. Jesus is God incarnate – God in the flesh.

When you read the Bible, you are having a living encounter with the living God, and within it is all the power of God to transform your life and mine. You may not understand it every time, but that’s okay – like the early church, keep reading it, keep studying it, keep discussing it in your small groups, and keep praying over it. Because God’s Word will change you if you let it – even before you fully understand it.

God has gone to miraculous lengths throughout the history of the world to deliver his Word to you. Don’t get me wrong – there are many good things you can read in this world today – things that will inspire you. But there is only one thing that is inspired by God: His Word.

### *Prayer*

Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God. And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him. (Colossians 3:16-17, esv)