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THE CHRISTIAN FAITH

CHURCH OF ENGLAND IN AUSTRALIA DIOCESE OF SYDNEY

STUDY No.

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WHY BELIEVE IN THE BIBLE?

Man, left to himself, rejects the revelation of God that nature and conscience give him, and every time worships the creature rather than the Creator.¹ He even fashions an idol with wood or silver and then bows down and worships the things he has made himself!² So it is just as well that God gave man a written record of His acts in the past and a written revelation of His character.

How was it written?

The Bible is a collection of 66 books, poems and letters, written by more than twenty different authors. It was written over a long span of time, from 1300 B.C. to 100 A.D., and probably some of its oldest books like Genesis were oral traditions handed down from father to son long before ideas were committed to clay or parchment. It was written in three different languages — Hebrew (most of the Old Testament), Aramaic and Greek. Most of the authors were Jews, but some prominent writers like Luke were not. Some of it is in prose (e.g., Exodus) and some in verse (e.g., Psalms). Kings and priests, warriors and housewives, prophets and ordinary men: all had a share in writing it. The Bible contains riddles and laws, love songs and stories, proverbs and

history, prayers and sermons. The style changes continually, not only with the author, but also with the subject. Gay and sad, religious and secular: what is the thread that binds such diverse books into a unity? To find this, we must look at what the Bible says about itself and its origin.

The Bible's claims

Throughout, the Bible claims to be the "inspired Word of God" — that is, the words of the Bible are the words of God, just as the words we breathe are inspired by us. God chose men who wrote down what they saw and what they understood about God, and their record infallibly describes God, man and the relationship between them. God's Spirit spoke through them. This claim is spelled out in verses such as: "No prophecy ever came by the impulse of man, but men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God",³ and "All scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work."⁴ This same claim is made throughout the Old Testament as well, where prophets claim to be speaking "the Word of the Lord".⁵

Jesus put His own words alongside, and on an equality with, the words of God in the Old Testament.⁶ He said that His words were spirit and life⁷ and that they would never pass away.⁸ The apostles Paul and Peter also claimed to be filled with the Spirit of God when they spoke and wrote.⁹ Even among their contemporaries, the writings of the apostles were received as "scripture".¹⁰

But God did not use these men like typewriters, mechanically writing out a mystical word from God that came in the night or out of a cloud. While they claimed to be Spirit-led, the authors never lost their personality or their particular attitudes or viewpoints. For God's Spirit worked through their human gifts and nature, which He Himself had given them. So we can see even at first reading that, although Matthew, Mark, Luke and John all tell the story of Jesus, there are obvious differences in their approach; Matthew presumes a Jewish background, and never misses mentioning Jewish festivals; Mark skips the narrative about Jesus' birth to get on to his favourite theme of Jesus as the Christ; Luke has a thoroughly Gentile approach and carefully explains any terms which would be familiar only to Jews; John is completely different from the others, selecting his material into themes and concentrating on the teaching of Jesus. This variety is a good thing: for it gives us a stereoscopic view of Jesus and not a flat portrait; it also reminds us that God does not obliterate men's personalities when they come to Christ, but He uses and redeems their personalities. So the Bible authors are flesh-and-blood people like us. If there is any doubt left of this, turn to Paul's letters. Full of acute reasoning and warm concern, they strike at the root of the particular problems facing local

churches under Paul's spiritual care, but at the same time they spell out fundamental principles of belief and behaviour that have a significance for every generation.

Content of the Bible

It is important to see the sweep of action throughout the Bible. The whole book is a running commentary on the life of the Jewish race, down to the time of Jesus, and then a commentary on the new people of God, the Christians. The first phase of this plan of salvation is the creation story in Genesis — the universal sinfulness of man, his separation from God, his alienation from his fellowman, his struggle with his environment. Then God sets His heart on Abraham and from his descendants a great nation is born, living in Canaan, exiled in Egypt and then gloriously rescued under Moses' leadership. It is during this rescue that God gives ten basic laws for living, and then hundreds of detailed laws for worship and community living. Over the next 1300 years, the Old Testament tells the story of the progress of the Jews while they obeyed those laws, and their decline when they chose to ignore them.

God called the Jews to be a distinctive people, with their own laws and their worship of one God. Their salvation consisted of being rescued again and again from political and military enemies who wanted their territory, and from judgment when they strayed from their monotheism and worshipped the many gods of the tribes around them. The prophets like Isaiah, Amos and Hosea tried to bring the nation back to a wholehearted worship of their God and obedience to His laws for living. Justice, mercy and truth were the fundamental concepts, but often the Jews deliberately neglected

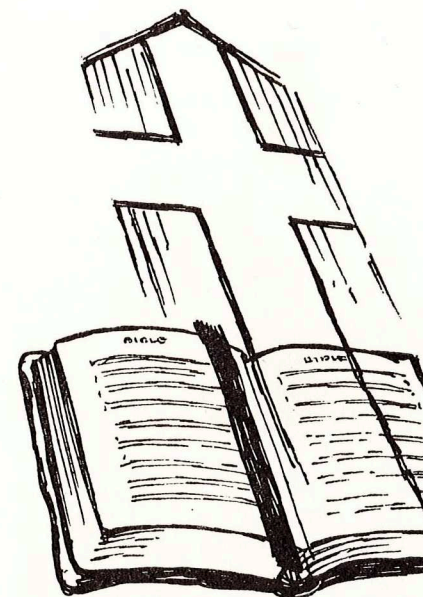
them to make a fast profit, or selfishly extend their territory.

A long period of exile in Babylon taught the Jews a lesson: they could not deliberately neglect God's laws without suffering consequences. Prophets like Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Daniel rammed this truth home. When the Jews were allowed back home, they finally accomplished the re-building of the city of Jerusalem and the temple against massive odds. Again prophets like Haggai and Malachi were on hand to declare God's word to them: get on with the job, give God the glory, set yourself up again as His people.

In the period 1000 B.C. to Jesus' time, a clear strand was emerging from the prophets: God would bring in a new day and a new deal with men; He would send a Saviour who would enable men to have a personal knowledge of forgiveness and to walk with God freely, wanting in their hearts to serve Him. This prophecy was exactly fulfilled when Jesus was born into the world and later commenced His public teaching ministry. He was the Living Word who ushered in the new age of God's dealings, whereby men would have God's Spirit in them, so that they actually wanted to do God's will and were able to do it. If you have this general scheme of the Bible's contents in your mind, it is much easier to fit into it any part of the Bible you happen to start reading, and you can see then the reason for inclusion in the Bible of sections like 1 and 2 Kings.

Is the Bible historical?

Both Old and New Testaments of the Bible are very good historical documents. It is simply not possible to write them off as "fiction" or "later writings". Take the evidence, for example, for the life and death of Jesus. The best evidence, of course, is the Bible record, written



down by eye-witnesses and first-generation spectators. There are five thousand Greek manuscripts in museums and libraries today testifying to the accurate way the Bible record of His life and death have been handed down through the years. Compared to that, the evidence for the life of Julius Caesar is puny — only nine manuscripts exist of his "Gallic Wars", but no-one ever suggests the Gallic Wars did not happen!

As well, there is external evidence for the historicity of Jesus. The Mishnah, writings by Jewish rabbis contemporary with the New Testament, records some of Jesus' teaching and never doubts His existence. Josephus, commander of the Jewish forces in 66 A.D., wrote of John the Baptist and of "Jesus the so-called Christ". Tacitus, a Roman historian, wrote of Jesus. Suetonius, a Roman historian around 120 A.D., wrote, "Punishment was inflicted on the Christians, a class of men addicted to a novel and mischievous superstition." So you cannot doubt the existence of Jesus, a great

teacher in the time of and of the kind described in the Bible.

Is the Bible reliable?

As well as the evidence listed above for its historicity, there is much evidence for the reliability of the Bible. Contemporary histories prove the accuracy, for example, of Luke's titles and terms. Archaeology again and again confirms the Bible record of empires expanding and declining, of cities growing and vanishing, of kings being struck down in their prime. Even when people have set out to disprove the facts in the Bible, they have been forced to admit that it is right. Sir William Ramsay set out to do this in 1870 in relation to Luke's record in the Acts of the Apostles of Paul's missionary journeys, but he concluded: "I was only gradually compelled to a complete reversal of my views by the inescapable evidence of the facts uncovered in the course of my research."

Historical accuracy only serves to bolster up theological accuracy and dependability. Church history is a series of living illustrations of the fact that, where men have taken the Bible at its face value and trusted in the God there revealed, they have in fact come to an experience of forgiveness and have come to know God in a personal way. Men have gone to the stake for its teachings, have given themselves to arduous trials to take the message to far-off tribes and nations, and have slaved for a lifetime in monasteries to hand down the Bible text accurately page for page, line for line. It is impossible and unreasonable to wipe church his-

tory off with a wave of the hand as if so many millions of people through the ages were all mistaken the same way about the same ideas.

As well, the Bible has a remarkable facility for being relevant to every age. That is because it deals with fundamental principles, while applying them to particular examples so that you can see how they work. The Bible is not filled with far-fetched fancies or mystical dreams, but with hard-hitting realities and unremitting moral standards.

How do we know?

In the end, all we have said about the Bible needs to be *experienced personally* before you will really believe it. With humility, we need to read the Bible as the word of God to us. We need to pray that God's Spirit will explain the passages to us and apply them to our lives. And we need to pray for an obedient attitude to what God reveals. David said, "Taste and see that the Lord is good."¹¹ Paul wrote to Timothy, "From childhood you have been acquainted with the sacred writings which are able to instruct you for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus."¹² The proof of the pudding is in the eating. So the proof of the Bible is in reading it, with the attitude of hearing God speaking to you through it.

Bible references:

- 1 Romans 1:18-21
- 2 Isaiah 40:18-20
- 3 2 Peter 1:21
- 4 2 Timothy 3:16-17
- 5 Jeremiah 1:4, Ezekiel 1:3, Hosea 1:1
- 6 Matthew 5:21-22
- 7 John 6:63
- 8 Mark 13:31
- 9 Acts 4:8, 1 Thessalonians 1:5
- 10 2 Peter 3:16
- 11 Psalm 34:8
- 12 2 Timothy 3:15

STUDY 3 is on "What is wrong with man and his world?"

Think about this question: Whatever happened to the idea that man was "coming of age" and progressing morally?