



“Apologies”

The Bible

Sadly the Bible is no longer held in high regard in our society. Writers such as Richard Dawkins view religion as merely superstition, and expect that in course of time theology and other humanities will no longer be taught at Universities. Even so called theologians such as the “Jesus Seminary” group in America choose which bits of the Bible they will accept. Whilst there is truth in Spurgeon’s exclamation “*Defend the Bible? I would sooner defend a lion*” we do need to be able to articulate our defence of the book that is so pivotal to our faith. This is what Francis Schaeffer would have termed “pre-evangelism”. This article will consider the reliability of the Biblical text, the canon of Scripture and the uniqueness of its contents.

The Text

Consider the text of the Old Testament. This was written over a period from around 1400-400 BC. The earliest complete manuscripts are to be found in the Leningrad library and are dated at AD 1008-1009. This is obviously some time after the initial texts would have been written, but let us consider how the texts were passed on.

The texts we have are described as Masoretic texts. The Masorites were groups of scribes in the period AD 500 to AD 900 coming from selected families, the most notable being the Ben Asher family in Tiberius. They devoted themselves to the meticulous copying of manuscripts. The accuracy of their copying can be seen from the fact that when the Dead Sea scrolls were found in 1946 in Qumran near Jericho, there were manuscripts among them dating from the 3rd century BC to 135 AD and the preservation of the text is exceptional. In a copy of the book of Isaiah found at Qumran only three words are different to the Isaiah of the Masoretic text – three words difference in textual copies almost a thousand years apart!

When we come to the New Testament text there are over 5,000 ancient Greek manuscripts in existence. The best whole copies of the New Testament date from around AD 250. There is the Codex Vaticanus held in the Vatican library and the Codex Sinaiticus held in the British Museum. Also dating from AD 500 is the Codex Alexandria, again held in the British Museum. Earlier fragments include the Chester Beattie papyri which contains most of the New Testament and dates from the third century AD. In the John Rylands library in Manchester, there is a fragment of the Gospel of John from AD 130. The Magdalene papyri is a fragment of the Gospel of Matthew which has been dated by German papyriologist Carsten Thiede at around AD 70. All the books of the New Testament were in circulation by the middle of the second century.

How does this compare with other accepted secular ancient texts? Caesar’s Gallic War was written between 58-50 BC. There are nine or ten manuscripts in existence, the earliest of which is dated 900 years after the time of Julius Caesar. Livy’s Roman history was written between 59 and 17 AD but only 35 of his 142 books survived and these are in 20 manuscripts dated around the 4th century. The Roman historian Tacitus wrote about AD 100. Only 4 ½ of his 14 books of “Histories” and 10 of his 16 books of “The Annals” are in existence and these are known from two manuscripts dating from the 9th and 11th centuries. Only 8 manuscripts of the writings of Suetonius (AD 69-140 AD) are in existence. Of Thucydides history (460-400 BC) we have 8 manuscripts dating from around AD 900.

It can be seen that comparing biblical manuscripts with other ancient literature, whose historical value is seldom contested, there are many more and many earlier manuscripts to support the biblical text.

The Canon

Now we must consider the canon of scripture, that is the books that actually make up the Bible. It is usual to say that the canon of the Bible was decided at the various early Church Councils such as the Council of Hippo in 393 AD or the Council of Carthage 397 AD. It would be more accurate though to say that these councils did not decide on canon but merely documented the books that were accepted in practice.

It seems that the development of the canon was a progressive thing. Walter Kaiser in his book "The Old Testament Documents" describes a succession of writing prophets. He notes how the writer of Chronicles declares the history of David was written in the books of the prophets, Samuel, Nathan and Gad. He further comments how in Second Chronicles the history of Solomon was written by the prophets Nathan, Ahijah and Iddo and how the reign of Rehoboam was chronicled by the prophet Shemaiah and Iddo. He continues to affirm that Abijah's history was written by Iddo and Jehoshaphat's written by the prophet Jehu, followed by the reign of Hezekiah by Isaiah and so on.

He also illustrates how Daniel, which was written in the 6th century BC, accepts the writings of Jeremiah 75 years previously as being the word of the Lord. Similarly Jeremiah had viewed the words of the prophet Micah 125 years earlier also as the word of the Lord. Thus, the Old Testament developed with progressive recognition of books being inspired as they emerged.

A similar situation is observed in the New Testament with the Apostle Peter in his second letter classing the writings of the Apostle Paul along with "other Scriptures".

The uniqueness of the Bible

The Bible is the word of God. God has spoken to us in the Bible revealing himself to us. The Bible is truth. Often where there has been no outside evidence to back up statements in the Bible the secular world has dismissed its writings as mere myth.

But archaeologists discovered that the City of Ur really existed. They found external confirmation that the tribe of the Hittites were real people. Solomon's chariot city of Megiddo actually existed and there are many other examples where archaeology has had to acknowledge the Bible's historical accuracy.

Another example of the uniqueness of the Bible is in fulfilled prophecy. Consider the prophet Isaiah predicting the fall of Jerusalem and the taking of the inhabitants into captivity. Then there is the writing of the prophet Jeremiah predicting the return from captivity and the prophet Daniel predicting the rise of the empires of Rome, Greece and beyond.

In particular there are many prophecies about one person, the Messiah who was to come as God's promised King and the Saviour of mankind.

Michael Trimble

©2017
www.christianstudylibrary.org