

# WHAT IS THE BIBLE?

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*What is the Bible?*

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# What is the Bible?

*“It’s a collection of ancient legends.”*

*“Myths from people who didn’t know  
modern science.”*

*“Not the word of God.  
The word of Humans.”*

*“Some good advice, but also lots of  
mistakes and contradictions.”*

## Do those quotes on the previous page sound familiar?

They're some of the typical things you'll hear if you ask people what they think the Bible is. You might hear about how the pre-scientific people who wrote the Bible couldn't have known the things we know, and so they did their best, but we can't expect them to get very much right. It's just old legends, tall tales, some moral teaching, and rules no one really obeys anymore. That's all.

But why are there still people around—in the 21st century—who actually claim to believe it? If you're a Christian, this position might be familiar to you, but if you're not, you might not have even heard that there are actually still people alive who claim to take the Bible seriously.

Very seriously.

The classic Christian belief about the Bible is something like this: *"It's a mistake-less group of documents that reliably report what God has done and said in our world."*

In fact, Christians have historically believed that the Bible is so accurate, so trustworthy, that it actually is God speaking to us, even when we read it today. Now, given what most people seem to think about the Bible, what Christians believe can sound pretty unrealistic. So why would they keep holding to their view?

Believe it or not, thinking about this question requires us to examine some pretty fundamental things about ourselves and the universe we inhabit. Why? Because the reason many people tend to write off the Bible has less to do with the Bible itself and more to do with some common ways of thinking, some *assumptions*, about a couple of the biggest issues of all—issues like *God* and *Humanity*. Surprisingly, a little bit of digging can show that we really don't have any basis for those assumptions.

# DO WE ASSUME THINGS ABOUT GOD?

First, let's tackle some of these common assumptions about God. We can start by thinking through the possible assumptions about God hidden in statements like, "The Bible isn't God's word, it's humans' words, so it's going to have mistakes." There's really just three:

1. Either God doesn't exist at all, or...
2. If he does, he couldn't have communicated in a book like the Bible, or...
3. he wouldn't have given us a book like the Bible as his word.

Let's look at one at a time:

## **Common Assumption about God #1:**

***"He just isn't there."***

A little booklet like this doesn't have the space to adequately discuss the question of God's existence. But we should notice that, of course, if God doesn't exist, then the Bible can't be God's word. Simple logic. But most of us haven't thought through the ramifications of there actually being no God. The best competing theory seems to be what many people associate with modern Science: a belief in materialism (that matter is all that exists).

*Exploring these things may require us to rethink some fundamental things about ourselves...*

But, honestly, have you ever really thought about what it would mean if that were true? What would it mean about you if you were only molecules moving around according to natural laws? And what if that's all there was...at all? It would mean the end of any significance, ultimate meaning, good, evil...basically, everything that makes us that human. Many thinkers have pointed out that following materialism out to its logical conclusion would mean the end of any belief in communication, and the end of trusting your brain to make sense of the world at all. In other words, if there's no God, a good case can be made that we aren't worth anything, we can't know anything, and we don't ever really say anything. Those might sound like big claims, but I invite you to do some research and think it through for yourself.<sup>1</sup>

Because of all this, some people might not be ready to say that there's no God, but they still don't think that a book like the Bible could really be God's word. Even if there is a God (we can imagine the thinking going) it doesn't mean that He's given us a *book*.

What's crucial to see here is that if we say this, we're leaving ourselves only two other possibilities—If God exists, but he hasn't given us a reliable source of information about Himself, then either we say he *couldn't* do it, or we claim to know that he just *wouldn't*.

**Common Assumption about God #2: “He couldn't communicate that way.”**

*If God could make us, why would he refuse to communicate with us?*

Let's take “couldn't” first. If such a being as God exists, someone who could make the whole universe (including us), why should we assume that he couldn't communicate to us? Does it make sense to say we think he exists, and could make us, but couldn't talk to us? Is that logical? We'd end up with a God who made other beings who could communicate, but who was unable to communicate for himself. Is God mute?

Hopefully we see that if God exists, he can talk to us. And he can talk to us in written communication, just like we can with each other.

(In other words, it's safe to assume he could at least do everything we can do.)

**Common Assumption about God #3: “He wouldn't communicate that way.”**

Even if we agree that God could communicate to us, some people might still say that he wouldn't talk to us in something like the Bible. Or maybe they could just say that he hasn't. But if he hasn't, and he could, isn't it really the same thing as saying that he chose not to—*that he wouldn't*, in other words? And if a being such as God could make us, and did make us, and could communicate to us, wouldn't the most reasonable conclusion be that he would want to communicate with us? Would he make us and then refuse to speak to us? What kind of God would that be?

At this point it's important to notice a consequence of making the last two assumptions. If we say that God does exist, but that he couldn't or wouldn't communicate with us, we have to see that this puts us in the same position as if there were no God at all. If God never communicates, we couldn't ever know anything about Him, including if he exists or not. And then we're thrown back to assumption #1.

Because a God who never speaks is no different, to us, than a God who doesn't exist.

When we think it through, there doesn't seem to be any logical reason to assume God is this way. And if he were, how would we even find out? If he refused to communicate anything about himself, how could we even come to the knowledge that he's the kind of God who won't communicate?

(By the way, here we encounter the problem with any kind of skepticism about God and the Bible. If we say that we know that God hasn't spoken in an understandable way, we are making the claim to know something about God: That he's a God who doesn't communicate. But how could we know that if he didn't communicate it to us? See the vicious circle?)

*A God who never speaks is no different, to us, than a God who just doesn't exist.*

We might add to these assumptions this final one: Even if God communicated to us, he could, or would, only do it in some vague way. We might know, for instance, that "God is love," but we couldn't go much beyond that. But again, why would a being that can make humans, who are able to communicate clearly and forcefully, not be able to do the same thing? Is God dumber, or less articulate, than we are? Does this make sense?

# DO WE ASSUME THINGS ABOUT HUMANITY?

But someone might say, “OK, but you still haven’t addressed the main issue. God didn’t write out the Bible with a big hand and a giant piece of paper. We’re not talking about God’s speaking, we’re talking about people writing. The Bible is not the word of God, it’s the word of humans.”

Fair enough. It’s true; Everyone knows that people wrote the Bible.

And so, we might say, the Bible must contain mistakes and contradictions. It’s just human. But now there are a couple assumptions about what humans are, and can be, that need to be thought through.

## **Common assumption about humans #1: “If humans are involved, God isn’t.”**

*Even under normal circumstances, we can do and say things that are error-free.*

This is subtle, but we seem to have this way of seeing the God-Human connection as a kind of pie graph. The bigger God’s slice gets, the smaller ours gets. When some people talk about the Bible, they seem to assume that the fact that humans were involved means that God wasn’t involved. Or at least, if God was involved, the human part messed up his part. In other words, since people wrote the

books of the Bible, it’s not God’s word.

But how do we know that humans are, by nature, the kind of beings who cancel out God wherever they are? It might sound powerful to say “The Bible is man’s word, not God’s,” but do you see the “either/or” thinking here? Why must it be *either* God *or* people? Why couldn’t it be both?

Maybe there are better ways for us to think about these things.

(There’s a hidden assumption about God here too: that he’s limited by our humanity; that he can’t work with, or speak through, or guide, our humanity. But why should we assume God is bound this way?)

## **Common assumption about humans #2: “Humans must make mistakes.”**

This is almost so obvious it seems dumb to contradict. Of course humans make mistakes. When we mess up, don't we say, "I'm only human?" But we should stop and think here. Even under very normal circumstances, we can do and say things that are error free. You might give someone directions to Wawa that are perfect. You might read an instruction manual that contains no errors. You might get 100 on your next physics exam. It's possible. (I believe in you!) So the fact that the Bible was written by humans doesn't necessarily mean that it must be imperfect, and therefore can't qualify as divine communication. Could God have worked in such a way that the people who wrote it wrote the right things? We have to see that at least it's a possibility.

So now we're ready to put this all together, and finally start answering the question: What *is* the Bible, anyway?

## **Beyond the Old Assumptions: The Bible is What Happens When God and Humanity Speak and Write Together in Perfect Harmony.**

Let's stop and look at the text of that heading one more time. It makes an attempt at a working definition of what the Bible is: it's the result of a total harmony in God's words and the words of the humans involved in its writing. It's God's word, written by people.

We need to see that old assumptions about God and humanity, these preconceived notions that there can't be anything in our world like the Bible, are small and narrow-minded.

Is that too harsh?

Think about it: Who decided the only kind of God that could exist is a mute, limited God who's tied down by our humanity and unable to get personal with the creatures he made?

Who decided that we humans are stuck in our mistakes, bound by our own non-God humanity?

Who decided we couldn't hear God?

And who decided that we humans already are all we ever could be?

Are you ready to step out into a world that's open to possibilities you might not have considered before?

Try this possibility: You are a totally unique kind of being in the universe. You are a human, and a human is that kind of creature who—by definition—can be in relationship to God.<sup>2</sup>

Of all the universe, we are the one part God talks to.

What does this have to do with the Bible? Well, we can take it one

*Of all the  
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step further: a human is that kind of creature who can be *indwelt* with the Spirit of God. As Christians so often say: “We have a God-shaped void in our hearts.” To put it another way, God created us to be so close to him that he could actually live in us, permeating our Spirits and uniting us to him. It's an elevation beyond our wildest dreams—to be in union with the One who made us. And the writers of the Bible say that it is exactly this reality that allowed

them to be humans who wrote God's words.

In a special way through history, some people (first known as the Prophets and later Jesus' followers known as Apostles) were so in union with God that, at times, what they spoke or wrote were God's words, even while they were simultaneously *their* words.

The Holy Spirit is the key link between God and man. “We have received...the Spirit who is from God, that we might know the things that have been freely given to us by God,” wrote the Apostle Paul in a letter to a church in Corinth. This Spirit, Paul says, knows “the deep things of God.” (That's in 1 Corinthians 2.)

“Holy men of God spoke,” the Apostle Peter wrote, “as they were moved by the Holy Spirit.” (2 Peter 1:21)

Here's where the old assumption about the “God vs. Human” pie-graph comes in. God is not the kind of God who has to cancel out our humanity when he wants to do or say something. He doesn't push us aside to get his work done. The whole universe is a theater for God to work in, through, and with *us*. We are, by nature, the kind of beings who find our highest expression when we are united to, becoming like, and working with our God. And that's exactly what happened—in a totally unique and never-repeated way—when the Spirit of God indwelt and guided the writers of the Bible. What they wrote was completely their words, and completely God's words.

That's why, in the Bible, different books and letters and poems by different authors sound different. Each author has a unique touch that shows individuality, exactly as we'd expect from a collection of books written by different people. And yet, all this humanity is no problem at all for God, who seems to like to speak his word in this way. He doesn't erase the individuality of the authors as they write—he actually seems to use their particular personalities. As Bible scholar Vern Poythress puts it:

“We can see that God manifests the infinity of his wisdom and his harmony with himself exactly when his speech resonates with the particularities of the personality of a particular human being. For example, we can see in Paul's writings the person of Paul...What do we think about this presence of Paul as a person in his writings? Do we think that it harmonizes with inspiration? Is it strange? Some people may be tempted to conclude that such personal expressions, by showing a human side, contradict the divine side. But that sort of reasoning misunderstands human nature, inspiration, and the way in which God's presence can affirm and take account of human contexts. In fact, once we have come to understand in some measure who Paul is and how he speaks, these personal touches are in full harmony with who God is and how he expresses himself. He speaks in harmony with the person of Paul when Paul is the person through whom he speaks.”<sup>3</sup>

This is what Christians mean when they say the Bible is inspired. Or, as the Apostle Paul wrote to his protegee Timothy: “Every word of scripture is breathed out by God” (2 Timothy 3:16).

In seeking to explain how this works when it comes to writing, theologian John Frame explains that inspiration is “a divine act that creates an identity [that is, an exact match] between a divine word and a human word.”<sup>4</sup>

If you've moved in Christian circles for a while, you might be seeing that this way of thinking about what the Bible is can help address some issues Christians sometimes disagree on—like the extent to which the Bible does or does not contain mistakes. Even in the Christian camp, some people may assume things about God and humanity that make it hard for them to see how God could have given us a clear, error-free book that is at once totally human and completely, perfectly, divine in origin. And yet, once we allow ourselves to be open to a biblical way of thinking about both God and humanity, we see that we don't have to play the human and divine off against each other. They exist together in perfect harmony.

In other words, the Bible shows us a supreme example of these horizon-opening truths: God exists. He speaks. We can hear and understand. We can know him. He can live inside us. And, even though we won't be writing scripture (those days are over), when we allow him to rule in our lives, it won't mean the end of our individuality or personality, but rather the fullest, truest expression of who we are.

## **CAN THIS REALLY BE TRUE?**

You may have noticed above that I wrote, “a supreme example,” and not, “*the* supreme example.” That's because the highest, greatest expression of these truths is actually found in a more familiar place for those of us steeped in the teachings of the Bible. Where do we find an example of God uniting himself to humanity and fully expressing himself in a way that is both fully human and fully divine? And, in a way that expresses full human freedom, individuality and personality completely ruled by all that God is?

Jesus.

Think about it. It is by looking at Jesus that we really see who God is.<sup>5</sup> He wasn't put off by becoming a man. It didn't feel too limiting to him to accomplish his purposes. He was fully able to show who he was in a real body of a real man. But don't stop there—keep thinking—it's by looking at Jesus that we really see who we are as well. At

least, we can see who we were meant to be. We don't see it in his "Godness," of course, but in his being a man who, in total freedom, chose God's will at every moment, and walked in complete union and communication with God. And even though he was truly human (getting tired, hungry, thirsty, etc...), he was flawless in all his communication, never made a mistake, and never sinned.<sup>6</sup> He, like the Bible, gives us a humanity that is completely error-free.<sup>7</sup>

And because of this, Jesus shows us what the Bible can be, and actually is.

It's true. So pick up a Bible, ask God to help you understand it, and read—in it you can hear the very voice of God, speaking to you.

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#### Notes:

1. See on the following page: "Resources for further study."
2. This idea was suggested to me in Robert Letham's book *The Holy Trinity*. He quotes Alar Laats, who says this: "A human person is one who is in principle open to the Holy Spirit and who is able to respond to him. Or to put it in other words: a human person is the one who can in principle be in communion with God." How can we know this is true? Because of who Jesus is. Letham explains, "If it were not so and could not be so, then Jesus Christ—God and man—could not be one person, for the difference between Creator and creature would be so great that incarnation would not be possible." [Robert Letham, *The Holy Trinity*, p.470]
3. Vern Poythress, *Inerrancy and Worldview*, p. 143-144
4. John Frame, *The Doctrine of the Word of God*, p. 140
5. Go read John 1:18!
6. Check out how he calls his enemies out on this point in John 8:46.
7. When you see this, it's hard to imagine why people who claim the bible must contain errors because of its human origin typically point to Jesus as the model for us to understand scripture. Doesn't Jesus, as both totally human and totally perfect, actually disprove their point?

## RESOURCES FOR FURTHER STUDY

If any of the ideas in this booklet got you thinking, here are some excellent books to further explore the vision of life and God you read about here.

**On topic of God's existence** (especially on what it would mean if there were no God), **Francis Schaeffer's book *The God Who is There*** has stood the test of time and will help you greatly.

**To read more specifically about the nature of the Bible as God's word in man's words:** Two recent books are especially helpful, and they are both cited in the notes: **Vern Poythress, *Inerrancy and Worldview***; and **John Frame, *The Doctrine of the Word of God***. For a quicker read still with depth, check out **Kevin DeYoung's book *Taking God at His Word***.

For **help with your own personal reading** of God's word, see the Truth on Campus booklet ***Planning Your Time with God***. Free downloads at [www.truthoncampus.com](http://www.truthoncampus.com).

If you want to start a conversation directly, speak to the leader of the campus group you're a part of or the person who gave you this booklet, or get in touch with us at [talk@truthoncampus.com](mailto:talk@truthoncampus.com).

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