

The Bible — Holy or Holey?

By Rex Morgan

The Bible is the world's best selling book – by far. It has been translated into over 2,000 languages, and is easily the most widely read and distributed book in history, with hundreds of millions of copies sold every year.

But can the Bible be trusted? Is it really the word of God, as it claims to be? Or is it just a collection of ancient folk tales, fables and superstitions? Is it just like any other book, written by men, containing some good ideas and some bad? Or was it divinely inspired by God? Is the Bible holy, or is it *holey* – riddled with mistakes, legends and contradictions?

Let's take a look at some interesting facts about the Bible; some of the reasons people believe it is true.

1. The Unity of the Bible

The Bible isn't really just one book, but a library of 66 different volumes, written by more than 40 authors who lived over a span of 1500 years. These writers lived in 10 countries on 3 continents, and represented 20 different occupations, from farmers and fishermen to statesmen and kings. They wrote in a variety of styles, from history and law to poetry and romance. The subject matter contains many controversial topics capable of strongly opposing opinions. Yet the book has a remarkable consistency and unity throughout. It is bound together as

one whole, with intricate themes interwoven all the way through it.

Imagine taking say half a dozen authors from just one country, New Zealand, and giving them just one controversial subject, such as whether GE or abortions should be allowed. How much harmony and agreement would result? But take any subject you like, including difficult questions of morality and ethics, and the Bible contains comments all through it that add up to a harmonious picture. It has one consistent central message, and even the minor details are all in

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alignment. It begins with a garden, a river, a tree of life and an invitation, and ends, many hundreds of pages (and years) later, with exactly the same themes.



Abundance of Bibles: In 2004 members of the United Bible Societies alone distributed more than 390 million scripture portions, including 25 million complete Bibles. Additional millions of Bible "aids" and reference books are printed every year. But is the Bible worth studying? From where does it get its remarkable pulling power, and its staying-power through centuries of opposition to its message? The accompanying article points out reasons Christians find the Bible worthy of study.

2. Historical Reliability

Thousands (not just hundreds!) of archaeological discoveries have verified things written in the Bible. Many of these finds have been catalogued in books such as *The Bible as History*, by Werner Keller. *Halley's Bible Handbook* includes a chapter listing discovery after discovery that corroborates the Bible writings. Websites such as *christiananswers.net* list many examples. Some of these instances have confounded the critics. For example, it used to be claimed that the Hittites mentioned in the Bible never existed -- until the archaeologists found their capital and records at Bogazkoy, in Turkey.

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It was also claimed there was no Assyrian king named Sargon as recorded in the biblical book of Isaiah, because this name was not known in any other record. Then, Sargon's palace was discovered in Khorsabad, Iraq.

Another king who was in doubt was Belshazzar, king of Babylon, named in the book of Daniel. The last king of Babylon was Nabonidus, according to recorded history. But then tablets were found showing that Belshazzar was Nabonidus's son who served as coregent in Babylon.

One of the greatest archaeologists of all time, Sir William Ramsay, set out to prove the books of Luke and Acts were unreliable, but after 30 years of study he concluded that "Luke is a historian of the first rank; not merely are his statements of fact trustworthy ... this author should be

placed along with the very greatest of historians."

Another great archaeologist, William Albright, said: "Discovery after discovery has established the accuracy of innumerable details, and has brought increased recognition to the value of the Bible as a source of history."

Nelson Glueck, a renowned Jewish archaeologist, wrote: "It may be stated categorically that no archaeological discovery has ever contradicted a biblical reference."

Not only archaeology, but also the writing of many historians, backs up what was written in the Bible. For instance, the famous Jewish historian, Flavius Josephus, who was born in 37AD, wrote about "Jesus, a wise man, a doer of wonderful works", and recorded his crucifixion and resurrection.

A number of other non-Christian writers of the first and second centuries also wrote about Christ and the Christians, including Cornelius Tacitus, Plinius Secundus, Suetonius, and Marcus Aurelius. Thousands of eyewitnesses of Jesus' life were still alive when the New Testament was circulated, but we have no knowledge of anyone refuting the writings as "fairy tales".

If someone wrote a book today saying that New Zealand's wartime Prime Minister, Peter Fraser had been resurrected after his death, there would be lots of people around to deny it! The Christians were hated and brutally persecuted by both the Jews and the Roman government. If the New Testament writings were false, surely these two groups would have produced a great deal of evidence to stop the growth of this "sect", yet there is none.

3. Scientific Accuracy

Amazingly, the Bible made reference to many facts hundreds or even thousands of years before scientists recorded them. For example, the Old Testament writings, dating from at least 2000 years ago, describe the circulation of

the atmosphere and the hydrologic water cycles of the weather, the suspension of the earth in space, the spherical shape of the earth, the countless numbers of stars, the importance of blood circulation, and many groundbreaking principles of good health.

Do you have too many grey hairs? Would you like to do something about it? How about this for a recipe: "To prevent the hair from turning grey, anoint it with the blood of a black calf which has been boiled in oil, or with the fat of a rattlesnake." This recipe comes from the famous *Papyrus Ebers*, an Egyptian medical book written in about 1552 B.C. Other remedies found in the *Papyrus Ebers* include lizards' blood, swine's teeth, putrid meat, stinking fat, moisture from pigs' ears and human excreta.

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The biblical writer Moses lived in Egypt at about the time the *Papyrus Ebers* was written, but the principles of health and hygiene he stated in the Bible have proved to be far ahead of their time, principles that are still valid today!

For example, Moses' writings provide for the careful disposal of human waste underground. But in 18th century Europe human excrement was regularly cast into the streets of cities, giving rise to epidemics of typhoid, cholera and dysentery. One instruction recorded thousands of years earlier in the Bible pointed the way to deliverance from those scourges! The implementation of other principles of quarantine and sanitation outlined in

the Bible also led to the control of the dreaded diseases of leprosy and bubonic plague, which over hundreds of years had killed millions of people in Europe.

In the 1840's Dr Ignaz Semmelweis began instructing those in the Vienna hospital where he worked to wash their hands thoroughly after patient examinations. There was a storm of protest at this "nuisance", but the mortality rate at the hospital started reducing immediately. Opponents of his ideas attacked him fiercely, and it was only after his death that it became recognised that he was right! But thousands of years earlier, God had given Moses instructions about cleansing the

Leviticus (3:17) against the eating of fat.

The very first sentence of the Bible says, "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth". It is instructive to compare this enlightened statement with the writings of other ancient cultures. According to the teachings of the Egyptians, the earth hatched from a winged egg, and men originally hatched from worms found in the slime of the Nile after the annual rains. When the Bible was written the Hindus are said to have taught that the world was flat and rested on the back of an elephant. The elephant stood on the back of a great tortoise, and what that rested on they didn't venture to suggest!

thunder by throwing a hammer at his enemies, Maui pulled up the fish of the North Island when he

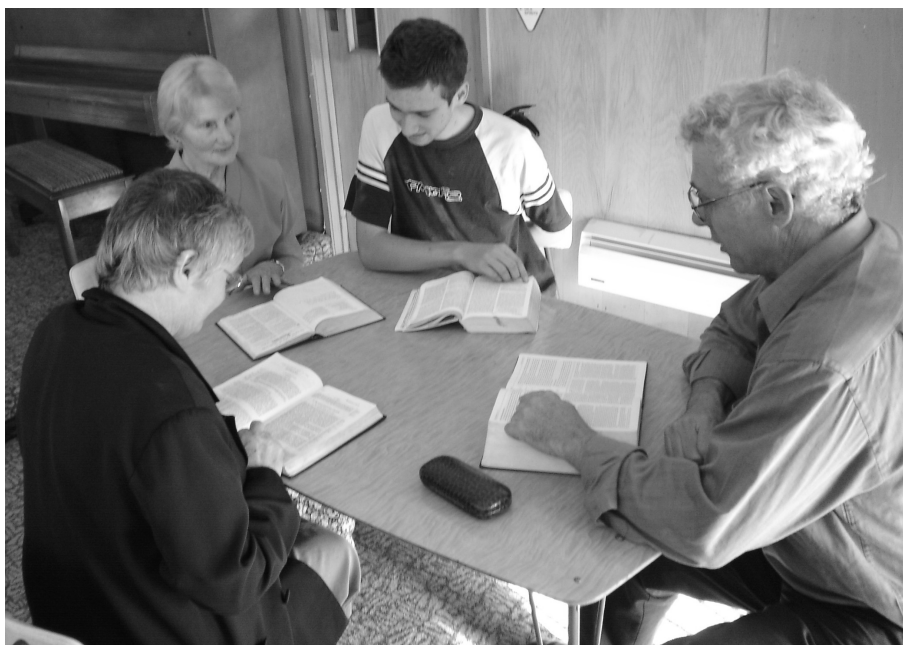
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was in a boat, which became the South Island. The Bible doesn't contain any legends like this. Yet many people have called the Bible "mythology"!

4. Preservation and Survival

The Bible was written on perishable material such as papyrus and animal skins. It was copied and recopied hundreds of times to preserve it throughout history, because there weren't any printing presses or computer discs in Old Testament times! But it was transmitted down through the generations in a unique way, and has been preserved much more accurately than any other ancient document.

It was very important to the Jews -- it was in effect their national law and constitution -- so they really looked after it. They had special classes of men whose sole duty was to preserve and transmit these documents with practically perfect fidelity, and who kept tabs on every letter, syllable and word. The Talmudists who preserved the text from AD 100 to AD 500 had rules including the following: "A synagogue roll must be written on the skins of clean animals, the length of each column must not extend less than 48 or more than 80 lines, the breadth must consist of 30 letters. No word or letter must be written from memory, the scribe not having looked at the codex before him... Between every consonant the



Diligent study: In 2005, more than 70,000 new Bibles and 40,000 copies of the New Testament were distributed in New Zealand by the Bible Society alone. Thousands of Christians purchase different versions of the Bible and study the Bible and other reference books diligently on a daily basis, in personal and even group situations. Is the Bible really worthy of such attention?

hands under running water after handling the dead, or infected living patients.

What should we do to avoid a heart attack? In relatively recent years the medical profession has warned against the build up of cholesterol in our veins since it may cause clogging and a heart attack. A major source of cholesterol is animal fat. Centuries ago, Moses spoke in the Old Testament book of

Later, among the Greek philosophers, it was taught that Atlas, one of the giants, or Titans, who warred with Zeus, was condemned to support the heavens, bearing the world on his neck and shoulders.

It's fascinating to look up "Mythology" in an encyclopaedia, and read about the way the ancients of all civilisations believed in gods of the sun, moon and stars, the sea god, the forest god, the god of war, and so on. Thor made

space of a hair or thread must intervene. Should a king address him while writing he must take no notice of him." (*Davidson, Hebrew Text of the Old Testament*, p89).

The Massoretes, who copied the text from AD 500 to AD 900, treated it with great reverence, and devised a complicated system of safeguards against scribal slips. For instance, they counted the number of times each letter of the alphabet occurs in each book, numbered the verses, words and letters of every book, calculated the middle word and middle letter of each, and so on.

There are about 25,000 manuscript copies of the New Testament or portions of it extant today. It is fascinating to compare this with other ancient documents. Herodotus, known as "the father of history", wrote in about 450 BC, but only 8 manuscripts of his work have survived, the earliest dated 900 AD, about 1350 years after he wrote. Aristophanes, a Greek playwright, wrote 45 plays in about 400 BC, but only 11 of these have survived, the earliest dating from 900 AD. Caesar's *Galic Wars* was written about 50 BC and only 10 manuscripts have survived, the oldest some 900 years later than Caesar's day. So it is with all of the ancient writers; only a handful of copies of their work have survived. An exception is Homer's *Iliad*, of which an amazing 643 manuscripts still survive. However, many people don't think Homer wrote it, and there are many differences between the copies. But there are 25,000 manuscript copies of the NT, the oldest dating from around 125 AD, only 50 years after it was written!

William Shakespeare wrote 37 plays in the 17th century. Not even one original manuscript has survived, and so the missing gaps in the copies of his works were filled in with "educated guesses" of textual scholars. There are differing documents of each of Shakespeare's plays, with items in dispute that materially affect the meanings of the passages involved. But the Bible only has a few

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What famous people have said about the Bible...

Abraham Lincoln: "I believe the Bible is the best gift God has ever given to man. All the good from the Saviour of the world is communicated to us through this book."

George Washington: "It is impossible to rightly govern the world without God and the Bible."

Queen Victoria: "That book is the secret of England's greatness."

Patrick Henry: "The Bible is worth all the other books which have ever been printed."

Charles Dickens: "The New Testament is the very best book that ever was or ever will be known in the world."

Woodrow Wilson: "When you have read the Bible, you will know it is the word of God."

Theodore Roosevelt: "A thorough knowledge of the Bible is worth more than a college education."

William Gladstone: "I have known ninety-five of the world's great men in my time, and of these, eighty-seven were followers of the Bible. The Bible is stamped with a Specialty of Origin, and an immeasurable distance separates it from all competitors."

Napoleon Bonaparte: "The Bible is far more than a book to me; it speaks to me as if it were a person. This book surpasses all others. I never omit to read it, and every day with some pleasure. Alexander, Caesar, Charlemagne and I myself have founded great empires... upon force. Jesus alone founded his empire upon love. None else is like him; Jesus was more than man."

Sir Isaac Newton: "There are more sure marks of authenticity in the Bible than in any profane history whatsoever."

Sir William Herschel: "All human discoveries seem to be made only for the purpose of confirming more and more the truths contained in the Sacred Scriptures."

Jean Jacques Rousseau: "Jewish authors would never have invented either that style nor that morality; and the Gospel has marks of truth so great, so striking, so utterly inimitable, that the invention of it would be more astonishing than the hero."

Lord Tennyson: "Bible reading is an education in itself."

Immanuel Kant: "I believe that the existence of the Bible is the greatest benefit to the human race. Any attempt to belittle it, I believe, is a crime against humanity."

Robert E. Lee: "In all my perplexities and distresses, the Bible has never failed to give me light and strength."

Victor Hugo: "England has two books; the Bible and Shakespeare. England made Shakespeare, but the Bible made England."

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But the Bible only has a few disputed textual readings, none of them affecting any doctrines or important details.

No other book has withstood more vicious efforts to stamp it out than the Bible. In AD 303 the Emperor Diocletian issued an edict to stop Christians from worshipping and to destroy their scriptures. All meeting places were destroyed, the property of Christians confiscated, and Bibles burned. Anyone found with a copy or even portions of the Bible received a death sentence. Ironically, 25 years later the new Emperor, Constantine, instructed that 50 copies of the scriptures should be prepared at the expense of the Government!

The French literary genius Voltaire, who died in 1778, said that 100 years after his time Christianity would have been swept from existence and the Bible would only exist in museums. Ironically, only 50 years after his death the Geneva

Bible Society used his press and house to produce stacks of Bibles!

The greatest indication of how accurately the Bible has been preserved came in 1947 with the discovery of the Dead Sea scrolls in a cave near Jericho. These scrolls of the Old Testament had been hidden there for nearly 1900 years. Matching them up with the manuscripts that had already been found, they were almost exactly the same, with just minor spelling differences. The Dead Sea scrolls are dramatic evidence that the Bible has been accurately preserved down through the centuries, in a truly amazing way.

5. Honesty and Character

The Bible is remarkably candid in describing the lives of its heroes and heroines. It doesn't try to cover up their problems. King David of Israel is recorded as being a murderer, adulterer and liar. Peter, one of Jesus' closest disciples and

a leader of the Church, is famous for publicly denying his Lord three times. Discord and troubles in the churches are openly confronted.

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If the Bible writers were trying to encourage people to believe and follow something they had invented, it is very unlikely they would be so open about the problems. And it is difficult to believe so many of them would have died, often in excruciating agony, for what was just an invention!

The quality and character of the Bible's moral and ethical teaching is another strong evidence of divine inspiration. The Bible has formed the basis for much of our western world's legal system. Whether we read the Ten Commandments, the wisdom of the Proverbs, or Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, there is a clear and confident standard of moral conduct presented that is timeless in its principles.

6. Fulfilled Prophecies

If you were asked what you think world conditions will be like 2000 years from now, around the year 4000, how would you answer? Do you feel you could make a pretty good guess? Will a nuclear war have destroyed everything by then, or will we be living on other planets? Who has a hope of knowing what will be happening at that time? It's hard enough to predict tomorrow's weather, let alone conditions 2000 years ahead!

Yet 2000 years ago the Bible made prophecies that are stunningly accurate predictions of trends and events now occurring worldwide. At a time when the most powerful weapon was a two edged sword or a battering ram, Jesus Christ predicted that mankind would



Pondering the future: What will Auckland be like a thousand years from now? So many things might happen in the course of a decade, let alone several hundred years, how would it be possible to know? Yet it is a fact that prophecies written in the Bible accurately predicted the rise and fall of many cities and empires hundreds of years before they happened.

develop the capability to destroy all human life. He prophesied wars and rumours of wars, famines and earthquakes in different places. He predicted that the Christian gospel would be published all over the world. He said that many people would be hated, persecuted and killed because of him, and that is exactly what has happened and happening in many places around the world right now. If Jesus was an ordinary human being, that would be a pretty egotistical thing to say!

Think of it for a moment. Is there anybody alive today who would have the gall to say that people in the year 4000 will be dying because of him or her?

But Jesus didn't only *make*

At a time when the most powerful weapon was a two edged sword or a battering ram, Jesus Christ predicted that mankind would develop the capability to destroy all human life.

prophecies – He *fulfilled* them too! And not just one prophecy, but literally *hundreds* of them!

A prophecy by Micah in about 700 BC predicted a Saviour would be born in Bethlehem. Isaiah's prophecy of 650-750 BC said he would be born of a virgin. A prophecy made in the book of Genesis (49:8) almost 2000 years before Christ was born, saying he would come from the tribe of Judah, was right on the button!

Other prophecies said he would enter Jerusalem riding on a colt, he would be sold for 30 pieces of silver, which would be used to buy a potter's field, lots would be cast for his garments, his hands and feet would be pierced, and he would be raised from the dead.

In all, there are 332 Old Testament prophecies fulfilled by this one

person, Jesus. How likely is it that it was just by chance that Jesus fulfilled all of these predictions? Peter Stoner, in the book *Science Speaks* used the science of probability to find that the chance any person could fulfil a particular 8 of the prophecies was 1 in 10 to the power of 17, and the chance of one man fulfilling 48 of the prophecies was calculated at 1 in 10 to the power of 157, an almost infinite number!

It was clearly impossible for Jesus to deliberately go about fulfilling all of these prophecies. Firstly, he would have had to ensure he was born of a virgin. As if that wasn't hard enough, he would have to be sure it happened in Bethlehem, and of the line of David. Then, somehow he would need to engineer his crucifixion and burial in a rich man's tomb!

There are lots of other Bible prophecies we haven't considered yet. A number of prophets predicted the destruction of various cities and the rise and fall of empires. Imagine the difficulty of taking a city such as Wellington and predicting that it will be destroyed, and outlining exactly how and when? This is what a number of Bible prophets did, in the case of ancient cities such as Tyre, Sidon, Samaria, Petra, Nineveh, and Babylon, and it can be shown that the prophecies were fulfilled in amazing detail.

7. Personal Experience

Perhaps the most important reason Christians believe the Bible is true is that they have practiced what it says, and have found that it works!

The Bible presents a code of challenging spiritual laws requiring love, purity, peace, honesty and faith. Millions of Christians have tried to live by these principles, and although no one is able to keep them perfectly, the Bible promises help for those who try to keep them, and people report that

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this really does happen. Millions of lives have been changed for the better because of the teachings of the Bible. And they have all been changed in very similar ways. Christians who believe in and try to follow the Bible all report that their lives are happier and more meaningful as a result! Thousands of criminals have reformed, drug addicts have been cured, selfish people have become generous – lives have been transformed by the scriptures! The Bible talks about benefits, such as deep inner joy and peace of mind, that arise from a personal relationship with God, and for those who have experienced this, no further proof of the Bible is needed!

So these are some of the reasons Christians believe the Bible is true. Any one of these can stand on its own as a strong argument, but when you add all seven of them together, it makes a very powerful case!

If you would like to learn more about the Bible and how to make sense of it in today's world, why not make a visit to a local Church and meet some of the people who believe in it? If you'd like to read more first, please feel free to write for our article "Why would anyone believe Christianity?"

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