

# How Can You Believe the Bible?

## 2 Peter 1:16-21

**Series:** Confronting Christianity – Summer 2021

**Preaching Date:** June 27, 2021

**Worship:** Your Word is True

**Chapter in *Confronting Christianity*:** 6

**Key Sentence:**

Critiques of the Bible are more problematic than the problems they portray

**Outline:**

I. Is the Bible crafted from myths and legends? (2 Peter 1:16-21)

II. Does the Bible have to be taken literally? (John 6)

III. How can you believe the Bible is historical? (1 Corinthians 15:3-8)

**2 Peter 1:16–21** For we did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty. <sup>17</sup>For when he received honor and glory from God the Father, and the voice was borne to him by the Majestic Glory, “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased,” <sup>18</sup>we ourselves heard this very voice borne from heaven, for we were with him on the holy mountain. <sup>19</sup>And we have the prophetic word more fully confirmed, to which you will do well to pay attention as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts, <sup>20</sup>knowing this first of all, that no prophecy of Scripture comes from someone’s own interpretation. <sup>21</sup>For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.

**1 Corinthians 15:3–8** For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, <sup>4</sup>that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures, <sup>5</sup>and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. <sup>6</sup>Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep. <sup>7</sup>Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. <sup>8</sup>Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me.

## How Can You Believe the Bible?

### 2 Peter 1:16-21

The American Atheist website has a page on Biblical Contradictions. It begins “It is a central dogma of all fundamental Christians that the Bible is without error. If written by a perfect being, then it must not contradict itself, as a collection of books written by different men at different times over many centuries would be expected to do.” After listing fifteen supposed contradictions in Scripture, they conclude: “What is incredible about the Bible is not its divine authorship; it’s that such a concoction of contradictory nonsense could be believed by anyone to have been written by an omniscient God. . . . To be an atheist, one need only be able to laugh when such obvious nonsense is offered as being ‘divine’ truth.” Strong words. But there are many, even those who have grown up in church who are swayed by arguments like this. In fact most struggles with doubt include questions about the reliability of Scripture. How can we believe the Bible if it is full of contradictions?

Ah, but is it? Do these so-call contradictions stand up to reasonable explanation? Not the ones on their website. Their first contradiction is about the Sabbath. The Ten Commandments say, Exodus 20:8 “Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy.” The contradiction, they say, comes in Romans 14:5 “One man esteemeth one day above another: another esteemeth every day alike. Let every man be fully persuaded in his own mind.” Is this a contradiction? Exodus 20 is directed at the Jewish people and establishes their practice of Sabbath. A thousand years later Christ came, and internalized this obedience, saying “the Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath.” Thus Paul can give Gentile believers, in Romans 14 to follow Sabbath laws and observe other Jewish practices not as law, but as a matter of choice and conscience.

The American Atheist article next pulls out four words from Ecclesiastes 1:4 “the earth abideth for ever.” The verse says “A generation goes, and a generation comes, but the earth remains forever.” This verse is poetically contrasting the relative permanency of the earth with the transitoriness of people. But they see a contradiction in 2 Peter 3:10, “the elements shall melt with fervent heat, the earth also and the works that are therein shall be burned up.” Again, this is picturesque language. It may not itself be saying that the whole sphere of the world disappears in this fire. But even if it was, it’s not a contradiction, because the first verse is talking about man’s perception, man’s limited point of view. The whole book of Ecclesiastes is written from this point of view. 2<sup>nd</sup> Peter is talking about God’s ultimate plan.

But even if these contradictions can be simply explained, we're still faced with the question "Can you believe the Bible?" Can we take the Bible as God's true and authoritative word? Can we believe what it teaches about man, God and our rescue in Jesus? Rebecca McLaughlin's response in "Confronting Christianity" argues that the critiques of the Bible are more problematic than the problems they portray. This morning we'll see how problematic several of these critiques really are.

Probably the biggest critique of the Bible floating around in our culture is that it is an irrational hodgepodge of myths and legends. We're told we can't know what the Bible originally said because it's origins are obscure, because it has been changed over and over in the copying, and because the early church added to or wrote the texts for their own purposes. One well-known critic is Bart Ehrman, a New Testament scholar, now an atheist, who writes bestsellers like *Misquoting Jesus*; *Jesus, Interrupted*; *Forged*, and *How Jesus Became God*. He attempts to dismantle the reliability of the Bible, especially the New Testament, and to teach that most of the Christian faith is based on manipulation and misinformation. For example, the Wikipedia article about Ehrman says "he highlights the diversity of views found in the New Testament, the existence of forged books in the New Testament which were written in the names of the apostles by Christian writers who lived decades later, and his belief that Christian doctrines such as the suffering Messiah, the divinity of Jesus, and the Trinity were later inventions." One reviewer says "Ehrman is an evangelist for unbelief, enabling sceptics to keep their disgust with Christianity fresh, while trying to persuade believers that their cherished beliefs about Jesus are a house of historical straw."

How do we respond to this? Have we lost what the Scriptures originally said? Did they never say it? Peter the disciple, Peter the apostle, confronts these questions pretty directly in 2 Peter 1:16–21 *For we did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty. <sup>17</sup>For when he received honor and glory from God the Father, and the voice was borne to him by the Majestic Glory, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased," <sup>18</sup>we ourselves heard this very voice borne from heaven, for we were with him on the holy mountain. <sup>19</sup>And we have the prophetic word more fully confirmed, to which you will do well to pay attention as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts, <sup>20</sup>knowing this first of all, that no prophecy of Scripture comes from someone's own interpretation. <sup>21</sup>For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.*

Verse 16 implies that even in the earliest days of the church some said believers were following clever myths. But Peter says no, these can't be myths, because we were eyewitnesses. We told you about the Lord Jesus Christ, his power, his coming. We saw His majesty. He then cites one specific miraculous moment, the transfiguration. "For when he received honor and glory from God the Father, and the voice was borne to him by the Majestic Glory, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased," <sup>18</sup>we ourselves heard this very voice borne from heaven, for we were with him on the holy mountain." A key reason why we can call the Gospel accounts of Jesus reliable is the fact that these so-called myths are actually the accounts of eyewitnesses. Peter says "It can't be a myth. We saw it." Notice the "we." This is one man's fantasy or delusion. There were many who saw these things and can testify to them.

Verse 19 makes an important conclusion. "we have the prophetic word more fully confirmed." In other words, "since we are eyewitnesses to all the fulfillments of the prophets, then the prophets must be true and we can rely on them." The chance of someone fulfilling by chance all the prophecies Jesus fulfilled is infinitesimally small. So these prophecies must be God's true word. "No prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit." He's asserting the authority and reliability of Scripture. It comes from God, not human imagination.

But of course the way to push back on this is to say that 2<sup>nd</sup> Peter itself is in our Bibles as a result of manipulation or tampering by people who wanted to use the text to control others. You can't believe what it says because it's been messed with. This is what Bart Ehrman, in a sophisticated way, is arguing. Books like 2<sup>nd</sup> Peter are later forgeries, or the original text has been modified over the course of time to say new things. For example, he would say that the Gospels have been modified to include all these claims of divinity by Jesus. There really was a guy named Jesus, who was a teacher, but he didn't really say any of these things or do any of these things. They've been added in.

But is that really more believable than what the Bible says, that it is the testimony of eye-witnesses to these things? First of all let's address this claim that the text of Scripture has been modified over the course of several centuries. If so you'd expect these details to be missing from the early copies. But they aren't missing, even from the earliest manuscripts. And there are a lot of copies. of the New Testament Scriptures. How many? Say 5800 in Greek, many in other Eastern languages, another 10,000 in Latin, the language of Rome, in total about 20 times more than for any other ancient document in the world. The runner up is Homer's Iliad with about 1900 copies. That doesn't count people quoting the Bible in other writings – the Church Fathers and so forth.

How old are these copies? If you look at the number of years between the original writing of a document and the earliest known fragment, the Gospel of John is the winner at about 25 years. There is a fragment of John from Egypt that has been dated around 110 AD. If you look at the time between writing and first complete manuscript, the Bible also wins, at about 225 years. Most ancient documents that we take as reliable, such as Roman histories, have complete manuscripts that are more than a thousand years newer than the presumed date of the original. They could be made up out of thin air, for all we know, but it wouldn't even be possible to modify all these early copies of the Bible.

Yet it is true that many if not all these copies have textual differences. Bart Ehrman makes a big deal of this in his book *Misquoting Jesus*. Remember, all early Scriptures were hand copied. It's easy to make a mistake, so there are many. And once a mistake is there, it is copied over and over. But the majority of errors in manuscripts are easy-to-spot like a word or line left out. Sometimes a copyist would substitute a word from one Gospel to another. A few are more than that: the longer ending of Mark's Gospel or the story of the woman caught in adultery in John's. But none of these would change a significant area of doctrine or belief. That kind of variation simply doesn't exist outside of a few blatant "other gospels" that have little or no historical reliability. Again, there is no evidence in the historical record of widespread modification. The New Testament documents were widely distributed before Christianity became the religion of the Roman empire, that is before anyone would be in a position to use Christianity for their benefit.

But could these early documents have been fiction to begin with? Think about what that implies: a group of fishermen and tax collectors, along with a doctor and a couple of Pharisees got together and decided to write a fictional religion similar to but heretically different from Judaism, each writing their own part but consistent across the whole, then distribute it around the world. The idea stretches belief, but in our conspiracy soaked age, some people will believe.

Nonetheless we are often asked "how can you believe in miracles? How can you take the Bible literally?" This is the question Rebecca McLaughlin addresses in chapter 6 of *Confronting Christianity*. There is a common misconception that to say the Bible is inerrant is to say that the Bible must always be literally true. That's not what we say. The Bible is full of the metaphors and figures of speech that belong to all human speech. Further the Bible is made up of different genres. Parts of it are history, parts are teaching, parts are poetry and song lyrics. You don't expect the same literalness in a poem that you do in the recounting of history. We don't take everything literally in daily life.

McLaughlin says “If your brother said he’d literally died of embarrassment when a girl he liked read his Valentine’s Day card, you would not marvel at his resurrection. But if he told you he was contemplating suicide because he was so heartbroken, you would do well to take him literally. Both literal and figurative language can describe reality.” In the same way Scripture employs both literal and figurative language, and both describe reality. When Jesus says, “I am the good shepherd,” he is not claiming to spend his life in the fields. When he says, “I am the true vine” he is not claiming planthood. Rather, he is inviting us into the Old Testament metaphor of Israel as God’s vine. People often misunderstood Jesus because they took him literally. In John’s Gospel, Jesus chases money changers out of the temple and challenges the shocked bystanders, “Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.” “It has taken forty-six years to build this temple,” they respond, “and will you raise it up in three days?” But John explains that Jesus is talking about his body—the true temple, which would be torn down and rebuilt for us.

Does this mean we can navigate around any difficult text by calling it metaphorical? Not at all. As with any conversation, some parts are intended literally, others not. Usually it’s easy to tell. For example, the New Testament writers emphasize that Jesus was literally raised from the dead—bones, wounds, and all. There is a balance here. Jesus uses metaphors but clearly intends some things to be taken literally. All this is evident in John chapter 6. If you have a Bible open it there. I’m going to hop from verses to verse to point out the literal miracle, the metaphors, and the literal meaning within the metaphors.

John 6 begins with one Jesus’ most famous miracles. He’s teaching a great crowd in the wilderness and notices their hunger. All his disciples can find is a boy with five loaves and two fish. But when Jesus gives thanks for this small offering he multiplies the bread and fish for the whole crowd, with 12 baskets leftover. This miracle is literal. Real people ate actual bread with literal leftovers. Now some will say that miracles are impossible, that the physical laws of nature always follow their course and so the miraculous is ruled out from the start. This is the same thing as saying that you must be an atheist before you can read the Bible. You’re saying there is no God to work miracles, or at least that God has no right to intervene in the workings of his creation. But if you do allow for miracles, then you can’t brand all miracle stories as myth or legend.

That night Jesus crosses back over the Sea of Galilee. The crowd follows him, and Jesus knows they are looking for another meal. Verse 26 “Truly, truly, I say to you, you are seeking me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves. <sup>27</sup>Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give to you.”

Verse 28 Then they said to him, “What must we do, to be doing the works of God?”  
<sup>29</sup>Jesus answered them, “This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent.” Jesus first turns the bread from a literal miracle into a metaphor – food that endures to eternal life – and then unpacks the metaphor plainly “this is the work of God that you believe in him whom he has sent.” The spiritual reality believing in Jesus. They don’t get it, so a few verses later Jesus goes back to the metaphor. Verse 35, “I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst.” As McLaughlin says, these are powerful, life-giving metaphors because they promise to meet our deepest needs using imagery we can understand.

But then in verses 41 to 59 he takes the explanation of the metaphor to a whole new level that disturbs and confuses his hearers. “I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever. And the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh.” This is a further expansion of the metaphor. Jesus is now literally predicting that he will give his flesh, his life for the life of the world. He’s wrapping a literal prediction inside an even more graphic metaphor. Verse 54 “Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day.” It’s still a metaphor, but now Jesus is saying that the fulfillment of the metaphor comes through his body broken and his blood shed. To be truly satisfied we must eat and drink of the benefits of his sacrifice on the cross.

Do you see this? McLaughlin gives more examples: “Jesus’s miracles often double as metaphors. By forgiving a paralytic before healing his legs, Jesus invites us to see parallels between physical and spiritual healing. When he calls his first fisherman-disciples to follow him, he tells them to leave their nets to become “fishers of men” But when Jesus’s miracles are invested with metaphorical meaning, this does not mean they did not literally happen. Jesus’s ability to do what only God can do points to who he is.”

So, do we take the Bible literally? Yes, when the Bible points us to literalness, as it does in the case of miracles. But we do not deny the presence of literary genre, figures of speech, even exaggeration for effect. This thinking solves many of the contradictions the American Atheists raise. For example they point to another Commandment “Honor thy father and thy mother,” but then seek a contradiction in the words of Jesus “If any man come to me, and hate not his father, and mother, and wife, and children, and brethren, and sisters, yea, and his own life also, he cannot be my disciple.” What they don’t recognize is that Jesus often, very often, uses exaggeration for emphasis, and that when he says “hate,” he means “love less.” He’s saying that nothing should have a higher priority in our lives than following him.

Finally, even if you concede that miracles are possible, and that the Bible's use of language defuses accusations of contradiction, this still doesn't fully address the idea that the Biblical accounts are myths and legends added later. We need to show that the Bible is historically reliable. Is there any evidence for Jesus outside the Bible? Is there internal evidence that the Bible is good history?

Is there evidence for Jesus outside the Bible? The amount written of him in the Bible dwarfs this other evidence, but it's there. The Jewish historian Josephus and several early Roman historians mention Jesus. I watched a video this week by Adrian Holloway which went through some of this evidence. Here's his summary "What would we know about Jesus from the ancient world if we ignored the Bible? Well, firstly Josephus and Lucian say that Jesus was regarded as wise. Second, Pliny, the Talmud and Lucian imply he was a powerful and honored teacher. Third, the Talmud implies that he performed miraculous feats but was rejected by the Jewish leaders. Fourth, Tacitus, Josephus, the Talmud and Lucian all mention that he was crucified. Tacitus and Josephus say this happened under Pontius Pilate, and the Talmud says it was on the eve of Passover exactly as the New Testament describes. Fifthly, Josephus has reports of Jesus' resurrection. Sixthly, he says that Jesus' followers believed that he was the Christ or Messiah, and finally both Pliny and Lucian indicate that Christians worshipped Jesus as God."

So the external evidence supports the historicity of Jesus and the events of his life, death and resurrection. But does the Bible read as historically true? Does it hold together as history? I'd love to spend the time to dissect the Gospels and see how their variations and even their apparent contradictions have convinced many skeptical historians that the resurrection is true. But for the sake of brevity, let's just consider these familiar verses from 1 Corinthians 15:3–8 *For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, <sup>4</sup>that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures, <sup>5</sup>and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. <sup>6</sup>Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep. <sup>7</sup>Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. <sup>8</sup>Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me.*

This passage presents several problems for those suggesting that the resurrection appearances are more legendary than they are historical. First of all, writing 25 years after the resurrection, Paul reminds the Corinthians that they can test whether or not the resurrection has any basis in fact because the majority of the 500 or so witnesses are still alive, and they are willing to be interviewed.

In fact some of these eyewitnesses are the leaders of the early church, Peter and the other apostles. As we heard Peter say earlier, they are eyewitnesses not only to the resurrection but to all that Jesus had done. Richard Bauckham's book *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses* carefully shows that the Gospels are intended not only as history but as testimony and that the presence of the names of people Jesus interacted with and the quick descriptions of their circumstances were clear indications to the original readers that these were living eyewitnesses, known to the church, whose testimony could be checked.

But the other thing that's happening in this passage is that Paul is quoting something he received much earlier. "For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received." It's likely that Paul received this list of the resurrection appearances of Jesus shortly after his own conversion in Damascus or not long after when he went to Jerusalem to meet with the leaders of the early Christian church. He describes this trip, which seems to have occurred around 35 AD in Galatians 1:18-19. Here is the key point. There is wide agreement among scholars from all sorts of different backgrounds that this list of resurrection appearances was already well established in the form that we just read when Paul received it. This formal list already existed before Paul arrived and it was passed on to him. This shows that the reports of resurrection appearances are as old as Christianity itself, literal reports of Jesus' resurrection, not much later, legendary developments. For that reason people have taken to calling these verses the earliest New Testament record: "that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, <sup>4</sup>that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures, <sup>5</sup>and that he appeared" to these eyewitnesses.

How can you believe the Bible? Isn't it just a collection of myths and legends? Isn't it full of contradictions? Isn't it nonsense to take it literally? No. The critiques of the Bible are more problematic than the problems they portray. We can believe the Bible, first, because it itself makes clear that many things are to be understood literally, as plain fact. It presents these using all the ways people speak and write, especially in genre's like poetry and metaphors like "I am the bread of life." We can believe the Bible because while it expects us to accept the possibility of miracles, it does not present these in mythical ways, but embedded in history and in eyewitness accounts. We can believe the Bible because copies of the New Testament go back almost to the time of the original writing, and there are many of them. We can believe the Bible because it's testimony to the resurrection of Jesus is the testimony of eyewitnesses. Finally, we can believe the Bible because as those witnesses testified, Jesus did rise from the dead, and his testimony is true.