

The Historical Reliability and Relevance of the Old Testament

Dr. Josh Moody

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Further Reading:

Walter Kaiser, *The Old Testament Documents: Are They Reliable and Relevant* (IVP, 2001)

RK Harrison, *Introduction to the Old Testament* (IVP, 1969)

KA Kitchen, *On the Reliability of the Old Testament* (Eerdmans, 2003)

Greg Gilbert, *Why Trust the Bible* (Crossway, 2016)

Paul Helm, "Faith, Evidence, and the Scriptures," in Carson & Woodbridge, *Scripture and Truth*, eds. (Baker, 1992)

Argument Outline:

1. Jesus accepted the reliability of the OT. If I accept Jesus as Lord, I will also accept the reliability of the OT. *Is there good reason for accepting the New Testament picture of Jesus? Yes! The Gospel writers are historically reliable in their portrait of Jesus. (See the paper on the Historical Reliability of the New Testament for more information on this.) When I read the Gospel writers, I am confronted with a Jesus who makes such stark and bold claims that, to paraphrase CS Lewis, I am presented with a choice of either accepting him as liar, lunatic, or Lord. The option of him being 'legend' is ruled out because the New Testament Gospels are historically reliable. If I accept Jesus as Lord, I will follow his attitude to life, including his attitude to the Old Testament. In many places Jesus quoted the Old Testament as the final authority in matters of life, death, and religion. All those who follow Jesus, therefore, should accept the Old Testament as God's Word.*
2. The OT claims to be God's Word. Therefore, I accept it as reliable. *All arguments about ultimate authority will have a degree of circularity to them. If I am to accept the Old Testament, or the Bible as a whole, as ultimate authoritative as God's Word, I cannot in the end reside that acceptance in any other authority (e.g. history, reason) or that authority is truly my ultimate authority, not the Bible. Experientially many people come to accept the Old Testament as God's Word because they find that God speaks to them through it. And actually, this approach is the same way that science validates its theories: the theory which best fits the facts is the correct theory. Many people find that the Old Testament's view of life fits the facts of life best and therefore they accept its view of itself as God's Word and its authority over their lives.*
3. The list of accepted books of the OT (the 'Canon'), while not achieving unanimity in the Christian church historically, is reliable because it is the same list of books that Jesus accepted.
4. Certain aspects of the OT have received criticism for being morally dubious – the wars, etc. A responsible interpretative approach to the OT, however, can solve most of the difficulties.
5. The nineteenth-century liberal approach to the OT has come under sustained and prolonged criticism from many quarters, both conservative and liberal. There is no scholarly consensus in liberal circles. What's more, speculative theories about dating documents must be challenged by the findings of archaeology.

Note: throughout this paper we are interspersing two approaches to establishing the reliability of the Bible. The first is evidential, the second presuppositional. An evidential approach looks for the concrete 'facts' and evidences in order to maintain the historical reliability of the Bible. A presuppositional approach, seeing the internal claims of the Bible to reliability and authority, and acknowledging that the authority of the Bible cannot be accepted without some degree of circular reasoning because it is an ultimate authority, and appeal to any other authority (reason, history) would be to supplant that authority with another, therefore when we read the Bible and see it accounts for the data of life better than any other approach, we accept it. (Scientific theories are validated in the same way.)

1. Canon.

The word canon is used to describe the accepted books in both the Old and New Testament. The church has always, in some way or other, realized that it did not create the Bible but instead humbly recognized the voice of God speaking in and through the Bible. This, therefore, was a 'canon', that is a rule, or test or standard. From this was derived the secondary sense of 'canon' as an accepted list of books of the Bible.

The church, though, has not had unanimous agreement over the constituency of the canon. The Reformation accepted the 66 books of Athanasius's *Festal Letter* of 367, in Jerome, and in the canons of the provincial council that met at Carthage in 397; the Council of Trent (1545-1563) defined 12 apocryphal (OT) books into the Roman Catholic canon in 1546; the Synod of Jerusalem defined four of these (Judith, Tobit, Wisdom, and Ecclesiasticus) into the Eastern Orthodox canon in 1672; Luther rejected James. What is important to realize here is that while some of the attempts to include books into the biblical canon have been far from persuasive, the principles to which appeal is made to decide have always been the same. These principles are: 1. Christ-commissioned Apostolic authorship or authentication. 2. Christ-honoring doctrinal content, in line with the

known teaching of other apostles, and 3. Continuous acknowledgement and spiritually fruitful use of the books from the apostolic age on – a consideration which becomes weightier and more compelling with each passing year. So Luther rejected James because he misunderstood him as contradicting Paul (considering no. 2); and no. 3 was the reason for accepting the apocryphal books as they had been a part of the Septuagint and the Vulgate, even though they had been no part of Jesus' Bible.

We accept the 39 books of the OT as canonical today because they were Jesus' Bible. He refers to the 'law and the prophets', meaning the 39 books of the 1st century Palestinian canon. In more than one place Jesus interprets something that the author of a book in the OT says as something that 'God says' (Matthew 19:5; Mark 7:9-13). Jesus therefore identifies the words of the 39 books of our OT as the words of God.

2. Morality.

However, one of the greatest reasons these days why people find it hard to accept the Bible is because certain aspects of it seem at first glance to be morally repugnant to modern moral palates. Can we really accept a book that describes God ordering the slaughter of thousands of people? Is this not ancient 'ethnic cleansing'? What about the apparently patriarchal structure of ancient Israel? Is this not God-sanctioned gender repression?

This is a very large question that really will only be fully addressed as we come to immerse ourselves in the teaching of the Bible and get a fuller grasp of its internal logic and coherence. For the purpose of this paper, let me take two test cases and then make some conclusions about this matter of the 'morality' of the OT.

Test Case 1: The Rape of Dinah (Genesis 34). In a recent article in the academically respected peer-reviewed journal the *Tyndale Bulletin*, Robin Parry analyzes this particular example of the concern that some have with the apparently patriarchal structure of ancient Israel. The Rape of Dinah is a test case, because the affront of Jacob's daughter being raped is seen by some as an example of a gender-biased, and defamatory, view of women, for the disgrace appears to be the male family member's, rather than Dinah's. In other words, does this portray a view of women as *property* rather than *personhood*? But even a mildly sympathetic reading of the text quickly exposes the fallaciousness of this view. The author comments that this rape was 'a thing that should not be done.' The apparently patriarchal attitude of the brothers, their fury and violent response, is described by the author but not commended. There are many narratives in the OT which are examples to *be avoided not copied*. This of course is one.

Test Case 2: The Conquest of Palestine (Joshua 1-12). Perhaps most controversially, the emerging nation of Israel is frequently commanded by God to not only conquer the resident peoples of Palestine but also totally destroy them, women, children, livestock and all. How can this be accepted as a part of 'God's book'? Doesn't this give credence to religious violence today? No, because it is God's judgment, not ours. The kind of answer that you give to these sort of questions partly depends on whether you are a pacifist or someone who stands in the just war tradition in Christian theology. In the just war tradition, while national violence is never the first option, it is sometimes a necessary action, like, for instance, in the war against the Nazis. *It needs to be remembered, then, that the peoples of Palestine at the time were engaged, it appears, in barbarous sacrificial rites and were ripe for judgment.* Furthermore, while these actions are bloody and unpleasant, they are nothing compared to the just judgment that God will deliver upon the unrepentant in the age to come, as described in the New Testament. Those who speak of a God of the OT as distinct from the God of the NT have not read either very closely. God is loving in the OT; he is a judge in the NT; and vice versa too.

We are told at various times that they totally destroyed those they were attacking. How do we answer those objections? To begin with, the Canaanites were engaged in extreme immorality (you can read about it in Leviticus 18), particularly sexual immorality. They also practiced child sacrifice (you can read about that in Deuteronomy 12:29-31). And when we are told that they were totally destroyed, the Bible is speaking in hyperbole, or rhetorical exaggeration, because immediately after saying that they were totally destroyed, it will then describe the peoples who are still living in the land (Joshua 13/24, especially Joshua 10:20!). What is more, Joshua describes how if God's people act in the same way that the Canaanites did then they will (and did) receive the same discipline and punishment as the Canaanites, eventually being expelled from the land for the same sins as the Canaanites (24:20). So what we are reading about here is not genocide, but God's righteous justice against flagrant and vile evil.

The important point to grasp in this matter of the morality of the OT is the basic intention of the OT. Here in the OT we do not find a model of secular government, though there may be something that modern leaders could learn from the Ten Commandments. Nor in the OT do we find a model of a national Christian state. Instead, the OT is full of Christ; it depicts the salvation plan of God gradually coming to fruition. And not everything that happens in the OT is good; far from it. In fact, some of it is intended to warn us of the perils of evil. But all of it is intended to point us to Jesus Christ, cause us to have faith in Him as the Savior, and fall at his feet as the fulfilment of the Law and the Prophets.

3. Graf-Wellhausen.

Wellhausen (1844-1918) occupied a position in the field of OT criticism analogous to that of Darwin in the area of biological science. Indebted to Graf, the theory that was spawned is usually referred to as the Graf-Wellhausen interpretation of the OT. Wellhausen regarded the Pentateuch (the first five books of the Bible traditionally ascribed to Moses) as essentially of composite origin, consisting of a Jehovistic source (J), dated in the ninth century BC; an independent Elohist document (E), coming from the eighth century BC; the basic content of the book of Deuteronomy (D), which was assigned to the time of King Josiah (640/39-609 BC); and a Priestly source (P), from about the fifth century BC. The Jehovistic author compiled a narrative document from the sources of J and E, and this was supplemented by the addition of Deuteronomy in the time of Josiah. Leviticus 17-26 was added to the Priestly document somewhat after the time of Ezekiel, while the remainder of the priestly material in the Elohist source was compiled by Ezra. The Pentateuch as we have it now, he concluded, was finalized perhaps by about 200 BC.

This theory proved immensely influential, and it still dominates some liberal approaches to the OT. In effect it consigns the formative first books of the Bible to exilic and post-exilic times, and therefore to be largely matters probably of legend compiled in order to shore up the confidence of a depressed remnant of Jews. However, the important point to grasp about the Graf-Wellhausen theory is that it is entirely speculative and driven by a philosophical commitment to evolutionary historical theory of the development of religions and a disbelief in the possibility of miracles. As such, it has come under sustained criticism by many senior scholars, both conservative and less conservative. In particular, the findings of OT archaeology challenge even the attempted resuscitation of a Graf-Wellhausen approach.

Instead of this philosophical commitment to a certain speculative theory, it is much more scientific and intellectually credible to be cautious and questioning and go where the facts lead. This makes the more rigorously archaeological approach below attractive. Even, though, within the confines of theoretical speculation about the construction of the OT documents there is ample evidence to suggest the power of alternative explanations. Graf-Wellhausen case is built upon a supposed distinction between the uses of the divine names in the OT; other explanations for these names have been advanced. Two recent articles, for instance, by Wilfred Warning suggest terminological patterns that advocate a united Pentateuch and thus a more traditional dating (W. Warning, "Terminological Patterns and the Divine Epithet *Shaddai*," *Tyndale Bulletin*, 52.1, 2001, 149-155; "Terminological Patterns and the First Word of the Bible," *Tyndale Bulletin*, 52.2, 2001, 267-275).

4. Archaeology.

Archaeological discoveries of the last hundred years have dramatically enhanced our understanding of ancient near-eastern culture. Some of these discoveries have illustrated the reliability of the biblical text. Others have challenged the accepted theories of Graf-Wellhausen. Pioneers in the scientific development of this archaeological approach to OT studies were W.F. Albright and C.H. Conrad, among others. Here are a few of the very many significant archaeological discoveries which relate to our understanding and appreciation of the historical reliability of the OT.

- a. Silver Amulets of Ketef Hinnom. The tomb in which these were found was of the Davidic dynasty, approximately the seventh century BC. The silver amulet thus dates to the end of the seventh or beginning of the sixth century BC. A prayer-like inscription contains the divine name (the tetragrammaton, the consonantal letters *yod, he, waw, he*, YHWH) which provides the oldest extra-biblical evidence for the name of God thus far archaeologically recovered in Jerusalem. Because the amulets contain material from the so-called Priestly source (Nu. 6:24-26) as well as from the frame of Deuteronomy (Dt. 7:9) disparate Pentateuchal texts existed and were conjoined prior to the reform of Josiah. We must also posit a length of time for these texts to become influential before being inscribed on such special amulets and placed in a tomb. This is evidence that directly challenges scholarship that dates Pentateuchal texts to exilic or post-exilic times (Erik Waaler, "A Revised Date for Pentateuchal Texts?" *Tyndale Bulletin*, 53.1, 2002, 29-56).
- b. Bullae. This is the name for hardened clay seal impressions. These have survived in damp earth in a remarkable way. In biblical Israel, papyrus was the primary form of writing material. Once an official document was written, it would be rolled up, one end folded in one-third of the breadth and the opposite end similarly folded in. The document, now shortened by folding, was tied with a string and a lump of clay was impressed on the knotted string. Then the upper surface of the clay lump was impressed with the signet ring of the owner of the document or its writer. Such documents were stored in temple or palace archives, with the unbroken seal guaranteeing the validity of the document's contents. Literally hundreds of Hebrew seals and seal impressions have been discovered in the last century and a half. E.g. Ahaz, Hezekiah, Baruch the son of Neriah the scribe, Jerahmeel the king's son (Jer. 36), etc. A beautiful seal of Manasseh (Hezekiah's son) has been found.
- c. Qumran. Among the more than eight hundred documents represented by whole scrolls, incomplete scrolls, and a myriad of fragments which have been recovered are complete copies or portions of all the books in the Hebrew Bible (our OT), except for the Book of Esther. These texts are older by at least a thousand years than any previous biblical texts written in Hebrew that we had prior to the discovery.

- d. House of David Inscription. Excavations at Tel Dan in the north of Israel at the foot of Mount Hermon directed since 1966 by Dr. Avraham Biran, distinguished Israeli archaeologist. On July 21, 1993, a broken fragment of basalt stone was uncovered in a wall. It turned out that the fragment mentions King David's dynasty, "the House of David." Two additional fragments of the stele were recovered in two separate, disparate locations in June of 1994. The discovery provides an archaeological connection to the biblical references to the ruling dynasty established by King David approximately two centuries before the events that are mentioned in the inscription. It is the first mention of King David and the earliest mention of a biblical figure outside of the Bible. The discovery is of particular importance in the face of those scholars who were either sceptical or denied the historical existence of King David.
- e. Mt. Ebal Altar. Israeli archaeologist Adam Zertal came across the ruins during an archaeological survey of the tribal region of Manasseh in 1980, and adheres to his somewhat controversial interpretation. He went on to excavate the site located on Mt. Ebal, the mountain from which Joshua pronounced the curses, lying opposite Mt. Gerizim, the mountain of blessings, and separated by the valley in which the ruins of ancient Shechem lie near modern Nablus. Excavations began in the fall of 1982, and revealed 962 animal bones which were burned or scorched. These included the remains of four species: sheep, goats, domesticated cattle, and fallow deer. These faunal remains differ from those found in typical Iron Age I sites because the range of animals represented is quite narrow. Usually, evidence of the donkey and the dog are also found in Iron Age sites. Further, the pig, which is attracted to the same environment as fallow deer, is lacking at this site. All this suggests that the Mt. Ebal ruins was a site where animals were sacrificed and eaten. The place was abandoned by 1130 BC. Because of its unique location and singular characteristics, Zertal believes this was the altar built and used when Joshua fulfilled Moses' command to build an altar to Yahweh on Mt. Ebal (Joshua 8:30-35).

5. Miracles and Science.

Usually unvoiced, the major agenda driving much of contemporary liberal scholarship is a philosophical commitment to the impossibility of the miraculous and the dominance of an evolutionary historical and scientific worldview. The problem with a traditional dating for many scholars today is the questions that raises with relation to the prophetic and the miraculous. Important as these philosophical discussions are, we should not let a prior commitment to denying the possibility of the miraculous prevent us from accepting descriptions of the miraculous when the facts lead that way. With regard to issues of creation and evolution, or of empirical science and the pre-modern cosmological worldview of the ancients attested in the OT, it is important to realize what is and what is not the purpose of the Scriptures. God did not write the Bible to teach us grammar, science or any other important educative program. His purpose in the Bible is to reveal to us the nature of salvation. Of course, the factuality of the events within which such salvation is recorded (such as the Exodus, or the prophetic predictions of Christ etc.) are crucial to establishing the credibility of the salvation to which the OT witnesses. If, though, we lay our philosophical convictions to one side for a moment and take the Bible as it stands, we will find that it speaks of a God who is there, who is not silent, and who has revealed himself in history and in his Word.