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President and CEO, Baylor Health Care System

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“If you’re tired of simplistic answers to complex questions about God, then you’ll love Jim Denison’s book. His uncommon courage puts into print the silent battles of many believers.”

Howard K. Batson

*Pastor, First Baptist Church of Amarillo, Texas
Author of Common Sense Church Growth and Jesus Is Lord*

HOW CAN I LOVE A GOD I'M NOT SURE I TRUST?



JAMES DENISON


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Designed by Mark A. Lane II

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Published in association with Rosenbaum & Associates Literary Agency, Brentwood, Tennessee.

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Denison, James C., date.

Wrestling with God : how can I love a God I'm not sure I trust? / James Denison.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN-13: 978-1-4143-1616-1 (sc : alk. paper)

ISBN-10: 1-4143-1616-X (sc : alk. paper) 1. Apologetics. I. Title.

BT1103.D46 2008

231.7—dc22

2008010443

Printed in the United States of America

14 13 12 11 10 09 08

7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Dedication

To Janet
The love of my life and joy of my soul

To Ryan and Craig
God's best gifts

To friends in four churches
Being your pastor has been my greatest honor

To the memory of Lester I. Denison
Finally, I understand

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PREFACE

Most days, I have all of God I want. My life is good: My family is blessed, our church is prosperous, my work seems successful. But I know that God wants a more intimate relationship with me than he and I have today. He wants me to love him with unbridled passion and trust him without reservation. I'll be honest—I don't, at least not often enough.

Part of the problem is that my life is too hectic and scheduled, without enough time for solitude and communion with God. But even my busyness is a reaction to the real problem. I have questions about God, issues that keep me from wanting to trust him more than I do.

It's hard to depend on someone who has disappointed you. (It's only natural to pull back, to minimize your risk and cut your losses, to decide not to let the person who hurt you hurt you again.) You may still have a relationship with that person. You may stay married, or keep your job, or maintain your friendship. But you won't expose yourself to further pain. More often than not, a liar will lie again. A thief will likely steal again. At the very least, you want the person to prove that things have changed before you'll believe they have.

So it is with my relationship with God. It's easy to confuse *working for* God with *walking*

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with God. Many of us who are religious professionals make this well-intentioned mistake. But that's not my real problem. The real reason why my life is so hectic is so I'll have a convenient excuse for not being closer to God. I'm so busy serving him that I don't have time to know him better. But it's not because I love him so much—it's because I don't. I don't really want to spend more time with him in prayer and worship. I don't really want to be alone with him more than I am. I know that I'm called to serve him, and I want to fulfill that calling. I want God to bless and use my life. But I don't want to be more intimate with him than I am. He is like a boss I want to please but would rather not see after work.

You see, God has done things both in my life and in the world that I don't understand. He has chosen not to do things for me that I think he should have. I have serious questions about him and his dealings with men and women. Until I can find some resolution for these issues, it will be harder to trust him more than I do. I know that God's ways are higher than mine (Isaiah 55:9) and that there are mysteries humans cannot comprehend. But I want to try. If I must choose to accept God's ways by faith, I need to know that I did my best to understand them first.

Over the decades that I've been a pastor, I've been close enough to various people to share my questions about God with them. Without exception, the person I confided in has admitted that he or she has struggled with the same issues. Like me, the friend didn't feel secure in telling someone about doubts and frustrations. But when a pastor confesses his spiritual struggles, I guess others feel safer in admitting theirs.

So I'm writing this book for both of us. For you, in the hope that what you read will help you choose to trust God more than you do. But even more for myself in the hope that I'll do the same. We'll see where we stand with God when this conversation ends.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Unlike Jacob, I have not wrestled with God in solitude. Many people have given me wise counsel and gracious encouragement in the struggle. Dr. Russell Dilday, chancellor of the B. H. Carroll Theological Institute and former president of Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, has been a theological mentor and hero for decades and was the first to give me a platform from which to ask my questions. Faculty colleagues and gifted students in four graduate institutions have been partners in the debate. Four of the greatest churches in America have allowed me to be their pastor and encouraged my quest for God. Minni Elkins, my ministry partner at Park Cities Baptist Church, has been a daily gift and a support to me.

Vester Hughes has been my spiritual father for many years. Dr. Gary Cook, president of Dallas Baptist University and the finest leader I know, has been my advisor and spiritual brother. Rev. Jeff Byrd has been my best friend and daily encourager. The staff of Tyndale House Publishers have been exceptional partners in this project, nurturing its formation and championing its success. My editor, Bonne Steffen, has worked steadfastly to make my intellectual arguments far more intelligible

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than they would otherwise have been. And my agent, Bucky Rosenbaum, was the first to believe that this work would help the reader as much as it would help the author. To each of them I owe far more than I can repay.

Through a lifetime of questioning and wondering, my most constant source of hope has been my family. Ryan and Craig are men after God's own heart and my daily joy. And Janet, my wife and life partner, is the wisest, most godly person I know, as well as my best friend. I dedicate this book to her, praying that it will glorify the God we will serve together forever.

INTRODUCTION
WONDERING ABOUT GOD

For as long as I can remember, I have wondered about God. I have an early childhood memory of lying back in the cool grass of our front yard in Houston, Texas, and staring up at white, cottony clouds in the afternoon sky. *Where did they come from? Where did we come from? What is beyond this?* There must be something on the other side of the sky I couldn't see, something surrounding the world that surrounded me. What I didn't know was where it all ended (or began). But I came to the reasoned, first-grade conclusion that the "something" must be God.

We didn't worship this God much in my family, or even talk about him. In fact, I don't remember having a real conversation about God with my parents or anyone else. I do remember finding out that my Cub Scout leader went to church on Wednesday nights, which meant our den had to meet on another night of the week. I asked my mother why anyone would go to church on Wednesday night. She didn't know.

Nothing changed until the ninth grade. I was in Mrs. Middleton's typing class, and she told us our typing would improve if we practiced typing whenever we could. For reasons I cannot begin to fathom, I wrote an

“Essay to God.” As far as I can recall, this was the first time I ever addressed him. I still have the essay, created on my father’s World War II–era manual typewriter on lined, three-hole loose-leaf paper.

I started the conversation on safe ground, telling God about my day (though it occurred to me as I sat typing that he would know more about it than I did). Then I got to the real issue, admitting that I wondered if he was real, and if he was, how could I know that he was? I now have an answer, but for a long time I didn’t.

Do you ever wonder if the whole business of faith and religion isn’t something we humans made up? If our belief in a “heavenly Father” is some Freudian wish-projection? William James asked the question well: “Is the sense of Divine presence a sense of anything objectively true?”¹ If God is real, why hasn’t he made himself so indisputably present that none of us need to wonder about this most crucial of all questions? And if he has, how has he done it?

Wrestling with Skeptics

This issue has come front and center in today’s culture. Ten million people said that Dan Brown’s sensationalist novel *The Da Vinci Code* changed their faith. A growing chorus is singing the song of agnosticism (we cannot know if God exists) and even atheism (we know that he does not). In Christopher Hitchens’s recent best seller, *God Is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything*, he goes on for nearly three hundred pages to support his position. Sam Harris followed his *New York Times* best seller *The End of Faith* two years later with his angry *Letter to a Christian Nation*. Scientist Richard Dawkins, called “the world’s most prominent atheist,” joined the fray of religion-fighting in 2006 with his best-selling *The God Delusion*. Dean Hamer’s book *The God Gene* claims that spirituality has genetic origins we can identify and understand. And Tufts University philosophy professor

Daniel Dennett's *Breaking the Spell* argues that religion is a natural phenomenon, unnecessary to a moral society. It seems that questioning the existence and nature of God guarantees a spot on someone's best seller list.

Wrestling with God has two parts. The first section is "wrestling with skeptics"—my attempt to show you why I believe that the God of the Bible is real and that Jesus is his Son. The second section moves on to the problems about which I'm not so certain, ones that I continue to wrestle with.

Is God Really Real?

One of the things I like about Dallas is the sunsets. There are no forests or mountains to get in the way of watching the sun go down. On a reasonably clear day you can see the sky change from blue to orange, purple, or red. I'm not sure how much of it is natural and how much is caused by pollution, but either way, the experience is inspiring.

Of course, my God of the glowing sunset may be your God of the raging tsunami or life-taking hurricane. I say that God appeared to Abraham and did his work through Isaac and his descendants; Muslims say that he did the same thing through Ishmael and his heirs. I believe that God is a person; Hindus believe that "he" is an "it," an impersonal reality. I can talk about all the ways I've been transformed by my faith, but Buddhists can say the same about their experiences on the path to enlightenment.

Who's to say who is right?

And what about all the horrors committed in God's name? Americans cannot fathom how God would send his messengers to kill three thousand people in New York City. But Muslims cannot fathom how God would send his crusaders to annihilate Arabs for two centuries. Hitler was apparently egged on by anti-Semitic Christian leaders, both Protestant and Catholic. Some people see suicide bombers as martyrs and view terrorist

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insurgents as freedom fighters. Whatever we call them, people are killing and being killed in the name of religion every day.

Is it time to admit that religion does more harm than good? Should we see the arguments about God's existence and nature, and the outrages performed in religious zeal as evidence that God isn't real after all? Maybe we should agree with Freud that religion is nothing more than a childish wish fulfillment that we should all outgrow.

At the very least, why should we sacrifice our time, money, or service to a God whose existence and nature are so ambivalent? I might choose to go to church, to accept what I'm told, even to preach and teach the faith, believing that I'm doing more good than harm. But if God doesn't exist, is there something more reasonable or beneficial that I can do with my life than what I'm doing now? Why pay a price to be more intimate with a God whose very existence is uncertain to me? If we believe in the existence of God, the lordship of Christ, and the authority of Scripture, a skeptic would want to know why. Can we demonstrate with any rational certainty that the object of our faith is real? Or is our faith merely personal and subjective?

I suspect that many professing Christians have harbored similar questions. Could it be that we don't share God's story with others because we have our own doubts about him? Maybe Christians divorce at the same rate as the rest of the population and live in ways that are no different than the culture because we're not sure God is real enough to deserve what we are asked to sacrifice in obedience to him.

If we could be sure that God is real and the Bible is true, what would change about our lives and our churches? Would we mean the words of the hymns we sing? Would we actually do what the Bible says? Would we risk telling our neighbors about Jesus? If we modern-day Noahs were sure the Flood was coming, would we build an ark of faith and invite everyone we know to get on board?

Billions of people say they believe in Jesus. How many have an intimate, transforming, obedient relationship with him? My guess is the same number as those who are sure he is who he says he is. Should we join their number? What difference will such a decision make in our lives?

What Exactly Is Faith?

Faith in God, like any other relationship, is a personal commitment. And all personal commitments transcend their evidence. Atheist Sam Harris claims:

It is time we acknowledged a basic feature of human discourse: when considering the truth of a proposition, one is either engaged in an honest appraisal of the evidence and logical arguments, or one isn't. Religion is the one area of our lives where people imagine that some other standard of intellectual integrity applies.²

He could not be more wrong.

All personal relationships require a decision that goes beyond what evidence can prove. If I had waited until I was sure I would be a good husband, I would never have gotten married. If I had waited until I could prove I would be a good father, I would never have wanted children. In making relational choices, we should all be “engaged in an honest appraisal of the evidence and logical arguments.” But then we have to step beyond the evidence into a commitment that becomes self-validating. You and I do this every day, with every personal relationship in which we choose to trust or not to trust.

How we relate to God is no different. Harris complains that “faith is nothing more than the license religious people give one another to keep believing when reasons fail,”³ but he’s wrong. Christianity could easily be proven false *if* someone could prove that Jesus did not rise from the dead. And if that happens, “we

are of all people most to be pitied” (1 Corinthians 15:19). If someone could prove that the Bible we read bears no trustworthy relationship to the original manuscripts of Scripture, we would be forced to abandon it as our authority source. As Christians we examine “the evidence and logical arguments,” then step beyond them into the faith they support but cannot prove.

The atheist or agnostic does exactly the same thing, choosing to believe that there is no God or that he cannot be known. Neither of these conclusions can be proven beyond doubt. Christians in no sense seek “some other standard of intellectual integrity.”

A Friend Who Changed My Mind

I hadn’t planned to include chapters on the truth of Scripture, the existence of God, or the deity of Christ in this book. But then I spent an afternoon talking to a young man at our church’s annual youth camp. His questions changed my mind.

He is a brilliant student, attending one of our nation’s best universities on a math and science scholarship. He and my youngest son, Craig, have been friends for years. Our family has greatly admired this young man’s gifts and his giving spirit. But I’d never had a long conversation with him before that afternoon. We talked very honestly about his faith questions: How do we know the Bible is true? How do we know that God is real or that Jesus is the Son of God? The answers he learned in Sunday school only confirmed his skepticism. He needed the best help I could give him.

I came away from that conversation convinced that there are more people with questions like my son’s friend who are attending church camps and worship services. If you’re wondering why you should believe the Bible, asking your question in the middle of a Sunday school class may not win friends. For example, I’d have to know a Muslim pretty well to ask why he or she believes the Qur’an without offending the person. If

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you're not sure you really believe in the existence of God or the deity of Christ, you may not know where to go to ask your questions. You can attend a local chapter of Atheists Anonymous (there really is a national organization by that name), but you probably won't get much objective help.

I hope that the first part of this book will be a safe place to explore such issues. Maybe you're reading it because you really do wonder whether you should trust the Bible, or because you want to investigate the existence of God and the deity of Christ.

Or it may be that you believe in all of the above, but aren't sure how you'd talk to my young friend at camp. Perhaps you'll find some answers here.



PART ONE

Why Wrestle with God?

CHAPTER 1

Why Believe a 2,000-Year-Old Book?

I'll never forget the evening I met Billy Graham. To be honest, I was more scared than excited. I was leading a delegation of preachers sent from churches in the Dallas-Fort Worth area to invite Dr. Graham to conduct a mission in our area. I was half certain that I'd say or do something to embarrass us all. As it turned out, I had every reason to be nervous.

Dr. Graham was speaking in Fresno, California, at the local university's football stadium. The locker room had been converted to a waiting area with chairs and tables. The world's most famous Christian was sitting there, waiting to go on the platform, when our little group of relative nobodies was ushered in to meet with him.

He had fallen the night before in his hotel room, breaking a bone in his foot. As we entered the locker room, we found Dr. Graham sitting in a red upholstered recliner, his injured foot in a walking cast propped up on a wooden coffee table. His sermon notes were open on his lap, a glass of water at his side. Even though it was a warm evening, he was wearing a sweater underneath his suit coat.

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At first glance I was struck by how frail he looked. Then he lifted his head and looked at us, and time stood still.

I've never seen such eyes. Blue, unwavering, gracious but piercing, kind but probing, seeing right into your soul. I'm sure that part of my reaction came from knowing Dr. Graham's reputation as one of the greatest evangelists since Paul. In that moment, I honestly felt myself to be in the holy presence of the Lord himself. During our thirty minutes together, as he turned those eyes to examine each of us individually, we all felt it. There was a power, a mystery, a convicting yet reassuring sense of divine presence in all he did and said. That night in the stadium, after he preached a brief, simple sermon, I watched in awe as thousands poured down from the stands onto the field to give themselves to Christ.

I lost count of the number of times Dr. Graham said, "The Bible says . . ." Quoting Scripture as his only authority, he captured the minds and souls of three generations gathered to hear him. Many wonder if there will be another like him. I don't think so.

I say that not just because of his unique charisma and godly passion, or his lifelong reputation for integrity. I'm skeptical that another Billy Graham will arise in this generation primarily because I don't think this culture really cares what the Bible says. We live in a world where the Qur'an, the Book of Mormon, the teachings of Buddha and Hindu masters, and the latest pop psychology manual compete with the Word of God for our attention. Our society doesn't believe in objective values or absolute truth. It's popular today to talk about your "personal" truth while respecting mine. "No one has the right to force their beliefs on me," people will say. "'The Bible says' may be Billy Graham's truth or your truth, but that doesn't make it mine."

If I were a skeptic of Christianity, I would begin my argument with the Bible. I would try to convince you that it is a human

rather than divine book, filled with contradictions and mistakes. If I could get you to abandon your trust in Scripture, I could remove most of the foundation upon which your faith is built. I'd try to persuade you that believing in the Bible is standing in quicksand. The longer you stay where you are, the lower you'll sink.

I wouldn't be the first person to attempt this strategy—not by a long shot.

Christopher Hitchens and Sam Harris

When I was growing up, our family Bible held a place of honor in the guest room. I was fascinated by this leather-bound book with its ribbon marker and gold-leaf-edged pages. In beautiful calligraphy our family tree—going back more than a century—was written down in the Bible's front pages. The whole thing was very mysterious to me.

The few times I had the nerve to actually read a little, I was put off by the "thees" and "thous," and more than a little frightened by the pictures. A painting of David holding the severed head of Goliath was probably not the best way to introduce an eight-year-old to the grace of God. But it never would have occurred to me to question whether or not the Bible was true.

I'll bet most people of my generation felt the same way. Whether we read it or not, at least we didn't question that this book was inspired by the God of the universe. There certainly were no books at the local bookstore telling us that it wasn't.

How times have changed.

Christopher Hitchens is a former Marxist¹ and stalwart atheist. His latest best seller, *God Is Not Great*, was written for this purpose: "Dear reader, if you have come this far and found your own faith undermined—as I hope . . ." In the book he concludes that "religion has run out of justifications. Thanks to the telescope and the microscope, it no longer offers any explanation of anything important."² I wish he'd tell us what he really thinks.

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Since Hitchens rejects the Christian faith entirely, I was surprised when he disclosed in the book that (at his father's funeral) he quoted this passage from the Bible:

Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.

Philippians 4:8

But he quickly explained why: "I chose this because of its haunting and elusive character, which will be with me at the last hour, and for its essentially secular injunction, and because it shone out from the wasteland of rant and complaint and nonsense and bullying which surrounds it."³ (And to think that Philippians is my favorite book of the Bible.) Hitchens is no happier with the book of Revelation (my second favorite book) and its "deranged fantasies."⁴ If Hitchens is right, any belief in God based on the Bible is wrongheaded and naive.

I wouldn't bother with Hitchens except that he speaks for a movement that's become a publishing phenomenon in our day. "Aggressive atheism," some call it. He represents a growing chorus calling for us to relegate the Bible to the status of *The Odyssey* and *Paradise Lost*—interesting books of mythology, but nothing more. If you're wondering why you should trust the Bible, listening to Hitchens will give your questions a very loud voice.

Of course, Hitchens does not pretend to be an objective source for our conversation on the value of Scripture and faith. For instance, consider this kind and evenhanded statement: "Violent, irrational, intolerant, allied to racism and tribalism and bigotry, invested in ignorance and hostile to free inquiry, contemptuous of women and coercive toward children: organized religion ought to have a great deal on its conscience."⁵ And there's plenty more

WHY BELIEVE A 2,000-YEAR-OLD BOOK?

where that comes from (see the appendix on page 193 of this book for a detailed response to Hitchens and Sam Harris).

Unfortunately, Hitchens's biases have apparently gotten in the way of his research regarding the Bible. For instance, he claims that "if Jesus was ever born, it wasn't until at least AD 4."⁶ Any first-year New Testament student can tell you that King Herod, the ruler who sought to kill the infant Jesus, died in 4 BC, so that Jesus' birth must have preceded that date. In case you're interested in more erroneous attacks on Scripture by Hitchens, please consult the appendix.

Sam Harris is no more objective than Hitchens. As he writes in his *Letter to a Christian Nation*, "Atheism is nothing more than the noises reasonable people make in the presence of unjustified religious beliefs."⁷ Apparently atheists are "reasonable," while people of faith are not.

However, Harris can mislead us on the facts as disastrously as Hitchens. For instance, he lists Jehovah's Witnesses as a "denomination of Christianity,"⁸ a claim that is news to both Christians and Jehovah's Witnesses. And he states:

The writers of Luke and Matthew, for instance, declare that Mary conceived as a virgin, relying upon the Greek rendering of Isaiah 7:14. The Hebrew text of Isaiah uses the word *'almâ*, however, which simply means "young woman," without any implication of virginity. It seems all but certain that the dogma of the virgin birth, and much of the Christian world's resulting anxiety about sex, was a product of a mistranslation from the Hebrew.⁹

If Harris had checked, he could have learned that Luke never quotes Isaiah 7:14. But why did Matthew? Because the Septuagint (the Greek Old Testament, translated by Hebrew scholars two centuries before the birth of Christ) rendered *'almâ* as *parthenos*, their word for "virgin." In addition, Gabriel made

it clear to Mary that she would be a virgin mother (Luke 1:34-36; note: no reference to Isaiah 7:14). The New Revised Standard Version renders Isaiah 7:14 as “young woman” and footnotes “virgin” as the Greek translation; the New Jerusalem Bible does the same. The Hebrew text is no secret kept from or by “the Christian world.”

Harris is simply wrong in arguing that “the dogma of the virgin birth” is “a product of a mistranslation from the Hebrew.” The appendix lists more mistreatments of Scripture by Harris and the obvious, often easy answers to his criticisms.

Hitchens and Harris do not bring a single criticism against the Bible that cannot be answered by the facts. If their skepticism was the only thing Christians had to answer, we’d be in good shape. Unfortunately, their books do not begin to compare in popularity to the publishing phenomenon we’ll consider next.

The Da Vinci Code and the Word of God

Dan Brown’s *The Da Vinci Code* is the number one best-selling hardcover novel in history. At this writing, more than 48 million copies have been sold worldwide. I bought my copy when the book was first published, thinking that it was a biography of Leonardo da Vinci, one of my favorite figures of history. In actuality, if Leonardo could turn over in his grave today, he would.

In his foreword, Brown claims that “all descriptions of art-work, architecture, documents, and secret rituals in this novel are accurate.”¹⁰ By “documents” he means his descriptions of the Bible and other ancient religious books. If he is right about Scripture, Christians are dead wrong. Brown’s fictional characters claim that the Bible is the product of human politics, not divine inspiration. And they go to great lengths to show how unreliable it is. While the novel is now old news, its attacks are not.

Listening to Brown’s views on the Bible will give us a window into the growing skepticism about Scripture in our culture. And

responding to his claims is a good way to give the factual side of the story.

Who made the Bible?

One of Brown's fictional characters is Leigh Teabing, a renowned English historian whom we're told is an expert on the origins of the Bible. Teabing calls the creation of the Bible, "the fundamental irony of Christianity!" and claims, "the Bible, as we know it today, was collated by the pagan Roman emperor Constantine the Great."¹¹

The news gets worse for Bible believers:

Because Constantine upgraded Jesus' status almost four centuries *after* Jesus' death, thousands of documents already existed chronicling His life as a *mortal* man. To rewrite the history books, Constantine knew he would need a bold stroke. From this sprang the most profound moment in Christian history. . . . Constantine commissioned and financed a new Bible, which omitted those gospels that spoke of Christ's *human* traits and embellished those gospels that made Him godlike. The earlier gospels were outlawed, gathered up, and burned.¹²

If Brown is right, the Bible we have today was produced by a political process that occurred around AD 325. But Brown is not right, as even a brief look at the facts will show.

The list of Old Testament books found in today's Bibles was finalized two centuries before Constantine at two meetings of rabbis held at the city of Jamnia, a town west of Jerusalem near the Mediterranean coast. However, these meetings did not determine the books of the Hebrew Bible so much as they discussed and ratified what had been accepted by the Jewish people for centuries. The thirty-nine books of the Old Testament had even been translated into Greek two hundred years before these

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councils met. In short, Constantine had nothing whatsoever to do with the Old Testament.

Perhaps Brown means the New Testament. Here the actual facts are just as damaging to his case.

Early Christians decided on four criteria for accepting a book as divinely inspired. First, it had to be written by an apostle or based on eyewitness testimony. Second, it had to possess obvious merit and authority. Third, a book had to be accepted by all Christians, not just a single church. Last, it had to be approved by the decision of the entire church, not just a few advocates.

Consider a book that didn't make the cut. *The First Gospel of the Infancy of Jesus Christ* tells of a man who was changed into a mule but converted back to human form when the baby Jesus was put on his back for a ride (7:5-27). The same book tells us that the infant Jesus killed some boys who made him angry (19:19-24). Sounds just like the Savior of the world, doesn't it? It was easy to dismiss such fiction.

The four gospels of our New Testament were chosen centuries before Constantine. In AD 115, Ignatius called them "the gospel"; in AD 170, Tatian made a "harmony of the gospels" using only Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John; around AD 180, Irenaeus referred to these four gospels as firmly established in the churches. The rest of the New Testament books were soon accepted by the entire church as well. Once again, Constantine had nothing to do with this process.¹³

Unlike the fictional Leigh Teabing, F. F. Bruce was in fact one of the world's most recognized authorities on the creation of the Bible. We might consider his expert opinion:

One thing must be emphatically stated. The New Testament books did not become authoritative for the Church because they were formally included in a canonical list; on the contrary, the Church included them in her canon because she already regarded them as divinely inspired,

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recognizing their innate worth and generally apostolic authority, direct or indirect. . . . What these councils did was not to impose something new upon the Christian communities but to codify what was already the general practice of those communities.¹⁴

Of course, we haven't proven that the Bible is the Word of God. But we have proven that its books were not written or chosen in a smoke-filled room by corrupt politicians. Rather, they were produced by believers who claimed to be guided by the Spirit of God. Should we believe them?

Should we trust the Bible?

"Historian" Teasing says no: "The Bible is a product of *man*, my dear. Not of God. The Bible did not fall magically from the clouds. Man created it as a historical record of tumultuous times, and it has evolved through countless translations, additions, and revisions. History has never had a definitive version of the book."¹⁵ Later he adds with a chuckle that scholars cannot confirm the authenticity of the Bible.¹⁶

What are the facts? Of course, the Bible claims to be the divinely inspired Word of God (John 10:35; Hebrews 4:12; 2 Timothy 3:16). But we would expect that. Is there objective historical evidence to support or refute this claim?

Biblical scholars consider four questions in determining the validity of an ancient book. First, has it been copied accurately across the centuries? This is the manuscript, or bibliographic, test. Second, what does archaeological evidence tell us? Third, is the book internally consistent? Fourth, if it makes predictions, are they fulfilled? While a full discussion of these issues requires a separate book, we can at least look briefly at the answers.¹⁷

First, let's consider the manuscript evidence. No original copies of any ancient book exist. The paper used by Aristotle, Plato, Julius Caesar, and the biblical writers was too fragile to

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last across the centuries. However, we possess five thousand copies of the New Testament in ancient Greek and ten thousand in other ancient languages. Some fragments were written thirty or so years after the original writings.

By contrast, we have only nine or ten good copies of Caesar's *Gallic Wars*, none made earlier than nine hundred years after Caesar. For Tacitus's first-century *Histories* we have only four and a half of his original fourteen books, none copied earlier than the tenth century. We possess only five manuscripts of any work of Aristotle, none made earlier than AD 1100 (fourteen centuries after the original).

Manuscript evidence for the New Testament far surpasses the evidence for any other ancient book. Quoting F. F. Bruce again: "The variant readings about which any doubt remains among textual critics of the New Testament affect no material question of historic fact or of Christian faith and practice."¹⁸ When Brown claims that history has never had a definitive version of the book, he's simply wrong.

Next let's look at the evidence of archaeology. Researchers continue to make discoveries that confirm the Bible. For instance, the pool of Beth-zada (Bethesda) described in John 5 was once dismissed as historical fiction. Then archaeologists located it in the northeast quarter of the Old City of Jerusalem. I've seen it myself.

Archaeologists have uncovered the remains of Caiaphas, the high priest during Jesus' trial and crucifixion. They unearthed the skeleton of Yohanan, a crucifixion victim from AD 70 whose remains confirm the details of Jesus' crucifixion as it is described in the Gospels. Archaeological evidence strongly supports the trustworthiness of Scripture.

Internal consistency is also important in deciding whether or not to trust a book. Taking the Gospels as an example, we find exactly the right kind of agreement. Each of the writers tells the story from his unique perspective, and yet they agree on every

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essential fact. When we interpret the biblical texts according to their intended meaning, so-called contradictions are always resolved.

For instance, a critic might say, “The Old Testament teaches, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’ But Jesus told us to turn the other cheek. Which is right?” Both. The Old Testament command (Exodus 21:23-25) had to do with physical injury, limiting retribution to the actual crime. Jesus’ statement (Matthew 5:38-39) had to do with insults, not bodily threats. He told us not to answer slander with slander; his teaching did not prohibit punishment for actual crimes. As another example, Matthew 4 records Jesus’ temptations in this order: turn stones into bread (v. 3), jump from the Temple (vs. 5-6), and worship Satan on a mountain (vs. 8-9). Luke 4 records the same temptations, but in a different order: turn stones to bread (v. 3), worship the devil on a mountain (vs. 5-7), and jump from the Temple (vs. 9-11). Which is right?

In their intentional context, there is no contradiction. Neither Matthew nor Luke claimed to be writing historical chronology, so the order of Jesus’ temptations was immaterial to their purpose. If two people ask you what you did yesterday, you can recount the events of your day in a different order to each person without contradicting yourself (unless you claim to be following strict chronology both times). So it is with this so-called “contradiction” in the Word of God. On occasion people will tell me that they don’t believe the Bible because it is “filled with contradictions.” I always ask them to name one. No one ever has.

Last, fulfilled prophecy is important in judging a book like the Bible. Probably the most important area of prophecy has to do with the Messiah, the one God promised to send to redeem his people. At least forty-eight major Messianic prophecies can be found in the Old Testament. Jesus Christ fulfilled every one.

For instance, here are some of the prophecies that Jesus fulfilled in his crucifixion. I’ve listed only the prophecies that he could not have controlled himself:

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A friend would betray him (Psalm 41:9; Matthew 10:4).

He would be sold for thirty pieces of silver (Zechariah 11:12; Matthew 26:15).

He would be wounded and bruised (Isaiah 53:5; Matthew 27:26).

He would be smitten and spit upon (Isaiah 50:6; Matthew 26:67).

He would be mocked (Psalm 22:7-8; Matthew 27:29).

His hands and feet would be pierced (Psalm 22:16; Luke 23:33, NLT).

He would be crucified with thieves (Isaiah 53:12; Matthew 27:38).

His garments were parted and lots cast for them (Psalm 22:18; John 19:23-24).

Not one of his bones would be broken (Exodus 12:46; John 19:33).

His side would be pierced (Zechariah 12:10; John 19:34).

He would be buried in a wealthy man's tomb (Isaiah 53:9; Matthew 27:57-60).

Of course, billions of people across twenty centuries of Christian history have proven the Bible to be true and relevant in their personal lives. But even if we discount such overwhelming subjective evidence, there are still compelling reasons to believe that the Bible is the trustworthy Word of God.

Should we trust The Da Vinci Code?

It's important for Christians to listen to the critics of Christianity. But we should also expect our critics to meet the same factual standards they expect of us. We've seen some of the mistakes made by Christopher Hitchens, Sam Harris, and Dan Brown.

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In fact, discussing the historical errors in Dan Brown's novel could fill a short volume. For instance, Brown calls the Nag Hammadi and Dead Sea Scrolls "the earliest Christian records."¹⁹ But the Nag Hammadi library was written by Gnostics, heretics who were in no sense part of the Christian church. And the Dead Sea Scrolls contain *only* the Old Testament; their readers would be surprised to learn that they possessed "Christian records."

Brown claims that Noah was an albino,²⁰ but the Bible nowhere describes him this way. He describes Joseph of Arimathea as "Jesus' trusted uncle,"²¹ but nothing in the Bible or early Christian history suggests this relationship. One of his central characters is a monk working for the Catholic organization Opus Dei, but Opus Dei has no monks.

We can view the Bible through the eyes of skeptics like Hitchens, Harris, and Brown, men who have no training in biblical study and interpretation but have a clear agenda to discredit the Christian faith. Or we can view their skepticism through the eyes of Scripture and those who have found God in its pages. I choose the latter.

So Should You Trust the Bible?

Has this chapter proven that the Bible is the inspired Word of God? Of course not. As I said in the introduction to part one, faith is a relationship, and relationships cannot be proven, only experienced. We cannot use scientific methods to prove relational truth, any more than we can use a bathroom scale to measure friendship.

But we can consider the evidence that supports a relational decision. I couldn't prove that Janet would be a good wife until I married her, but I could examine the evidence before making my decision. Had she been in prison for attempting to murder her last boyfriend? Had she been divorced four times by her senior year of college? These issues might have been a deterrent.

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(I actually married so far above me that a friend who met my wife told me I had “outkicked my coverage.”) Even if all the evidence was positive (and it was), I still couldn’t be sure until we got married.

So it is with the Word of God. The evidence we’ve considered shows that trusting the Bible is reasonable. If we discovered that the Bible we read today bears no similarity to the original manuscripts, or that archaeology disproves Scripture, or that the books disagree with themselves, or that the Bible’s prophecies are unfulfilled, we’d have reasons to reject the Bible as the Word of God.

In fact, the opposite is true. Rather than discovering vetoes to the Christian faith, we have found excellent evidence that it is based on a book we can trust. Now we must step beyond the evidence to experience—then the Bible becomes God’s Word for us.

Of all the people I’ve known who have chosen to do that, one has stood out in my memory for many years. I met her during the summer of 1979 when I was working as a missionary in East Malaysia on the island of Borneo. Most of the Christians I encountered there had never owned a copy of the Bible in their own language. The mission team in Singapore sent my partner and me into the country with a large bag filled with paperback Malay New Testaments. They told us the Bibles would probably not get through customs, but that we should try. *Easy for you to say*, I thought to myself. *What if the Bibles are not the only things they take into custody?*

My partner and I came to the luggage checkpoint and placed our bags on the conveyer belt. The customs official zipped open our blue gym bag filled with New Testaments. I knew that only Muslims were allowed to work for the government, and I expected this Muslim to confiscate our bag or something worse. Instead, he zipped the bag shut, smiled at me, made a cross in the air, and sent it through.

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But that's not the best part of the story. On Sunday we stood outside the small warehouse where the local Christian church met, ready to distribute our Bibles. The people formed a long line out into the dirt street. It was hot and humid in the tropical sun. Each person wanted to thank us for our gift. Their speeches and our responses, all conveyed through our interpreter, multiplied by the hundred or so people waiting for their Bibles, took most of the afternoon.

Finally we came to the end of the line. An elderly woman, stooped over on her twisted cane, shuffled her way through the dust to our little table. I handed a New Testament to her. Her weathered hands trembled as she accepted the first Bible she had ever owned. She hugged it to her chest in a tight, loving embrace. Tears began to flow down her weathered cheeks. I thought of all the Bibles at home in my apartment gathering dust. And I was shamed by her love for the Word of God.

"The Bible says . . ." may not be all our culture wants to hear. But it's enough for God to say.

FOR FURTHER REFLECTION

Faith in God, like all relationships, requires a personal commitment transcending the evidence. Do you wish that faith could be more certain? Why or why not?

Skeptics of biblical authority often allege that the Scriptures contradict themselves. Can you think of other motivations for their attacks on God's Word?

As you have seen, the manuscript evidence for biblical authority is remarkable. What more could God have done to give us his Word in a way we would trust? Why do you think he transmitted the Bible to us as he did?

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How do you think a skeptic would respond to the evidence from fulfilled prophecy? How does this evidence relate to the definition of faith we've considered?

Do you think that Christians often take the gift of God's Word for granted? Do you? What could be done to encourage greater reverence for Scripture?

CONCLUSION

A Man with Two Names

Jacob was the first person recorded in Scripture to wrestle with God. When his match was over, the man named “Deceiver” by his parents would never be the same. Across forty centuries he has been known as Israel, meaning “one who wrestled with God” (Genesis 32:28).

For most of my Christian life, I have been a Jacob. I have tried to convince myself and others that my faith was certain, my questions all answered. It’s difficult to trust a dentist with rotten teeth or a pastor who has issues with God. So I’ve smiled at their questions and answered them with assurance, all the while working hard to sound more confident than I really was. Deceiver, my doubts mocked. But I was too busy to take time and wrestle with God for the answers. Or maybe I was afraid of what would happen if I did. I reasoned that a challenge you haven’t tried to defeat is better than one you faced and failed.

But over this past year I’ve worked at being honest with God and with my own soul. I’ve given myself permission to ask my hardest questions about God and follow the truth

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wherever it leads. The truth has led to this book and this conclusion: I know much more now than I did a year ago. I've settled (at least for myself) some of the most perplexing issues the Christian faith must face. But now that I can claim the name Israel, I know that the match is far from over.

Israel would continue to wrestle with God to the day he died. He still had his estranged brother, Esau, to confront, God at Bethel to meet, his son Joseph to lose and regain. We won't be done with our questions until we stand before the One who is the Way, the Truth, and the Life.

So I'm going to go on wrestling with God. I'm going to ask my hard questions and trust his Word and Spirit for the answers I need. I'm going to believe more than I can understand and trust more than I can prove. I'm going to step into the flooded Jordan before it stops, march around Jericho before it falls, and claim the Promised Land before it's mine. I'm going to leave my nets so I can fish for men and get out of my boat so I can walk on the water. I'm going to follow my Lord, whether he leads me to a dungeon in Rome or a cave on Patmos. Because wherever I go, he'll be waiting for me.

One day I'll finish wrestling. On that day, when every knee bows and every tongue confesses that Jesus Christ is Lord, he'll invite me to ask my questions and express my doubts. And I'll say with doubting Thomas, "My Lord and my God" (John 20:28).

I hope you'll join me.

APPENDIX

A Response to Christopher Hitchens and Sam Harris

In the early chapters of this book we listened to atheists Christopher Hitchens and Sam Harris making their case for atheism. Both purport to be spokesmen for a reasoned worldview. Both claim to cite evidence that disproves the Christian faith. Both want us to abandon that faith and approach the world as they do.

Before you make that decision, you might want to look more closely at their arguments. Consider first some of Hitchens's more remarkable assertions and see if you find him a trustworthy guide to the world of religion.

In *God Is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything*, we learn that "Augustine was a self-centered fantasist and an earth-centered ignoramus."¹ Of course, the fact is that the majority of scholars are united in their belief that St. Augustine was one of the greatest intellects in human history. But Hitchens knows better.

Hitchens assures us that "all attempts to reconcile faith with science and reason are

consigned to failure.”² All without exception? Christians who are scientists should definitely take note.

Hitchens describes Mel Gibson’s *The Passion of the Christ* as “an exercise in sadomasochistic homoeroticism starring a talentless lead actor who was apparently born in Iceland or Minnesota.”³ I guess Gibson’s long list of awards for the movie doesn’t count.

Hitchens raises my hackles when he describes C. S. Lewis’s reasoning as “so pathetic as to defy description.”⁴ Lewis took three “firsts” from Oxford University: in Greek and Latin literature, philosophy and ancient history, and English language and literature. (This would be comparable to graduating summa cum laude at Harvard three times.) I’ll admit that Lewis is my favorite theologian of the twentieth century, but he is also widely considered the most influential apologist of the modern era. Meanwhile, Hitchens’s criticism comes from a man who titled chapter 10 of his diatribe, “The Tawdriness of the Miraculous and the Decline of Hell,”⁵ but failed to discuss hell in the chapter at all.

He is convinced that “the whole racket of American evangelism was just that: a heartless con run by the second-string characters from Chaucer’s ‘Pardoner’s Tale.’”⁶ I guess Hitchens must be right, and all the Americans who name Billy Graham the most admired person in the world are wrong.

Hitchens and the Bible

Hitchens has plenty of specific criticisms of God’s Word and the Christian faith. I’ll respond to a number of them, of varying degrees of significance. Let’s begin with the shocking disclosure that “all three monotheisms [Judaism, Christianity, and Islam] . . . praise Abraham for being willing to hear voices and then to take his son Isaac for a long and rather mad and gloomy walk.”⁷ Of course, the Qur’an teaches that Abraham sacrificed Ishmael, not Isaac—a crucial point in Muslim theology. Hitchens got wrong a fact any first-semester world religions student would know.

Recommended Reading

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Notes

Introduction

1. Quoted in Dean Hamer, *The God Gene: How Faith is Hardwired into Our Genes* (New York: Anchor Books, 2004), 197.
2. Sam Harris, *Letter to a Christian Nation* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005), 64–65.
3. *Ibid.*, 67.

Chapter 1

1. Christopher Hitchens, *God Is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything* (New York: Twelve, 2007), 151.
2. *Ibid.*, 282.
3. *Ibid.*, 12.
4. *Ibid.*, 56.
5. *Ibid.*
6. *Ibid.*, 60.
7. Sam Harris, *Letter to a Christian Nation*, 51.
8. *Ibid.*, viii.
9. *Ibid.*, 57–58.
10. Dan Brown, *The Da Vinci Code* (New York: Doubleday, 2003), 1.
11. *Ibid.*, 231.
12. *Ibid.*, 234, emphasis his.
13. The New Testament list we use today was set forth by Athanasius in AD 367 and approved by church councils meeting at Hippo Regius in 393 and Carthage in 397. But these councils did not choose the books of the New Testament. They simply affirmed what the church had believed for generations. Constantine had nothing to do with these decisions.
14. F. F. Bruce, *The New Testament Documents: Are They Reliable?* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1977), 27.
15. Brown, *The Da Vinci Code*, 231, emphasis his.
16. *Ibid.*, 256.
17. For a more in-depth discussion of the evidence for biblical authority, please see my book, *The Bible: You Can Believe It—Biblical Authority in the Twenty-First Century* (Dallas: BaptistWay Press, 2005).
18. Bruce, *The New Testament Documents*, 19–20.
19. Brown, *The Da Vinci Code*, 245.

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20. Ibid., 167.
21. Ibid., 255.

Chapter 2

1. J. L. Mackie, *The Miracle of Theism: Arguments for and against the Existence of God* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982), 10.
2. J. P. Moreland and Kai Nielsen, *Does God Exist? The Great Debate* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1990), 35.
3. Harris, *Letter to a Christian Nation*, 51.
4. See for instance, Kai Nielsen, "No! A Defense of Atheism," in *Does God Exist?*, 48–63.
5. Harris, *Letter to a Christian Nation*, 52.

Chapter 3

1. Hitchens, *God Is Not Great*, 6.
2. Ibid., 13 (emphasis his).
3. Ibid., 52.
4. Harris, *Letter to a Christian Nation*, 25.
5. Ibid., 30.
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid., 31.
8. Ibid., 39.
9. Ibid., 40.
10. Ibid., 44.
11. Ibid., 45.
12. Ibid., 54.
13. Hitchens, *God Is Not Great*, 6.
14. Ibid., 13.
15. Harris, *Letter to a Christian Nation*, 44.
16. Ibid., 25.
17. Jon Meacham, "The God Debate," *Newsweek* (9 April 2007), 58.
18. Harris, *Letter to a Christian Nation*, 90–91.
19. Hitchens, *God Is Not Great*, 4.

Chapter 4

1. See <http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/mara.html>
2. Suetonius, *The Lives of the Twelve Caesars*, ed. Joseph Gavorse (New York: Modern Library, 1931), 250.
3. Tacitus, "The Annals," *Great Books of the Western World*, 2d ed., vol. 14, ed. Mortimer J. Adler (Chicago: Encyclopedia Britannica, Inc., 1990), 168.
4. Pliny, *Letters* 10.96, cited in R. T. France, *The Evidence for Jesus* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1986), 42.
5. Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*, trans. William Whiston (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 1978), 423.
6. Ibid., 379.