

## **DID GOD REALLY SAY? Can We Trust the Bible?**

### **Introduction**

Lee Strobel is a former law reporter for the Chicago Tribune, who converted to Christianity through his investigation of his wife's new-found religion. One of the reviews for his book, "The Case for Faith," I read on amazon.com says, "How is it possible to take a document "literally" when it is stuffed to from one cover to the other with contradictions and fantastical nonsense?" That's the subject of our talk tonight – this book we Christians call "The Holy Scriptures," or "The Bible." To put it in a way Strobel's reviewer might understand, what makes this particular collection of contradictions and nonsense different than any other?

First, it's probably not a bad idea to talk about what this book is, humanly speaking. First, it's more of a library than a book. The Protestant Bible contains 66 books, 27 in the New Testament and 39 in the Old Testament. The New Testament contains the books about Jesus; the Old Testament deals with the thousands of years before Jesus came on the scene.

The Old Testament itself can be viewed as having three sections: the Law, the Prophets, and the Writings. The Law would be the first five books of the Old Testament. The Prophets contain books of history, the four major prophetic books Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Daniel, and the short Minor Prophets. The Writings are everything else: the Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, etc – books that are more philosophical and poetic than historical or prophetic. The New Testament contains four histories of Jesus' ministry, one book of church history, 21 letters, and 1 extended vision. The Old Testament was written between 1500 BC and 300 BC; the New Testament was written between 40 and 70 AD. All toll these books represent the work of around 50 authors spanning 1600 years of history.

For comparison, the *Qu'ran*, the holy book for Muslims, was written by one man over a decade or two. The Hindu *Baghavat Gita* was written at one shot sometime between 500 and 200 BC. The *Book of Mormon* was written by one man in the 19<sup>th</sup> century in upstate New York. Other than these two books, there aren't a lot of holy books floating around. Put the Bible up against any of these other books, and for consistency and quality of "fantastical nonsense" the Bible will come out quite well.

Once again I'd like to use an acronym to guide us through tonight's journey. This time it's short: the word "FACT". We'll look first at evidence for the flood – that's F. Then we'll look at evidence from archaeology – that's our A. Next we'll look at the evidence from Christ's own testimony. That'll tie our discussion into the discussion we had last week. And lastly we'll look at the T for tensions – seeming contradictions – and show that they're not really contradictions at all.

F – Flood evidence

A – Archaeological evidence

C – Christ's evidence

T – Tensions or contradictions?

## **F is for Flood**

Next to the story of creation in Genesis 1 and 2, the story of the flood seems the hardest for most people to swallow. I know it was for me for a long time. Could there really have been a devastating storm that covered the earth in water and destroyed almost all life, except for a small handful of people? Next to evolution, which we talked about our first week here, the Flood is probably the next most controversial. I'd like to approach the flood, if you will, from two angles. The first is from the angle of world legend and mythology, and the second is geography. By necessity I'll have to keep both short, but hopefully it'll wet your appetite to learn more.

### *Legends*

There are flood legends to be found among every people on earth. I'm not just talking about stories of water rising and destroying lots of things. I'm talking about stories that have astonishing similarities, and that exist even in areas where there hasn't been a lot of water for thousands of years, like Africa and the American southwest. But before I give you a sampling of some of these stories, let me refresh our memories as to the Scriptural account of the story.<sup>1</sup>

A man named Noah was instructed by God to build an ark and take into it two of most of every animal on earth, and seven of certain animals. He also took his own wife, his three sons and their wives into the ark. After years of building the ark, the "wells of the deep" were opened and it rained enough to cover the earth. After 150 days, the waters began to recede. After another forty days, Noah sent out a raven, then a dove, then another dove who came back with an olive branch, signaling the flood was over. God sent a rainbow as a sign he would never again flood the earth.

In Lithuanian, a Baltic country in Northern Europe next to Russia, there's a story that goes like this. A supreme god sends two gods to destroy mankind because of their war and injustice. A few people and animals escape the flood by fleeing to the top of a mountain. As the waters rise, they climb into a nutshell dropped by the supreme god and escape the flood. Afterwards, the supreme god sends a rainbow to comfort those who survive the flood. One elderly couple on top the mountain helps the god repopulate Lithuania.

There is an long story from the 7<sup>th</sup> century before Christ from Iraq called the Gilgamesh epic. In one particular part of the story we hear about the hero, Utnapishtim. Utnapishtim is given directions for building an ark, although the dimensions are slightly different than Noah's ark. Utnapishtim's ark is square, not rectangular, and has twice as many decks. Utnapishtim also saves the workmen who helped build the ark, and not just his family. The flood itself lasts seven days. The whole earth is not covered – there are fourteen mountains visible at the end of seven days of flooding. Utnapishtim's ark comes to rest on one of these, and after seven days he begins sending out birds to look for dry land. First he sends a dove, then a swallow, then a raven. Utnapishtim then offers a sacrifice to the gods.

In Zoroastrianism, a Persian religion from before Christ, it is Ahura Mazda, God of Light, who instructs Yima to prepare for the flood. He says to Yima, "...make thee a Vara, long as a riding-ground on every side of the square, and thither bring the seeds of sheep and oxen, of men, of

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<sup>1</sup> These stories and their references can be found in my paper, "Remembrances of the Flood," which can be found at [stonge.intheway.org/Essays.htm](http://stonge.intheway.org/Essays.htm).

dogs, of birds, and of red blazing fires. Therefore make thee a Vara, long as a riding-ground on every side of the square, to be an abode for man; a Vara, long as a riding-ground on every side of the square, for oxen and sheep.”

Here’s another story from Tanzania. When the rivers begin flooding, the god tells two men to go into a ship, taking with them all sorts of seed and animals. The flood rises, covering the mountains. Later, to check whether the waters have dried up, the man sends out a dove, and it comes back to the ship. He waits and sends out a hawk, which does not return because the waters have dried. The men then disembark with the animals and seeds.

In a story from central India, a fish fed by a pious man warns him that a great deluge will come. The man prepares a large box into which he, his sister and a rooster embark. After the flood, the god Rama punishes the fish for warning the man of the flood and removes his tongue. The man is then ordered to repopulate the earth.

You may be familiar with the New Zealand natives, the Maori, from the film “Whale Rider.” They have a flood story that is somewhat similar to the Biblical account. In the distant past, the creator god Tane became angry that the tribes were fighting each other and not worshipping him. Two prophets came to teach the people the truth about god, but they refused to listen. In frustration, the prophets build a raft with a house on it, stocked it with food, and boarded two more men and a number of women. The priests then prayed for rain, which came and flooded the world for five days. After eight months, the waters thinned, and they landed on a mountain. The people on the raft were the only survivors.

The Skokomish natives of Washington State, the Hopi of Arizona, and the Tarahumara of Mexico all give man’s warring and evil as the reason for a great flood. Stories from South America are very similar to those of North America. For example, the people of Panama tell of one man, his wife and family escaping a global deluge in a canoe. This family became the ancestors of all mankind.

The Montagnais natives of Eastern Canada tell this story. Kunyan (which means “Wise Man”) foresees the possibility of a flood and builds a great raft. He tells other people, but they laugh at him. Then the great flood did come, with water rising higher than the trees and drowning all the people but the Wise Man and his family on his raft. “As he floated, he gathered pairs of all animals and birds he met with. Some time later, the musk-rat dived into the water looking for the bottom, but he couldn’t find it. He dived a second time and smelled the earth but didn’t reach it. Next beaver dived. He reappeared unconscious but holding a little mud.”

Discoveries from the one of the oldest human civilizations, the Sumerian empire, describe a great flood, with long-lived kings ruling before it, and a substantial drop in lifespan afterward. Apparently lifespans for people before the Flood were tens of thousands of years! They make the 500 to 900 year Biblical lifespan of humans before the Flood seem downright reasonable.

I hope you’re as astonished by those stories as I was the first time I came across them. If anything, it’s an astonishing coincidence to have so many stories be so similar among people from every continent on earth. And the closer the people telling the story are to the Middle East, the closer the stories are to the biblical account.

### Geology (section under development)

Frederic B. Jueneman, FAIC, “There has been in recent years the horrible realization that radiodecay rates are not as constant as previously thought, nor are they immune to environmental influences. And this could mean that the atomic clocks are reset during some global disaster, and events which brought the Mesozoic to a close may not be 65 million years ago but, rather, within the age and memory of man.”<sup>2</sup>

### **A is for Archaeology**

The “A” for archaeology details some of the corroborating evidence for the Old Testament we’ve uncovered in documents and buildings in the Middle East. Christianity like Judaism claims to be a historical faith, so evidence to support the history of the Scriptures outside the Scriptures is always helpful. Here are some of the more interesting things that have been discovered.

### Other Books

The story of Sinuhe, an Egyptian account of life in Palestine around 2000 BC, fits well with the traditions recorded in Genesis during Abraham and Lot’s time in Palestine. A stone monument called the “Israel Stela” exists that mentions Israel as a nation occupying the land of Palestine by 1229 BC.<sup>3</sup> The attack of the Pharaoh Shishak against Solomon’s son Rehoboam and the northern king of Jeroboam is recounted in a relief found in Egypt in 926 BC.<sup>4</sup> From the 9<sup>th</sup> to 7<sup>th</sup> centuries Assyrian records can be found referring to Israel as the “House or land of Omri,” one of the kings of Israel recorded in 1 Kings 16. The Bible recounts David conquering Moab, Solomon holding it, then that it broke free, but that King Ahab of Israel later received tribute from it once again. A monument called the “Moabite Stone” recounts how King Omri of Israel, Ahab’s father, defeated Moab after it broke free, thus filling in the details.<sup>5</sup> King Shalmaneser of Assyria records King Ahab of Israel marching to war against him.<sup>6</sup> The annals of Tiglath-Pileser III of Babylon record the overthrow of King Pekah of Israel and the besieging of Samaria (2 Kings 15:29). The Scriptures record the prophet Daniel being offered the position of “third ruler” of Babylon for his dream interpretations (Daniel 5:16). Historians have puzzled why only “third” and not second. Archaeology has discovered that Balshazzar, who offered the position, was in fact ruling in the stead of his absent father. So he was only second ruler, and could only offer “third” to Daniel.<sup>7</sup> Lastly, the history of King Xerxes, his official “Marduka,” and other details confirm the historicity of the book of Esther.<sup>8</sup>

### Exodus

Some of the oldest books of the Scriptures are the books that record the Exodus from Egypt. They, too, seem to be authentic records of a people who had lived for a long time in Egypt. They all have a definite “Egyptian” flavor to them. Moses is itself an Egyptian name, probably from the Egyptian Mw-s, meaning “Water Son”. There is a higher percentage of Egyptian words in

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<sup>2</sup> *Industrial Research and Development*, Tune, 1982, 21

<sup>3</sup> Gleason Archer. *A Survey of Old Testament Introduction*. (Chicago: Moody Press, 1994), 185.

<sup>4</sup> Alfred J. Hoerth. *Archaeology of the Old Testament*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1998), 301.

<sup>5</sup> Hoerth, 309

<sup>6</sup> Hoerth, 312.

<sup>7</sup> Hoerth, 381.

<sup>8</sup> Hoerth, 400.

these books than elsewhere in the Old Testament.<sup>9</sup> The fact that Pharaoh is not named is peculiar to the 18<sup>th</sup> Dynasty Egyptian Usage. Later on names would be given the rulers; but at the time of Moses, no one would have called him anything but “Pharaoh.” They wouldn’t have thought to write his name. Only later, when Egyptian usage changed, does biblical usage change (ie: 2 Kings 23:29).<sup>10</sup> The flora and fauna mentioned throughout the Exodus account, and even the order of the seasons is Egyptian. Genesis 13 compares the Jordan Valley to Egypt – why do that, unless the readers were more familiar with Egypt than with Palestine? As Old Testament scholar Gleason Archer writes, “We cannot but admit that the writer of these two narratives [ie: of Joseph and the Exodus] was thoroughly well acquainted with the Egyptian language, customs, belief, court life, etiquette and officialdom; and not only so, but the readers must have been familiar with things Egyptian.”<sup>11</sup>

In the words of archeologist John Elder, “Little by little, one city after another, once civilization after another, one culture after another, whose memories were enshrined only in the Bible, were restored to their proper places in ancient history by the study of archaeologists...Nowhere has archaeological discovery refuted the Bible as history.”<sup>12</sup>

### Dinosaurs

I would also like to take a minute or two to talk about everyone’s favorite animals, dinosaurs. Everyone loves dinosaurs, and a question that often gets asked is how the fossils of these animals fit with the history recorded in the Old Testament. First of all, dinosaurs actually seem to be mentioned in the Bible. Bet you didn’t know that! In the book of the Prophet Isaiah (Isaiah 30:6) we find this writing:

An oracle on the beasts of the Negeb. Through a land of trouble and anguish, from where come the lioness and the lion, the adder and the *flying fiery serpent*, they carry their riches on the backs of donkeys, and their treasures on the humps of camels, to a people that cannot profit them. (Isaiah 30:6, ESV)

What might this flying fiery serpent be? Could it be some kind of pterodactyl or other flying dinosaur? There’s also a record in the Book of Job, considered to be one of the oldest written books in the Bible, to what may well be a dinosaur:

Behold, Behemoth, which I made as I made you; he eats grass like an ox. Behold, his strength in his loins, and his power in the muscles of his belly. He makes his tail stiff like a cedar; the sinews of his thighs are knit together. (Job 40:15-17, ESV)

That description doesn’t fit any living creature. What animal has a tail like a cedar, strong leg and abdominal muscles, but eats grass like a cow? A brontosaurus does. But that would suggest that human beings knew about dinosaurs. That human beings even lived, like Fred Flintstone, at the same time as dinosaurs! Could that be true?

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<sup>9</sup> Archer, 119.

<sup>10</sup> Archer, 121.

<sup>11</sup> Archer, 120.

<sup>12</sup> Archer, 174.



On your handouts you should have a picture of a dinosaur drawn on rock (Indian Rock Painting from White River Canyon, Utah). In fact, it might surprise you to know that there are a number of caves in the American southwest and even some in Europe with drawings that look an awful lot like dinosaurs.

If dinosaurs did live into the age of humans, it would explain, for example, all of the dragon myths that exist in so many cultures around the world, especially in Asia. What is a dragon but some kind of flying fiery serpent, a dinosaur?

### **C is for Christ**

Next up is C, for Christ. This evidence for the historicity of the Old Testament works best if you were here last week. If Jesus really did rise from the dead, then he was probably who he claimed to be. If he was who he claimed to be, the eternal Son of God, then he probably knew what he was talking about when he talked about the Old Testament. So it's worth our while to look at what Christ thought about the writings of the prophets.

Jesus himself said that the Scriptures "cannot be broken," that they must stand for all time. In John 10:35 – and I'm going to give my own translation from the Greek – Jesus says. "It is not able to be dissolved the Scripture." Jesus claims that there was a real Moses, and that he wrote at least a portion of the Old Testament. In John 5:45-47 he says: "But do not think I will accuse you before the Father. Your accuser is Moses, on whom your hopes are set. If you believed Moses, you would believe me, for he wrote about me. But since you do not believe what he wrote, how are you going to believe what I say?" Jesus quotes the Book of Isaiah (Isaiah 6:9-10) in Mark 4:12 and again (Isaiah 29:13) in Mark 7:6-7 as being written by Isaiah. He compares himself to the prophet Jonah, who he claims really was in the belly of the fish for three days. (Matthew 12:40 and Matthew 16:4). He considers the prophets Elijah and Elisha to be historical (Luke 4:25-27). He talks about Adam and Eve as if they are real people, the ancestors of the human race (Matthew 19:4-6). He considers Daniel to be a real prophet (Mark 13:14) and claims to have spoken with Abraham (John 8:56). Lastly, he considered Noah and the Flood to have been real, historical events (Matthew 24:38-39).

In short, here are the possibilities. The Gospel writers misquoted Jesus, which as we discussed last week, seems very unlikely. Or Jesus didn't know what he was talking about. But since he said he would rise again from the dead, and last week we gave proof that he did, that also seems unlikely. Or Jesus really knew what he was talking about, and we can trust that his words were accurately recorded, and therefore we need to take the history of the Old Testament seriously if we want to take Christ seriously.

### **T is for Tensions or Contradictions**

The last subject for tonight is the issue of *tensions*, or what some people call "contradictions" in the Bible. Things like, if Adam and Eve were the only humans, who did their sons Cain and Seth marry? I'm sure you know at least one unexplained tension in the Bible you'd like explained. I could spend literally hours up here answering some of them. Rather than do that, I'd like to approach the issue more generally.

First of all, let's suppose two friends tell a story. The stories seem different. Who is telling the truth? Do you trust one, the other, or both? Is it possible that both are telling the truth, from different perspectives? If they are both your friends, you're going to look for a way to reconcile their stories before you call one or both of them liars. If the Spirit has moved us to believe that the Scriptures are true, we'll do the same thing. Jesus himself, who prized truth above almost everything else, didn't seem to be puzzled by these supposed "contradictions" in the Bible (John 8:31-32).

Second, the writers and readers of the Old Testament over the ages didn't seem to think their Bible was filled with contradictions. The writer of Kings said that the Lord was angry against David, and let him take a census of the people despite having told him not to. The writer of Chronicles tells the same story later, and said Satan caused him to write the census. Clearly the writer of Chronicles had read Kings. He didn't seem to think what he was writing contradicted the earlier story. He wouldn't have wrote it if it did. Even supposing he did, why would his book have been allowed to become part of the Holy Scriptures, if it had such a blatant contradiction? Clearly the people who included Chronicles didn't think it contradicted, but clarified, the other history books. It's like we said about the Gospel writers: you don't include blatant contradictions in your work and then make big claims about it being the Word of God.

As far as miracles go, those of a naturalistic philosophical bent have long denied their possibility. They consider any miracles in the Bible to contradict nature. But in a world where the observer of a beam of light determines its path, as has been proved by physicists in experiments, and where the subatomic world is defined by probability, not certainty, who can be certain of what is and is not possible? The world is full of possibilities and probabilities, but very few certainties. Furthermore, miracles are so because they are "extraordinary", outside of our ordinary experience. The existence of miracles cannot be proved; if they could, they would be observable, repeatable events, and by definition would no longer be miracles!

That's why I don't speak of contradictions in the Scriptures, but tensions. If something seems contradictory, it's probably because we don't understand the real meaning of one or the other statements. Truth is often found in paradox, not in simple dogmatic statements.

### **Conclusion**

Do that's it for tonight: F.A.C.T. F for Flood, A for Archaeology, C for Christ and T for tensions. In 50 minutes it's simply not possible to answer every question about the Old Testament. But I've presented these in the hope that they will demonstrate that the Old Testament, unlike any other religious document, stands up well as history. And if its history can be trusted, perhaps we can also trust what it says about God, and the relationship he wants to have with us through his Son, Jesus Christ, the savior and redeemer of the world.