

## “Isn’t the Bible outdated?”

### THE OBJECTION

The Bible is a collection of ancient writings, the most recent of which (that is, the books of the New Testament) were written almost two thousand years ago. The Old Testament books are centuries older than that. While the Old Testament was written against the backdrop of the ancient Hebrew culture (as well as that of the Babylonians, Persians, and others), the New Testament originated in a mixed culture of first-century (sometimes called Second Temple) Judaism and the ancient Roman Empire. Recognizing these cultural backgrounds is important in understanding the Bible, so they are the object of much study.

Critics of Christianity sometimes ask, “How can such an ancient book have anything relevant to say to people today?” After all, they say, our modern cultures are vastly different from those of the Bible, and there have been tremendous strides in technology since those ancient times. How can we possibly expect to find anything in the Bible that will speak to people twenty centuries after it was written? In addition, many of the Bible’s teachings are out of step with current beliefs concerning morality and ethics, particularly on such matters as sexual morality, abortion, the role of women in society, and even the rearing of children. Add to this the fact that many of the ideas of modern science (such as the theory of evolution) are at odds with what the Bible teaches, and people wonder, “On what basis can anyone suggest that the Bible is relevant today?”

### RESPONSES TO THE OBJECTION

1. The charge of irrelevance assumes that it

is impossible for a book as old as the Bible to be relevant. However, if the Bible is, in fact, God’s Word, why can it not be relevant to us today—or for that matter to anyone living at any point in human history? If God exists, is it not possible for Him to produce a message that could have enduring relevance through the ages? To claim that the Bible *cannot* be relevant is to deny the power and all-sufficiency of God. Only those who deny God’s existence altogether can consistently argue that the Bible cannot be relevant today.

2. The Bible’s antiquity is an argument in its favor. First, the mere fact of its survival is amazing, since it has been banned, burned, and slandered so frequently through the centuries—and yet survives. Further, it not only survives, but also thrives. The Bible continues to be translated into hundreds of languages, more than any other book. Millions of people have found and still find the Bible to be relevant for their lives, so it is difficult to argue convincingly that the Bible is outdated. Its teachings have been tested and found trustworthy by so many that the burden of proof lies on those who would argue against its relevance.

3. Naturally, in reading the Bible, we must make allowances for its historical context. No one suggests that we must ride camels and live in tents because people did so in ancient times, any more than we must speak the languages of the ancient peoples for whom and about whom the Bible was originally written. However, the fact that the Bible’s cultural setting is different from our own does not make its teachings irrelevant or any less true. Even when reading current literature, we must make allowances for the

cultural setting and viewpoint of the author and characters; but this in no way makes the writing irrelevant. A German reading the *Times of London* would find it helpful to know something of current events in the United Kingdom, as well as British history, in order to get the full impact of the accounts it records; but that would not make the information contained in it “irrelevant.”

4. Even though the Bible was written in different times and different places from our own, its basic truths have *not* changed. We might consider, for example, what the Bible says about God. Psalm 90 speaks eloquently of the eternal nature of God, in contrast to the temporal nature of humans. Man returns to dust, but God is “our dwelling place in all generations.” In His sight “a thousand years . . . are like yesterday when it passes by, or as a watch in the night” (Psalm 90:1, 4). In speaking through the prophet Malachi, God declared, “For I, the LORD, do not change; therefore you, O sons of Jacob, are not consumed” (Malachi 3:6). James wrote, “Every good thing given and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shifting shadow” (James 1:17). Let’s think about this: If God’s nature were not constant and eternal, how could we ever know Him or have a relationship with Him? How would we know what He desires or whether or not we have pleased Him? God’s unchangeable nature is thoroughly attested in the pages of the Bible; and because He has not changed, we have hope.

Likewise, human nature has not changed since the Bible was written. The sins mentioned in the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20:1–17) and the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5–7) are still commonplace today and show that people basically have not changed in thousands of years, even though we now use computers and travel in jet aircraft. One need only read the list of sins in Romans 1:18–32 to see further proof of this: It sounds almost as if Paul had been reading the newspaper from one of our major cities when he wrote these verses! Romans 7:14–21 describes the common human struggle against what Paul calls the “flesh,” the pull to do that which is evil, even when we know that doing right is better. Truly, nothing has changed! The Scriptures still appeal to the deepest needs of our human nature, such as the need for God’s care and protection (Psalm 23), the need for forgiveness (Psalm 51), and the

assurance of a place with God when this life is over (John 14:1–6).

If God has not changed and people have not changed, then neither have the reality and the consequences of sin. Jesus declared in John 12:47, 48 that the words that He spoke (and which are written in the Bible) will be our judge “at the last day.” When we focus on the basic truths of the Bible, rather than on its cultural differences with our own times, we can clearly see that very little has truly changed.

5. The Bible makes numerous statements regarding its own continuing validity. Hebrews 4:12, 13 describes God’s Word as “living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword, and piercing as far as the division of soul and spirit, of both joints and marrow, and able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart.” The writer went on to say that we are all exposed to the eyes of God, to whom we must give account. It is the penetrating Word that lets us know what God requires and gives us the assurance of His grace through Jesus. Later, the same book declares that “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever,” and that we should therefore not allow ourselves to be “carried away by varied and strange teachings” (Hebrews 13:8, 9). Since Jesus is the same and our spiritual needs are the same, the Bible’s message continues to be directly relevant to every one of us.

6. Jesus frequently quoted the Old Testament as having a continuing relevance, even though it was hundreds of years old in His time. One example is when Jesus and His disciples were criticized because they plucked grain on the Sabbath and ate it (violating the law of the Sabbath as the Pharisees understood it). Jesus replied by citing the example of David, who also “broke the rules” by entering the sanctuary at Nob and eating the bread which had been placed as an offering to God, which it was lawful only for the priests to eat (1 Samuel 21:1–6). In the same context, He pointed to the example of the Israelite priests who “worked” on the Sabbath (because it *was* the Sabbath) in the temple, yet were not faulted for their work (Matthew 12:1–8). In Jesus’ mind, both examples were of immediate relevance to His own situation.

The continued relevance of the Scriptures is likewise apparent in the numerous times that the New Testament writers referred to prophe-

cies from the Old Testament. These prophecies were “fulfilled” (“filled full”—that is, they came true in the fullness of their intended meaning) by the coming of Christ. The first two chapters of Matthew display several examples of such “fulfillment,” which would have had no validity at all if those ancient texts had ceased to be valid because of the passing of time.

7. Many of the reasons for the charge that the Bible is outdated have little, if anything, to do with the Bible itself, and more to do with the attitudes of those making the accusation. Some arrogantly judge the Bible by cultural or personal standards, rather than realizing that we are judged by the Word. Others simply do not like what the Bible says about morality and ethics, so they accuse it of being out of step with the times. In reality, the times are out of step with God.

It is much easier to dismiss the Bible as “ir-

relevant” than it is to learn it and live by it. Most people simply are not courageous enough to reach for the high standard set by the Scriptures, so they declare that standard to be invalid by pointing out the age of the source. To many, the charge of irrelevance sounds somewhat sophisticated, and they have a stronger desire for human approval than for the approval of God.

## CONCLUSION

As anyone can see, there can be many reasons for claiming that the Bible is “outdated” other than its truly being so. To claim that the Bible is outdated because of its antiquity is to declare that we have nothing to learn from the past. Undoubtedly, it is true that the Bible is a very old book. However, it is equally true that wisdom will lead us to learn from the past rather than recklessly ignoring it. ■ Tommy South

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