



## Is the Bible True? Plan with Leader's Notes



"The Bible is a mass of fables and traditions, mere mythology"  
Mark Twain

**Note:** This has sufficient material for up to 2 sessions depending on the length of the session and the detail/pace required for the group.

### **Aim/s**

- Are all the stories in the Bible real?
- Where did the Bible come from and how reliably has it been recorded?
- Is it dependent on the knowledge of its' human writers?

### **Starter: Bible or Potter game:**

Ask whether the quotes you show/read are from the Bible or elsewhere. *See PowerPoint or activity sheet pages 9-10.* As well as being fun, this uses quotes that contribute towards their well-being.

- Do these books have anything in common? humour, wisdom...
- What is the main significant difference? One is completely fictional – what about the other?

### **Is the Bible a Book of Stories?**

Everyone has a story and the Bible tells the stories of many people. The family stories of Abraham, Jacob and Joseph were complex with plenty of drama – hopes, fears, love, sibling rivalry, resentment, hostility and reconciliations.

The stories about the Israelites escaping from Egypt as a group of tribes, to their return from exile centuries later, are full of accounts of faith, supernatural signs, daring deeds, conflicts, failures and victories.

The Bible also contains poems, proverbs, instruction, guidance and laws.

The purpose of the Bible is to teach us about life, who we are, our destiny, how to treat each other, how to look after the Earth and how to have a relationship with our Creator God.

- What are the differences between learning from stories and learning from other types of writings?

### **Are the stories true?**

1. Some of the stories are **definitely true**, with evidence to support this. They have been faithfully handed down via both oral traditions which have been proven to be incredibly reliable and later in written form by dedicated scribes. They have a hard honest journalistic approach. They enable us to learn much from both the example and the mistakes of others.

2. Other stories are **definitely parable or allegories** – pure story created in order to teach valuable truths.

3. Then there is a third group which are **controversial**. Are they:

- a) True in every detail?
- b) Pure story created to teach truths?
- c) A mixture of these two – a simplified version of something that really happened put into the format of a story so that anyone could understand it whoever they were and whatever their background?

#### Why use story?

- Stories are more interesting and memorable.
- A story is universal.
- Everyone can relate to a story.
- Only stories can have layers of meaning enabling the reader to go deeper as they grow.

One important story where there is a strong debate over this is Genesis 1-3. Some see it as the story of actual events as they happened. Other read it as pure story - a parable or allegory. There are other views that fall in between. There will always be differences of opinion about it in this life but the truths it is there to teach us are the same either way and we would do well to focus on those the most.

### Activities

**Select** at least one story from each group below and **reflect upon the truth** of the content.

A. The Two Builders: Matthew 7:24-27; The Rich Fool: Luke 12: 16-21

B. King Cyrus helps Jewish exiles to return home: Ezra 1:1-11; The death of Jesus: John 19:31-37

C. Adam and Eve: Genesis 2 & 3; Jonah.

If time allows, **pick out the essential truths that Genesis 1-3 aims to teach** regardless of whether the story is literal or allegorical. In small groups with Bibles, pens and paper.

**Bible Origins – Is the Bible True Quiz:** This is a teaching aid (not a test) to provide the opportunity to cover Bible origins. Give out quiz sheets (see page 7-8) & pens and let them work in pairs for a few minutes. Then teach as you chat through the answers discussing important facts such as

- What do we know about the writers?
- Is the Bible dependent upon the natural knowledge of its' human writers?
- Has the text been altered at any stage?

### Reflection

David lived around 500 years after Moses had written the first 5 books of the Bible.

- How does David describe these writings in Psalm 19, especially verses 7-10?

Perfect; trustworthy; radiant; pure; precious; sweeter than honey; worth more than gold

- **Extra:** What other phrases does David use in Psalm 119? These are from **'The Message'** the road revealed by God; the map of your Word; road signs; clear directions; insights; what God has revealed to us; divine truth; words of wisdom; words of hope; Gods promises; ancient landmark words; God's plans for us; miracle-wonders;

### Application

How reliable do you feel the Bible is for your life?

How could you try it out for yourself? **OR** - How do you use it yourself?

## **Leaders Notes**

### **Oral Traditions**

For centuries the stories that are recorded in the oldest parts of the Bible were handed down by oral tradition. This might sound unreliable but in fact the opposite is true. Ancient pre-literate cultures all around the world developed strong oral traditions, learning how to handle and communicate vast amounts of knowledge and information by using a range of linguistic strategies. These included heavily rhythmic speech filled with mnemonic devices such as alliteration, repetition, assonance, and proverbial sayings, making them easier to remember, rather in the same way that song lyrics can be easily learnt. The verse often has a metre to it with an exact number of syllables so that if an error is made, it is immediately obvious. Today's equivalent might be something like a rap.

In this way, they recorded their **history, law codes and other vital information**.

Becoming a Druid in Celtic Britain for example, could take up to 20 years as it was similar to memorizing everything needed for both a law degree and a theology degree. Druids were forbidden to commit their teachings to writing. In other cultures people eventually started to write these down and the style can be seen today in Hindu and Buddhist Chandas as well as in Biblical text.

Even with the advent of writing, there was no easy access to writing materials. Schools in UK used wipe-able slate boards instead of paper as late as the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Ancient Palestine did not have printed books, newspaper television or radio. They had official storytellers. Some great event would happen and within a day or two the story would be told all round the village. Everyone would know the story but some of the better storytellers in the village would be recognised by the others as the right people to tell it. And that's what they'd do. They wouldn't change the story or modify it; if they did people would notice and set them straight. Perhaps the closest we get to this in the modern Western world is when a family tells a story or anecdote, often with everyone knowing what's coming. So when Luke went round the villages of Palestine and Syria in the second half of the first century, listening to the stories told by the accredited storytellers – 'the stewards of the word', as he calls them – he would know he was in touch with solid reliable evidence that went right back to the early events. Plato had said 500 years earlier, that there was a danger in writing things down; human memories, he thought were the best way to get things right and pass them on.<sup>6</sup>

The Bible presents extremely unbiased accounts, portraying both the strengths and weaknesses of its' unlikely heroes. It does not set out to present anyone as a hero except for Jesus.

The men and women in Genesis are not heroes & heroines... "they are ordinary people made extraordinary by their willingness to follow God."<sup>7</sup>

### **The Written Record**

Moses was the first person to write down some of these stories as well as codes of conduct and the terms of the covenant between God and the Israelites. The Bible says that angels helped him in this task and that God spoke to him 'face to face' at times. Acts 7:53; Galatians 3:19; Hebrews 2:2; Ex 33:11

Over the next 1,500 years or so, other Jewish writers also felt led by God to write. Some of their writings stood out from other works. They were written in different genres, stories, biographies, poems, letters and so on. The Levites, scribes and later monks then faithfully copied out the texts without either editing or even correcting apparent errors.

***Who were the Writers?***

One vital question is the authorship of the various books of the Bible.

Do we believe that it was given to us by God?

Do we believe it is a collection of blessed inspirational thoughts and stories written by men and edited as it has been passed down the centuries?

Do we still believe 2 Timothy 3:16-17 which is a huge claim? If it is true then the Bible is totally reliable. If it is untrue, then how much can we trust it at all?

All Scripture is **God-breathed** / inspired by God - and is useful to teach us what is true and to make us realize what is wrong in our lives. It straightens us out and teaches us to do what is right. It is God's way of preparing us in every way, fully equipped for every good thing God wants us to do. 2 Timothy 3:16-17

At least 35 people contributed to these writings.

- Some writers were eye-witnesses or their close friends e.g. Matthew, John, Peter, Luke, Paul, David, Moses, Mark, 2 Peter 1:16-21
- Some were prophets e.g. Jeremiah 36 (verse 4 but the whole chapter is interesting)
- Some used a combination of previous sources writings, their own research and their own experience, e.g. Luke.
- Some were believers writing letters of guidance, teaching and advice to their mentees and younger believers. Paul, Peter, John, James
- All had a prophetic gifting which means that they had learnt how to tune in to the voice of God. Or in some cases they did hear an audible voice. They were able to allow the inspiration of the Holy Spirit to flow through their writings as He gave wisdom and direction concerning what to include and exclude. The individual writing styles of each writer comes across but with these works there was something special that does not appear in other works by the same people.
  - Have you ever read several works by the same author?
  - Why do some works become famous and others get forgotten?
  - Do some of these works come across as being of much better quality than others?
  - Have you ever read a Bible verse or passage and felt it was speaking directly to you?

***Has the Bible been updated or edited over the years?***

Although we do not have the handwritten originals, we have more ancient copies of much of the Old and New Testaments than any other ancient literature. It has been proven that the text has not been tampered with over the years and it has been reliably passed down with only a few minor clerical errors.

In 1947 the famous Dead Sea Scrolls were discovered by some shepherds. These are ancient manuscripts which were hidden in pots in caves up in the cliffs by the Dead Sea, by the Essenes just before 70AD in order to protect them from the Romans. They include texts covering every book of the Hebrew Bible except Esther. There are scraps of the books of Samuel as old as the third century BC.

***Archaeological and Historical evidence:***

As more research is done, so more proof is gradually uncovered confirming events, people and customs recorded in the Bible across the years. This includes:

- The Law Code of Hammurabi, which bears interesting comparison to the Law of Moses.

- The arrival of the Philistines in the early 12<sup>th</sup> century BC recorded by Pharaoh Rameses 111 who commemorated a battle against them in 1175 BC in a stone relief.
  - The palace of Sargon, King of Assyria who overthrew the Kingdom of Israel, capturing Samaria and exiling the inhabitants. His name appears in Isaiah 20:1: 'King Sargon of Assyria sent his commander in chief to capture the Philistine city of Ashdod' (711 BC).
  - Sennacherib of Assyria who tried to overthrow Hezekiah around 700 BC. His palace and pictures of his siege of Lachish were discovered. 2 Kings 18
  - Jesus as an historical figure has been proved beyond doubt by the Annals of Tacitus, a Roman historian and other ancient writings, including the Talmud whose writers saw Jesus as an enemy.
  - Pontius Pilate
- And many more.

### ***Other Outstanding Features of the Bible***

The Bible displays a level of knowledge that is totally out of its' time zone such as:

- **Hygiene & medical advice**

Leviticus' guidance on hygiene and quarantine to prevent or control disease was completely counter cultural and ahead of its' time. Moses did not learn this from his Egyptian education. Prescriptions in the Egyptians' medical text book 'Ebers Papyrus' (1552 BC) included ingredients such as animal dung. This contains tetanus spores so it made people more ill. It wasn't until the 19<sup>th</sup> century that research showed that medical staff needed to wash their hands and equipment. Some cultures in remote areas today have their own hygiene guidance whilst others still suffer from many preventable diseases.

- **Food laws:** Old Testament law banned people from eating animal fat which modern science has shown to cause heart disease. Likewise we can now see that other banned foods such as pork and seafood held a high risk of food poisoning. Leviticus 7 and 11
- **Prophecies:** The Old Testament has over 300 prophecies about Jesus which all came true. Some of this included where he was born and raised. There is a 400 year gap between the last prophecy and the birth of Jesus. The Hebrew Bible which is guarded by Orthodox Jews who do not follow Jesus, is the same as the Christian Old Testament and contains all these prophecies.

### ***Quotes for deeper discussion***

"One of the lasting achievements of Jesus was to tell such vivid and easily memorable stories that people of every age, and in every part of the world can hear a word for themselves." <sup>1</sup>

"Each of its stories [*in Genesis*] has layer upon layer of meaning and significance, which we only grasp after repeated readings. Our understanding of the book grows as we grow." "The truths of the human condition are simply too deep to be understood at once and on the surface. Only stories have this depth, this ambiguity, this principled multiplicity of meanings."<sup>2</sup>

"Not by accident is Genesis a book about the family. The family is where we learn emotional and spiritual intelligence. There is nothing simple or idealized about the families of Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebecca, Jacob, Leah and Rachel. There are tensions, rivalries, setbacks and unfulfilled hopes as well as love, kinship and loyalty."<sup>3</sup>

“Genesis is truth as story. It is a unique work.” “It is not myth. It is not history in the conventional sense... Nor is it theology... It deals with all the central questions of philosophy in a comprehensible way.”<sup>4</sup>

“Genesis is about “first principles”. It is here more than anywhere else that the emphasis is on personal relationships, and here that the themes of hostility, resentment, estrangement and reconciliation are explored in all their depth and pathos.”<sup>5</sup>

### ***Some Final Thoughts***

“The Bible is not a book of religion. I find in your Bible a unique interpretation of universal history, the history of the whole of creation and the history of the human race. There is nothing else in the whole religious literature of the world to put alongside it.” A Hindu scholar of world religions

“A thorough knowledge of the Bible is worth more than a college education” Theodore Roosevelt, President of the United States 1901 - 1909.

Thinking about your teachings gives me better understanding than my teachers, and obeying your laws makes me wiser than those who have lived a long time. Psalm 119:99 CEV

“The Bible is God's chart for you to steer by, to keep you from the bottom of the sea, and to show you where the harbor is, and how to reach it without running on rocks or bars.” Henry Ward Beecher a US clergyman and social reformer who supported the abolition of slavery.

Jesus said, “If you hold to my teaching you are really my disciples. Then you will know **the truth**, and the truth will set you free.” John 8:32

### ***Credits and Sources***

The following do not necessarily endorse all the opinions in these notes.

2, 3, 4, 5, 7 Rabbi Jonathan Sacks: Covenant and Conversation: Genesis, page 7, 9, 6, 10, 325

1, 6 Tom Wright: Luke for Everyone, page 78; page 2

John Foley: Signs of Orality, 1999.

Peter Scharf (2013). Keith Allan, ed. The Oxford Handbook of the History of Linguistics. OUP

Crowley, David; Heyer, Paul (1999) Communication in History: Technology, Culture, Society. Longman USA

Tatyana J. Elizarenkova (1995) Language and Style of the Vedic Rsis. State University of New York Press.

Julius Caesar's The Conquest of Gaul, book VI

S. I. McMillen: None of These Diseases; chapters 1 and 14

Alan Millard: Treasures from Bible Times

Image: Nicole Davison

Writer: Brenda Lord; last updated 16-Oct-18

**Quiz sheets: Is the Bible True?**

1. Moses wrote the Torah with the help of angels. True/false?
2. Oral tradition uses special speech patterns to enable total recall. True/false
3. Ancient civilizations understood the link between dirt and disease and the need for good hygiene. True/false?
4. The hygiene regulations in Leviticus were centuries ahead of their time in helping to combat diseases. True/false?
5. Why are genealogies/family trees significant (even though boring)?
6. The Old Testament includes prophecies about Jesus which all came true over 400 years or more later. How many were there?
  - 10 - 49
  - 50 - 150
  - 150 - 299
  - Over 300
7. Which of the gospel writers were part of Jesus' team of 12 disciples?
  - Matthew
  - Mark
  - Luke
  - John
8. Which of these sources did Luke use when writing the books of Luke and acts?
  - Written sources such as the gospels of Matthew and Mark
  - Jesus' friends and family
  - The accredited storytellers from local communities
  - Personal experience
  - All of themHow would you rate him as an investigative journalist?
9. Is Mark mentioned anywhere in the New Testament?
10. Most of the New Testament books were written as letters of guidance, advice and teaching to Christian believers. True / false?
11. Who wrote most of these letters?
12. Which James wrote the book of James?

13. The Levites and scribes in the Bible were guardians of the holy writings, faithfully copying and preserving them. True/false?  
Which group later did this for the Christian Bible before the invention of the printing press?
14. The Old Testament in the Bible is identical to the Hebrew Bible. True/false
15. We have more ancient manuscripts of most parts of the Bible than any other ancient literature. True/false?

The Torah = Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers & Deuteronomy; aka the Pentateuch or the 5 Books of Moses.

The word 'torah', often translated as 'law' has a deeper meaning than our word, encompassing guidance and fatherly advice but with the weight of law.



## Bible or Harry Potter Quiz Sheets

Which of these quotes are from the Bible and which from a Harry Potter book by J K Rowling?

1. A loud and cheerful greeting early in the morning will be taken as a curse.
2. Why spiders? Why couldn't it be "follow the butterflies"?
3. Ehud pulled out the dagger and plunged it into the king's belly. The dagger went so deep that the handle disappeared beneath the king's fat...and the king's bowels emptied.
4. I solemnly swear that I am up to no good.
5. Do not be fooled, you can't cheat God.
6. The lookout reported, "He has reached them, but he isn't coming back either. The driving is like that of Jehu - he drives like a madman."
7. Can you believe our luck? Of all the trees we could've hit, we had to get one that hits back.
8. If we say we have no sin, we are fooling ourselves,...  
But if we confess, he will cleanse us from all the wrongs we have done.
9. Just because you have the emotional range of a teaspoon doesn't mean we all have.
10. We're all human, aren't we? Every human life is worth the same, and worth saving.
11. So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them;
12. It matters not what someone is born, but what they grow to be.
13. It is our choices...that show what we truly are, far more than our abilities.
14. Above all else, guard your heart, for everything you do flows from it.
15. Do to others as you would have them do to you.
16. If you want to know what a man's like, take a good look at how he treats his inferiors, not his equals.
17. Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you,
18. But you know, happiness can be found even in the darkest of times, if one only remembers to turn on the light.

19. Get rid of all bitterness, rage, anger, harsh words, and slander...  
Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other,
20. It takes a great deal of bravery to stand up to our enemies, but just as much to stand up to our friends.
21. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.
22. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.
23. What's comin' will come, an' we'll meet it when it does.
24. Trust in the Lord with all of your heart and do not depend on your own understanding.
25. Things we lose have a way of coming back to us in the end, if not always in the way we expect.
26. I think we've outgrown full-time education... Time to test our talents in the real world, d'you reckon?
27. The last enemy that shall be destroyed is death.