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INTRODUCTION

IT SEEMS LIKE just yesterday that we parents were doing great. Our kids were singing “God is good; God is great” on cue. Their bottom line on Jesus was “He loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so,” and their habitual last move of the day was an earnest prayer crediting God for pretty much everything.

Christian parenting? On point.

Now, our kids are hitting double-digit ages. As we read Bible stories with them, their questions are taking things up a notch faster than we expected. “If Noah saved two of every animal, why’d he skip dinosaurs?” or, “Wait, why didn’t Paul free that slave in the story of Philemon?” or, “Why doesn’t God rescue me from having no friends? Our family from divorce? That child from abuse? From poverty? From war?”

Leading up to parenthood, we had vowed to be ready for such a time as this (Esther 4:14). Our parenting plan was to bestow wisdom on our kids without resorting to clichés, so our kids’ childlike faith would not stagnate into a childish faith.

Most of us know what that feels like. A lot of us have hit faith forks in the road in college or adulthood. We leaned on our faith, but the underpinning was wobblier than we expected after all those years in church. We committed then and there that that would not be the case for our kids.

Now, at the dawn of our kids detecting the nuances of the Christian faith and looking to us for direction, we parents are decidedly . . . not ready. First of all, who has time to do all that homework? Also, who knows how to avoid oversimplified jargon and still spread the actual gospel in 140 characters or less?

Plus, our kids’ curiosity window is closing as quickly as it opened.

Our opportunity to reign as the deliberate, reputable resources that our kids will keep coming to all their livelong days is already on borrowed time, depending on how well we handle the next few years. We can tell by the way our kids are starting to smile a little too wide when they hear our current cobbled-together talking points. They nod politely, but something new is registering behind their eyes: “Ah. I get it. Parents don’t know these answers either.”

Fortunately, we sophisticated parents of the twenty-first century aren’t afraid to hijack a bright idea from the days of yore.

Like the biblical word *dialogomai*.

Dialogomai is a Greek word in the New Testament that means to discuss, dispute, or reason.¹ It is what Paul did in Athens and what Jesus’s disciples did on the way to Capernaum. It’s sprinkled throughout the New Testament and refers to wrestling with and talking through who God is and what he’s all about (Mark 9:34; Acts 17:2; 18:4, 19; 19:8; 24:25; Heb. 12:5).

If one limiting factor of parenthood is that we do not quite do all the homework we mean to do, then the superpower we parents do have is our ability and willingness to *dialogomai*. Our kids need training up in the art of thinking through their faith. That happens by talking it out.

How?

Digging through the pages here is a good start. The Parent Primers are for parents to read on our own, then the Q&As are a way to talk through that with our kids.

We can tell our kids, “Our family is planning to start something new—reading a few short questions and answers each week so we get to know some church stuff that we haven’t otherwise talked about directly.

“Also, we will bribe you with *blank*.” (This is optional, of course, but you know, not really.)

Let’s attempt to do what we vowed to do back in the day: reinforce our kids’ faith foundation at its onset so they’ll have less detangling of faith from fiction later on. Let’s believe as parents, and as members of the body of Christ, that mastering the art of *dialogomai* is worth

the work. Then every time we read these questions with our kids, let's harness our fervor and bombast and commit with all our might to do one thing: keep it short. That way, no kid will secretly pray, "Please get the adults in the room to ditch this idea."

Because ditch it we will. That's how life goes. Our energy will wane. At some point it'll bug the kids when we pull out the questions, and that surprises exactly no one at all. Our best antidote to distractions is to *just start*. Then pick it up again. And a little later, try some more. Whatever morsels we download into our kids will count.

Leave it at that.

Sharing information incrementally, in small bites, is more powerful than we can imagine. We have the backing of parents since the beginning of time who, looking a hard thing in the face, gave their level b-e-s-t, which is spelled different than p-e-r-f-e-c-t-i-o-n for a reason.

One more thing: let's consider praying on our own before running through the questions with our kids. Here's a primer if needed: "Dear Father, these are *your* children, whom I love to my very core. Help me be a good helper to them as they get to know you. Help me believe that you pursue them personally, in ways I don't even know. Help me give them simple information that bends their hearts toward you, rather than any other authority. In Jesus's name, amen."

Let the *dialogomai* begin.

PART
ONE

WHAT DOES "THE BIBLE
TELLS ME SO" REALLY
MEAN?

INTRODUCTION FOR PARENTS

LITTLE KIDS LOVE Bible stories. God holds the whole world in his hands and he loves our kids and our kids can trust him. These are the things our kids know, for the Bible tells them so.

Then kids grow and start noticing all that other stuff the Bible tells them.

“Dragons are real, you know,” a young boy once reported to anyone who would listen, holding up a Lego dragon for all of us adults chatting in the room at the time. He’d heard a story in church that week about the dragon from the book of Revelation (Rev. 12:13–17), and he was proceeding as instructed since toddlerhood: if it’s in the Bible, it’s true.

What do we parents do with that? The Bible *is* true. Yet the Scriptures are ancient literature, and that kind of text asks for a specific discipline from our kids. Namely, our kids must learn how to listen for what Bible writers actually say through allegory, history, or poetry, and resist bending Scripture into a genre they understand as more straightforward.

That is not going to be easy.

One problem with letting the Bible speak for itself is that it includes stories with slavery and killing and “good” characters who turn out to behave deplorably as well as heroically, depending on the page. That’s unnerving for young readers just graduating from the sunny Jesus jingles of their younger days.

Plus, the Bible has ancient cultural subtleties that are not obvious to our kids (or most of us adults for that matter), which can tempt our kids to ignore whole parts of Scripture altogether.

Add to all that the mystery of what exactly our kids are holding in their hands. We ask them to memorize Bible verses, but have we

helped them understand how reliably those verses have been passed down through the millennia? God divinely inspired the Bible, we know, but by what practical process did these verses come to be in this book?

Maybe that sounds like a lot to lay on a kid at these early junctures. Yet one cautionary tale from our ancestors is this: rich, deeply meaningful Bible stories can become rote, religious incantations if handled incorrectly.

We, the parents of this generation, do not want to do that. In the hopes of avoiding this, we are here to embark on the following short but mighty task list:

1. Help our kids sort through how this ancient Bible came to be in their twenty-first-century hands. We'll sketch out its idiosyncrasies and give a timeline of its basic assembly.
2. Run through the Bible's reputation among today's scholars. We'll outline academic philosopher and ancient historian opinions and clear up conspiracy theories and political innuendos that undermine our kids' high view of Scripture if left unaddressed. We'll gut-check our own parental analysis of the Bible, as well as once and for all purge a lingering, false OT versus NT dichotomy that needs to go.
3. Impart to our kids the nuts and bolts of navigating stories from an ancient writer's point of view.

We parents hereby join together and commit that our answers will not loop back to the *you have the Bible because God gave you the Bible* kinds of answers that served us well when introducing God to our kids. Introductions have been made. Now it's time for getting-to-know. If we ignore the stomach acid that the above task list causes most of us, and if we speak forthrightly with our kids about the Bible, they stand a shot at knowing God just a little bit better.

We parents want desperately for that to happen. We want to empower our kids to lean confidently on the Bible, with abiding faith in its truths, in ways that speak into their current situation. We also

want what we cover here to hold them steady as they move forward, so that as they grow and dig into God’s Word, the parts that catch them by surprise do not destabilize their faith.

Let’s get started.

CHAPTER 1

How the Bible Was Put Together

■ Parent Primer #1: We Don't Have Originals, Yet the Word Is Stronger Than Stone

LET'S START OFF the chapter with this little gem: when it comes to the documents that make up our Bible, we do not have originals, and there are variants in the copies that survived. Most are minor, but there you have it.

This presents a problem that—is it rude to point out?—could have been easily avoided. This is *God's Word*. He parted the Red Sea for Moses and dried up the Jordan for Joshua. Surely he could have delivered to us Scripture originals with no variants.

Yet he didn't.

This can really trip us up as believers. Take Charles Spurgeon, for example. “I was somewhat startled,” the preaching giant from the Victorian era wrote when he found a discrepancy in his Bible’s version of the gospel of Luke.¹

We parents are right there with you, Charles. We feel startled when we stumble over reminders that the Bible has not been fed to us like a beatific, bound, enchanted playbook.

However, that didn't stop Spurgeon from being flat-out honest

about it. “Spurgeon’s most famous break from the King James [Bible] happened in July 1885,” wrote Elijah Hixson for the *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*. “He began by saying, ‘A genuine fragment of inspired Scripture has been dropped by our older translators, and it is far too precious to be lost.’”²

We parents can appreciate Spurgeon’s nerve to call it like he saw it. We can borrow that nerve when we tell our kids that God insists that rather than idolize Scripture, we must engage with it—not as a thing to be worshiped, but as a gift to be dug into and pondered and examined and prayed over and thought through. Neglect that, and we have a problem on our hands, especially if we promise our kids that the text is above having any quirks.

It isn’t.

We get it. God does not ask for utter devotion to a written word. He asks for utter devotion to the *God* of that written word (John 5:39–40).

Yet God does tell us his Word is a light unto our path (Ps. 119:105), which makes it hard to let this go. As parents, we think, “Wouldn’t delivering that Word in a dramatic way, say, etched in stone, have made all our jobs a lot easier? God’s included?”

Apparently not. Evidently, God is smarter than we are. This is obvious on several fronts, including the fact that he has run through the “etched in stone” scenario before, when he carved out for Moses the Ten Commandments. By the time Moses came down the mountain to present the stones to the awaiting Israelites, they had already given up on Moses, made a gold calf, and said that *that* was the god who had rescued them from slavery in Egypt.

It wasn’t.

God does not mistake “etched in stone” as the way to make people believe or even to establish the authority of his Scriptures. He seems to deliberately make the point that we shouldn’t either.

Plus, ancient literature just does not play that way. The Bible emerges from ancient times through the same kinds of bumps and bruises faced by other pieces of antiquity, which inserts the Bible smack into history. God acted in physical circumstances among real

people. As such, the Bible is rooted in a civilization that developed over time, which can be traced and touched in the same way other ancient civilizations can be traced and touched.

Despite the very earthly development of the Scriptures, however, our kids need to know that the Bible can be counted on with the full assurance of its ultimate author—God.

God said, “So is my word that goes out from my mouth: It . . . will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it.” What desire and what purpose? “So . . . it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater” (Isa. 55:10–11). Which is to say, God’s confidence in his word does not waver, and with good reason.

“[The Bible] has outlasted kingdoms—many, many kingdoms,” said clinical psychologist Jordan Peterson in his series on the psychological influence of the Bible. “It’s really interesting that it turns out that a book is more durable than stone, more durable than a castle, more durable than an empire.”³

Yes. That is interesting. Really, *really* interesting.

HONEST ANSWERS Q&A

We Don't Have Originals, Yet the Word Is Stronger Than Stone

(Parents—remember, these Q&As are an interactive, structured, no-stress way to review with our kids what we just read ourselves. Parents can read this intro paragraph, then kids read the Q&As aloud, or everybody take turns reading aloud. Nobody's on the hook to be an expert here; the point is just to talk about it, with it laid out right here at our fingertips.)

We love the Bible. Adore it. We're grateful for it. However, how would you feel if somebody told you that the Bible in your hands has something called "variants"? As in, a word here and there might be different from what the writers first wrote down. Would that freak you out? We hope not, because yes, that is what happened, but no, you needn't freak out about it. Let's talk about why.

1. Which of the following is a true statement about how we got the Bible?

- A. It miraculously got passed down from Moses to Peter to Paul and then landed on my nightstand as is.
- B. The Scriptures were compiled over thousands of years. They are extremely well preserved, but we do not have originals, and there are "variants" in the copies that survived.
- C. The apostles made one set of Scriptures at the dawn of time, and all Bibles are copied off that original.

Answer: B

2. What are three good reasons we do not need to freak out about the answer to question #1?

- God does not ask for utter devotion to a written

word. He asks for utter devotion to the *God* of that written word (John 5:39).

- If God wanted this handled differently, he could have at any time overridden earthly limitations and miraculously preserved Scripture originals. He didn't.
- God wants us to dig into the Bible, and he promises that he will guide us as we study it (2 Tim. 3:16).

3. What does it mean to find a “variant” in Scripture copies?

- The church has found old Scripture writings—some were found not long ago in caves—that were *ancient* ancient (some were dated from before Jesus's time, before Cleopatra's time, before Julius Ceasar—like *old* old).
- Church scholars compared these most ancient writings to the Bibles we have today. Where words or phrases were different, Bibles were adjusted and updated.⁴
- For example, a Bible from the twelfth century has a line in John 5 about an angel stirring a pool. That wasn't in more ancient copies of John. Check out John 5:4 in your Bible and you'll see that that line likely has a note by it.⁵

4. Can we trust the Bible even though it has variants?

- Yes. Most variants are a word or letter that changes the meaning of the Scriptures ZERO. As in nada. Like not at all.
- Plus, the church has found EXTREMELY old pieces of Scripture and there are VERY few variations. It's crazy just how amazingly it's been preserved, actually.

5. Wouldn't delivering the Bible in a dramatic way—say, etched in stone—have avoided all this, and wouldn't that have been better?

- Let's review how things turned out when God *did* once upon a time etch instructions for humans (read Exod. 31:18–32:19; Deut. 9:10–12).
- So, once upon a time, God carved out for Moses the Ten Commandments, but by the time Moses came down the

mountain to present the stones to the awaiting Israelites, they had already given up on Moses, made a gold calf, and said *that* was the god who had rescued them from slavery in Egypt. It wasn't.

- People do not believe in God because proof of him is “etched in stone.” People believe because, in relationship with God, he affirms to them that he is real, and through that relationship they discover and believe that he is true. God does not get confused about this. We shouldn’t either.

6. When did we finally have a full copy of the whole Bible with Old and New Testaments?

- A. Just before Jesus was born.
- B. Just after Jesus’s resurrection.
- C. 300 years after Jesus’s resurrection.

Answer: C

Okay, *that sounds long*, but it was being compiled little by little leading up to that time.

7. It’s hard to drop this idea that God could have preserved Scriptures differently. Does God want the Bible to be just like any other ancient literature? Really?

- No. No. No way. The Bible is not just like any other ancient literature.
- What makes the Bible different is that its story is true, not that it’s written with twenty-first-century thought processes.
- God said his word “yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater” (Isa. 55:10–11). Seeds that are planted, bread that is eaten—it is picture language that can be understood by watching how the people in the Bible lived out the idea in their lives.

8. Can’t we just say, “It says so in the Bible,” and let God deal with all this his way? Why do Christians care about all this stuff about Bible reliability?

Christians care about what God cares about. The Bible is a divinely inspired gift from God, which God gave us through people at specific points in history. If Christians pay attention to those points of history, it'll help us do with God's word what God wants.

■ Parent Primer #2: A Sketch of How the Bible Was Assembled

Often by this age, our kids have not only memorized beautiful verses from the Bible but have also learned a few fun incidentals about the Bible—like how many books are in the Bible or what's the order of those books or how fast they can flip to a certain story and whatnot.

That works for bingo games or Bible trivia, but what we cover in the following pages is a boots-on-the-ground style of getting to know the Bible. As in, if a friend at recess catches wind of the fact that our kids go to church and then asks a simple question about the Bible like, “What is it exactly? Where did it come from?” we want to arm our kids with more than, “From God.”

We do not want to be a generation of parents to beat this notion unnecessarily hard, but the facts of the matter may leave us no choice. The facts being that the Bible came from God through people's stories and the matter being that our kids will need training on that, because these stories have not been the church's strong suit lately.

“Biblical illiteracy sadly . . . has become worse, not better,” notes Asbury Theological Seminary's Ben Witherington. “Even within the church. I mean it's just appalling how bad it really is. Therefore I think you have to start over from scratch and retell the story.”⁶

And all the parents reading this just fell over, exhausted.

Start over? From scratch?

Chin up, friends. Any job well done is a process. We parents are not in the middle of nowhere. We are here, together, capable of breaking this down into manageable bits, starting with coaching our kids on how we got the Bible stories in the first place.

The New Testament

Here's a brief rundown on how we got the New Testament.

After Jesus's resurrection, the apostles and other champions of the faith ministered to new believers. As they did, they wrote letters to specific house churches addressing issues happening in that community. Churches kept these letters to be read over and over.

In addition to these letters, several apostles wrote down a summary of Jesus's ministry. These were not necessarily a chronology of Jesus's life; rather, the writers meant to bring out the theology Jesus was illustrating, verbally and through his actions, during his ministry.

These letters and documents were shared among other house churches and eventually became the New Testament.

Sound easy? It was not.

Determining which documents made up our Christian theology took time and was not handled by any one person alone. Believers weighed the documents by asking questions like, Did someone who knew Jesus or one of his twelve apostles write this document? Does this document fit with Hebrew Scripture? Does this document focus on Jesus's redemptive resurrection and bear witness to the Holy Spirit?⁷

Finally, almost three hundred years after Jesus's resurrection, bishop Athanasius of Alexandria posted in his Easter letter a list of twenty-seven letters and documents that churches should be reading regularly. That ended disputes over documents still vying for a spot on the roster and also ended questions of authenticity around documents that had already made the list.⁸

It was official. Hello, New Testament.

The Old Testament

Anytime a back-of-the-bus inquisition regarding our kids' Christianity pops up, there's a good chance our kids will be asked about the "telephone game." In short, how could they believe old, old, *old* stories are anything but a joke, since those stories got their start by word of mouth (aka oral tradition)?

Oral tradition is no joke.

Oral tradition reportedly can be passed down relatively unchanged for thousands and thousands of years.⁹ Most importantly, oral tradition is *nothing* like the telephone game.

We parents can illustrate this for our kids through an example. Say a mom at her daughter's thirteenth birthday party whispered,

“The brown dog ran across the road to bark at a rabbit,” into her daughter’s ear for her to pass down the line to her friends. It would be garbled by the time it came back to the mom, like in the game of telephone.

Let’s say instead that the mom told all of those girls, who knew the mom well and knew the daughter, Isabella, very well, this true sentence: “My mom, Isabella’s grandma, passed away last year, the day before Isabella’s birthday, February 7. It was a sad birthday.” Then let’s say the mom discussed further details with the girls at various times during the party, then happened to be standing next to the girls at pickup time as they told their moms about it and corrected bits that the girls got wrong.

What would the girls get wrong? Isabella’s name? Doubtful, since she’s their friend who is standing right there and just hosted them for a party. The date? Maybe, although there they were, celebrating at her house in early February. That the grandma died? That it was sad? Doubtful, since they were talking about a real thing here—real circumstances, real people. It was really sad.

That is a better picture of oral tradition than the telephone game, except that actual oral tradition was much, much more strict. Assigned people were trained to pass down stories with extraordinary specificity from each generation to the next.

This was true among lots of cultures, like Bedouins, African and Middle Eastern and ancient Near Eastern tribes, and Native American tribes; preliterate people did and still do handle cultural stories through oral tradition.¹⁰

Scripture began to be written down around the time of Moses (Exod. 17:14) and included twenty-four Old Testament books by the time Jesus was born. We have since rearranged and broken them into the thirty-nine smaller books of our Old Testament today, though some Bibles include books that were not in the original Hebrew Scriptures.

HONEST ANSWERS Q&A

A Sketch of How the Bible Was Assembled

If your friends asked you anything about how the Bible was put together, would you know what to say? Easy questions, like, “Why does my Bible have more books than yours?” or “Why do kids at the Christian school learn Latin? Is that from the Bible?” Or what if friends said something rude about the Bible like, “The way you got those stories is a joke—like the game of telephone.” What would you say? Let’s run through some background details that might help.

1. Which of these are original languages of the Bible?

- A. Old Testament: Hebrew; New Testament: Greek.
- B. Old Testament: Hebrew (mostly, but there's some Aramaic); New Testament: Greek (mostly, but there's some Aramaic).
- C. The whole thing originated in Latin.

Answer: B

It's true the Old Testament was Hebrew and the New Testament was Greek. There's a little Aramaic in Daniel and Ezra, because during the Babylonian exile Jewish people began to speak Aramaic, and there's a smattering of it later in the New Testament because it was a common language during Jesus's time. The Latin language was around before Julius Caesar but didn't become integrated into the church until hundreds of years after Jesus died, when a scholar named Jerome translated the Bible into Latin (this is called the Vulgate).¹¹

2. Even before Jesus came on the scene, the Old Testament was translated from Hebrew to Greek. Why?

- A. Have you read Hebrew? There are no vowels, and it's written right to left instead of left to right.

Everybody was exhausted trying to keep that up so they switched it to Greek.

- B. Alexander the Great had taken over huge swaths of land around Egypt just a few centuries before Jesus was born, which made Greek the main language. In order to keep Scriptures alive in a Greek-speaking culture, the Hebrews translated their Scriptures from Hebrew to Greek (called the Septuagint).¹²
- C. Everybody had a real good feeling that Jesus was on his way, so they started getting the Old Testament ready to be written in Jesus's language.

Answer: B

It's true that the Hebrew language has no vowels and is written right to left, but that's not the reason for translating Hebrew Scriptures to Greek. They did it because Alexander the Great's conquests made Greek the reigning language of the land, which once again put God's Word smack in the middle of actual history.

3. For a long time, the Old Testament was passed down by word of mouth (called oral tradition). Is oral tradition different from the telephone game?

- A. No. It's the same, obviously.
- B. Yes, oral tradition is different from the game of telephone because oral tradition had a procedure in place to help keep the stories intact. Also, stories and events passed down through oral tradition were not arbitrary goofy lines meant to trip people up like in the telephone game.

Answer: B

This example might help. Say a mom at her daughter's thirteenth birthday party whispered, "The brown dog ran across the road to bark at a rabbit," into her daughter's ear for her to pass down the line to her friends. It would be garbled by the time it came back to the mom—that's the game of telephone.

Let's say instead that the mom told all of those girls, who

knew the mom well and knew the daughter, Isabella, very well, this true sentence: “My mom, Isabella’s grandma, passed away last year, the day before Isabella’s birthday, February 7. It was a sad birthday.” Then let’s say the mom discussed further details with the girls at various times during the party, then happened to be standing next to the girls at pickup time as they told their moms about it and corrected bits that the girls got wrong.

What would the girls get wrong? Isabella’s name? Doubtful, since she’s their friend who is standing right there and just hosted them for a party. The date? Maybe, although there they were, celebrating at her house in early February. That the grandma died? That it was sad? Doubtful, since they were talking about a real thing here—real circumstances, real people. It was really sad.

That is a better picture of oral tradition than the game of telephone, except that actual oral tradition had much, much stricter rules, with assigned people trained to pass down stories with extraordinary care to each generation after the next.

4. Why do some Bibles have extra Old Testament books?

Those are Bibles with extra stories about Jewish history (like Hanukkah). They’re called the Apocrypha or deuterocanon, depending on who you ask. Scholars largely agree that they were not part of the original Old Testament.

Jerome, the scholar who translated the Bible into Latin (the Vulgate), said that the Jews never used those stories as Scripture and that they had been added as extra chapters to the Bible back when folks translated Hebrew Scripture into Greek (the Septuagint). Augustine, another scholar we’ll talk about a lot, agreed that the chapters were not part of original Scriptures but said they tell us important stuff about the history of Israel.¹³

5. How was the New Testament put together?

- A. After Jesus’s resurrection, the apostles and other champions of the faith ministered to new believers and then wrote

letters to them and to their house churches to encourage them. Several apostles also wrote down summaries of Jesus's ministry. Churches kept these letters and read them aloud over and over.

- B. The apostles divvied up the writing chores among themselves, hired a bunch of scribes to jot down everything they said, and banged out the entire New Testament while in the upper room where Jesus came to show them his nail-scarred hands and feet.

Answer: A

6. True or False: The authors of the Bible didn't even write their own stuff. Scribes did.

Answer: Mostly true!

But believers can't let that bug us. Just because they didn't physically write it doesn't mean it isn't what they said. Prophets, teachers, kings—they all had scribes (trained professionals) to write as they spoke.

7. True or False: Compiling the New Testament was straightforward, and since this whole thing was inspired by God, let's call it like it was—pretty much piece-of-cake easy.

Answer: False!

Scripture *was* inspired by God (meaning: it was written by God's knowing and doing), but remember that God works in history through real people. Keeping these documents safe during the early years of Christianity, when one Roman ruler after another was trying to snuff out¹⁴ Christians by burning, bludgeoning, and other gruesome torture was not *easy*.

8. In the face of so much danger, why would Christians write the New Testament in this way?

Because they were telling the truth.