

Aim of lesson

To prepare the young people for some of the arguments used against the authority and inspiration of Scripture.
To provide some initial responses to these criticisms.

Bible background

Exodus 17: 14, Joshua 24:26, 1 Samuel 10:25, Isaiah 30:8, Jeremiah 30:2, Habakkuk 2:2, Luke 1:3, Revelation 1:11.

Preparation required

Read through the arguments listed and consider which of these might be of particular concern to your students, both now and in the future.

If you do not have a white board, try to find some other means of writing a list of points which everyone can see.

Suggested outline of lesson

The students may have already heard of some criticisms of Scripture, and may have concerns about them. Naturally these should be addressed first. Perhaps you could ask for examples of other people's views first of all. Try writing them on a white board - dividing them into the two groups shown below as they think of particular criticisms.

Outright Opposition: - the views of the atheist, the critic.

- "It is a collection of verbal traditions."
- "It is myth, portraying unhistorical characters."
- "It was written after 'prophecies' had happened."
- "We cannot accept the miracles."
- "It is full of contradictions."
- "It was written by many now-forgotten authors."

Faint Praise - supportive, yet not accepting full inspiration by God.

- "It is a valuable history book - no more."
- "It is the world's greatest work of literature."
- "It is one of several 'holy books'."
- "It is the Word of God in the words of men." or "It contains the words of God."
- The Bible is true but God has since revealed further truths to men.

Such ideas are perhaps more likely to arise in school Religious Education and assemblies. In some ways they are more insidious, "having a form of godliness, but denying the power thereof."

It is clearly impossible to answer these kinds of points comprehensively in one lesson, but you need to be prepared for them, and to have thought through how you will respond. Try to encourage the young people to answer the questions themselves, but be prepared to help them out if they get into difficulties.

Here are some relevant points:

Outright Opposition

"It is a collection of verbal traditions."

First of all, the Bible's own claims should be noted. It does NOT claim to be a collection of oral stories handed down over time:

- Exodus 17:14, "And the LORD said to Moses, Write this for a memorial in a book ..." (The 1st occurrence of 'write'.)

- Joshua 24:26, “And Joshua wrote these words in the book of the law of God,” (Shows the ‘law’ extends beyond Moses.)
- 1 Samuel 10:25, “Then Samuel ... wrote in a book and laid it up before the LORD.”
- Also Isaiah. 30:8, Jeremiah 30:2, Habakkuk 2:2, Luke 1:3, Revelation 1:11.

The critic should at least take as much notice of the Bible as he does any of other historical documents. Not everyone is aware of these categorical statements that Scripture was very often written down ‘on the spot’.

“It is myth, portraying unhistorical characters.”

Commonly thought. However, throughout the twentieth century as unbelief has generally increased there has been a steady stream of discoveries confirming different parts of the record. It used to be thought for instance that Moses would “be unable to write, as writing had not been invented then.” It is now known that many different scripts were already in use. An amazing recent set of discoveries has been made by Dr. Rohl (found in his book ‘A Test of Time’). Re-dating much of Egyptian history by 250 years or so, he then found:

- widespread evidence of ‘Asiatic’ slaves who lived in the Nile delta
- monuments built by and to Joseph, even possibly his tomb and his statue!
- the tumbled walls of Jericho
- a clay letter written by King Saul!
- another mentioning David
- Solomon’s wife’s house and tomb.(Pharaoh’s daughter.)

Being very recent, his findings are still disputed but they demonstrate the ever increasing support for Biblical history.

“It was written after the prophecies had taken place.”

John Urquhart’s book “The Wonders of Prophecy” lists about seventy specific prophecies fulfilled at and since the time of Jesus. Now it is beyond serious dispute that the Old Testament was written before the time of Jesus - scholars accept that it was all translated into Greek (the Septuagint) about two hundred years before Christ. So at least these particular prophecies were provably written BEFORE the events they depict.

“We cannot accept the miracles.”

“These are myths and legends - not serious records.” Perhaps this is the most common view among atheists, i.e. straightforward unbelief. And we for our part cannot force the atheist to believe. There is no quick, slick formula to make him change his mind. Faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God. We can only continue to encourage him/her to read the Bible personally and seriously. It has the “ring of truth” about it. The power is in God’s message itself, not in our persuasive arguments about it. We can point out however:

- the reasonableness of it. (A religion that makes sense.)
- that it is what the scientists call ‘falsifiable’, that it lays itself open to disproof if prophecies fail, or history is inaccurate.

“It is full of contradictions.”

Compared with the number of times the Bible supports itself - what we tend to call undesigned coincidences - there are very few examples of apparent contradictions and these are all of an insignificant nature. Lesson 4 discusses these.

“It was written by many lost authors.”

Over the last 150 years critics have claimed that books of Scripture were not written by the human authors it names. For instance they have said that there were two ‘Isaiahs’, and that they can trace different oral traditions in various sections of the book of Genesis. Another example was the Apostle Paul’s letters. It was claimed that the varying styles of language between epistles revealed that they were not written by the same man. However such ‘linguistic analysis’ is poor evidence. The methods are unreliable often proving that certain passages or letters were written by different authors when they were known to have been written by the same person. Critics are also far from unanimous in their opinions and they differ greatly in their reasons and in the dates they assign to passages.

Faint Praise

“It is a valuable history book - no more.”

If the history is accurate, then we should take notice of the lessons of that history. Were there ten plagues in Egypt? Then what did the death of the firstborn teach? It taught Pharaoh to fear God! If the Red Sea was parted, then who parted it? The history is valuable as it is the record of God’s dealings with His people. “These things are written that ye might believe ... and have life.” John 20:31.

At what point does one stop accepting the history as accurate: Jesus lived, Jesus teaching, Jesus’ miracles, Jesus’ death, His resurrection and ascension? It is all of a piece.

“It is the world’s greatest work of literature.”

Such a point sounds initially supportive of Scripture - but it ignores the vital question - is the Bible the wholly inspired Word of God? Human works of literature are judged by human standards, and the Bible is not to be. If it is not “Thus saith the Lord” then the “world’s greatest work of literature” is a fraud!

“It is one of several ‘holy books’”.

Again, this sounds reverential. But, of course, if this statement is true, then the Bible is not! There is “no other name under heaven whereby men might be saved” than Jesus Christ our Lord. Scripture forces us to make a choice: either it is God’s Word, or it is a great lie. The Bible tells the believer to remove all idols from his heart and worship God alone. He cannot therefore consider idolatrous literature to be ‘holy’.

Unbelievers often view Scripture as ‘superstitious’ like the other ‘holy books’. They see Hindus worshipping at statues that ‘drink milk’, and then ‘Christians’ worshipping images of Mary that ‘shed tears’. (Both statues and images being made out of porous stone, it is suspected.) In ignorance of the reasonableness of God’s Word they then assume it is on the same level as other books.

“It is the Word of God in the words of men.” or “It contains the words of God.”

Typical of the kind of clever phraseology which is employed when people start picking holes in Scripture, or accepting more palatable parts and rejecting other sections. Ambiguous statements like these allow wide variation in how much of the Bible different people accept.

The introductions to some translations (like the RSV, although it is still a useful translation) show other examples of complicated wording which hide an incomplete acceptance of inspiration by the translating committees. Such convoluted arguments subtly deny Scriptures like “The commandment of the Lord is pure, enlightening the eyes.” Psalm 19:8. If God’s law is pure, why should some parts of it be considered uninspired? It stands, or falls, together.

One can’t fully believe in the Jesus of the New Testament without accepting his view of the Old: “the Scripture cannot be broken.”(John 10:35) “If you do not believe (Moses’) writings, how will you believe my words?” (John 5:47). The Bible is simply God speaking to us.

“The Bible is true but God has since revealed further truths to men”

Often beliefs which are considered to be God’s further revelations are directly opposed to what the Bible says, i.e. what happens when a person dies. Verses like Deuteronomy 4:2 and Revelation 22:18-19, suggest that God has told us what we are to believe and we are not expected to alter it.

Relevance to our lives

Facing these criticisms of the Bible together and discussing how valid they are will give the young people confidence in their own beliefs and preparation for how to deal with antagonistic comments.

Prayer

“Lord, increase our faith. Open thou mine eyes, that I may behold wondrous things out of Thy Word.”

Other suggestions for activities

For those who might think the Bible is dated, some of the arguments put forward in ‘Some of these Diseases’ by

Dr. S. I. McMillen could be discussed to show how the laws given through Moses one and a half centuries before Christ show an appreciation of health and cleanliness only recently discovered by men. If you don't have access to a copy you may well be able to buy one quite cheaply over the internet - Amazon, for instance.

About next week

The next topic is about Bible versions. If you intend to deal with that next week, you may like to suggest to the young people that they bring along different translations to compare.