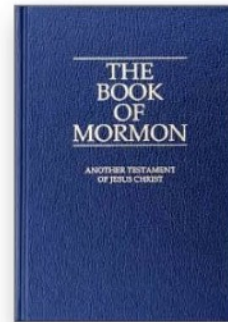
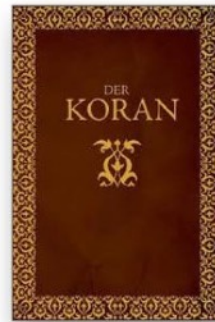
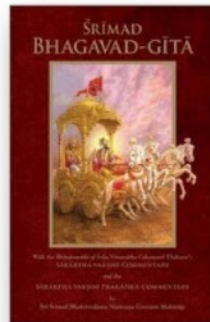
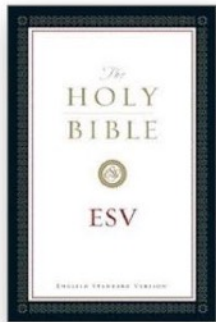


Why Should We Believe The Bible?



by Shane Rosenthal, host of *The Humble Skeptic* podcast



Because there are so many “holy books” out there in the spiritual marketplace, why should we believe the Bible? Isn’t it possible that this collection of ancient documents is really just a work of pious fiction or the ramblings of madmen? If you’ve never thought about ideas like these, be assured that some of your neighbors have. Whenever I’ve asked questions of this kind on various college campuses, I’ve found that many of today’s students tend to view the Bible this way — which is why they don’t end up trusting its claims or following its advice.

So what about you? Have you thought deeply about the foundation of your faith? Have you taken the time to put your convictions to the test? Now at this point, it must be said that there are a lot of Christians who believe this approach to be an impious affair. We don’t need to think through questions like this, because, well, “The Bible says it, I believe it, and that settles it!” But in an increasingly pluralistic culture, this form of dogmatism simply isn’t persuasive. How would such a person making such a statement respond to a Muslim friend who insists that “The Qur’an says it, I believe it, and that settles it!” In either case, what appears to settle the argument is faith, but the question to pose in each of these situations is, “Why should a person have this particular faith, in contrast to all the other faith options?”

In 1Ths 5:21, Paul encourages Christian believers to “Test all things,” and to “hold on to the good.” Similarly, in 1Jn 4:1 we’re instructed “not to believe every spirit,” but instead to “test the spirits to see whether they are from God, for many false prophets have gone out into the world.” But how are we to test the spirits, and how is a person to distinguish between true and false prophets? The first text I’d like you to consider as you think about this important question is the fascinating scene from Exodus chapter 3, in which God appears to Moses at the site of the burning bush.

After he was appointed to announce God’s message of liberation to the elders of Israel, the former prince of Egypt began to consider the complete implausibility of his own story—particularly in light of the fact that he recently had a conversation with a talking bush! This led Moses to ask, “What if they will not believe me or listen to what I say?” (Ex 4:1). If you’re familiar with the story, you’ll remember that God never rebuked him for asking such a question. Instead, he promised to empower Moses to perform a variety of signs and wonders which would have the effect of confirming the authenticity of his words: “If they will not believe you nor pay attention to the evidence of the first sign, they may believe the evidence of the last sign” (Ex. 4:8, NASB). Now, when Moses did finally report all that God revealed to the elders of Israel, we’re told that he “performed the signs in the sight of the people,” just as God instructed. And the result was that “the people believed” (Ex 4:29-31 NASB). In other words, from the very beginning, biblical faith was never seen as a kind of “spiritual sixth sense,” or “blind leap in the dark,” but was always presented as a trustworthy and reliable conviction, grounded in external evidence and real-world events.

Notice what happens later at the foot of Mt. Sinai as recorded in Exodus chapters 19 and 20. Speaking to Moses, God declares, “Behold, I am coming to you in a thick cloud, that the people may hear when I speak with you, and may also believe you forever” (19:9). Soon after this, God descended upon the mountain just as he had promised:

On the morning of the third day there were thunders and lightnings and a thick cloud on the mountain and a very loud trumpet blast, so that all the people in the camp trembled. Then Moses brought the people out of the camp to meet God, and they took their stand at the foot of the mountain. Now Mount Sinai was wrapped in smoke because the LORD had descended on it in fire. The smoke of it went up like the smoke of a kiln, and the whole mountain trembled greatly. And as the sound of the trumpet grew louder and louder, Moses spoke, and God answered him in thunder...Now when all the people saw the thunder and the flashes of lightning and the sound of the trumpet and the mountain smoking, the people were afraid and trembled, and they stood far off and said to Moses, “You speak to us, and we will listen; but do not let God speak to us, lest we die” (Ex 19:16-19; 20:18-19).

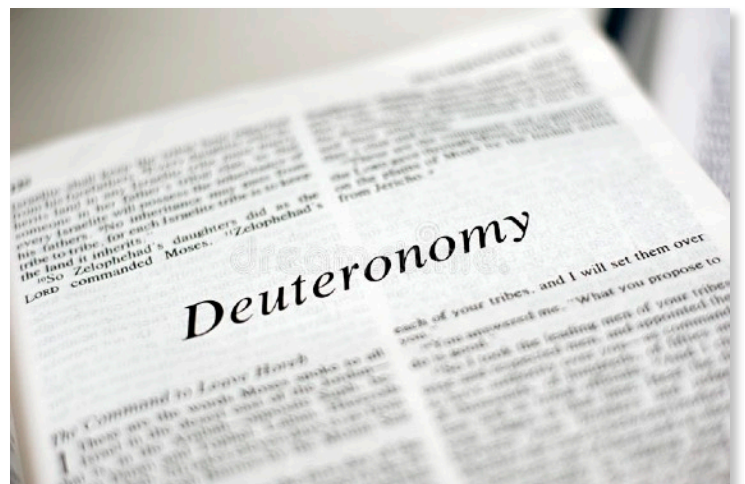
Now, if the events described here really occurred, then the people of Israel who gathered at the foot of Mt. Sinai wouldn’t have had any reason to doubt God’s existence. They would have walked through the waters of the Red Sea and would have seen with their own eyes the great cloud descend upon Mount Sinai, and they would have heard God’s voice with their own ears. But what’s particularly interesting is the fact that according to Ex 19:9, the signs and wonders seen at Mt. Sinai served not only to prove to the Israelites that God really did exist, but also had the secondary effect of establishing Moses’ authority as well. When the people “hear when I speak with you,” God told Moses, they will have a sure foundation to “believe you forever.”

Why did so many generations of Israelites come to believe that Moses spoke for God, and why did they end up concluding that the words he wrote down were divinely inspired? I believe the explanation is found here in Exodus. You see, Moses was directly involved in all the miracles witnessed by the Israelites. When he struck the water of the Nile with his staff, it turned to blood (Ex 7:20); when he raised his staff over the sea, the waters were divided (Ex 14:21); the people witnessed the pillar of cloud and fire and heard God's voice as he spoke directly with Moses. None of these things could be explained naturally, which is why they ended up concluding that his writings were authoritative and inspired, which is why they copied them with such great care and taught them diligently to their children, and their children's children. Of course, if you're wondering whether the entire account has simply been made up, hold that thought for a moment. At this point, I just want you to consider the specific claims that the Bible itself is making.

Instructions Concerning Future Prophets

In a few places in the book of Deuteronomy, God promises to send other prophets who will speak his word and shepherd his people. But the question arises, how will the people of Israel be able to distinguish true prophets from false and deceptive ones? God addresses this issue specifically by giving two criteria for determining authentic prophets, the first of which appears in the first 5 verses of chapter 13:

If a prophet or a dreamer of dreams arises among you and gives you a sign or a wonder, and the sign or wonder that he tells you comes to pass, and if he says, 'Let us go after other gods,' which you have not known, 'and let us serve them,' you shall not listen to the words of that prophet or that dreamer of dreams. For the LORD your God is testing you, to know whether you love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul. You shall walk after the LORD your God and fear him and keep his commandments and obey his voice, and you shall serve him and hold fast to him. But that prophet or that dreamer of dreams shall be put to death, because he has taught rebellion against the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt and redeemed you out of the house of slavery...



The basic thrust of this passage is that even if a person is able to perform what appears to be a miraculous sign, he should still be rejected as a false prophet if he ends up leading the people to worship foreign gods. In short, a prophet's teaching must be consistent with all that God had already revealed through his servant Moses. He must lead them to the exclusive worship of Yahweh, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

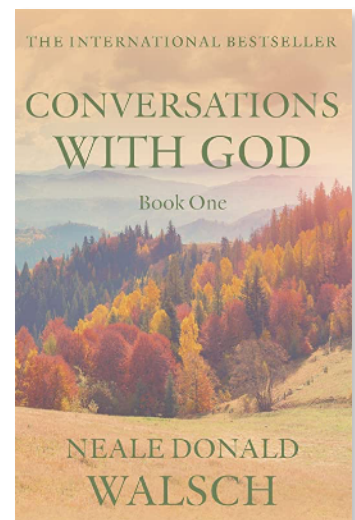
The second criteria is found in Deuteronomy 18:17-22:

The LORD said to [Moses], “I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their brothers. And I will put my words in his mouth, and he shall speak to them all that I command him. And whoever will not listen to my words that he shall speak in my name, I myself will require it of him. But the prophet who presumes to speak a word in my name that I have not commanded him to speak, or who speaks in the name of other gods, that same prophet shall die.’ And if you say in your heart, ‘How may we know the word that the LORD has not spoken?’— when a prophet speaks in the name of the LORD, if the word does not come to pass or come true, that is a word that the LORD has not spoken; the prophet has spoken it presumptuously. You need not be afraid of him.

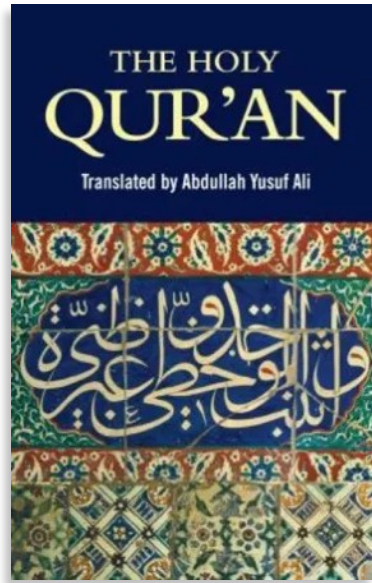
In this passage, the people of Israel are specifically warned about false prophets and are warned not to immediately trust those who merely claim to speak for God. Rather, they were instructed to reserve their judgment until a prophet’s words concerning future events were officially verified. Notice that the people of Israel were not instructed to pray for a kind of “burning in the bosom,” or any form of religious experience as a test of truth. They were also never told to put the words of a potential prophet into practice to see whether doing so would increase their own prosperity. Instead, they were specifically instructed to look for objective evidence that a prophet was able to describe future events before they occurred. This is how Israel was called to distinguish between true and false prophets.

Once again, a close examination of this foundational biblical story ends up revealing that from the very beginning, Israel’s faith was anything but blind. As Moses records, the people of Israel were not only encouraged to exercise discernment, since false prophecy was a very real threat, but they were also instructed to look for supernatural signs that served to authenticate and establish the inspiration and authority of any person who claimed to speak for God.

A few decades ago, a man by the name of Neale Donald Walsch claimed that as he was writing out his concerns in a letter addressed to God, to his utter astonishment, God began to take over his pen and answer him back. According to Walsch, God told him that “leaders, ministers, books, and even the Bible itself are not authoritative sources.” Instead, he was told, “Listen to your feelings...Listen to your experience. Whenever any one of these differ from what you've been told by your teachers, or read in your books, forget the words. Words are the least reliable purveyors of truth.” Ironically, of course, Walsch then wrote down these words in a book, which eventually became a bestseller. But think about how this account violates both criteria from Deuteronomy. First of all, we’re told to forget the words of all other teachers and books,



which of course would include the writings of Moses and the rest of the Bible. Secondly, Walsch never provided any external evidence that he was actually speaking for God — instead, his readers were simply encouraged to turn inward, to trust their subjective feelings.



There also happens to be an interesting passage in the Qur'an in which Mohammed asks Allah what he should say to those who demand signs and wonders to prove that he was an inspired prophet. Allah then tells Mohammed to respond to such people by saying, "The signs belong to Allah, and I am only a public preacher." "Is it not enough," Allah went on to say, "that we have revealed to you the Book which is recited to them?" (Q29 50-51, Shakir). In short, no signs were to be given—nothing outside the Qur'an itself attests to its supernatural character and authority. As in the case of Neale Donald Walsch, it is merely an assertion asking to be believed.

What's odd is the fact that so many people in our day, whether believers or unbelievers, seem to think that this is the approach we find in the Bible. It's not a question of evidence, but personal faith. In fact, you'll sometimes hear Christians themselves claiming that the words of scripture are "self-authenticating." I don't believe this is a good way to summarize the material we just looked at from the book of Deuteronomy. What we find there instead is that the words of a true prophet were to be externally authenticated, by comparing a given utterance with things that would later come to pass.

I will grant that often it's a later book of the Bible that ends up recording the historical fulfillment of earlier prophetic utterances—which is perhaps what some people mean when they speak of the self-authenticating nature of Scripture. To put it another way, if you study all the individual texts of the Bible in the same way that you might look at all the collected documents related to an important public trial, all the recorded facts of the case become clear and self-evident. However, I'm convinced that when we use this language of the self-authenticating nature of Scripture, I think we end up communicating something closer to the statement made by Allah in the Qur'an.

From the very beginning, the Bible insisted that a person's internal feelings were not the proper way to authenticate the words of an inspired prophet. Rather, the biblical approach always promoted external and objective means of confirming the supernatural character of true prophetic speech. These two criteria from Deuteronomy 13 and 18 served to guide Israel across the centuries as she evaluated the messages of those who claimed to speak for God. A true prophet was someone who promoted the exclusive worship of Yahweh and who accurately described the future before it happened.

Now, let's step back for a moment and examine how these two criteria were applied in the course of Israel's history. Think for example about a prophet like Isaiah, who lived at a time of great unfaithfulness and idolatry. In fact, according to Is 9:15, there were many false prophets in the land during his day. So how was the average Israelite able to know which of these men, if any, were

officially commissioned by God? Another way of getting at this question would be to ask how and why later Israelites came to believe that Isaiah was a true prophet whose writings were to be collected and added to the Hebrew canon? The answer is that, like Moses, Isaiah promoted the exclusive worship of Yahweh (Is 43:9-11, 45:5-6, 21-22) and declared numerous things well before they ever came to pass. Notice the way, for example, how the God of Israel challenges the false gods of his day in this passage from Isaiah 41:21-24:

Set forth your case, says the LORD; bring your proofs, says the King of Jacob. Let them bring them, and tell us what is to happen. Tell us the former things, what they are, that we may consider them, that we may know their outcome; or declare to us the things to come. Tell us what is to come hereafter, that we may know that you are gods; do good, or do harm, that we may be dismayed and terrified. Behold, you are nothing, and your work is less than nothing; an abomination is he who chooses you.

In the very next chapter, God ends up confirming the supernatural character of Isaiah's prophecy by making unmistakably clear announcements related to the coming of his messianic servant who "will bring forth justice to the nations" (Is 42:1). In fact, this is the beginning of what scholars refer to as Isaiah's Servant Songs which declare, among other things, that Israel's messiah will be "despised and rejected" by his own people (Is 53:3), and that his death (Is 53:8-9) will provide atonement for sin (Is 53:4-6) which will also end up bringing salvation to the ends of the earth (Is 49:6). All this was written some 700 years before the birth of Jesus, and because of the amazing correspondence between these Servant Songs and the life of Jesus, at the very least we should consider these things to be significant signs worthy of further investigation.

But this doesn't answer the question as to what motivated the Jewish people to add Isaiah's writings to the Hebrew Bible before the time of Jesus. As it turns out, a close examination of his prophecy shows that he accurately predicted many things that came to pass within the span of his own lifetime and beyond. For example, in Is 37:21-38, the prophet foretold the Assyrian invasion, which later occurred around 701 BC. More specifically, Isaiah reassured king Hezekiah that Sennacherib would return to Assyria



Clay seal of "Isaiah the Prophet" discovered in 2018, only 10 feet away from another seal featuring the name of King Hezekiah, under which he served.

without ever entering the city of Jerusalem, an event which was later confirmed by the famous Sennacherib Prism, as well as by a few lines in Herodotus (Histories 2.141). Isaiah also went on to announce the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians (cf. Is 39:5-8) which later occurred around 586 BC under King Nebuchadnezzar. And in Is 13:17-22, the prophet announced that Babylon would fall to the Medes, which ended up taking place around 539 BC, the account of which is recorded in Daniel chapter 5.



The Sennacherib Prism

This ancient Assyrian artifact is housed in the British Museum, but another copy is on display at the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago (pictured on the left). In these annals Sennacherib famously boasts, "As for the king of Judah, Hezekiah, who had not submitted to my authority, I besieged and captured forty-six of his fortified cities, along with many smaller towns" (cf. Is 1:7-8). The capitol city of Jerusalem, by contrast, had not been laid waste, but was only temporarily surrounded, "As for Hezekiah, I shut him up like a caged bird in his royal city of Jerusalem" (cf. 2Kgs 19:32-34, Is 37:33-35).

In chapters 44 and 45 of Isaiah, the prophet writes of a time well beyond the Babylonian captivity in which the Jewish exiles would be allowed to return to their homeland, an event which took place around 501 BC under Cyrus the Great. What's curious is the fact that in this section of his prophecy, Isaiah specifically mentions Cyrus by name: "Thus says the LORD...who confirms the word of his servant and fulfills the counsel of his messengers, who says of Jerusalem, 'She shall be inhabited,' and of the cities of Judah, 'They shall be built, and I will raise up their ruins'...who says of Cyrus, 'He is my shepherd, and he shall fulfill all my purpose'" (Is 44:24-28).

These prophecies are so clear that naturalistic historians who refuse to admit the possibility of anything "supernatural" have been compelled to argue that there must have been other writers who added to Isaiah's original work sometime after the events already took place. In essence, they wrote history *in the guise of prophecy*. The problem with this approach, however, is that it ignores the numerous prophecies throughout Isaiah's work related to the coming Messiah and the international scope of his future kingdom. In other words, the explanation that other writers later added material to Isaiah's prophecy to make it appear predictive, fails to account for the way the prophet was able to correctly describe events in the life of Jesus Christ in such clear and amazing detail.

Think about this for a minute. The oldest complete copy of Isaiah (pictured below) dates to sometime around 200 BC, and is part of the Dead Sea Scroll collection. No one disputes either the age or authenticity of this particular scroll. So, just for the sake of



argument, let's assume for a moment that the book of Isaiah took its final form sometime just before this period. In this case, nothing supernatural at all would be required to explain Isaiah's predictions concerning the activities of Sennacherib, Nebuchadnezzar, or Cyrus, since there would have been plenty of time for later writers and editors to insert references to those leaders as if they had been written well in advance. But this theory doesn't even begin to address the most amazing prophecies of all. Earlier I mentioned some of the parallels between the life of Jesus and the Servant Songs of Isaiah. Here are some additional examples from the final Servant Song found in chapters 52 and 53:

- This coming servant will be both exalted and despised (52:13-14, 53:3)
- He will attract the attention of kings around the world (52:15, 53:2)
- He will be a man of sorrows who is stricken, smitten, and afflicted (53:3-4)
- He will be pierced for our transgressions (53:5, cf. Ps. 22:16, Zec. 12:10, 13:7)
- He will be cut off from the land of the living and laid in the grave (53:8-9)
- A rich man will be involved in his burial (53:9, cf. Mt 27:57-58)
- He will bear the iniquities of many, and account them as righteous (53:11)
- After his suffering and death, he will “see light,” and his days will be prolonged.
- He will then divide spoils in a victory celebration (53:11-12)

Many scholars argue that this final Servant Song is the primary text Paul alluded to when he famously wrote to the Corinthians reminding them of the thing of “first importance,” namely that “Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures” (1Cor 15:3-4).

In my experience, when most apologists unpack the arguments that Paul makes in 1Cor

15, they tend to focus on his appeal to eyewitness testimony—that Christ’s death, burial, and resurrection were seen by witnesses such as Peter and the twelve, and later by “more than five hundred brothers at one time.” But what gave power to the early Christian proclamation was the fact that the events that were seen and described by reliable eyewitnesses had also been *foreseen* centuries in advance by prophets such as Isaiah. As you read through the epistles and all the sermons recorded throughout the book of Acts, again and again, you’ll discover that the primary emphasis of the early church was on Jesus’ fulfillment of these messianic prophecies, particularly those that related to his death, burial, and resurrection (cf. Acts 2:22-31, 4:1-2, 10:36-43, 17:18-32, 2Tim 2:8, 1Pet 1:3).

As we find these themes outlined in Isaiah’s Servant Songs, we must begin to ask whether the naturalistic theory concerning the origin of this prophecy is the best explanation. Since this theory is unable to explain the accuracy of its detailed prophecies related to Jesus and the rise of Christianity, why should it be considered the most reasonable hypothesis to explain some of the earlier examples of fulfilled prophecy relating to Sennacherib, Nebuchadnezzar, or Cyrus? If you think about it, the naturalistic hypothesis is unable to account for why Isaiah’s writings were added to the Hebrew canon in the first place. If later events were added to his book to make it look like he fulfilled prophecy, this would mean that he never did end up fulfilling any of the criteria laid in the book of Deuteronomy. And if that’s true then we need to ask how it was that Isaiah began to be regarded as a holy prophet in the first place.

Because our oldest copy of Isaiah dates to around two hundred years before Christ, we know that the countless parallels to events in the life of Jesus could not have been written after the fact. Furthermore, Isaiah 49:6 reveals that Israel’s messiah would become “a light to the nations,” and that his salvation would “reach to the ends of the earth.” How would anyone involved in writing or redacting this document be able to know in advance that men throughout the world would begin to embrace Israel’s Messiah? How could they have known that “of him the nations [would] inquire” (Is 11:10)? The fact is, this mysterious text cannot be accounted for by any naturalistic theory, which then suggests that perhaps something supernatural is really going on.

As I mentioned above, this connection between Old Testament prophecy and the life of Jesus ended up being the primary focus of early Christian proclamation. Along those lines, think about the way Paul commended the Bereans in Acts 17:11 as they examined the Scriptures to see whether the things he taught about Jesus were written in the ancient scrolls just as he claimed. What’s fascinating about this passage is that Paul didn’t ask to be believed simply because he was an Apostle, nor did he encourage “blind faith” in any of the claims he was making about Jesus. Rather, he praised the Bereans for seeking to confirm his message by examining what had already been revealed centuries in advance through Moses and all the other prophets. In a sense, these Bereans were fulfilling both criteria from Deuteronomy 13 and 18, since they were seeking to verify A)

that Paul's gospel was consistent with earlier revelation, and B) that the things spoken in advance by the prophets had now been fulfilled in the person and work of Jesus Christ.

In his second epistle, Peter writes that “we did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty...[and]...we ourselves heard God's voice borne from heaven [while we] were with him on the mountain.” As a result of this, Peter went on to say that “we have the prophetic word more fully confirmed, to which you will do well to pay attention as to a lamp shining in a dark place...” (2Pet 1:16-19). Basically, his point is that the things foreseen so long ago by the ancient prophets have now been confirmed by credible eyewitnesses. Can you think of any other “holy book” that has been confirmed in this way?

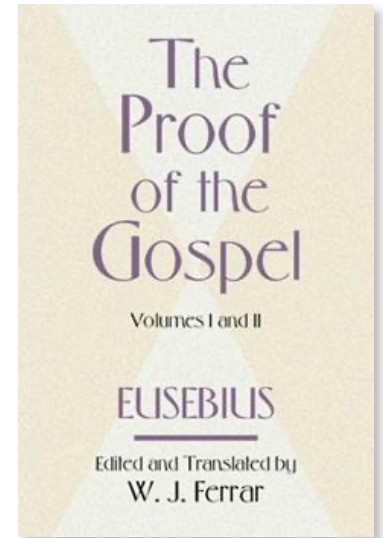
In this exploration, we've spent much of our time considering various prophecies from Isaiah. But suppose we stepped back and looked at the entire tapestry of the Hebrew Bible. In that case, we'd quickly discover that Jesus was indeed correct when he said that all the Scriptures testify of him (Jn 5:39). For example, in Gen. 22:17 Abraham was told that in his seed, “all the nations of the earth shall be blessed.” In Psalm 22, David wrote of a forsaken man whose hands and feet were pierced, and whose garments were divided by those who cast lots. And how does that particular psalm end? According to verse 27, “All the ends of the earth shall...turn to the LORD, and all the families of the nations shall worship before [him].” Similarly, the prophet Jeremiah wrote that one day, “nations shall come from the ends of the earth and will learn of Yahweh's power and might” (Jer 16:19). And the prophet Micah records the following:

But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah, who are too little to be among the clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel, whose coming forth is from of old, from ancient days...And he shall stand and shepherd his flock in the strength of the LORD, in the majesty of the name of the LORD his God. And they shall dwell secure, for now he shall be great to the ends of the earth. And he shall be their peace (Mic 5:2-5)

All these things have now been confirmed. Jesus is the one born in Bethlehem; he is the good shepherd who today is worshipped by men and women around the world — he is the prince of peace. Before I conclude this article, I'd like to share a few lines from a 3rd and 4th-century Christian writer named Eusebius of Caesarea. Some of you may be familiar with his history of the early church, but Eusebius also wrote an important book titled *The Proof of the Gospel* in which he argued that fulfilled prophecy provides convincing evidence of the supernatural origin of our faith, and for the inspiration of the Bible. In this classic volume, Eusebius writes this:

If so many things were proclaimed by the Hebrew divines, and if their fulfillment is so clear to us all today, who would not marvel at their inspiration? Who will not agree that their...

teaching and beliefs must be sure and true, since their proof is to be found not in artificial arguments [or] clever words...but in simple and straightforward teaching, whose genuine and sincere character is attested by the virtue and knowledge of God evident in these inspired men? Men who were enabled not by human but by divine inspiration to see from a myriad ages back what was to happen long years after, make sure they claim our confidence for [their beliefs]... Because of the extraordinary foreknowledge shown in the prophetic writers, and of the actual events that occurred in agreement with their prophecies...[all men should be convinced] of the inspired and certain nature of the truth we hold. [This] should silence the tongues of false accusers [who slander us by saying] that we...are unable logically to present a clear demonstration of the truth we hold, and think it enough to retain those who come to us by faith alone, and as they say that we only teach our followers like irrational animals to shut their eyes and staunchly obey what we say without examining it at all, and call them therefore 'the faithful' because of their faith as distinct from reason...Our conversion was due not to emotional and unexamined impulse, but to judgment and sober reasoning (*Proof of the Gospel*, 1.1.7-11)



Why should we believe the Bible? Because the words recorded throughout this amazing library of 66 books have been confirmed. At many times and in many ways, the God of Israel promised to one day send a messiah who would redeem, not just one nation, but the entire world. And in the fullness of time, all this eventually was accomplished through the person and work of Jesus Christ. That which had been foreseen and written down centuries in advance by Moses and all the Hebrew prophets was seen and reported by trustworthy and reliable eyewitnesses. Therefore, the Bible does not merely claim to be an inspired book, but also provides for its readers “many convincing proofs” (Acts 1:3).



Shane Rosenthal is the founder and host of *The Humble Skeptic* podcast. He was one of the original creators of the White Horse Inn radio broadcast back in 1990 and served as the host of that program from 2019 - 2021. Shane received an M.A. in Historical Theology from Westminster Seminary California and has written for numerous publications and sites, including *Modern Reformation*, *TableTalk*, *Core Christianity*, *The Heidelberg*, and *The Beautiful Christian Life*.