

Truth or Consequences
The Historic Reliability of the Bible

Are the B'rit Hadasha (N.T.) and the Tanakh (O.T.) historically reliable?

Tests for the Reliability of Ancient Literature

1. Bibliographical Test

- a. The Number of N.T. Manuscripts and their closeness to the Original
- b. Accuracy of Manuscripts supported by:
 - i. Various Versions
 - ii. Lectionaries
 - iii. Early Church Fathers
 - iv. Internal Evidence

2. External Evidence Test: *****Covered Next Month*****

- a. The Stones Cry Out – Evidence from Archeology
- b. History of the O.T. Text
- c. The Dead Sea Scrolls
- d. Non-Hebrew Manuscript Evidence

The majority of the following text is taken almost verbatim primarily from “The New Evidence That Demands A Verdict” by Josh McDowell with additional data from “The Big Book of Bible Difficulties” by Norman L. Geisler and Thomas Howe and “The Historical Reliability of The Gospels” by Craig Blomberg along with some back ground information pulled form the internet including Wikipedia.

Test for the Reliability of Ancient Literature

What we are looking to establish today is the historical reliability of Scripture – not its inspiration.

The historical reliability of the Scripture should be tested by the same criteria by which all historical documents are tested.

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In his book titled “*Introduction to Research in English Literary History*”. He lists and explains the three basic principles of historiography.

These are:

1. The ‘Bibliographical Test’.
2. The ‘Internal Evidence Test’.
3. The ‘External Evidence Test’.

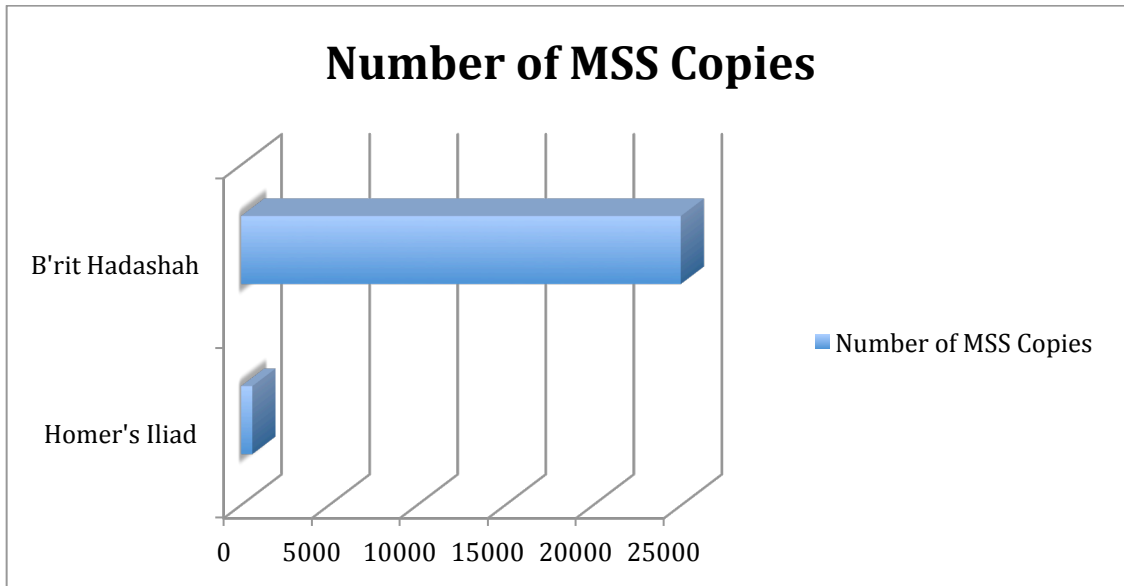
1. The ‘*Bibliographical Test*’ is an examination of the textual transmission by which the documents reach us. In other words, since we do not have the original documents, how reliable are the copies we have in regard to the number of manuscripts (MSS) and the time interval between the original and extant (currently existing) copies.

1.a. The Number of Manuscripts and Their Closeness to the Original.

Not including the Bible, Homers Iliad has the most surviving manuscript copies at 643. The first complete preserved text of Homer dates from the 13th century. (Leach, OB, 145)

Now let’s compare that with the known copies of the Bible, first the B’rit Hadashah and then the Tanakh.

There are currently 5,686 know Greek manuscripts, over 10,000 Latin Vulgate and at least 9,300 other early versions, adding up to almost 25,000 manuscript copies of portions of the New Testament in existence today.



The importance of the sheer number of manuscript copies cannot be overstated. As with other documents of ancient literature, there are no known extant (currently existing) original manuscripts of the Bible. Fortunately, however, the abundance of manuscript copies makes it possible to reconstruct the original with virtually complete accuracy. (Geisler, GIB, 386)

John Warwick Montgomery says that “to be skeptical of the resultant text of the New Testament books is to allow all of classical antiquity to slip into obscurity, for no documents of the ancient period are as well attested bibliographically as the New Testament.” (Montgomery, HC, 29)

Sir Frederic G. Kenyon, who was the librarian of the British Museum and second to none in authority for issuing statements about MSS, states:

Besides number, the manuscripts of the New Testament differ from those of the classical authors.... In no other case is the interval of time between the composition of the book and the date of the earliest extant manuscripts so short as in the New Testament. The books of the New Testament were written in the latter part of the first century; the earliest extant manuscripts (trifling scraps excepted) are of the fourth century – say from 250 to 300 years later. This may sound a considerable interval, but it is nothing to that which parts most of the great classical authors from their earliest manuscripts. We believe that we have in all essentials an accurate text of the seven extant plays of Sophocles; yet the earliest substantial manuscript upon which it is based was written more than 1400 years after the poet's death. (Kenyon, HTCNT, 4)

Kenyon continues in *The Bible and Archaeology*: “The interval between the dates of original composition and the earliest extant evidence becomes so small as to be in fact negligible, and the last foundation for any doubt that the Scriptures have come to us substantially as they were written has now been removed. Both the authenticity and the general integrity of the books of the New Testament may be regarded as finally established.” (Kenyon, BA, 288)

Dockery, Matthews, and Sloan have recently written, “For most of the biblical text a single reading has been transmitted. Elimination of scribal errors and intentional changes leaves only a small percentage of the text about which any questions occur.” (Dockery, FBI, 176)

It must be said that the amount of time between the original composition and the next surviving manuscript is far less for the New Testament than for any other work in Greek literature.... Although there are certainly differences in many of the New Testament manuscripts, not one fundamental doctrine of the Christian faith rests on a disputed reading. (Dockery, FBI, 182)

AUTHOR	BOOK	DATE WRITTEN	EARLIEST COPIES	TIME GAP	NO. OF COPIES
Homer	<i>Iliad</i>	800 B.C.	c. 400 B.C.	c. 400 yrs.	643
Herodotus	<i>History</i>	480-425 B.C.	c. A.D. 900	c. 1,350 yrs.	8
Thucydides	<i>History</i>	460-400 B.C.	c. A.D. 900	c. 1,300 yrs.	8
Plato		400 B.C.	c. A.D. 900	c. 1,300 yrs.	7
Demosthenes		300 B.C.	c. A.D. 1100	c. 1,400 yrs.	200
Caesar	<i>Gallic Wars</i>	100-44 B.C.	c. A.D. 900	c. 1,000 yrs.	10
Livy	<i>History of Rome</i>	59 B.C.-A.D. 17	4 th cent. (partial) mostly 10 th cent.	c. 400 yrs. c. 1,000 yrs.	1 partial 19 copies
Tacitus	<i>Annals</i>	A.D. 100	c. A.D. 1100	c. 1,000 yrs.	20
Pliny Secundus	<i>Natural History</i>	A.D. 61-113	c. A.D. 850	c. 750 yrs.	7
New Testament		A.D. 50-100	c. 114 (fragment) c. 200 (books) c. 250 (most N.T.) c. 325 (complete N.T.)	+ 50 yrs. 100 yrs. 150 yrs. 225 yrs.	5,366

Accuracy of Manuscripts supported by:

i. Various Versions

Another strong support for textual evidence and accuracy is the ancient versions. For the most part, “ancient literature was rarely translated into another language.” (Greenlee, INTTC, 45)

From its inception Christianity has been a missionary faith. “The earliest versions of the New Testament were prepared by missionaries to assist in the propagation of the Christian faith among peoples whose native tongue was Syriac, Latin, or Coptic.” (Metzger, TNT, 67)

Syriac and Latin versions (translations) of the New Testament were made around A.D. 150. These versions bring us back very near to the time of the originals. There are more than 15,000 existing copies of various versions.

Syriac Versions:

Old Syriac Version contains four Gospels, copied about the 4th century. It should be explained, “Syriac is the name generally given to Christian Aramaic. It is written in a distinctive variation of the Aramaic alphabet.” (Bruce, BP, 193) Theodore of Mopsuestia (5th century) wrote, “It has been translated into the tongue of the Syrians.”

Syriac Peshitta – The basic meaning is “simple”. It was the standard version, produced around A.D. 150-250. There are more than 350 MSS from the 400’s extant today. (Geisler, GIB, 317)

Palestinian Syriac – Most scholars date this version at about A.D. 400-450 (5th century). (Metzger, TNT, 68-71).

Philoxenian – Polycarp translated a new Syriac New Testament for Philoxenas, bishop of Mabug. (A.D. 508)

Harkleian Syriac by Thomas of Harkel. (A.D. 616)

Latin Versions:

Old Latin – Testimonies from the 4th to the 13th century relate that in the 3rd century an “old Latin version circulated in North Africa and Europe.”

African Old Latin – (Codex Babbiensis) (A.D. 400). Metzger writes that “E. A. Lowe shows paleographical marks of it having been copied from a second century papyrus.”

Codex Corbiensis (A.D. 400-500) contains the four Gospels.

Codex Vercellensis (A.D. 360)

Codex Palatinus (fifth century A.D.)

Latin Vulgate (meaning “common or popular”). Jerome was secretary to Damasus, the Bishop of Rome. Jerome fulfilled the bishop’s request for a version between A.D. 366-384. (Bruce, BP, 201)

Coptic (or Egyptian) Versions:

F.F. Bruce writes that it is probably that the first Egyptian version was translated in the 3rd or 4th century. (Bruce, BP, 214)

Sahidic – Beginning of the 3rd century.

Bohairic – The editor, Rodalphe Kasser, dates it around the 4th century (Greenlee, INTTC, 50)

Middle Egyptian – 4th or 5th century.

Accuracy of Manuscripts supported by:

ii. Lectionaries

This field is a greatly neglected one, and yet the second largest group of NT Greek MSS is the lectionaries.

So what are lectionaries?

“Following the custom [min hag] of the synagogue, according to which portions of the Law and the Prophets were read at divine service each Shabbat, the Christian Church adopted the practice of reading passages from the New Testament books at services of worship. A regular system of lessons from the Gospels and Epistles was developed, and the custom arose of arranging these according to a fixed order of Sundays and other holy days of the Christian year.” (Bruce Metzger, TNT, 30)

There are approximately 2,396-catalogued lectionaries, but as of yet the majority still awaits critical analysis. “The earliest lectionary fragments are from the sixth (6th) century, while complete MSS date from the eight century and later.” (J. Harold Greenlee, INTTC, 45)

The lectionaries were usually rather conservative and used older texts, and this makes them very valuable in textual criticism.

They are of value, even if only secondary, in establishing the NT text. Here are three reasons why:

1. They contain the entire NT many times over, with the exception of Revelation and parts of Acts.
2. As a result of recent scholarship on the lectionaries, they are assuming a significant role in establishing the true text. Lectionary types are predominantly Byzantine [Eastern Roman Empire – Greek rather than Latin influence], but there are certain groups that are characterized by Alexandrian [Egyptian] and Caesarean [Roman – Latin] readings.
3. Lectionaries have also influenced the understanding of specific passages, for example, John 7:53-8:11 and Mark 16:9-20. (Geisler, GIB, 418).

A detailed listing of lectionaries may be seen in the Greek New Testament published by United Bible Societies and Nestle-Aland, both printed in Stuttgart.

Accuracy of Manuscripts supported by:
iii. Early Church Fathers

The patristic citations of Scripture are not primary witnesses to the text of the NT, but do serve two very important secondary roles. First, they give overwhelming support to the existence of the twenty-seven (27) authoritative books of the NT canon. It is true that their quotations were often loose, although in the case of some Fathers they were very accurate, but they do at least reproduce the substantial content of the original text. Second, the quotations are so numerous and widespread that if no manuscripts of the NT were extant, the NT could be reproduced from the writings of the early Fathers alone. (Geisler, GIB, 430).

Writer	Gospels	Acts	Pauline Epistles	General Epistles	Revelation	Totals
Justin Martyr	268	10	43	6	3 (266 allusions)	330
Irenaeus	1,038	194	499	23	65	1,819
Clement (Alex.)	1,107	44	1,122	207	11	2,406
Origen	9,231	349	7,778	399	165	17,992
Tertullian	3,822	502	2,609	120	205	7,258
Hippolytus	734	42	387	27	188	1,378
Eusebius	3,258	211	1,592	88	27	5,176
Grand Totals	19,368	1,352	14,035	870	664	36,289

Justin Martyr (A.D. 133) battled the heretic Marcion.

Irenaeus (A.D. 202) best-known book *Against Heresies* (c. 180) is a detailed attack on Gnosticism, which was then a serious threat to the Church.

Clement of Alexandria (A.D. 150 – 212)

Origen (A.D. 185-253 or 254) compiled more than 6,000 works including more than 18,000 NT quotes.

Tertullian (A.D. 160-220) was an Elder in Carthage, and quotes the NT more than 7,000 times, of which 3,800 are from the Gospels.

Hippolytus (A.D. 170-235) sometimes considered the first antipope because he opposed the Roman Bishops that had softened the penitential system for new pagan converts.

Eusebius (A.D. 263-369) a bishop in Caesarea and early Christian scholar.

Accuracy of Manuscripts supported by:

iv. Internal Evidence

When Bible critics ask, “How can you believe the Bible when it is riddled with errors?” what do you say? Many Christians punt to faith. They simply cling tenaciously to their belief no matter what the evidence may be against it. This, however, is contrary to both Scripture and sound reason. The Bible declares, “Walk in wisdom... that you may know how you ought to answer each one” (Col. 4:5-6). (From the Preface to “The Big Book of Bible Difficulties” by Norman L. Geisler and Thomas Howe.)

Speaking on the *Internal Evidence* test, John Warwick Montgomery writes that literary critics still follow Aristotle’s dictum that **“the benefit of the doubt is to be given to the document itself, not arrogated by the critic himself.”** Therefore, **“one must listen to the claims of the document under analysis, and not assume fraud or error unless the author disqualified himself by contradictions or known factual inaccuracies.”**

Dr. Gleason Archer was known around the seminary as the man who learned over thirty languages, most of them languages of Old Testament times in the Middle Eastern world. Dr. Archer taught for over thirty (30) years at the graduate seminary level in the field of biblical criticism, here is his modest description of his qualifications to discern the meaning of difficult biblical texts:

“As an undergraduate at Harvard, I was fascinated by apologetics and biblical evidences; so I labored to obtain a knowledge of the languages and cultures that have any bearing on biblical scholarship. As a classics major in college, I received training in Latin and Greek, also in French and German. At seminary I majored in Hebrew, Aramaic, and Arabic; and in post-graduate years I became involved in Syriac and Akkadian, to the extent of teaching elective courses in each of these subjects. Earlier, during my final two years of high school, I had acquired a special interest in Middle Kingdom Egyptian studies, which was furthered as I later taught courses in this field. At the Oriental Institute in Chicago, I did specialized study in Eighteenth Dynasty historical records and also studied Coptic and Sumerian. Combined with this work in ancient languages was a full course of training at law school, after which I was admitted to the Massachusetts Bar in 1939. This gave me a thorough grounding in the field of legal evidences.”

This same Dr. Archer wrote a book titled “*Encyclopedia of Bible Difficulties*”, in the forward he stated this:

“As I have dealt with one apparent discrepancy after another and have studied the alleged contradictions between the biblical record and the evidence of linguistics, archaeology, or science, my confidence in the trustworthiness of Scripture has been repeatedly verified and strengthened by the discovery that almost every problem in Scripture that has ever been discovered by man, from ancient times until now, has been dealt with in a completely satisfactory manner by the biblical text itself – or else by objective archaeological information. The deductions that may be validly drawn from ancient Egyptian, Sumerian, or Akkadian documents all harmonize with the biblical record; and no properly trained evangelical scholar has anything to fear from the hostile arguments and challenges of humanistic rationalists or detractors of any and every persuasion.”

Both Dr.’s Geisler and Archer point out that what many label as ‘errors’ are more accurately designated as ‘difficulties’.

St. Augustine wisely noted, “If we are perplexed by any apparent contradiction in Scripture, it is not allowable to say, the author of this book is mistaken; but either the manuscript is faulty, or the translation is wrong, or you have not understood.”

Below is a list of common mistakes made by Bible critics that we can use as principles for understanding apparent discrepancies in the Bible.

1. *Assuming that the Unexplained is Not Explainable.*
Example: Critics once proposed that Moses could not have written the first five books because there was no writing in Moses’ day. Now we know that writing existed a COUPLE OF THOUSAND YEARS or more before Moses. Another Example is: Critics once believed the Bible was wrong in speaking of the Hittite people, since they were totally unknown to historians. Now historians know of their existence by way of a Hittite library found in Turkey.
2. *Presuming the Bible Guilty Until Proven Innocent.*
This speaks nothing more than a prejudiced belief that the Bible must be wrong and therefore is assumed to be so unless proven

otherwise. If we lived our lives under this principle we would have to assume all food labels are false or that all speed limit signs don't really mean what they say or... you get the point.

3. *Confusing Our Fallible Interpretations with G-d's Infallible Revelation.*

Human beings are finite, and finite beings make mistakes. That is why there are erasers on pencils and delete keys on computers (trust me on this one!). And even though G-d's word is perfect (Ps 1:7), as long as imperfect human beings exist, there will be misinterpretations of G-d's Word and false views about His world.

4. *Failing to Understand the Context of the Passage.*

Perhaps the most common mistake is to take a text out of its proper context. As the adage goes, "A text out of context is a pretext."

5. *Neglecting to Interpret Difficult Passages in the Light of Clear Ones.*

A classic example of this is the apparent contradiction in what James teaches about 'works' and what Paul teaches about 'grace'. There is abundant Scripture clearly stating that we are saved by grace and not by works. James is stating that before G-d we are saved by grace but men do not see our faith, we are to demonstrate our faith by the actions in our lives

6. *Basing a Teaching on an Obscure Passage.*

Sometimes the words are clear but the meaning is not evident because we are not sure to what they refer. An example of teaching a doctrine based upon an obscure passage can be found in 1 Corinthians 15:29 where Paul speaks of those who were "baptized for the dead.". Is he referring to the baptizing of live representatives to ensure salvation for dead believers who were not baptized (as Mormons claim)? Or, is he referring to others being baptized into the church to fill the ranks of those who have passed on? Or, is he referring to a believer being baptized "for" (i.e., "with a view to") his own death and burial with Christ? Or, to something else? **Remember, when we are not sure "the main things are the plain things and the plain things are the main things."**

7. *Forgetting that the Bible Is a Human Book with Human Characteristics.*

With the exception of small sections, like the Ten Commandments which were written by the finger of G-d" (Ex. 31:18), the Bible was not verbally dictated. The writers were not secretaries of the Holy Spirit. They were human composers employing their own literary styles and idiosyncrasies.

8. *Assuming that a Partial Report is a False Report.*

Critics often jump to the conclusion that a partial report is false. However, this is not so. If it were, most of what has ever been said would be false, since seldom does time and space permit an absolutely complete report. The Bible expresses the same thing in different ways, or at least from different viewpoints, at different times. Hence, inspiration does not exclude a diversity of expression. Compare, for example, Peter's famous confession in the Gospels:

Matthew: "You are the Christ, the Son of the living G-d." (16:16)

Mark: "You are the Christ." (8:29)

Luke: "The Christ of G-d." (9:20)

9. *Demanding that NT Citations of the OT Always Be Exact Quotations.*

Critics often point to variations in the NT's use of the OT Scriptures as a proof of error. However, they forget that every citation need not be an exact quotation. It was then (and still is today) a perfectly acceptable literary style to give the essence of a statement without using precisely the same words.

10. *Assuming that Divergent Accounts Are False Ones.*

Just because two or more accounts of the same event differ, it does not mean they are mutually exclusive. For example, Matthew 28:5 says there was one angel at the tomb after the resurrection, whereas John 20:12 informs us there were two. But, these are not contradictory reports. In fact, there is an infallible mathematical rule that easily explains this problem: wherever there are two, there is always one – it never fails! One has to add the word "only" to Matthew's account to make it contradict John's. Matthew does not say "only" one angel.

11. Presuming that the Bible Approves of All it Records.

It is a mistake to assume that everything contained in the Bible is commended by the Bible. The whole Bible is *true* (John 17:17) but it records some lies, for example, Satan's (Gen. 3:4; cf. John 8:44) and Rahab's (Josh. 2:4) Inspiration encompasses the Bible fully and completely in the sense that it records accurately and truthfully even the lies and errors of sinful beings. The truth of Scripture is found what the Bible *reveals*, not in everything it *records*. Unless this distinction is held, it may be incorrectly concluded that the Bible teaches immorality because it narrates David's sin (2 Sam. 11:4), that it promotes polygamy because it records Solomon's (1 Kings 11:3), or that it affirms atheism because it quotes the fool as saying "there is no G-d" (Ps 14:1).

12. Forgetting that the Bible Uses Non-technical, Everyday Language.

To be true, something does not have to use scholarly, technical, or so-called "scientific" language. The Bible is written for the common person of every generation, and it therefore uses common, everyday language. The use of observational, nonscientific language is not *unscientific*, it is merely *prescientific*. The Scriptures were written in *ancient* times by ancient standards, and it would be anachronistic to superimpose *modern* scientific standards upon them. However, it is no more unscientific to speak of the sun "standing still" (Joshua 10:12) than to refer to the sun rising (Joshua 1:16). Contemporary meteorologists still speak daily of the time of "sunrise" and "sunset."

13. Assuming that Round Numbers are False. Round numbers are just

that - round numbers. Like most ordinary speech, the Bible uses round numbers (1 Chron. 19:18; 21:5). For example it refers to the diameter as being about one third of the circumference of something. It may be imprecise from the standpoint of a contemporary technological society to speak of 3.14159265as the number three, but it is not incorrect for an ancient, non-technical people.

14. Neglecting to Note that the Bible Uses Different Literary Devices.

An inspired book need not be composed in only one literary style. Human beings wrote every book of the Bible, and human language is not limited to one mode of expression. The Bible

reveals a number of literary devices. Several whole books are written in poetic style (e.g. Job, Psalms, Proverbs). The Gospels and Epistles are filled with parables, allegories, metaphors, similes, hyperboles, satire and figures of speech. It is not a mistake for a biblical writer to use a figure of speech, but it is a mistake for a reader to take a figure of speech literally.

15. *Forgetting that Only the Original Text, Not Every Copy of Scripture, Is without Error.* When critics do come upon a genuine mistake in a manuscript copy, they make another fatal error – they assume it was the original inspired text of Scripture. They forget that G-d only uttered the original text of Scripture, not the copies. St. Augustine wisely noted; “*when we run into a so-called ‘error’ in the Bible, we must assume one of two things – either the manuscript was not copied correctly, or we have not understood it rightly.*” What we may not assume is that G-d made an error in inspiring the original text.
16. *Confusing General Statements with Universal Ones.*

Critics often jump to the conclusion that unqualified statements admit of no exceptions. They seize upon verses that offer general truths and then point with glee to obvious exceptions. In so doing, they forget that such statements are only intended to be generalizations. The Book of Proverbs is a good example of such an issue. Proverbial sayings by their very nature offer only general guidance, not universal assurance. They are rules for life, but rules that admit of exceptions. Proverbs 16:7 is a case in point. It affirms, “*When a man’s ways please the L-rd, He makes even his enemies to be at peace with him.*” This obviously was not intended to be a universal truth. Paul was pleasing to the L-rd and his enemies stoned him (Acts 13:19). Jesus was pleasing to the
17. L-rd, and His enemies crucified Him! Nonetheless, it is a general truth that one who acts in a way pleasing to G-d can minimize his enemies’ antagonism.
18. *Forgetting that Later Revelation Supersedes Previous Revelation.* Sometimes critics of Scripture forget the principle of progressive revelation. G-d does not reveal everything at once, nor does He always lay down the same conditions for every period of time. Therefore, some of His later revelation will supersede His former

statements. Bible critics sometimes confuse a change of revelation with a mistake. The mistake however, is that of the critic. For example, the fact that a parent allows a very small child to eat with his fingers, only to tell them later to use a spoon is not a contradiction. Nor is the parent contradicting himself to insist later that the child should use a fork, not a spoon, to eat his vegetables. This is progressive revelation, with each command suited to fit the particular circumstance in which a person is found. There was a time, under the Mosaic Law, when G-d commanded that animals be sacrificed for people's sin. However, since Christ offered the perfect sacrifice for sin (Heb. 10:11-14), this OT command is no longer in effect. Here again, there is no contradiction between the latter and former commands.

Wrap up discussion and next months topics.