BIBLE Q&A

Matthew J. Pinto

Did Adam & Eve Have Belly Buttons?
And 199 other questions from Catholic teenagers.

Foreword by Jeff Cavins

HELLO my name is JESUS

Did Jesus Have A Last Name?
And 199 other questions from Catholic teenagers.

Matthew Pinto & Jason Evert
Question #25

"Are the stories in the Bible true?" Stephen C., 15

A. Yes, all the stories in the Bible are true, but not all are intended to be read as history. The parables of Jesus contain life-changing truths that can lead us to a deeper understanding of God and His message of repentance, love, and truth. But that does not mean things described in the parables necessarily really happened (Lk 8:9–10). We do not have to think there really was a Prodigal Son, for example (Lk 15:11–32). Jesus used this story to illustrate the love of the Father for us.

On the other hand, when the biblical author intended to say that something really did happen, then it really did happen. The Gospel writers intended to say that Jesus Christ really lived, suffered, died, and rose from the dead. That is not a parable, and they did not intend it to be viewed as one (1 Cor 15:14; CCC 137).

This requires a bit of common sense. Many think the Bible is one big fat book written in only one way. It is not. There are many different writers using several different styles or "genres" of writing. We see this in our own experience. The news anchor on CNN is telling the truth (we hope) in a different way than a play by Shakespeare or a song by a poet or a sermon by a saint. Their "styles" are different and the way they speak the truth is different. You do not expect Shakespeare to deliver the truth via a stock market quote, and you do not expect the anchorman to burst into a sonnet to deliver the weather report. But both speak the truth in their own ways.

The same with the Scriptures. The Bible sometimes aims to give a historical chronicle of real events that really occurred. At other times it employs poetry, myth, or fiction, in order to convey truth according to that genre. Nobody thinks Jesus "lied" because there wasn't really a Prodigal Son. Likewise, nobody thinks that because Jesus used parables or stories to teach a moral truth, it must therefore follow that nothing in the Bible is historical.

Whether a given story is history, then, depends on the intent of the author in telling it. How do we know what the writer intended? That requires properly interpreting the Bible in accordance with the Tradition of the Church. It is the responsibility of the Magisterium (that is, the pope and the bishops), with the assistance of trained biblical scholars, to guide us in this matter.
Question #27

“When we say the Bible is God’s Word, does that mean that God actually wrote it? Didn’t He use men to write it?”

A. Actually, you’re right on both counts. As the Catechism tells us, God is the author of the Bible (CCC 105). But He chose certain men to actually write the books of the Old and New Testaments under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. During the first three centuries A.D., the Church discerned which writings were inspired by the Holy Spirit and included them within the list (called the canon) of sacred books.

Regarding the writing of these sacred texts, the Catechism states that God “made full use of [the human writers’] faculties and powers so that, though he acted in them and by them, it was as true authors that they consigned to write whatever he wanted written and no more” (CCC 106). In other words, God did not dictate the words of Sacred Scripture to the human writers nor did He temporarily suspend their free will, style of writing, emotions, intellect, or cultural influences. Rather, God worked within and through the natural abilities of the human writer in order to speak to us “in a human way.” When we read the Bible, “we must be attentive to what the human authors truly wanted to affirm and to what God wanted to reveal to us by their words” (CCC 109). Rather than diminishing the freedom of the human author in the composition of Sacred Scripture, God enhanced that freedom. Within that freedom, an authentic openness to the inspiration of the Holy Spirit was exercised, allowing the human author to become the very instrument by which God’s written Word is conveyed to us.

Blessed Teresa of Calcutta (Mother Teresa) used to encourage her sisters to be “a pencil” in the hand of God, allowing Him to write whatever message He wanted with their lives. In a sense, the human writers of the Bible were “pencils” in the hand of God, humbly allowing Him to use their unique gifts and circumstances through which He could perfectly write His message of love to us.

Question #28

“After 2,000 years, how do we know that the Bible we have today is the same one that the first Christians used?”

A. From the time of the apostles to now, it has been the Church’s highest priority to faithfully preserve and protect the faith entrusted to her by Jesus Himself. In the New Testament, Paul implores Timothy to guard and keep safe the deposit of faith which has been entrusted to him (see 1 Tm 6:20). For 2,000 years, millions of Christians have given their very lives in defense of the faith. It is integral to the Church’s mission to uphold the integrity of the faith in both its written form—Sacred Scripture—and proclaimed word—Sacred Tradition. This is why St. Paul also tells the Thessalonians to “hold to the traditions which you were taught by us, either by word of mouth or by letter” (2 Thess 2:15).
It was the Church, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, which finally determined which books were to be included in the sacred canon (i.e., the list of inspired books) of the Bible. This process took three centuries and was ultimately resolved at the Council of Hippo in A.D. 393. Later, at the Councils of Carthage in both A.D. 397 and 419, the universal Church continued the process and finally determined which books were divinely inspired and which were not.

The earliest Christians did not have access to the Bible in the way that we do today. The first printed Bible was not available until the printing press was invented in the 15th century, and, even then, the number of copies was very limited and not affordable for most people. Christians who lived during the first centuries after Christ had to rely almost exclusively on the proclaimed word of God (i.e., Sacred Tradition), as taught by the apostles and their immediate successors. Although the books of the Hebrew Old Testament were well known and firmly established during the time of the early Church, the very first New Testament books were not written until about A.D. 50 when St. Paul began writing his letters to the various Christian communities. The Gospels followed later. The book of Revelation, the final book of the Bible, was not written by St. John until about A.D. 90.

Unfortunately, no autographs (i.e., original manuscripts) of any biblical books have survived until today. This is not surprising, given that they were written thousands of years ago on parchment and papyrus, which both decay over time. In addition, many manuscripts of the Bible were ordered destroyed during times of persecution by the Roman emperors. The oldest known existing manuscript of a portion of the Bible is the Dead Sea Scrolls, discovered in a cave near Jericho in 1947. Written in Hebrew by a Jewish community living in that region around the 2nd century A.D., it contains portions of most of the books of the Old Testament as well as a complete text of the book of Isaiah. It closely matches the version of the text we have now.

The oldest known existing fragment of the Bible written in Greek, the original language of the New Testament, can be dated to the 2nd century A.D. Many other Greek manuscripts have also been discovered over the years. Of those, perhaps the most important and complete, as well as the oldest, is known as the Codex Vaticanus. Dated approximately A.D. 325, it offers one of the most accurate and reliable witnesses of the Bible's original texts known to exist. Today, it is safely preserved in the Vatican Library.

In about A.D. 400, St. Jerome was commissioned by Pope Damasus to translate the Bible from its original languages (Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek) into Latin. This version is known as the Vulgate, a word meaning the “common” Latin of the day. As the various European languages developed, the Bible was translated by hand from the Vulgate into these languages.
Although it was recently revised, the Vulgate remains the official Latin translation recognized by the Catholic Church. Since the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965), however, the Church has encouraged newer translations of the Bible directly from the original languages. This scholarly effort has resulted in a number of new Catholic Bible translations, including the *New American Bible*, which is used during Mass. Another excellent translation is the *Revised Standard Version–Catholic Edition*, which is used in the *Catechism*. Catholics should make sure any Bible they use has an *Imprimatur*, i.e., an official declaration of a bishop that its text is free from doctrinal error.

In this way, the Church continues to be the official guardian and infallible interpreter of the Word of God. So we can be assured that God’s Revelation, as given to the apostles by Christ Himself and preserved throughout the years by the Church in both Sacred Scripture and Tradition, is the same today as it was at the time of the first Christians.

**Question #31**

“Aren’t there contradictions in the Bible, for example, about how Judas died? How can the Church say the Bible has no errors?”

A. Many apparent contradictions in the Bible actually are not, if they are understood correctly. The death of Judas is a good example of this fact. The two accounts of Judas’ death are Matthew 27:5, which tells us that he “hanged himself,” and Acts 1:18, which describes Judas as “falling headlong, he burst open in the middle, and all his insides spilled out.” It is clear that neither account contradicts the other; each offers different details—a different *perspective*—on the same event. Both authors want to express the depth of despair that Judas experienced, hence the graphic descriptions of his death. The particulars may not be exactly the same, but the underlying event *is* the same.

So, it is entirely possible that, when he hanged himself (as Matthew describes) the noose broke and he fell to the ground. From this point, Luke’s description can be seen as entirely compatible with Matthew’s; it is not contradictory at all. In fact, this is exactly how the two accounts are blended together in the classic, 1960s movie about Jesus, *King of Kings.*
Question #37

“What’s the difference between the bibles that most Protestants use, like the King James Version, and Catholic bibles?”

A. The major difference is that most Protestant versions of the Bible—including the popular King James Version—are missing seven books from the Old Testament. Those books are Tobit, Judith, Wisdom, Sirach, Baruch, and 1st & 2nd Maccabees. Interestingly, the original King James Version (published in 1611) included these books, but they have since been removed from most Protestant bibles or placed in a separate section called the Apocrypha (meaning “hidden”).

In order to understand why Protestants removed these seven books, we need to go back some two centuries before the time of Christ. At that time, Jewish scholars translated the original Hebrew Old Testament into Greek. This translation became known as the Septuagint, and it became popular among Greek-speaking Jews and with the first Christians. In fact, the majority of the Old Testament quotations used in the New Testament are taken from the Septuagint translation.

Between the years A.D. 90 and 100, Jewish rabbis met to determine which books would be considered a part of their Bible. Many believed that these seven books, although included in the Septuagint, should not be included in their list of books because they were written in Greek rather than Hebrew, the original language of the other books of the Old Testament. Nevertheless, the early Christian Church accepted these books as part of the canon of Sacred Scripture. Early Church councils—at Hippo (A.D. 393) and Carthage (A.D. 397 and 419)—determined that these seven books were inspired by the Holy Spirit. This raised the number of books of the Old Testament to forty-six.

This canon of Scripture was accepted by all Christians for nearly 1,600 years. It was Martin Luther, when he translated the Bible into German in 1534, who first dropped these seven books from the list of approved books. He also called such New Testament books as Hebrews, James, Jude, and Revelation “non-canonical” based on his new, unorthodox theology. Luther’s actions led to the exclusion of Tobit, Judith, Wisdom, Sirach, Baruch, and 1st & 2nd Maccabees from nearly all Protestant versions of the Bible (with the exception of the original King James Bible, as we have mentioned).

The Catholic Church has always taught that these seven Old Testament books are inspired and canonical. In reaction to Luther and the other Protestant leaders, the Council of Trent in 1546 decreed that these books be treated “with equal devotion and reverence” to the other books of the Bible. This has been reaffirmed in the new Catechism of the Catholic Church (see CCC 120).