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Is the Bible Merely Unreliable Translations Written by Men?

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#STRask - Stand to Reason

Question about how to respond to someone who dismisses the Bible's divine authority on the grounds that it was "written by mere men" and "is a bunch of unreliable translations of translations of translations."

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Transcript

[Music] [Bell] This is Amy Hall. I'm here with Greg Koukl and you're listening to #STRask. Of course.

Of course. Hopefully you know what you're listening to because you're pressed play. Alright.

What do you got? So Greg, we're going to go back to a classic apologetics question today. This one comes from Hank in Ohio. Alright.

When I shared the gospel with an agnostic octogenarian, he dismissed the Bible's divine authority on two grounds. #1 It was written by mere men. And #2 It's a bunch of unreliable translations of translations of translations.

How would you answer him? Well, I agree with the first point and I disagree with the second. Okay. But in agreeing with the first point, what am I conceding? Now what he wants to, what he wants to, the point that the Hank's friend wants to make is that it's written by men.

Therefore, it's not reliable to tell us true things about God or salvation or Jesus or anything like that. Alright. Now this is such a strange position to take, though people take it all the time with the Bible.

Now there's a very simple question that can be asked regarding that statement or the sentiment that's expressed. Of course, if you're taking a tactical approach when the person says, "Well, it's written by men," you say, "Yeah, and therefore what?" So that's a columnal number one. You want more information.

They are making a presumption and you want them to cash that out, express that clearly. Here is the consequence regarding the authority of the Bible. Since it's written by men, it can't be relied on.

Or it can't be true. Or it's not inherent or whatever. I don't know what they're going to say, but you want them to say it.

Okay, because it doesn't matter what they're going to say, it's going to be ridiculous. Now it's not going to sound ridiculous at the moment, but you'll see, and just with my follow-up question, that it's ridiculous. And again, I'm not trying to be disparaging.

I think it turns out to be a ridiculous complaint. Here's why. Follow-up question.

Once they say, give clarification on what the problem is when it's written by men, men make mistakes. Yes, therefore what? Regarding the Bible. You can't say, therefore, the Bible is mistaken just because humans do make mistakes.

Doesn't mean they have made mistakes with regards to the Bible. All it means is that humans can make mistakes. My follow-up question is, do you have any books in your library? Of course, everybody's got a library, maybe small, maybe two or three books, I don't know.

But if they have any nonfiction books, do you have any books in your library? Yeah. Do they give you accurate information about the world on your assessment? Sure. Were they written by God? No, of course not.

I don't believe in that kind of thing. Okay, so even books that are written by human beings can still give you accurate information about the world, right? Of course is the proper response, but that's why this kind of complaint borders on being ridiculous, because it implies that you can't trust anything written by human beings. There's another difficulty here, and some of you maybe have picked up on it.

If you think about practical suicide, that being a tactic, a self-refuting statement, the statement that you can't trust things that are written by human beings or given by human... is something that is given by a human being. So if that person wrote the statement down, that's written by him and you can't trust it. Okay, well, that becomes... you can see the obvious contradiction that's built into that approach.

The fact is we trust all kinds of things as being factual and ought to that were written by human beings. That's how we know things. Most of the things we know or think we know

and probably do know, we know because somebody else told us not because we figured it out on our own or had a personal experience.

Everything that happened in the past before we were born, everything that is happening in other places of the world, where we're not actually at all kinds of information about things too big for us to comprehend, like the universe or too small for us to comprehend, like atoms, etc. Biology and cells and all that. All that information we got from other people.

And we have in most cases good reasons to believe it's accurate. Written by men, why is that the problem? What we have to do is examine the particulars themselves and not just simply dismiss a piece because it's written by men. So this is the kind of conversation, Hank, that I would encourage you to have with your friend.

Yes, written by men. I agree. And therefore, well, men make mistakes.

They do sometimes and therefore, what the Bible's mistaken? Oh, well, that's a different step. You have to show the Bible's mistaken or give some good reasons that you think it is on particular things rather than just presume it's mistaken because human beings wrote it. All right.

And if it turns out that it must be mistaken because that's supernatural in it, now that he's imposing something on the text that's a philosophy of anti-supernaturalism, maybe materialism or naturalism or physicalism or something else, which itself needs justification before you impose it on the text. Okay. So anyway, that's dealing with the written by men aspect.

Do you want to add anything to that before we move on to the next one? Well, it strikes me also if Hank says he dismissed the Bible's divine authority on the grounds that was written by mere men. Well, that's just circular. That's not an actual argument.

He's just saying, "I reject this divine authority because it isn't divine." Uh-huh. Yeah. So he hasn't given any reasons at all.

So in other words, if human beings wrote it, there's no sense in which God could have super intended it. That's right. That's circular.

He's presuming what he has to prove, right? So you might ask him, "Well, yeah, I understand that's your position, but why do you think it has no divine authority? Or why do you think this is the nature of what we're looking at here?" So that's the question I think I would ask. So if a person is, he works for an employer and there's an attorney, let's say the person's attorney working for an employer, and the employer sends the attorney to negotiate a contract for the company. Okay? And the attorney is negotiating the contract, so to speak, in the name of the employer.

With the authority of the employer, that's not a bizarre concept. Everybody understands that delegated authority. Okay.

Well, I can't. If human beings can do that, why couldn't a God accomplish that? Now, we're not arguing at this point that the Bible is such a book. We are dealing with the kind of objection that's being raised that it isn't.

And our point is that kind of objection can't show that the Bible isn't the divinely inspired book it claims to be. All right. So we're defeating a defeater.

We're not adding a positive. It's a little different part of the process. We've talked, I think in the last few months, it seems like Greg, we've talked about arguments for the divine authority of the Bible, so people can go back and see more on what you've said about that in the past.

Yes. So, okay. So that's the first thing.

Just that because it's written by men takes us nowhere as an observation. And I think the question about having books in your library that tell you the truth about the world is a very fair counter to just simply say, just because a book is written by men doesn't mean it can't tell you the truth, even the truth about God, even the truth about what God told them to write. It's a separate question.

All right. The second one was, go ahead, remind me. It's a bunch of... It's a bunch of unreliable translations of translations of translations.

Okay. Well, this is just a mistake of the understanding of the process. When I debated Deepak Chopra on national TV many years ago now, he brought the same thing up.

He said, well, the Bible's like the third... Our Bibles are like the 13th iteration. He actually said, made the claim twice, and he got the number different. Both times he made the claim.

I didn't catch it in the conversation. I was focusing on something else, but when I watched the video, I noticed that. Because the feeling people have, the sense people have is the Bible was written in one language, the Old Testament in Hebrew, most of it, some Aramaic, and the New Testament in Greek.

Okay. And then Greek is translated into Latin. Then Latin is translated into German, and the German is translated into Lithuanian, and Lithuania is... And you've gone to... And then finally somebody takes the Ugandan translation, translates it into English.

Well, that isn't the way it happened. That's nutty. I mean, obviously, if that were the sequence, you're going to lose a little bit more in every translation, and the margin of error is going to increase every time.

Whenever you have a translation, you do have a small margin of error of understanding, because anybody speaks two languages knows that things that work in one language are hard to understand, and in one language are hard to express sometimes in another language, and do the best you can't. Okay? But the translations that we have now are all translated from the standard translations that you use in Bible study and reading, and what I have here in the American Standard. They're all translated from Greek manuscripts.

From the Greek, the original Greek. One step of translation, that's it. Now, there are... There are family... There are differences in some of the Greek manuscripts, and most of those differences can be resolved fairly simply.

They're spelling errors, for example, etc. But nevertheless, the point is, it's one step. It's not all these steps.

And frankly, there really is very... There's... This point is never made by anyone who knows anything about how this works. Even critics, even Bart Ehrman, would make this particular point. He would raise other concerns, but not this one, because he knows that all of our English translations are translated from Greek manuscripts, and Greek in the New Testament was the original... was the language of the original.

It's just one step of translation. So this is a tactic I call just the faxman. It's a challenge or a mistaken thinking regarding something relevant to Christianity that is based on a misunderstanding of the fax.

And the fax... These are not contentious or controversial. He just got it wrong completely. But this mistake is not one that is unusual.

Lots of people are confused on the process. And they talk about the telephone game and all this other stuff. It isn't the way it happened.

That's all. So the translations are made from one to the other, from the Greek to, in our case, to English. Excuse me now.

English changes over time. And so people are reading the King James Version. Well, they're reading an ancient English.

And I know John Montgomery said, "I only use the King James Version with people who are 350 years old or older." All the rest of the years are more about our translation, just because words change their meaning. English words change their meaning. So when it says, "Suffer the children," it means, "Allow." You know, Romeo, where for art thou Romeo? He's not saying, "Where are you?" He's saying, "Why are you Romeo a Capulet rather than a Montague?" Or maybe I got the last name to be mixed up.

But the point is, the language, even English changes meaning, so we need more up-to-

date translations. That's sometimes an issue. But even with the King James, you're going to get the basic truth of the original manuscripts.

So this is just a misguided objection. I think what I would start with, if somebody said this, is, you know what? I think you've misunderstood how this works. If I could show you that we actually have a reliable text, and we can demonstrate that, would that resolve this for you? And I wonder how he would respond.

He might be interested, but maybe he's not. I don't know. Well, that's an intellectual integrity question.

And sometimes it's really good to start with that. You suggested Frank Turic also suggest things like that. You know, if I could show you the XYZ, would you change your mind? No.

Okay. Well, I don't know why you're asking me the question. You know, it's like people who complain that, "Would Jesus never said anything about homosexuality?" Or they presume that.

Nothing, he said, had any implications for sexual behavior, especially homosexuality, which isn't true, but nevertheless they think it is. But the question, this is the integrity question, is, if Jesus had condemned homosexuality, would you be against it? Well, of course, practically speaking, no, they wouldn't be, because that's not their project. Their project isn't to follow Jesus, whatever he says.

Their project is to follow their own views. And if they get Jesus on board to support them, then they'll take that if they get it. So sometimes an integrity question is a good question to ask early on.

Well, for one thing, I don't know how much of an explanation you want to get into if he's not really interested. But for another thing, if he does say he's interested, now he's more invested in listening to what you have to say. And he's kind of agreed to listen to you, so I think that's really helpful.

But you could just explain, and hopefully you have a kind of basic idea of how textual criticism works and the kind of manuscripts we have. I was at the Chester Beatty Library in Ireland several years ago. They have... Fancy you.

Just happened to be scouting things out there at Ireland and Chester Beatty, you know. They have copies of Paul's letters. And if I remember right, they're like from around 200.

Yeah, they're early. And looking at those was amazing. Now, I was in England just a couple of months ago, and I really wanted to see the fragment they have at the John Ryland's Library, which is around 125, the fragment of John.

Yes, right, right. And it was off display. Oh, that's too bad.

Well, you could go to the British Museum, and they have the Sananticus and Alexandrin sitting next to you. The British Library, yes. The whole.

Now, they used to have the British Library. I think they moved to the British Museum next door, but whatever it is, it's right there in London. You know, or maybe it was the other way around, but I saw them sitting right next to each other.

And I did wonder about the wisdom of having two of the greatest codices of the old whole Bible, fourth century, fifth century. Yeah, it's crazy. Sitting next to each other.

So, I dropped an incendiary bomb or something like that. You know, those things we felt. There are a lot of things in that giant room that we would not want to get destroyed altogether.

Yeah, like the bagna card is right there, or one of the copies. And also one of the Beatles songs that's famous, that I want to hold your hand, that they jotted down on a napkin in a restaurant somewhere. There's a so much stuff anyway.

All really important stuff like that. But the point is, there are some really interesting things people don't even know about. They don't know they're out there.

They don't know how this is determined. So even getting past this idea of the translations, translations, translations, which is very easily dealt with, is you explain Greg. But then the question becomes, well, how do we know that's the original? And now we get into the subject of textual criticism where we look at the variance and we, there are different methods to try and figure out how to do it.

And so the method is to try and figure out which one is the correct one. And Greg, on our website, you have, if anyone looks up, Aunt Sally's secret sauce on our website, you will see how that works. And it's pretty, once you see that, and I'm just going to recommend you go look at that.

You can see that there is a system that is very doable for figuring out what the original was, considering all the copies that we have going very far back. And see what he says, see if that gets him interested. There's also all the things we've talked about in the past about the unity of the Bible and the prophecy and all those things that you go through, Greg, with the mnemonic.

And I'll let people look that up. With a hand, has God spoken as the title of that material. So there are a lot of reasons to think the Bible's divine.

And then as Greg, you always mentioned. Well, we're not talking about, well, yeah, we are talking about divinity and also about the reliability of the idea. Yes.

So he's just missing the Bible's divine authority. So he's just dismissing it altogether. But

there are very good reasons to take it seriously.

Even if you're just start there, take it seriously. Look at how the Bible built Western civilization. You know, we were just talking about England.

Go to England. Look at what you see there. Look at these old cathedrals and the beauty.

And look at the magna carda. Look at these ideas that came from the Bible. Or the Declaration of Independence.

Yeah. They're deeply rooted in those notions. And look at the good that's come from now.

So this reminds me of J. Warner Wallace's book, "Person of Interest" where he details all the ways that Jesus changed the world. So if that's another tack you could take with this is to say, well, okay, you don't have to agree it's divine. Why don't we look at its significance first? Why don't we look at the weightiness of it and the beauty of it and what it did for society? And let's just start there because I think a lot of atheists think Christianity is silly.

And they dismiss it as being, you know, they talk about Jesus being quote, the magic carpenter and all these sky God and all these things. When the truth is the weightiness and the beauty of Christianity has been waiting enough and beautiful enough to undergird the most beautiful creations of literature, music, art, architecture, all these different things. It came out of the value of Christianity, which is all of course centered on who Jesus is.

So I would start there. Start with the weightiness of Christianity. Well, J. Warner's project is really interesting because he asked the question, what if all of the religious texts, all of the New Testament was just destroyed? We have all New Testament, every single one of them.

Let's just look at what Newton said. I don't mean John Newton. I mean Isaac Newton.

1.3 million words Isaac Newton wrote on theology. Yeah, the guy who, you know, the physicist guy, you know, the gravity guy, 1.3 million words. Robert Boyle, you know, look at what he wrote.

He, and these are founders of modern science and, and, or look at all the top 100 hit songs of all time. And what can you learn about Jesus from these or look at all the art from all these different periods of time or look at all these other religions say about Jesus. You know, the ones that co-opted him after they made him one of theirs, you know, like Hinduism work Jesus into their pantheon, et cetera, et cetera.

But he looks at all of these areas of influence all over the world and how much you can

actually learn about Jesus from all of these other sources, all the information from the gospels and the influenza culture filtered down and radically and no one has ever influenced the world the way Jesus had. I mean, it's mind boggling when you see the work that he's done, you know, the research. And of course, when he does his presentations, they're magnificent, you know, they're just, just magnificent.

So he covers all this ground and what he, what it shows is this, the point you're making the impact of this so one solitary life kind of thing. And the, and there's no one in the world who's had that kind of impact. Why? Certainly not because he's a fictitious character.

You know, Paul Bunyan hasn't had that kind of, you know, or anybody else like that. And so this is, this is just another angle, so to speak, that's really an interesting one that Jay Warner has developed in a person of interest. So we highly recommend that work.

Greg, this is the third episode in a row we've done with just one question. So my apologies to everyone who's sending questions and is waiting. I think maybe in the next one, Greg will take a few shorter ones.

More than one, yeah, but it's actually a compliment to the questioner who asks such good questions. Yes. So thank you, Hank.

We appreciate that. If you have a question, send it on Twitter with the hashtag #STRask or you can go through our website. Just go to the page we have for a hashtag #STRask and then you'll see a link right at the top.

And you'll be able to send in your question. And then we will consider taking a direct episode to answer it. All right.

Well, thank you for listening. We look forward to having you with us next time. This is Amy Hall and Greg Cogle for Stand to Reason.

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