

Buzz King

buzz@BuzzKing.com

<https://BuzzKing.com>

Hebrews 6:13–20 ESV

¹³ For when God made a promise to Abraham, since he had no one greater by whom to swear, he swore by himself, ¹⁴ saying, “Surely I will bless you and multiply you.” ¹⁵ And thus Abraham, having patiently waited, obtained the promise. ¹⁶ For people swear by something greater than themselves, and in all their disputes an oath is final for confirmation. ¹⁷ So when God desired to show more convincingly to the heirs of the promise the unchangeable character of his purpose, he guaranteed it with an oath, ¹⁸ so that by two unchangeable things, in which it is impossible for God to lie, we who have fled for refuge might have strong encouragement to hold fast to the hope set before us. ¹⁹ We have this as a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul, a hope that enters into the inner place behind the curtain, ²⁰ where Jesus has gone as a forerunner on our behalf.

From the Old to the New Testament: from fiction to fact?

If we were to name some of the main characters of the Bible, starting with those who lived during the most ancient period of biblical time and then moving forward in time, we would get this list: Adam and Eve, Noah, Job, Abraham and Sarah, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, Joshua, Naomi and Ruth, King Saul, King David, King Solomon, Jonah, Daniel, Ezekiel, Jesus. I’ve left out many people obviously. But here is some perspective. We cannot accurately date when Adam and Eve, Noah, Job, or Abraham could have lived. A sloppy guess puts Abraham alive around the year 2000 BC. But if Moses was a real character, we might be able to date him to around 1250 BC, because that is when the Pharaoh that Moses made his demand

of – that is, to release Moses’ people from captivity - apparently lived. If King David was a true historical person, then he probably was alive around 1000 BC. Jesus of course dates to about the year zero. What’s true is that the further back we go in the Bible, the less people are convinced that the characters and events are real. Scholars tend to completely dismiss Adam and Eve and Noah. The story of Adam and Eve is seen as an allegory about listening to God’s advice before acting. I have given a sermon on this. It is not believed there was any true, global flood. There is disagreement on Abraham, although more and more, he is seen as a mythical, not a historical figure. One reason why the existence of Moses is strongly doubted is that scholars tend to believe that there was no exodus, that the Israelites rose out of the native Canaanite population and that there was no invasion and slaughter of the Canaanites. I’ve given a couple of sermons on this. The most ancient biblical character that we have evidence was a true historical person is King David – around the year 1000 BC. Most people, even non-believers, do believe, however, that Jesus really did exist as a person and can be reliably dated to about the year zero.

So, let’s start with King David, a person that many archeologists have tried hard to prove really lived. Again, the biblical history before David is very suspect. But from David on, there is indeed evidence that the stories in the Bible are at

least rooted in historical fact. As for King David, the evidence is, however, controversial. There is a stone called the Tel Dan stele, which was discovered in 1993. The inscription on it tells of a ruler of a kingdom who defeated both a king of Israel named Joram, as well as a king of Judah named Ahaziyahu, who were both members of the house of David. There it is: the house of David, a direct reference to King David on an archeological artifact. In case you don't know it, this is a big deal. There really isn't much evidence at all to suggest that anyone in the bible actually existed until King David. And the evidence for him is thin. Who says that this "house of David" actually refers to THE King David?

But let's suppose he was indeed real. How powerful was he? What was his kingdom like? Was there truly a united monarchy, as the Bible claims, that pulled all the Jews together into a powerful kingdom? Here's the problem. Over the course of the past hundred years, archeologists have opened up over thirty thousand archeological sites around Israel, a country the size of New Jersey, and yet there is no meaningful evidence of 10th century BC building activity in Jerusalem. In other words, there was no united monarchy and kingdom, as described in the Bible. But there is evidence of large buildings having existed during this period, just outside Jerusalem. Still, what most academics believe is that King David did exist, but that he was a desert nomad, who lived out of a tent,

did not build a magnificent empire, and had under his command a rather small, unimpressive kingdom – at least by biblical standards. But he probably did exist. King David is real. In an area that was surrounded by powerful, militaristic city-states, David did indeed build a kingdom. By our standards it might seem pitiful. But he built a city, established a tax system, and brought the Ark of the Covenant to Jerusalem. It's just that his kingdom wasn't as magnificent as we might like to believe. The Bible story is simply, well, exaggerated. But the authors of the Bible did NOT consider this to be wrong. They did not see themselves as writing a lie.

Consider this. In the Bible, there is a direct descendent of King David. He was King Josiah. He was the 16th king of Judah – part of Israel – and probably lived around 600 BC, 400 years after King David. This is why he is far more important than we might think, given his modest role in the Bible: he was probably alive during the period when much of the Old Testament was written. A popular scholarly belief is that he had the ancient stories of the Bible hyped up, puffed up, if you will, in order to lend legitimacy to his own rule. He had the stories of people like Moses and David dramatized in order get the population of Israel to stand behind him as their king, the descendent of the now-great King David. Yes, the idea is that the Bible was deliberately fabricated by King Josiah, who is described in Scripture as the saintliest of the kings of Israel. Interestingly,

he was only eight years old when he became king. His father had been wicked, as had the Jewish kings in the decades preceding Josiah's father. Josiah, it says in the Bible, set out to restore the house of Israel to its proper status as the home of God's people. His workers found the lost and long forgotten Torah. When it was brought to Josiah's attention, he wept, grieved for the sinful ways of his ancestors, and he sought the counsel of the Lord through a prophetess named Huldah. Josiah then led his people in a Passover to rival all past Passovers. For the rest of Josiah's days, the people of Israel lived by God's law. The kingdom of God was restored by the saintly descendent of the magnificent King David who built a massive, glorious empire – at least according to Scripture.

So, is Scripture from Josiah onward accurate? If it was exaggerated before Josiah, is it historically correct after that? Maybe. Maybe not.

Our quote today comes from Hebrews. We don't know who wrote Hebrews. Some have suggested Paul. But the style, vocabulary, and the emphases in the sentence structure are very different from Paul's Greek. The writer of this letter – whoever it was – was very literate. The Book of Hebrews has a rich vocabulary and eloquent Greek. It quotes the Old Testament frequently. It offers a firm warning for sinners and a warm encouragement for the faithful. Hebrews is about Jesus, who he is, and what he has done for us. It

tells us to take action in order to actively become more like Jesus Christ. I am using this passage today because it contains an often-quoted phrase: *it is impossible for God to lie*. The Bible is supposed to be the Word of God, and God does not lie. So what do we do about the fact that as Christianity moves through the 21st century, we are going to have to accept that much of the Bible is untrue, at least historically?

Here is what I think. Let's talk about the New Testament, written long after Josiah, long, long after King David. Can we assume that it is historically accurate, that no one has exaggerated the story of Jesus? The people who wrote the New Testament were not in the business of writing modern histories. We carefully distinguish between fiction and fact, and we expect modern histories to be accurate to the finest detail. But that is not what the people who write the Bible, including the New Testament, were trying to do. I believe that the New Testament stories of the twelve Apostles, along with the life of Jesus, are a combination of historical fact and near facts that are derived from oral memories. The people who wrote the Bible, in particular, the authors of the four Gospels, did their best to record what actually happened. But they didn't have detailed, modern style historical documents to draw on. And back then, people were more

concerned with telling a faith story, with illuminating the lessons that Jesus preached, not with creating an accurate history simply for the sake of creating it.

The important thing is that the New Testament account of Jesus and his followers became the source for Christianity. It is the basis by which we understand God. Those beliefs are far, far more important than anything else. The story of Jesus is astonishingly true. It is spiritually accurate. It tells of a man who brought to us a New Covenant, a way to have a relationship with God. He also told us how to live in the kingdom of God here on earth and how to earn the right to live in the kingdom of God forever. The Israelites were real people. The kings of Israel were real. Jerusalem is real. Jesus is real. The Apostles were real. The great evangelist Paul is real. Above all else, the story of our faith is real. I am not at all convinced, by the way, that the authors of the Bible, Old and New Testament alike, had any intention of having us take it all literally. Keep in mind that the Bible is full of obvious inconsistencies. Even the four Gospels conflict with each other on a number of different points. The people who wrote the Bible were not idiots who didn't think that we wouldn't read it carefully. They knew what they were writing - and they were honest about it. Perhaps our faith ancestors had more faith in God, and along with it, a greater ability than we have, to appreciate faith stories. Keep in mind that Jesus himself taught in parables –

stories that are meant to convey great truths without being factually true themselves.

I am a believer. In some ways, I am not a literal believer, and I am willing to say that. I am not a fundamentalist. I am willing to accept that parts of the Bible were written to tell us what to believe, not to elucidate us on the blow-by-blow facts of ancient times. In many ways, I find the Bible to be something that frees me from the technical world that I spent forty years in. The Bible is not a computer program that, if a single character is typed wrong, crashes and brings the entire U.S. power grid down with it. I don't have to sweat the details. I can love God. I can accept Jesus as my savior, as the person who, as a descendent of the truly great King David, as the inheritor of a lineage that began with the story of Adam and Eve, offered himself up to evil people who lived for the things of this world, not for the things of God's world. I love the Bible. I love reading it and studying it. I think you know that about me. I am so thankful that the Israelites and then the Jews and then the first Christians wrote down this record and left it for me. For me. I am so thankful. Because of this book, I know that all people are equal, all people are made in the image of God, all people deserve a decent place to live, enough food to be healthy, proper clothing, opportunities in society, and

the respect of all other people. Most of all, I know that we live in the kingdom of God. Yes. We live in the kingdom of God. Please pray with me.

God, you have blessed us with your Word. Your book. It is the most magnificent, history-changing thing ever written. However it was written and by whomever it was written, and whatever their motives were, it was all driven by you. You saw to it that the Bible would be perfect. It would be the book that would bring your truth to the world for thousands of years. There is no way it was an accident. Our best evidence of it being your true Word is by judging its impact – which is truly and almost unbelievably phenomenal. Thank you for blessing us with the Good Book. Thank you for giving us a place to go when we need regeneration spiritually, when we need guidance, and when we need to see that example of true godliness - your son, Jesus Christ. Amen.