Although it took Christianity until the end of the fifth century to decide what books belonged in its Bible, once that decision was made, Christianity has considered those books to be sacred. Whether from the Old Testament or the New, these books bore true witness to the acts and words of God and his followers. After all, if the Bible was holy, it could not be false.

Since the 18th-century Enlightenment, truth has been defined in new ways. The most significant of these have come from the new fields of science and history. Drawing from the Enlightenment’s emphasis on careful observation of data and conclusions based on rational arguments, these two fields made truth accessible to human inquiry and removed its dependence on Scripture’s divine revelation.

Because of this, Scripture has been subject to many attacks and doubts in the modern world. In the 18th century, Enlightenment thinkers delighted in pointing out the Bible’s internal contradictions. In the 19th century, the United States government dismissed the Bible’s support of slavery as immoral and illegal. But the most damaging attacks on Scripture, from the earliest days of the Enlightenment into the 21st century, have come from the new disciplines of science and history. Their methods for testing the accuracy of their claims, which enabled the ongoing identification of errors and their improvement, continues to challenge Christianity’s claims for biblical truth.

Geology’s discovery that the world’s existence can be measured in billions of years and that life’s development on the world took place over millions of years, along with biology’s attributing the diversity of life to the Theory of Evolution, directly challenge the description of God’s creating acts found in Genesis chapter one.

In response to this challenge, Evangelical Christianity has chosen to combat science on its own ground, using its definition of truth. The Creationist movement claims that Genesis One is true in a scientific sense, that Scripture provides an accurate description of the geological and biological processes that formed the earth and its life, instead of maintaining an older definition of biblical truth that interpreted this chapter as evidencing spiritual or theological truth. By adopting the scientific definition of truth in this controversy, Creationism decided to fight on science’s turf, a battle ground that Scripture’s authors could never have imagined.

Like science, the discipline of history also arose from the Enlightenment. In a similar methodology, it studies evidence and then formulates rational arguments to arrive at conclusions about historical events.

When historians turned their attention to the Israelites’ conquest of Canaan under Joshua—a series of battles lasting about three months—they found little evidence to support this short war. Not even archaeological excavations lent much useful support to the conquest story. Cities that Scripture claims Joshua destroyed were not; some were even uninhabited. Newly-built villages at this time showed Canaanite building characteristics, rather than Egyptian ones, as would be expected from a people who had spent the previous centuries in Egypt. Historians finally admitted (some quite reluctantly) that Joshua’s conquest did not take place as related in Scripture.

The response by Evangelical Christianity again has been to adopt the definition of truth used by the discipline of history. Despite the lack of supporting evidence and the existence of contradictory evidence, the response is that Joshua’s conquest is historically true. It happened just as the Bible says it did. Rather than stay with a religiously-accepted definition of truth—whether spiritual, theological or allegorical—Evangelicalism accepted a new, modernist definition of truth, the one defined by the field itself. As in its struggle against science, the religious side has chosen to fight on its opponents’ turf and has therefore made victory an even more difficult task.

Evangelical Christianity does not realize what it has done. The writings in these controversies indicate that the authors do not understand that there is any definition of truth other than the ones set out by their opponents. Indeed, they do not recognize that the definitions even originated from science and history. Given this fundamental flaw in their strategy, it is unlikely that they can turn back the challenges represented by science and history.

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