

BOOK REVIEW

of

Jeffery L. Sheler,

Is the Bible True?: How Modern Debates and Discoveries Affirm the Essence of the Scriptures,
HarperSanFrancisco/Zondervan, 2000 [1999].

This book is in the Evangel Library,
and this review is presented by Larry D. Paarmann.

I hesitate to give this book an unqualified recommendation for a couple of related reasons. Sheler attempts to write as an unbiased secular journalist, and therefore stops short of what an evangelical writer endorsing Biblical inerrancy would do. He does not state his own position, but in my judgment he likely considers himself a Christian, but probably in the mainline Protestant/liberal branch of Christendom. Nonetheless he is obviously intrigued by the many lines of investigation that point to the truthfulness of the Bible. It could be he is a convinced believer, but disguises it somewhat for the benefit of the book having more of an apologetic appeal. Having said that, the book is however a very interesting read. According to the front cover, the book received a *Christianity Today* Book of the Year Award for 2000.

Sheler is a religion writer for *U.S. News & World Report*. He is also a correspondent for PBS's *Religion & Ethics Newsweekly*. As Sheler states in the Acknowledgments, several of the chapters in the book are based on cover stories that appeared in *U.S. News & World Report* since 1989.

The book covers an amazing range of subjects related to the truthfulness of the Bible. The book has six parts: Part One, The Bible and History; Part Two, The Bible and Archaeology; Part Three, The Bible and the Dead Sea Scrolls; Part Four, The Bible and the Historical Jesus; Part Five, The Bible Code and Prophecy; Part Six, The Bible and Belief. Through all of these parts, Sheler presents the results of modern research that suggests compelling reasons for confidence in the truthfulness and accuracy of the Bible. He also presents folly, and shows it to be such. Such as what passes for scholarship in the Jesus Seminar, or for prophecy by adherents of the Bible Code.

In Part One, Sheler presents in four short chapters an overview of "The Battle for the Bible" that has occurred over the centuries. He notes that in the early centuries of Christianity the naysayers were outside the Church or heretics, but now "modern assaults in most instances have come not from professed enemies of the church but from learned professors of the Bible whose approach to the Scriptures reflects the largely secular mindset that has come to characterize much of the biblical academy in the twentieth century."

In Part Two, in eight chapters, Sheler presents numerous cases where archaeological findings have supported the history of the Bible. Many of these discoveries have been recent. In 1993 a basalt stone was discovered from the 9th century B.C. commemorating a military victory of the king of Damascus over the king of Israel and the house of David. Apparently this was the first extra-Biblical reference to David ever found. Sheler finds much in archaeology to collaborate the history of the New Testament. In fact, he favorably quotes an archaeologist as saying "Five gospels record the life of Jesus. Four you will find in books and one you will find in the Land they call Holy. Read the fifth gospel and the world of the four will open to you."

In Part Three four chapters are given that report the history, the scholarship surrounding, the scandals accompanying, and the relevant findings of the Dead Sea Scrolls. Sheler concludes that there is no real evidence linking Christianity to the Qumranites. Christianity is unique and grew out of Judaism "among a people whose biblical faith had prepared them to look for a Messiah who would be called the Son of God and the Son of the Most High."

In Part Four the search for the historical Jesus is reviewed in six chapters. He identifies four main movements in the search for the historical Jesus: the Old Quest, the "No Quest," the New Quest, and the Third Quest. The "No Quest" movement consisted of post-enlightenment theologians who gave up on any historical Jesus, and promoted the Christ of faith. With friends like these who needs enemies. Yet, even here, Sheler notes that even "the most skeptical of scholars concede that something extraordinary happened in Jerusalem after Good Friday".

In Part Five, although Sheler attempts to be generous and understanding, he does a fairly good job of debunking "Bible Code" advocates as essentially crackpots, or at least misguided. If you're not familiar with the so-called Bible Code, consider yourself fortunate.

Part Six is just one chapter and concludes the book. And just what does Sheler conclude: "we have found the Bible consistently and substantially affirmed as a credible and reliable source of history." But you knew that already!