

Taking the Bible Seriously

Why should I bother with the Bible?

I mean, it's all outdated stuff, what with all those "these" and "thous" and stories that really are out of the Ark. Who reads that nowadays anyway? After all, does it really matter what's in the Bible?

Plenty of questions. But seriously, why should I read the Bible? What is it all about? And what has it got to do with me?

God's Word?

Most people have no idea what's in the Bible, and when they do pick it up and start casually reading, many are put off by its contents. Questions come immediately—for example, why is the Bible termed the word of God when it has so much human fault and failing in it?

Some have turned away, citing the Bible's shocking descriptions of human sinfulness as reason enough not to read it. For example:

"Whenever we read the obscene stories, the voluptuous debaucheries, the cruel and torturous executions, the unrelenting vindictiveness with which more than half the Bible is filled, it would be more consistent that we called it the word of a demon than the word of God. It . . . has served to corrupt and brutalize mankind." Thomas Paine.

"The Bible is one of the most genocidal books in history." Noam Chomsky.

"I know of no book which has been a source of brutality and sadistic conduct, both public and private, that can compare with the Bible." Lord James Paget.

There's no doubt that the Bible does portray defective humanity in glaring terms, not mincing words but rather exposing the rottenness of evil to its core. Like the story of the Levite and his concubine—a horrific account of rape and murder, of betrayal and hatred and lust, that leads to civil war and genocide. The tale of Noah and his daughters, story of drunkenness and deception and incest. The record of Cain murdering his brother, the human sacrifice of Jephthah's daughter, the killing of the babies in Bethlehem...

How does God look?

So much violence and death—and worse still, some of this brutality is directly attributed to the action of God Himself: the death of the firstborn in Egypt at the hands of the Angel of the Lord, the destruction of 185,000 Assyrians, the drowning of all but eight in the Flood.

The God of the Bible can seem alarmingly dangerous. The way God appears to operate in the Bible cause many great concern. Thomas Paine again:

“There are matters in the Bible, said to be done by the express commandment of God, that are shocking to humanity and to every idea we have of moral justice.”

Or in the words of Mark Twain, “It ain’t the parts of the Bible that I can’t understand that bother me, it is the parts that I do understand.”

Such a reaction is perhaps understandable due to all the carnage and violence which appears in the Old Testament, and which is also apparent at times in the New. God is credited with much death and destruction. If God is seen as truly responsible for such actions, then it is hardly surprising that He would seem to be the worst tyrant in history.

That’s why critics like Robert Ingersoll have concluded: “If all the historic books of the Bible were blotted from the memory of mankind, nothing of value would be lost.”

These are hard words for those who accept the Bible, and wish to present it as “the rule of faith and practice.” It comes as a surprise to many Bible believers to discover such problematic stories are in the Bible, yet if it is true that “*all* Scripture is given by inspiration of God and is profitable...”¹ then it is essential to take the *whole* Bible and seek to understand it.

The question therefore arises as to the responsibility of God, and what relationship He has to the actions of human beings. However some cautions are important to remember. Just because an event is recorded in the Bible does not mean that this is an example to follow, for instance. Nor is every word spoken, even by God’s supposed followers, to be understood as the will and intention of God. In many cases there is no commentary and the reader is left to understand what is right and wrong, and what lessons are to be learned.

Much of the Bible is story, and frequently told without comment. So often there are highly involved situations, yet we are not told who is right and who is wrong and what is the right path to follow. The record provides the evidence of the way that God deals with humanity in all its complexity. We have to determine what God is saying through all this.

The Cure in Context

So what about all the violence and death, the evil and wickedness that the Bible describes? It’s a bit like a medical textbook that has plenty of graphic illustrations that are enough to upset even the strongest stomachs. Why? Because in order to treat disease, it has to be described and identified. Without knowing the problem it’s hard to know the cure.

And that’s why even the “bad bits” of the Bible are important—because you see the sickness of sin in the light of God’s cure. Recognizing your own deficiencies in Bible

characters, you begin to see how God operates, and how he can help you too. For God is the doctor who can heal your disease of sin and its fatal consequences.

If the Bible is a book to describe God, then it could be very brief. You could write a description of God (“God is love, God is righteous, God is the source of life” etc.) that would not need all the pages of the Bible’s sixty-six books. But if on the other hand it’s important to see God and human beings acting in context, then the whole perspective and situation is very important.

Similarly a list of commands to be followed would be much shorter and simpler. If the purpose of the Bible is simply to instruct and enforce behavior, then a sheet of rules and requirements would be sufficient. But it’s not that.

If the Bible was intended to be a code book or recipe sheet, you wouldn’t need all the stories either. The Bible is not intended as a set of magical instructions for guaranteed goodness, nor is it attempting to reveal some kind of secret knowledge that will provide illumination to some privileged elite.

So when the Bible is called the “word of God,” it needs to be seen in this context—that God is simply presenting *all* the evidence, and invites us to make our decision as to what it means and what lessons are to be learned.

Far from being a book of rigid rules and declarations, the Bible tells the story of fallen humanity in its full context. It tells the story of us as ourselves, fallible and frail, willful and woeful, self-centered and self-condemned. It hides no faults, excuses no failings, and like a medical textbook, illustrates the diseased condition while at the same time supplying the cure.

The alternative would be a book of pious platitudes or unchallenged prepositional statements that have to be accepted without question. But the God whose word is the Bible tells us far more—not only explaining salvation but also what we need to be saved from. The book is not only the answer to what and when and where, it is how and why. That God should continue to work through such bad representatives of the human race says much about Him and His nature and character. Even when his nature and character will surely be misunderstood and maligned...

Reasons for reading

So read the Bible! Not for literary benefit, or for insight into ancient customs, or for some ritual requirement—but to understand God. As God uses past experiences to teach truth about himself, then we can begin to catch a glimpse of the divine in all the humanity that fills the Bible.

Most of all read the gospels, which tell us of God becoming a human being, walking this earth, and revealing the true nature of our heavenly Father. “If you’ve seen me, you’ve

seen the Father,” Jesus tells us. “I and my Father are one. I came to do the will of my Father. Whoever looks at me sees the Father who sent me.”²

The reason to read the Bible is to find its Author. Not Bible reading for its own sake, as some have done, but because it’s vital to find the God whose nature and character are revealed in his book to us, and to accept his offer of healing salvation. As Jesus himself said, “You are always searching the Scriptures, because you think you will find eternal life in them. But the Scriptures are giving proof about me!”³

The proof of this saving God is in how he acts. Anyone—even God—can make claims. The evidence is what is all-important, and the Bible is the record of this evidence. The verdict of the evidence is: “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.... This is the verdict: Light has come into the world.”⁴

There are many other reasons. George Washington commented that “It is impossible to rightly govern the world without God and the Bible.” Queen Victoria is supposed to have remarked of the Bible: “That book accounts for the supremacy of England.” Charles Dickens’ view was that “The New Testament is the very best book that ever was or ever will be known in the world,” while Sir Isaac Newton believed “There are more sure marks of authenticity in the Bible than in any profane history.” Alfred Lord Tennyson added that “Bible reading is an education in itself.”

These may all be true, and good reasons for spending time reading the Bible. But the primary reason for reading the Bible is to encounter the saving God who wants you as his closest friend. God intention is to have the deepest relationship with each one of us, and that’s why he makes himself known—so we can accept his salvation and live together with him: “Now this is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent.”⁵

That’s why Abraham Lincoln is on record as affirming, “I believe the Bible is the best gift God has ever given to man. All the good from the Saviour of the world is communicated to us through this book.”

That’s why Dr. Henry H. Halley said, “The Bible is the most priceless possession of the human race.”

That’s why Patrick Henry concluded, “The Bible is worth all other books which have ever been printed.”

That’s why *you* should read the Bible!

References

1. 2 Timothy 3:16.

2. See John 10:30; 6:38; 14:9; 12:44.

3. John 5:39. Simple English John 5:39 Simple English Version.

4. John 3:16-19 NIV.

5. John 17:3 NIV.

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