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The Bible

The Bible is the Christian's great sourcebook, the one place where followers of Jesus turn repeatedly for guidance, consolation, encouragement, and hope. The Bible is an inspired book, revealing aspects of God's character that would otherwise be unknown. But the Bible is also a human book, assembled over hundreds of years, that documents how people have often stumbled their way through history, oblivious to God's care and concern.

These two aspects of the Bible, the human and the divine, are intertwined throughout the text, combined in the same stories, layered on top of each other. In that sense, the Bible is very much like life. The divine is present in the midst of human fallibility. We run across God in unexpected places

and sometimes trip over God when we least expect to. Simultaneously, we sometimes discover sinners where we expect saints and saints where we anticipate finding sinners.

The Bible is an ancient and complex text that is not always easy to understand, but it is also our chief guide for Christian faith and life. How should we read this special book? What do we mean when we say it is inspired and authoritative? Why do Christians sometimes disagree about what it means? What does the Bible communicate?

What Is the Bible?

While we call it a book, the Bible is not really a book in any normal sense of that term. Instead, it is a library between two covers, a remarkably diverse collection of writings composed by many people in many times and settings. It is an eclectic collection

that took many hundreds of years to assemble, but the items included are all there because they somehow seemed necessary in order for the Bible's readers to develop a full and proper understanding of God, the world, and what it means to be human.

A homey analogy is to think of the Bible as something like a refrigerator door in the kitchen of a large family. The door is plastered with notes, messages, and mementos held on by magnets or pieces of tape. Family pictures appear along with grocery lists, clipped articles from the newspaper, and announcements about various upcoming meetings (half of which may already have taken place). There are coupons for special sales, reminders that someone is on a diet, emergency phone numbers, somebody's grade-school artwork, and perhaps some short and pithy comment spelled out with little magnetic letters all lined up in a row. The mix may not make sense to a visitor—it can look rather haphazard—but family members can usually explain why most of it is there.

If that image seems too chaotic or irreverent, an alternative analogy is to liken the Bible to a newspaper. Just as a newspaper includes many kinds of writing (front-page news, ads, sports, fashion news, business reports, comics, editorials, and local stories), so the Bible contains poetry, prose, snippets of wisdom, laws, songs, stories, letters, philosophy, and a variety of how-to advice. The different kinds of items that appear in a newspaper require different kinds of background knowledge and reading skills to make sense of them—reading the sports page is not at all like reading the classified advertisements—and the same applies to the Bible. Thus, biblical poetry is not supposed to be taken literally; it is meant to be read literarily. Letters contained in the Bible require a different kind of skill: the ability to read between the lines, where most of the important stuff in letters is usually found. The passages of the Bible that are written in the form of a stage play or drama (like Job and the book of Revelation) require still other interpretive skills.

One thing is for sure: The Bible reflects human life in all its good and bad complexity. Nothing is exempt from its pages. Its sinners sin boldly, and its saints pursue their saintly passions with exuberance and pleasure. The Bible describes treachery and hatred, but it also plumbs the depths of love and compassion. Every human experience or emotion is there—anger, beauty, alienation, arrogance, romance, tragedy, brutality, humor, sickness, and death. Its pages at times drip despair, but they can also ripple with hope and the sheer enjoyment of life lived well. It is all there, every facet of human existence.

With which parts of the Bible are you most familiar? Have you ever read the entire Bible? Which parts of the Bible seem the hardest to understand?

What distinguishes the Bible, however, is that God is also there, sometimes in ways we expect and sometimes in ways that surprise or even trouble us.

The Bible is a literary classic because of its portrayal of human existence, but it is a religious classic because it so wonderfully reveals God to us over and over again. The twentieth-century theologian Karl Barth said, “We shall always find in it as much as we seek and no more,” but he added that “there is a river in the Bible that carries us away, once we have entrusted our destiny to it.”¹

That “river” derives from the Bible’s inspired character; it springs from God’s own presence within, behind, around, and in front of the text. But we need to be careful not to treat the Bible as a magical book. The Bible’s inspired character has a specific purpose, as it was given “for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that everyone who belongs to God may be . . . equipped for every good work” (2 Tim. 3:16–17). The Bible does not provide esoteric knowledge hidden from other people. It is not a book of formulas designed to assure us of long life, good fortune, and wealth. Nor is it a book of science to

explain the natural world. Instead, the Bible equips us for every good work. The Bible is given to make us better people, more fully in tune with God's deep affections for the world and the people who live in it.

Sometimes the Bible simply reflects human life; sometimes it brings a new word from God. How do you tell the difference? Can meaning vary from person to person?

Reading the Bible Intelligently

The Bible has much to tell us, but how do we unearth its messages and discover its treasures? At the time of the Protestant Reformation in the sixteenth century, some church leaders suggested that because the Bible is inspired by God it must also, by necessity, be easily understood. If the Bible is God's Word to us, they thought, its meaning must

be easy to ascertain. If God wants us to live according to the Bible's message, its meaning should be right there on the surface.

This belief in the Bible's unambiguous clarity, which is called the perspicuity of Scripture, was used by Martin Luther and other Protestant Reformers to defend their new interpretations of the Bible against older medieval Catholic ways of explaining what the Bible said. In overly stark terms, the Catholic argument was that the Bible had to be read in the light of past tradition, that is, in agreement with the way earlier Christians had understood the Bible. The Protestant assumption was that past ways of reading the Bible could be in error: the only valid approach is to read each section of the Bible in light of its own simple and clear meaning and then compare text with text to see how they inform one another.

There is wisdom in both of these views but also danger. The strength of the traditional Catholic approach is that it necessarily links our reading of the Bible with the way Christians understood it in

the past. This makes sense, since those who lived before us have much to teach us. Just because we are located later in history does not mean we are necessarily smarter or more spiritually insightful than our forebears. But reading the Bible only in light of past meanings can shut off the possibility of discovering new meaning and depth in Scripture.

In terms of the Protestant approach, there is great power in reading the Bible anew each time we sit down with it. What's more, some of the most important teachings of the Bible can be understood with relatively little interpretative effort. It does not require much hermeneutical finesse to understand that when Jesus said to forgive one another, he meant we are literally to forgive one another. When Jesus said to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, and give drink to the thirsty, we can pretty much assume he was talking about real people with real needs.

But the meaning of many other passages is harder to discern. What does the Bible mean when it says in the Ten Commandments that we should not kill,

especially when some other passages seem to valorize horrendous acts of war? What does the Bible mean when it says in some passages that women should be silent in church but in others that men and women are equal in the Lord? How are we to interpret the powerful imagery found in the books of Daniel and Revelation? None of this is easy; none of it is unambiguously clear.

The nub of the problem is this: If we insist that the Bible is easy to understand, we will be prone to read our own ideas and views into the Bible because they will seem the most self-evident. Of course, when the meaning seems self-evident, it does not feel like we are interpreting the Bible at all; it feels like we are just reading what the Bible incontestably says. Too much confidence in our own reading can make us dogmatic when perhaps we should be humble, and presumptuous when we ought to be cautious. We need checks on the ways we interpret the Bible individually and even in groups. Some of these checks are found in tradition; some are found in

reading the Bible in dialogue with people who have had different life experiences or come from different cultures (so that their sense of what is self-evident in the text can help us rethink what we see as self-evident); and some are found in the works of biblical scholars and theologians who devote their entire lives to understanding the Bible.

How easily is the Bible understood? Are some passages less clear than others? Has your devotional reading of the Bible ever raised questions that require scholarly research? Has your scholarly study of the Bible ever produced change in your faith?

Intelligent reading of the Bible requires, on the one hand, making sense of individual passages of Scripture and, on the other hand, making sense of the message of the Bible as a whole. Most biblical scholars focus on the first task, seeking to decipher what specific passages of Scripture meant to the people to whom they were originally addressed. Most

theologians focus on the second task, trying to integrate the many insights that are found in the Bible into a single overarching vision of God, the world, and humankind.

The Bible as a whole recounts the story of God's interactions with humanity, and that historical narrative has a progressive tone. Ideas develop. The plot thickens. The story line becomes more complex. God did not change in this process, but humanity's perception of God did. On some pages of the Bible, God seems to act like little more than a local tribal deity because that is how the people of that time imagined God. Later, God is increasingly revealed as the creator of the entire universe, the lord of all creation. At one point, the rule of justice is an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth—no one is to exact more damage than they themselves have received—but later the standard is redefined in terms of forgiveness and nonretaliation. At some points, the Bible seems to condone the supremacy of men over women and to reinforce ethnic arrogance, but

elsewhere the Bible says that all people, all men and all women from all the peoples of the world, are equal in God's sight.

While this biblical trajectory of development is not without its twists and turns, later passages in the Bible seem generally to expand or deepen the meanings of earlier passages. Thus, the special favor that God shows to Israel is ultimately expanded to include everyone, and older rules of tribal purity are slowly deepened into universally applicable norms of human moral behavior. As a result of such changes of insight, we no longer believe that slavery is allowable, that disobedient children should be stoned to death, or that women should be forbidden to cut their hair. Just because these sentiments appear in the Bible in one place or another does not mean they represent the Bible's last word on these topics.

The concept of progressive revelation is helpful in understanding the Bible, but it has to be used cautiously. Not everything is subject to development,

and Christians generally agree that we should be leery of reading the Bible today in ways that are totally at odds with what those passages meant to the people for whom they were first written. The God we worship today is still the same God who was worshiped long ago by Abraham and Sarah and by Isaac and Jacob. Every book of the Bible, and every literary subunit, has its own integrity and its own messages to convey. Many of these messages are clear, but there is also much to take into account. It takes intelligence as well as a willing heart to read the Bible as the Christian's handbook of faith and guidebook for life.

The Church, the Churches, and the Bible

The earliest Christians—those who lived during the first fifty years or so of the Jesus movement—did

not have the entire Bible available to them. The New Testament had not yet been gathered together; in fact, much of it had not yet been written. During those early years, Christians had to rely on the Old Testament, oral tradition handed down from Jesus and his disciples, the guidance of the Holy Spirit, and their own God-given powers of reason and judgment. Until the early 200s, most of the small Christian communities scattered around the Roman Empire possessed only some of the books that would later be incorporated into the New Testament. The Bible as we know it today came together following a long process of discernment about which writings seemed the most inspired by the Spirit, which were the most directly linked to Jesus and his disciples, and which seemed most needed by the church itself.

Not everyone has always been happy about those decisions, but the consensus of the church, especially about the twenty-seven books that form the canon of the New Testament, has been clear since at least the fourth century. For all the centuries since that time,

Christians have had to take all of the Bible into account, even the parts we may not find particularly appealing. For example, Martin Luther, founder of the Protestant movement, really wished the book of James had not been included in the canon. Luther believed medieval Catholicism had overemphasized the role of human effort in Christian faith, and the book of James did not help him make his case. He thought that it placed too much emphasis on human effort and not enough on God's grace. But James is a part of the Bible, and therefore Luther had to deal with it. His own theology is stronger as a result.

Another example comes from the well-known African American preacher Howard Thurman. His concern—or, at least, his grandmother's concern—was with the writings of Paul. Thurman's grandmother had been a slave, and later in life she said she never wanted to read any of Paul's New Testament books again because some of Paul's writings had been used repeatedly to justify slavery and to tell slaves to be docile and obedient to their

docile and obedient to their masters.² In contrast to Luther, she much preferred James to Paul. Her attitude is thoroughly understandable, but many spiritual treasures will be missed if Paul's writings are rejected because they have been used to do harm.

Scriptural preferences are also reflected in the history of Christian denominations. Different churches tend to emphasize different themes found in different books of the Bible and then to interpret the rest of the Bible in light of those themes, ironing out any interpretive wrinkles or difficult passages that get in the way. These favorite passages are sometimes referred to as a "canon within the canon." For example, Protestants in the Reformed tradition tend to take the book of Romans (especially the first eight chapters) as the key to the Bible as a whole, and they read the rest of the Bible through its Pauline, theologically systematic understanding of faith. Pentecostals often center on the book of Acts and read other passages of Scripture in light of that book's experiential emphases. Mennonites and other

Anabaptists typically focus on the Gospels, especially the Sermon on the Mount, and then interpret other parts of the Bible in relation to its norms of compassion and peace. Other churches do the same thing with other themes derived from various passages within the Bible.

Through the years, these different ways of reading the Bible have supplied insight, wisdom, and instruction to a wide variety of individuals, churches, communities, and cultures. In the last century or so, these differences have become more evident, however, as we no longer live in isolation from one another but instead rub shoulders every day. We can now communicate at will across denominational and cultural lines, becoming aware of one another's distinctives and strengths as well as peculiarities and shortcomings. Yet the Bible makes it clear that ultimately Jesus wants all his followers to be one, just as he and the Father are one (John 17:11).

What passages of Scripture are most popular in your church? What passages seem to be

overlooked or ignored? What is your own canon within the canon?

It is this call to unity that prompted the modern ecumenical movement, which began in the early twentieth century for the purpose of promoting the visible unity of all Christians. No one expects that all Christians will agree on everything anytime soon. The goal is not to eliminate all differences of opinion and interpretation but to help one another evaluate what God is saying to us through the Bible. That means listening to one another with respect, learning from one another as much as we can, and living together in love as best we can.

In this ecumenical conversation about the Bible, Christians might find inspiration in the Jewish Talmud. The Talmud is a commentary on Scripture, and it has a unique format. Rather than propound the one right interpretation of a passage, the Talmud records a legacy of rabbinic debate about that text, with all the arguments, counterarguments, and counter-counterarguments displayed side-by-side on

the page. As a result, the Talmud opens up conversation about a text rather than closing it down, and when Jews and others discuss the Talmud today, they join in that long legacy of religious debate about the Bible that the Talmud itself exemplifies.

Christians will never entirely agree about what the Bible says, but agreement is not the only thing that matters. The conversation itself is worthwhile, perhaps especially when we disagree. Our disagreements keep the Bible alive, forcing us to read it over and over again as carefully and as honestly as we can, letting the Bible speak to us rather than forcing our own meanings on to the text. Reading the Bible talmudicstyle sharpens our understanding of the text while simultaneously calling us to respect and even love those with whom we disagree.

The Story and the Stories of the Bible

Despite the diversity that exists in Scripture, one overarching narrative holds the entire Bible together. This grand story of the Bible goes something like this: There was a time when nothing existed except God, and then God decided, purely out of love, to make something else. What God made is the reality in which we now live, the universe in all its vast and wonderful beauty. This universe is not a mere machine but instead is full of life. The life of humankind is uniquely stamped with God's own image, which includes both the freedom to love God and the freedom to turn away. Unfortunately, we often do turn away, trying to live on our own, oblivious to God's love and cut off from the real source of our existence. The world as we know it, with all its heartache and evil, is the result.

Despite humanity's failures, God's love for the world has been constant. The Bible explains that long ago God chose a covenant people, the Jews, to be a model for the rest of the world. God revealed the law to them and sent prophets to guide them into more profound understandings of God, themselves, and the world.

God then entered history in the person of Jesus, taking on human form to communicate with us more clearly and to show us what true love looks like. Rather than heeding Christ's message, the world killed Jesus, but God raised him from the dead, honoring his life, affirming his message, and promising that someday the bonds of love that were meant to hold the world together would be fully restored. Even now, God is mending those bonds of love, reconciling us to God and one another. Someday that process will be complete. We do not know when or how that will happen, but someday, in some way, God will make all things new, and the whole of creation will be enveloped in God's love. We live in the middle of this grand narrative, and thus we cannot see clearly all the details of the story's beginning or its end, but we can discern the basic plot and understand its implications.

In addition to this grand story, the Bible also contains many other smaller stories. Some of these stories reflect the goodness of creation; others document humanity's freedom and failures. Some

stories provide us with hope; others warn us not to presume about the future. Some stories deal with personal concerns; others are much more political in orientation. Some stories focus on lofty ideals; others address practical concerns. All these stories are important in their own right. They provide close-up views of life as it is: sometimes good, sometimes evil, sometimes sorrowful, and sometimes joyful.

What is your favorite Bible story? What is its message for you? Why is it your favorite?

One example of a story that has instructed Christians and Jews alike about goodness and evil is the tale of David and Bathsheba (2 Sam. 11:1-12:23). David is loved by God, but he is also a dismal sinner. He has a sexual encounter with Bathsheba, the wife of one of his soldiers, and when she becomes pregnant, David orders her husband to the front lines so he will be killed in battle. The Bible does not tone down the evil of this story but recounts it with blunt honesty. David and Bathsheba both suffer because of what has

taken place. Their child dies. One of David's sons rises up against him and eventually is killed. Other revolts follow. His government is a mess. The story of David and Bathsheba demonstrates how severely we can damage both our own lives and the lives of others by our sin. It is a blunt warning to mind our ways.

The story of the wedding at Cana (John 2:1-10) records a very different kind of human encounter, one of joy, not evil. In this story, Jesus is attending a wedding feast when the wine runs out. The celebration is starting to unravel, and Jesus' mother asks him to do something. So Jesus makes more wine for the guests—really good wine, lots of wine—and the celebration gets back on track. What is the point? At least one message of this story is that there are times when it is fully appropriate to celebrate the goodness of life with exuberance. In particular, this story tells us that the pleasures of love and family are good and ought to be cherished.

The Bible deals with every facet of life and assures us that God cares about every moment. The Bible is

simultaneously honest and hopeful, demanding and embracing, challenging and comforting. It offers us an awe-inspiring vision of God, a rich and complex portrayal of human life, and an unsurpassed body of wisdom for living. In helping us understand the breadth of human experience and the depth of God's grace, the Bible transforms us as we read it into persons ever more capable of showing grace to others.

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The Future

Gracious Christianity is forward looking and hopeful. Someday, as Jesus taught us, God's kingdom will come in its fullness, and God's will really will be done on earth as it is in heaven. The path to that coming kingdom may not be as direct as we would like, and our present situation may sometimes be disturbing, but Christian hope is ultimately about long-term outcomes, not short-term optimism. Christian hope is about faithfully working together with God so that peace, righteousness, and justice are established on earth whenever possible, looking forward to the day when God will make all things new.

Talk about the future also raises questions about our own fates, not just the fate of the world as a whole. What will happen to us when we die? Will we see our