Why You Should Read the Bible **[1]**

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As we embark on a new calendar year, I want to begin with a series of articles about the Bible: what it is, how to read it, etc. In this first article in the series, I want to give some reasons why you, why anyone—whether Christian or not—should read the Bible.

In the film *The Book of Eli*, the main character, Eli, is on a perilous journey which he believes is the purpose of his life. Carrying with him through the post-apocalyptic wasteland is the last copy of the Bible in existence. After the war which had devastated the world, people were angry at religions which they thought caused the war and destroyed all the books associated with it. On his journey, Eli encounters a man named Carnegie who desperately wants a Bible. He remembers seeing, as a young boy, the power which that book had over people, and he wanted to use the Bible to gain that obedience and subservience from his own people.

> I grew up with that book. I know its power. ... It's a weapon! A weapon aimed right at the hearts and minds of the weak and desperate.
>
> Carnegie, The Book of Eli

People have very different perspectives of the Bible. For some, like Carnegie, it is a tool which can control the simple minded. Others, like Eli, think that it is a holy book and contains the words of God, and draws strength and wisdom from it. And others yet have strange preconceptions of it. "My expectation was that the New Testament was, like my grandparents had told me, a book on how to persecute the Jews," tells messianic Jew Mottel Baleston as he describes his own conversion to Christianity [2]. "And yet, when I'm opening it, I'm reading a story written by Jews about Jewish people. The New Testament was a fascinating book."

Someone once told me, to my great surprise, that he thought that Jesus wrote the Bible. Jesus of course did not write anything in the Bible; the Bible contains the stories about Him which His followers wrote down shortly after He departed from this world. This ignorance was very astonishing, given that the Bible is the best selling book in history, and has been translated into more languages than any other book.

Regardless of whether you believe that the Bible is the inspired and indisputable word of God, or a collection of Middle Eastern fables and fairy tales, or mostly historical material which has been applied in very misguided manners, I am going to argue for three reasons why you, and everyone else, should read the Bible. But first, I am going to give a short introduction to the Bible itself.

What is the Bible?

In brief, the Bible is not a single book, but a collection of 66 books written roughly over a period of 1400 years in three language (Hebrew, Aramaic and Koine Greek). It includes the Jewish Tanakh, which in the Bible is called the "Old Testament". The Old Testament contains narrative, poetry, prose, prophecies and apocalyptic stories. The "New Testament" contains narratives of the life and sayings of Jesus (in the style of ancient biographies), the history of the very early church, and letters written by Jesus's first followers, the apostles.

Reasons why you should read the Bible

1. The Bible has been incredibly influential in human history

The Bible has had a profound influence of human history over the past two thousand years. This point cannot be understated. It guides the largest religion in the world today, and even Muslims believe that the Bible was (once) inspired1. Many of the idioms which we use today come from the Bible2. It has inspired great men, laid the foundation for governments, and spurred many incredible groups and movements: from monastic orders to armies to universal suffrage. What is it, in this book, which has inspired so many people throughout these two millennia?

> I started reading the Bible not because I believed in Christianity, but because it was the best-selling book of all time. To my surprise, it started to change me.
>
> Rosalind Picard, MIT Professor of Media, Arts and Science

2. The Bible is a literary masterpiece

Even if you do not believe that the Bible has any more real-world meaning than Beowulf or Shakespeare has, you should be excited to know that it is as beautiful, if not more, than these pieces of work. It truly is a literary masterpiece. Unfortunately, much does get lost in translation, especially when one gets to the poetic parts, such as the psalms. But even when one is reading narrative, the wordplay in the original Hebrew can be incredibly subtle and powerful. Hebrew has a relatively small vocabulary, so there are many homonyms, which has spurred the creativity of writers. One example is God chiding the overweight priest Eli for not giving God His due glory (1 Samuel 2:27–36), but rather fattening himself (the word translated as "enlarge", "fatten", "honour" and "glorify" is the same and differentiated based on context and grammar). However, one does not need to know Hebrew to be able to appreciate the beauty of the Bible (especially if one has sufficient footnotes or a study Bible).

> The Bible is a literary 'classic'; perhaps *the* literary classic. And like many works in the literary canon, the Bible can be hard-going. It requires thoughtful reading, at a slow pace, preferably with a few footnotes helping us bridge the cultural divide. You might not like it at first, maybe for a hundred pages or more. Eventually, its subtle logic and moral power creeps up on you, and you may even find yourself agreeing with those who say that no one can claim to be an "educated Westerner" until they've read the Bible.
>
> John Dickson3

3. The Bible is historical

No matter how hard some people try to rail against this assertion, the Bible contains good and reliable history (even if you don't buy everything that is said). Its description of places and monarchies have repeatedly been verified by archeology. It describes ancient near eastern practices—which are included in the Bible even though it has little or no theological

significance—which otherwise may have been lost to us today. And even in niche secular fields, such as the study of ancient Mediterranean maritime practices, are today only sourced from two sources: one of which is the book of Acts in the Bible. If you are willing to accept other semi-religious texts (such as Egyptian hieroglyphics) as having historical value, and you appreciate the value of history, the Bible has a wealth of information for you to consume.

> Luke's history is unsurpassed in respect to its trustworthiness. ... Luke is a historian of the first rank; not merely are his statements trustworthy ... this author should be placed along with the very greatest of historians. ... Acts could bear the most minute scrutiny as an authority for the facts of the Aegean world, and that it was written with such judgement, skill, art and perception of truth as to be a model of historical statement. ... You may press the words of Luke to a degree beyond any other historian's and they will stand the keenest scrutiny and the hardest treatment.
>
> W. M. Ramsay, *St. Paul the Traveler* and *The Bearing of Recent Discoveries on the Trustworthiness of the New Testament*

Conclusion

Whether you are into religion, history or literary masterpieces, the Bible has something to offer you. There are also many other reasons to read the Bible, but I trust that these ones give will whet your appetite for this incredible book.

- 1. Many of the stories found in the Qur'an come from the Bible, although it also contains many extra-biblical stories, such as stories from the gnostic gospels, which Christians do not believe are true or inspired.
- 2. For example, "the blind leading the blind" comes from Matthew 15:13–14; "by the skin of your teeth" comes from Job 19:20. We also get our words "talent" and "scapegoat" from the Bible. There are many more and these are just brief examples.
- 3. https://www.biblegateway.com/blog/2015/02/challenge-for-skeptics-read-100-pages-of-the-bible/ [3]

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