What is the Bible? [1]

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Read time: 10 minutes
In my first article [2] on this series on the Bible, I chiefly looked at reasons why I believe everyone should read the Bible. I briefly touched on what the Bible is. In this article I want to explore further what the Bible is, particularly to the Christian, as well as what the Bible is *not*.

Facts About the Bible

To recap what I said in the previous article:

> In brief, the Bible is not a single book, but a collection of 661 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.

These statements are factual, clinical and academic. They do not, however, reveal anything about the power of the Bible—at least, what power the Christian think that it has.

What the Bible Is for the Christian

Evangelical Christians—that is, Christians who primarily base their theology and understanding of the world on what is in the Bible—believe that the Bible is *inspired* by God and contains His *full* and *sufficient* revelation to mankind. Let us unpack these statements to understand them better:

- **Inspired**: This means that God somehow worked with or through the authors (and editors) of the individual books of the Bible to convey the exact message which God intended. This could either have been dictated, as we see in many of the prophetic books, or a more subtle moving of the Spirit, such as is found in the epistles2 of the apostle Paul. This was a *collaboration*, in a sense, though, as God allowed these books to be written in a way which was natural to the authors. For example, Luke was a trained physician. Having received an advanced education, his gospel and the book of Acts are stylistically similar to other scholarly texts from the ancient time, with precise language (and a particular emphasis on details in which a doctor may be interested). On the other hand, Mark was not a native Greek, but a Jew. Greek was his second language. He was also probably not a trained scholar. As such, the

Greek grammar in the Gospel of Mark is particularly bad.

- **Full and sufficient**: All that mankind needs to know to attain salvation is contained in the Bible. Despite its many different genres and seemingly unrelated stories, the Bible tells a single, broad tale (more on that just now). While God may give prophecies and revelations to people after the Bible was completed (even in this day and age), nothing is *lacking* from the Bible and nothing can *supersede* it (1 John 4:1).

The Purpose of the Bible

This brings us to the crux of matter: what the *purpose* of the Bible is. *The Bible is God's revelation to mankind on how the broken relationship between God and mankind can be restored*. The Bible begins with God's good creation (Genesis 1–2), and then describes how this creation was marred by mankind's rebellion (Genesis 3). The whole of the rest of the Bible describes the tension which exists between God and mankind, and how God reveals Himself to a world which does not want to know Him. It also describes God's plan for the future, when creation will be renewed and restored to its original state and purpose.

The Bible, therefore, is essentially God's revelation of Himself to mankind. That is why it is crucial in the discipline of *theology*, which literally means "the study of God". If we understand God, as far as we as finite mortals are able, then we can understand our need for salvation and why God desires for us to do with our lives.

> Grace to you and peace be multiplied in the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord, seeing that His divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of Him who called us by His own glory and virtue, by which He has granted to us His precious and exceedingly great promises; that through these you may become partakers of the divine nature, having escaped from the corruption that is in the world by lust.
>
> 2 Peter 1:2–4

What the Bible Is Not

The primary purpose of the Bible, therefore, is to teach us about God; specifically how He has made it possible for us to relate to Him again through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. There are many other details which can come through incidentally. For example, in Paul's letters, he would describe the renewed life a Christian who has come to know God has. He would then expound this in how Christians should relate to each other in their behaviour and attitude. This is not laying down "rules" whereby a Christian should live; rather it is an exercise in expounding what we understand about how we relate to God and His creation. The Bible is not a rulebook, as Jews hold the Torah to be. The point is that this knowledge of the true and living God, this understanding, should lead to a (voluntary) change in behaviour to affirm a real belief in this knowledge.

Therefore, we need to take note of the following:

- The Bible contains poetry, but it is not a book on poetry.
- The Bible contains history, but it is not primarily a book about history.
- The Bible contains myths (in the proper sense of the word[3]), but it is not about myths.
- The Bible touches on genealogies, colloquialisms, seafaring, trading, supernatural observations, architecture, war and warfare, and many other things, but it is not primarily about these things.

With this in mind, we need to be careful of two things:

1. *Forcing the Bible where it does not belong*. If you show up to a maths or physics or economics or biology class with a Bible instead of the appropriate textbook, then you need to carefully and humbly re-examine your motives and concerns4.
2. *Being shaken by a secondary issue*. Let us suppose that you discover in the Bible some apparent discrepancy, whether historical or otherwise. This could either be a legitimate discrepancy (bear with me), or one that can be explained by more careful study, examination and investigation. What damage will this do to your faith? What does this reveal in where you place your trust, bearing in mind that the Bible is not primarily intended to be a history etc. textbook? One must always keep in mind the primary purpose of the Bible and not fall prey to inconsequential distractions.

How the Bible Should Be Used

While we can gain many valuable insights from the Bible on the less significant things on which the Bible touches, we should read the Bible in an attempt to get to know God a little bit better. God is not whom we want Him to be: He is autonomous and has the capacity to reveal Himself to us. Like an adoptee meeting a biological parent for the first time, we need to discover who the person behind the name is, and not let our preconceptions get in the way. Once we understand something about who God is and how we should relate to Him, we can begin to learn how we should best relate to the rest of the world: other Christians, non-Christians, nature, wealth, poverty, entertainment, sex, sickness, death, and everything else with which we come into contact.

> Every Scripture is God-breathed and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for instruction in righteousness, that each person who belongs to God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work.
>
> 2 Timothy 3:16–17

Is the Bible Holy?

I feel I need to briefly say something on whether the Bible is holy. In Islam and Sikhism, their holy books are holy in a physical sense. They are spiritually holy as well, to be use, but the object of the book—the paper and ink—itself becomes imbued with some spiritual power. (Some people may think the same about the Bible, especially when it comes to vampire films.)

For Christians, Jesus is the living Word (John 1:1—18). Nothing can or should be worshipped other than Jesus. A book with ink on it, even if it contains (in a semiotic sense) the words of God, are still just physical objects. The real holiness lies in the timeless truths embodied by Jesus.

For more on this, see this previous article [3] which I had written.

Conclusion

In this article I discussed how the Christian views (or, at least, should view) the Bible. I also looked at what the Bible is *not*, and how that should inform us when reading the Bible.

If you are not a Christian, then all this may or may not be plausible or convincing; at the very least, I hope that you have a better insight into how Christians view the Bible. Much more can be said on this topic, and I am happy to have any discussions which may arise.

In the next article I shall discuss how one should go about reading the Bible.

- 1. I neglected to mention in my previous article that there is no one version of the Bible which is universally accepted. For example, the Roman Catholic Bible contains more that 66

books. Some Eastern Orthodox Bibles may contain even more. The Ethiopian Bible may contain yet a different variation. In this series of articles, I am going to be referring to the 66 books of the Bible in the Reformed tradition; these are common in almost all Bibles all over the world. I do not mean to shy away from the discussion on why these different versions of the Bible exist, but that is not the main point of any of my intended articles in this series. Restricting ourselves to the 66 "canonical" books is sufficient, and the existence of these variations of the Bible does not necessarily pose a major problem to this discussion.

- 2. The word "epistle" simply means "letters".
- 3. To not alarm my readers, I need to explain what I mean here. I am not saying that the stories in the Bible are myths. However, as an example, when Jesus tells the parable of the rich man and Lazarus, He is referring to a rabbinical myth.
- 4. See my series on science [4] for a more thorough discussion of pitting religion against science (and vice versa).

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