

# Be Serious with the Bible

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Without question, the Bible has been and is a very important book in the life of Western Civilization, and a strong case can be made for the life of most of the world. In this essay, I am putting my view of the Bible into the "[marketplace of ideas](#)" for perusal, consideration and discussion. You may see a brief statement about my [personal history](#) at the end of this essay (for people who like to know something about an author).

Let me state at the outset that I take the Bible seriously. The rest of this essay explains what I mean by that assertion and provides some of the reasons why I take this position. My personal studies, formal education and life experience (as well as my inner spirit) convince me that the Bible should be taken seriously – not belittled by nor relegated to simple human phrases, such as, "the Word of God" or "just more folklore by ancient and ignorant people."

## The title, *Bible*

What is meant by the book's title, *Bible*? A short and simplified history of the word "Bible" is in order. By the time of Jesus, the Old Testament texts were referred to as γραφή (ancient Greek which is transliterated into English as graphē) which means "writings." When the New Testament texts were written, they were also referred to as "writings." In current English these "writings" are called (translated as) "scriptures."

After the New Testament texts were written and were added to the Old Testament texts, the writings in the collection (consisting of 66 texts) were also called βιβλία (ancient Greek which is transliterated into English as biblia), which means "books." Several centuries after Jesus was crucified, Christians put the Old Testament scriptures together with the New Testament scriptures,

and the singular forms βιβλίον (biblion) and βιβλος (biblos), which mean "book" came to be used for the combined collection. The Greek word "biblos" was transliterated into English as "Bible." Thus, the meaning of the word "Bible" is "Book." Part of the reason was to differentiate the collection of writings (that were officially accepted as legitimate) from numerous writings that had appeared in the preceding centuries.

This book, the Bible, is a collection of writings that were written over a period of about 1,500 years. The last writings were done almost 2,000 years ago. The exact time span for the actual writing of the original texts is the subject of much debate. The precise length of time is not a crucial factor in being serious with the Bible. The time factor might influence how a person understands the particulars of different parts but does not significantly change the overall development of the themes of the Bible. A main theme and multiple common themes emerge from this collection of writings which cover a significant period of time in multiple cultural settings.

## **Two common and contrasting views**

Many people in Christian organizations are adamant in saying that the Bible is the "Word of God." Many other people inside and outside of the Christian tradition consider the Bible to be a collection of ancient fables like the multitude of other ancient writings that exist in cultures across the world. These two views of the Bible express extremes that may be thought of as opposites or as the two ends of a continuum. There are many views of the Bible – too many to be considered in this essay. Both extremes just mentioned are inaccurate, even wrong, in some of their important points. To further complicate matters, people often use the same words in these views with different meanings.

For example, within the view that the Bible is the "Word of God" there are at least two groups of people who use this same phrase but with different fundamental meanings. The differences often conflict and are not merely variances within the same idea. They use the same words for different, even conflicting, ideas. I personally do not refer to the Bible as the Word of God. However,

I know people in the first group of this view who use the phrase, and I know what they believe and what they are expressing with the phrase. I agree with some of their ideas. I know people in the other group who use the phrase and I disagree with their meaning and what they are expressing. Without going into detail, the first group is emphasizing the importance of the writings collected in the Bible. The second group is using the Bible as a sledge-hammer to beat people into religious submission, somewhat like criminal law. Remember, that I am not saying that all of the people in the second group are not in the Kingdom of God. I think that many of them misunderstand what the Bible is and often misuse or abuse the Bible and its message.

## **Preconceived beliefs**

The two extremes in views ("word of God" versus "human fables") about the Bible share a common component. That component is that most adherents of either view bring their beliefs to their reading of the Bible. That is, most people in either camp have preconceived beliefs about the Bible before they read and/or study the Bible. Since they have preconceived ideas, their understanding of what the Bible says is unduly determined before they read the texts in the Bible. Their preconceived ideas are the basis of and determinants of how they understand the Bible. For example, if a person already believes that the Bible is a collection of human fables, then she likely will not accept the story of the resurrection of Jesus as being factually true. On the other hand, a person who believes that the Bible is the inerrant word of God and that God inspired the specific wording in it will likely view the early chapters of Genesis as being literal and historically precise. They tend to see the creation of Earth as happening about 6,000 years ago (along the lines of the [Ussher Chronology](#)).

I am not saying that the people in these two extreme positions are the only people who have preconceived notions about the Bible. I am merely using these two views to illustrate some of the effects of preconceived beliefs.

What is wrong with human beliefs about the Bible such as the two views that I have mentioned? The base problem with such

beliefs is that they reduce the Bible to a human level only. Remember that we humans are finite. God is infinite. We are temporal (caught inside of time). God is eternal (outside of time). Indeed, He created time when He created the heavens and the earth (our universe). When we approach the Bible, we should remember that an infinite and eternal mind is behind and involved in it. Any attempt on our part to fit the Bible into a human category, a belief, is to reduce the Bible to our level of comfort – to our finite and limited level. Further, we are reducing God (more accurately our understanding and view of God) to our finite and limited level.

## **Truly and fully**

Let me posit and clarify a distinction that should always be remembered when dealing with the concept of understanding – especially when trying to understand things about and from an infinite and eternal God. There are at least two measures for understanding: truly and fully. Worded differently, there is a qualitative measure and quantitative measure. Truly understanding has to do with the qualitative measure and fully understanding has to do with the quantitative measure.

A simple and practical illustration is in order. Consider two men who work for a company. One steals \$10. Another steals \$10,000. On the qualitative scale, they are both thieves. They stole from the company and have the quality of being thieves. However, on the quantitative scale they vary: \$10 is less than \$10,000. Our criminal law system reflects these two measures, quality and quantity. A \$10 theft is a misdemeanor offense and a \$10,000 theft is a felony. Both men have committed the crime of theft and are qualitatively thieves. But the difference in the quantity of a theft changes how they are punished for the crime of theft.

In terms of understanding, we can truly understand something without fully understanding it. For example, a young child can truly understand that her parents love her. But that child will more fully understand a parent's love after she has become an adult and has reared her own children. For another example, I trusted Jesus as my savior and Lord many years ago when I was a young person. I truly understood my need to trust God, to trust Jesus. But I did

not fully understand. Now many years later I still truly trust but my understanding is more full. I more fully trust and understand. As I continue to exist, the quantity of my understanding increases, but the quality of my understanding is the same. I truly trusted the Lord (God, Jesus) then and I still do now. But, the fullness of my trust is still growing.

Let me illustrate again from a different perspective. On a quantitative scale, there is a measurable relation and distance between humans and amoebas. (Genetics provide one such measure.) That is, humans are **finitely** distant from amoebas. However, we are **infinitely** distant from an infinite God.

On a **quantitative** scale humans are closer to amoebas than to God.

The situation is different on a qualitative scale. Humans may actually commune with God. God's spirit may actually influence and speak to humans. Humans may have a qualitatively valid relationship with God. The Preacher in the Old Testament dealt with this idea. He said that God:

"has made everything beautiful in its time; also he has put eternity into man's mind, yet so that he cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end. (Ecc 3:11 RSV)"

Both the qualitative dimension ("put eternity into man's heart") and the quantitative dimension ("he cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end") are expressed.

On a **qualitative** scale humans are closer to God than to amoebas.

## Revelation

The Bible is not God's revelation to humanity. It is the written record of God's revelations to humanity. God has revealed spiritual truths to many humans over a period of centuries. Often these revelations spoke to the people in that time and context. Sometimes these revelations dealt with things to come in the futures of the people with whom God was working. Sometimes

these revelations dealt with both things that were current and things that were future for the person receiving the revelation.

What is a prophet? What is prophecy? Our current misunderstanding of these words results in confusion. A prophet is a person who speaks before people with a revelation (message) from God. He is the spokesperson for God in a particular situation. The message that a prophet delivers is the prophecy. Being a prophet was not and is not an official religious position such as the priests were in the temple. The Old Testament law defines the qualifications for being a priest but does not define the qualifications for being a prophet. God spoke and speaks through whomever he chooses. Any revelation that God provides to a person could be a prophecy if the person receiving the revelation communicates it to other people. Any message that God provides to man helps us to learn more about God and his doings among humanity. Keep in mind that "prophecy" does not mean "prediction." If a person shares a revelation, she is prophesying. The prophecy might not be a prediction about the future. It might be only about the present. Or it might be about the present and the future.

## **Revelation is progressive**

People learned more and more about God over the centuries. For example, the apostles understood much more about God's dealings and plans after Jesus was resurrected than Abraham did when God told him to leave Ur. (Gen 12:1, Neh 9:7) (Worded differently, Abraham truly trusted and truly understood God, but the apostles truly trusted and more **fully** understood God—yet Abraham is the one who is called the "Father of Faith.") Every revelation from God provides opportunity to more fully understand God and his purposes in dealing with mankind. Christians today have the opportunity to understand more fully than the apostles did (since we have 2,000 more years of history and the words of the apostles and prophets in the Bible from which to learn). Unfortunately, few Christians do understand more fully. It is difficult to discuss this issue since most Christians (indeed, most people) confuse the two dimensions of understanding (truly and

fully). Regardless, it is helpful when reading the Bible to remember that the revelations recorded in it are progressive.

## Revelation preceded the Bible

It is helpful to remember that the word "scripture" in the Bible is more accurately translated as "writing." Thus, the phrase, "the scriptures," is "the writings." I asserted earlier that the Bible "is a written record of God's revelations to man." This assertion applies both to prophecy being recorded in the original texts and to the collection of these texts into one book at a much later time. The following New Testament passage explains that God's spirit moved prophets to **speak**. By implication, what the prophets spoke was written down for posterity.

For when he received honor and glory from God the Father and the voice was borne to him by the Majestic Glory, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased," we heard this voice borne from heaven, for we were with him on the holy mountain. And we have the **prophetic word** made more sure. You will do well to pay attention to this as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts. First of all you must understand this, that no prophecy of scripture is a matter of one's own interpretation, because **no prophecy ever came by the impulse of man, but men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God.** (2Pe 1:17-21 RSV)

## Revelation and prophecy preceded the original texts

Peter wrote that he and the other apostles heard a voice from heaven asserting that Jesus was the son of God. Peter wrote an account of what he heard. The heavenly revelation about Jesus was done before Peter put that revelation into writing. Further, Peter asserted that the prophecies in the Old Testament were spoken ("men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God") by people whom the Holy Spirit moved to speak for God. It is obvious that what was spoken at the urging of the Holy Spirit was later written

down so that people in later generations could learn from what had been spoken.

But **what God foretold by the mouth of all the prophets**, that his Christ should suffer, he thus fulfilled. Repent therefore, and turn again, that your sins may be blotted out, that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord, and that he may send the Christ appointed for you, Jesus, whom heaven must receive until the time for **establishing all that God spoke by the mouth of his holy prophets from of old**. Moses said, 'The Lord God will raise up for you a prophet from your brethren as he raised me up. You shall **listen to him** in whatever he tells you. And it shall be that every soul that does not listen to that prophet shall be destroyed from the people.' And **all the prophets who have spoken**, from Samuel and those who came afterwards, also proclaimed these days. You are the sons of the prophets and of the covenant which God gave to your fathers, **saying to Abraham**, 'And in your posterity shall all the families of the earth be blessed.' (Act 3:18-25 RSV)

Notice Luke's emphasis on "what God foretold by the **mouth** of all the prophets." God was "establishing all that God **spoke** by the mouth of his holy prophets from of old. "All the prophets who have **spoken**" about the days of Jesus should be heeded. Jesus should be heeded. Those prophets said to "**listen** to him." The main point that I am showing is the emphasis on prophets speaking (not writing) and on listening to the ultimate prophet, Jesus. It is worthy of note that Jesus **spoke** to people. We have no evidence that he wrote to or for people. Further, the emphasis is on God **speaking** through people.

## **The original texts preceded the Bible**

In the current section, I started the with heading that "revelation preceded the Bible." I then made the point that in the history of revelations from God that "**revelation and prophecy preceded the original texts**." Now I am pointing out that "**the original texts preceded the Bible**." The last original texts in the



Bible were written 400 or more years before copies were collected into a book, into the Bible. I do not want to get bogged down into disagreements about when the manuscripts were written. But the first manuscripts could have been written as much as 2,000 years before the Bible was put together in its current form. Now, it has been close to 1,500 years since the copies of the original manuscripts were collected. I do not care if my generalizations are off by several centuries, though they do reflect some good estimates by scholars.

My main point is that the Bible is not the Word of God. It is our written record of God's revelations, teachings, prophecies and actions for man over a long period of time and in circumstances that varied for the people who heard God's revelations. Worded differently, the Bible is not the Word of God. It is a written record of the Word (words) of God which were spoken many years ago in different cultures. Today, people who trust the Lord have the privilege of learning from events and revelations in the past. We do not have to relive, to repeat, the same mistakes with which God has already dealt. Sadly, too often, we do not learn from the scriptures and we do repeat the mistakes of the past. But, we have the privilege (the great benefit) of reading about God's love for us and the most important display of that love, namely, Jesus—his teachings, death and resurrection for us.

Regardless of the specifics of what a person believes about the Bible, it is worthwhile to remember a quote from Russell Dilday.

"The Bible did not produce the Christian faith, but the Christian faith produced the Bible."<sup>1</sup>

## **Next Essay in this series**

My next essay in this series will deal with understanding the Bible. The main idea will be that we need deal with the actual text, the actual words, in the Bible. We need to understand them in the histori-

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<sup>1</sup> Russell H. Dilday, *The Doctrine of Biblical Authority* (Nashville: Convention Press, 1982), p. 69.

cal context in which they were written. After we understand the words in their historical context, then we can validly deal with the meaning of the words for our lives (in our current context).

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## Personal history

Here is a brief statement about my personal history which is pertinent to essays on my site. As of 2016, I am a man in my late 60s. In terms of education I graduated summa cum laude from a large state university. My major was empirical psychology with a minor in criminal justice. I went through a Master of Divinity program at a Christian seminary, the largest in the United States at the time. After that I went through a Ph.D. program in humanities and a Ph.D. program in history. These programs of study were in a large state university. My formal and advanced educational history spanned my ages from 18 to 52 years.

As to my career, I spent 26 years in law enforcement and 16 years in the military. My first 8 years on a large police department were as a line officer and later a supervisor. My last 18 years were as the Chaplain for the police officers and their families. I spent 16 years in the military. My first 6 years in the Army when I was drafted during the Vietnam War and my last 10 years in the Air Force as a Chaplain. Occasionally I was an interim pastor at a local church. After I retired, I worked several years as a programmer for a company that developed programming software. I also taught as an adjunct professor in a college and in a university. I taught United States history, Western Civilization, Old Testament history and New Testament history.

Since 1983 I have published, in printed media (magazines and books), more than 80 times. Many of these articles provide further insight into my journey as I clarified my thoughts when writing these works. Some of the articles also appear on my website. Recently, I have begun publishing articles and essays with first

exposure on the Internet, such as on my site at <http://www.constantsite.com>.

One of the things that I hoped to accomplish with these choices of education and vocation was to be balanced in my approach to and understanding of life. I wanted to be experienced in the "real world" but not ignorant. I wanted enough formal education to be very informed as my thoughts developed. I did not want to have only secular education nor only religious education. In short I am not a devotee of any mode of life nor of any school of thought. My perspective is not formed by a particular religious organization nor by a particular secular philosophy.

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