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الكتاب المقدس

**WHY THE BIBLE?**

CHAWKAT MOUCARRY

شوكت مقرّي  
دكتور في العلوم الدينية

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## **WHY THE BIBLE?**

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# WHY THE BIBLE?

*No other book in the world is as widely available, as frequently read, or as widely translated as the Bible. Nevertheless, for a large number of men and women it remains a book misunderstood or even unknown. There are many opinions concerning the Bible, not all of them accurate: It is said to be hard to obtain, difficult to read and understand, or to be so old that it can be of no value for us today.*

*This short introduction to the Bible aims to dispel such ideas and also to correct some additional misunderstandings. We hope that having read it you will want to obtain a Bible - if you do not already own a copy. You will then be in a position to judge for yourself.*

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*On the following pages we will touch on various questions relevant to the Bible: its contents, inspiration, interpretation, and authenticity. Such questions are valuable insofar as they help us to grasp the message of the Bible better. The last part of this introduction gives an outline of that message.*

**How to read Bible references:**

Matthew 5:17 = The Gospel of Matthew, chapter 5, verse 17

## The contents of the Bible

The word *Bible* is of Greek origin and means simply *the book*. This *book* is in fact a collection of books divided into two major sections: the Old Testament, written before Jesus Christ, and the New Testament, set down in the first century after Jesus Christ.

The Old Testament is the Bible of the Jewish people, their Holy Scriptures. These Scriptures are often called the *Torah*, a word meaning *Instruction*, or again the *Law* (The Gospel of Luke, chapters 16 and 17). The word *Law* is understood in its widest sense, referring to the whole of the Scriptures rather than merely the sections pertaining to the Law.

At the time of Jesus, the Bible was also called the *Law and the Prophets* (Matthew 5:17; 7:12; 11:13; Luke 16:16). The *Law* referred particularly to the first five books of the Bible - the books of Moses (Luke 16:9 and 24:27): Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. The *Prophets* on the other hand were other books of the Bible such as Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel, to name some of the most important. Yet another expression was used to refer to the Holy Scriptures, namely *the Law, the Prophets, and the Psalms* (Luke 24:44). This expression specifically mentions that part of the Bible associated with King David, the Book of Psalms. Again the term is used in a wider sense, referring, as well as to the Book of Psalms, to various writings, in particular the wisdom literature (Job, Ecclesiastes, Proverbs). So the Old Testament is a collection of writings associated not only with Moses and David, but with many other prophets. These books were written in Hebrew, with the exception of the passages in Aramaic contained in the books of Daniel and Esther. Aramaic is closely related to Hebrew, and was widely used among the Jews after they were deported to Babylon in the sixth century before Jesus Christ (BC).

The Old Testament was first translated into Greek. The work began in Egypt, during the 3rd century BC. In those days Alexandria was a major cultural centre of the Mediterranean world where the most widely-spoken language was Greek. Some Greek-speaking Jewish scholars of Alexandria undertook the translation of their Holy Scriptures in order to make them available to their contemporaries. This translation is known as the *Septuagint* or *LXX* (the number seventy) because it was attributed to seventy scholars who, it was said, finished the task in seventy days. In fact the complete translation took several centuries.

The Septuagint includes those Old Testament books which were written in Hebrew and other books whose manuscripts were entirely in Greek. The 39 books in Hebrew are called *canonical* books. The *Canon*, in Christian terminology, is the list of those books stamped with divine authority, and which therefore constitute the Holy Scriptures.

In addition to the canonical books, many versions of the Bible include other books from the Septuagint. These are Judith, Tobit, 1 and 2 Maccabees, Wisdom, Ecclesiasticus (or Ben Sirach), Baruch, the Epistle of Jeremiah, and the Greek versions of the books of Esther and Daniel. Those who accept these books as being part of the Canon of Scriptures call them *deuterocanonical* books, whereas those who do not accept them within the Canon consider them to be *apocryphal*.

The Old Testament and the New Testament make up the Holy Scriptures, or the Bible, of the Christians. The second part of the Bible is sometimes known as the *Gospel*, a word taken from the Greek and meaning literally *Good News*. In the singular (the Gospel) it refers to the message of Jesus Christ; while the plural (the Gospels) means the four books which tell the story of Jesus. Thus the Gospel of Jesus Christ is recounted in the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John; but equally in the rest of the New Testament writings. The New Testament also includes the Acts of the Apostles, the Epistles (or letters) and the Revelation. It contains 27 books, all of them written in Greek.

Of the authors of the four Gospels, Luke is the only one not of Jewish origin, and the only one who did not know Jesus in person. Nonetheless, as he tells us at the beginning of his Gospel, his account relies on eyewitness reports which he has checked himself. Luke is also the author of the Acts of the Apostles, a book which begins by announcing the mission which Jesus gave his apostles before ascending into Heaven, to take the Gospel to all the peoples on earth. The book goes on to tell how the Gospel was announced from Jerusalem all the way to Rome, the capital of the Roman Empire. Wherever the Gospel was preached, men and women accepted it and formed communities of Christians called *churches*.

The Epistles, which number twenty-one in all, are letters written mostly by Jesus' apostles, notably Paul, Peter, and John. In the few decades after Jesus' ascension into Heaven, large numbers of churches were founded around the Mediterranean world, particularly in Palestine, Syria, Lebanon, Cyprus, in Asia Minor (modern-day Turkey), Greece, and even as far as Italy. The Epistles were mainly addressed to churches or church leaders, to give them a deeper understanding of the Gospel and of its practical consequences.

The Book of Revelation, written by John, recounts a vision given by Jesus to one of his disciples. This book stresses that the Gospel is destined to meet strong opposition as it advances. The author also warns the people of God of the sufferings which await them, while encouraging them to keep their hope alive. Hope of this kind is based on the first coming of Jesus and draws strength from its eager expectation of his certain return. Unlike his first coming, this time Jesus will come in glory to establish the kingdom of God, a kingdom of peace and righteousness.



## The inspiration of the Bible

The first chapter of the Bible tells us that God created man - male and female - in his own image (Genesis 1:26 to 2:2). In bestowing such dignity on him, God showed his desire to communicate with man and to reveal himself to him. He did this first through the work of creation. In this sense nature bears witness to God's glory (Psalm 19:1-6). Secondly, God revealed himself by sending the prophets (2 Peter 1:21). However, prophets are mortals. In order to ensure that his Word remain immortal, God willed that it should be set down in writing. The Bible is the result of this divine decision. Being God's Word, it is intended to give man the possibility of knowing his Creator as he truly is.

But how did God reveal his Word? The Bible tells us that 'Men, filled with the Holy Spirit, spoke on God's behalf' (2 Peter 1:21; 2 Peter 1:11). In other words, the Holy Spirit was the agent of revelation. This holds true for the whole Bible, and for each individual text. 'All Scripture is inspired by God' (2 Timothy 3:16). So inspiration is a process begun by God, through his Spirit causing men to set down his Word in written form. It is this that makes the writings of the Bible entirely trustworthy.

However, inspiration does not mean that God dictated his Word. Man is not a robot controlled by his Creator; his task was not simply to record God's Word as a tape-recorder would. Is God not capable of revealing his Word to men while also respecting and indeed making full use of their personalities? The answer is obvious, and moreover it is a fitting one in view of the dignity which God bestowed on man from the time of his creation. Indeed the biblical authors played an active role in giving expression to God's message, using their intellectual abilities, and making the most of the techniques at their disposal. Each wrote with a focus on his own area of interest, and each gave his own perspective.

Consequently, each book of the Bible bears the distinctive mark of its human author. Far from being a handicap, this variety in the Biblical writings makes reading or studying them all the more profitable. The Gospels provide a particularly eloquent instance of this point. Matthew emphasises that Jesus is the promised Messiah, Mark portrays him as the perfect servant, Luke underlines his humanity and compassion for suffering people; John, for his part, highlights Jesus' glory as well as his love for his disciples. Obviously these four sketches of Jesus are not mutually exclusive; on the contrary, they help us to learn more of the riches of his personality.

The biblical authors also took into consideration the culture, religious background, social position, etc. of the people they wrote for. The most striking example of this is the language in which they wrote the Gospels. Although Jesus spoke Aramaic, the Gospels were first written in Greek. Since God intended the message of the Gospel to be for all nations it was important that it was communicated in the most widespread language of the day. From this point of view it was no less important that the Gospels should then be translated into the languages of all nations. In fact the translations began in the early centuries. By the end of the third century the New Testament had been translated in part into Latin, Syriac, and Coptic, the languages then used in Western Europe, Syria, and Egypt respectively. Today over two thousand languages have a translation of at least one book of the Bible.

This concept of *inspiration* means that the Bible is said to be both the Word of God, because God is its author, and also the words of men, by virtue of the fact that the Word went out through men who were actively involved in composing divine revelation. Some of these men are famous, others have remained unknown. Some were aware of being spokesmen for God, such as Moses and the Apostle Paul, others did not know that they wrote under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. What is of greatest importance is that God, in his sovereignty, ensured in various ways that his Word was faithfully handed on.

The fact that the Word of God is also the words of men means that the Bible can be translated, since it remains the Word of God in whatever language it is written. It is therefore not only possible but desirable that each language should have at least one translation of the Bible. That the Bible is potentially available in any human language reveals a significant principle: The God of all mankind is no far-off God but a God who is close to us, and he may, indeed he wants to, speak to us in our own language!

The Bible was written over a period of about thirteen centuries. From the Pentateuch (the five books of Moses) to the Book of Revelation there are about 40 authors. Such a great variety makes the unity of the message of the Bible all the more apparent. This unity can be discerned in its witness to Jesus which runs like a thread throughout the whole of Scripture. For the truth that Jesus revealed is what inspired the prophets (Revelation 19:10). The Old Testament promises the coming of Jesus; the New Testament proclaims the fulfilment of that promise.

## **The interpretation of the Bible**

There can be few more important subjects than the interpretation of the Bible. It is true that God has spoken to us in his Word but, if we want to hear his voice, we have to read the Word with care. It is quite possible, and also dangerous, to be mistaken about the meaning of the Bible, or to give false interpretations of it. The danger comes not from the Bible being difficult to understand, but from our prejudices which sometimes prevent us from reading it correctly. It was, after all, in the name of the Torah that Jesus was condemned to death.

So when reading the Bible it is of some benefit to understand certain rules of interpretation. Here are five rules which should help the reader to make the most of reading the Word of God.

## (1) Respecting literary genres

We have stressed that the Bible is a collection of extremely varied writings. Each Bible passage can be classified into a specific literary genre. For example, the Gospels belong to a *narrative* genre, the Acts of the Apostles to a *historical* genre, the Epistles to a *didactic* genre (aiming to teach), Revelation to an *apocalyptic* genre (characterised by visions, symbols, and numbers), Leviticus to a *legal* genre, the Prophets to *prophecy*, the Song of Songs to *poetry*, Proverbs to *wisdom*, and so on. Furthermore it is not uncommon to find several genres in the same book. Thus the gospel of Matthew includes didactic passages, for example in the Sermon on the Mount (chapters 5-7), teaching with parables - consisting of stories as well as symbolic gestures (chapter 13), eschatological sayings, that is, concerning the end of the world and the last judgement (chapters 24 and 25), and a historical section (chapters 26-28). The special place held by the Psalms in the Bible is also worth mentioning. The inspired prayers of this book are a real treasure for the spiritual life of every believer. Nevertheless, many of them are quite obviously a product of their age. At that time the people of Israel was the people of God, and there was no distinction between the kingdom of God and the kingdom of Israel.

It is therefore necessary to interpret a biblical passage according to its literary genre. For example, we should avoid making a historical passage legal, in other words making a description of events into a rule for us to follow. Thus when we are told of the sinful actions of certain prophets, such as Noah (Genesis 9:20-23), Abraham (Genesis 12:10-20), Lot (Genesis 19:30-35), and David (2 Samuel chapter 11), it is obviously not to discredit these men of God, and still less to give them as examples for us to follow. But the Bible recounts these sins because they actually were committed. This refusal to cover up the truth, however shocking or dishonourable for the men involved, confirms the authenticity of the Bible.

Nevertheless, a historical passage in the Bible always has a theological dimension to it, in that the author wishes to give spiritual instruction through his story. For him communicating this teaching outweighs reporting the facts of the story accurately. Indeed the Bible does not present itself as a history book in the narrowest sense of the word, and it would be wrong to read it as such. Rather it contains teachings which are there for us to discover. The previous example contains a grave warning: the fact that the prophets gave in to sin suggests that ordinary believers like ourselves are unlikely to be spared temptation. There is an important truth here as well: the fact that great men of God fell into sin shows how deeply ingrained sin is in human nature. This is not said to plunge us into despair but rather to lead us, as David was led, to trust only in God's mercy for our salvation (Psalm 51; 2 Samuel chapter 12).

The Bible often speaks in imagery, and we must avoid taking these passages literally. By respecting the literary genres we can interpret biblical texts according to the type of literature in question (symbolic, poetic, apocalyptic, etc.). God's hand or his arm are ways of speaking of his power. When it says 'God's ear is not too hard to hear' it means that he is still moved by the prayers of all who call on him (Isaiah 59:1). Where God's people are depicted as an unfaithful wife, this represents a provocative picture deliberately chosen to attract our attention and point out how undeserved and vast is God's tenderness and mercy toward his people (Ezekiel chapter 16; Hosea chapters 1-3). The Song of Songs is nothing less than a love song celebrating the relationship between a man and a woman. It is such a noble one that it becomes a parable of the relationship between God and his people. Again, the Book of Revelation is studded with numbers, symbols, and figures which the reader must decipher.

## **(2) Allowing for the historical context**

While it is eternal, the Word of God nevertheless belongs to a certain time and place. In order to establish its meaning, we must

read a passage in the light of its particular circumstances. It was through the people of Israel, throughout their age-old history, that God revealed his Word. God took pains, as any good teacher must, to adapt the communication of his Word to each successive stage of this history. Therefore we should allow for the historical context in interpreting a biblical passage.

Jesus' mission provides us with a good example of this principle. Born into a Jewish home, Jesus hardly ever went beyond the geographical borders of his own country. One day, when he was in the territory of Tyre and Sidon (in the Lebanon), a woman came and begged him to heal her daughter. Jesus replied: 'I have been sent only to the lost sheep of the people of Israel.' It is worth noting that Jesus had already limited his disciples' field of activity to the land of Israel (Matthew 10:5-6). How are we to interpret this saying of his about his own task? Taken out of context, it could lead us to think that Jesus' mission was intended exclusively for the people of Israel. Such a conclusion, however, would be hasty and undoubtedly mistaken. To find out the exact meaning of his assertion, we must first of all put it in its immediate context: Jesus gave the Canaanite woman what she had asked of him in the end and, even better, praised her faith (Matthew 15:21-28). Here is a hint as to the universal extent of his mission. We should therefore place it in the perspective of history. Given that Jesus was the Messiah promised from of old to Israel, he naturally addressed himself first of all to the Jewish people. Yet he never shut out foreigners from his field of mission; this is recorded particularly in the beautiful story of his meeting with a Samaritan woman (John 4:1-42). What is more, there came a decisive turning-point in his mission when the promised salvation became a reality through his cross and resurrection. Soon after his resurrection he sent his disciples out on a mission 'to all nations' (Matthew 28:19-20). Then, and only then, could the Gospel go, indeed had to go, throughout the world so that Jesus Christ might be known and proclaimed as the 'Saviour of the world' (John 4:42).

### **(3) Considering church tradition**

God revealed his Word to men in order to guide his people. Indeed it would be absurd to believe that God would show his people the way to follow and then allow them to stray from it. Jesus promised his disciples that the Spirit of God (which they would receive after he had gone up into Heaven) would make known to them the full truth concerning him (John 16:12-14). We have grounds here for believing that the people of God, that is the church, has been able with divine assistance to discern the general meaning of the Scriptures. So it is that the Church in its great diversity unanimously acknowledges that Jesus has a unique and unrivalled position among the prophets by virtue of his person, his message, and his work.

We should therefore treat with the utmost seriousness the interpretation given by the *people of the Bible* to this book throughout the ages. This will protect us from the twin dangers of being too subjective and of believing ourselves to be the only enlightened ones. This would be seen in a person's pronounced preference for interpreting the Bible according to his own ideas, with no regard for a thousand years or more of church tradition. It would be wrong, therefore, when considering a major issue, to deduce from the Scriptures a doctrine that was in evident contradiction with the recognised doctrine of the Church. May we nevertheless admit that the Church has been (and still is) mistaken on questions that do not touch on the heart of the message? The answer must be yes, for there is no lack of instances where Christians have made errors of judgement, or gone astray in interpreting Scripture. The Crusades are a mighty denial by Christians of Christ's way, for he never took up a sword to defend God's cause. A further example is furnished in the condemnation by the Church of Galileo's theory that the earth revolves around the sun. Closer to our own time, those South African Christians who supported the policy of apartheid were a thousand miles removed from Christ's teaching on loving one's neighbour (Luke 10:25-37).

#### **(4) Interpreting Scripture by Scripture**

We have shown that the Scriptures, while being very diverse, retain a fundamental unity. This unity stems from the fact that they are first and foremost the Word of a God who is One. There is then in the Scripture an inner cohesiveness which must be respected if we want to grasp the biblical message. This implies that we must interpret each passage of the Bible in the light of other passages.

In practice this rule means that we must not adopt a rationalist approach, since that would amount to submitting the revelation of God to the authority of our own reason. In particular, such an approach leads us to cast doubt on anything that our intelligence finds shocking or surprising - for instance miracles. We should also beware of a strictly scientific approach which demands that we read the Bible in the light of our knowledge of science. Firstly the Bible is not a book of science, and secondly our scientific knowledge itself is likely to undergo change. The purpose of the Bible is to make God known to us, not to further scientific knowledge. Rational analysis and scientific techniques can and should help us to understand the Scriptures, and in this respect science and reason have an important part to play. However, we must beware of attributing to them an authority they do not possess.

Interpreting Scripture by Scripture means too that we should avoid basing a given doctrine on one isolated text. Also we should attempt to harmonize passages with one another - not to set them up against each other. On a particular subject, obscure or difficult passages can be interpreted in the light of those that are clear.

Let us illustrate this principle. Jesus, knowing that he is soon to be arrested by his enemies, wishes to prepare his disciples to face the test. So he warns them with these words: 'Whoever has no sword must sell his coat and buy one.' Immediately the disciples present him with two swords (Luke 22:35-38). Were they justified in understanding their Master's words in this way as



a call to arms? The answer comes as Jesus is about to be arrested. Peter then draws his sword and strikes with it. Jesus immediately says to him: 'Put your sword back in its place. All who take the sword will die by the sword.' (Matthew 26:52). In saying this Jesus condemned all use of force in the name of God, even in legitimate defence. This principle is clearly set out; and it shows that the disciples were mistaken in understanding Jesus' words as a call to take up arms. He was calling them to spiritual warfare.

## **(5) Discerning the person of Jesus Christ behind the Scriptures**

While the Bible is the Word of God in written form, Jesus Christ is the Word of God incarnate in human form (John 1:1-14). The written Word - the Bible - bears witness to the living Word (Revelation 19:10) - that is, to Christ himself, God's faithful witness (Revelation 1:2; 3:14). In reading the Bible, it is important to remember that it is Christ's servant. As we look through the Scriptures we should expect to meet Christ who is 'the visible likeness of the invisible God' (Colossians 1:15; 2 Corinthians 4:4).

While he was still young, Jesus enjoyed a very close and intimate relationship with God. He was preparing himself for the task that he said he had received from his Father (Luke 2:41-52). Later he would show the religious leaders of his people that he was the one spoken of in the prophecies, and that the function of the Torah was to prepare for the coming of the Messiah: 'If you believed Moses, you would believe me, for he wrote about me.' (John 5:46). Moses did indeed foretell that Jesus would come in these words: 'The Lord will send you a prophet like me from among your own people, and you are to obey him.' (Deuteronomy 18:15). Jesus' disciples, for their part, were convinced that their Master was 'the one whom Moses wrote about in the book of the Law, and whom the prophets also wrote about.' (John 1:45; The Acts of the Apostles 3:20-22).

The fact that Jesus is the focus of the Torah has a great impact on our interpretation of the Bible. In particular it means that the Old Testament should be read in the light of the New. The promises God made to Abraham have been fulfilled in Jesus (Galatians 3:16). The covenant God made with the people of Israel has been overshadowed by the New Covenant in Jesus (Hebrews 8:13). The temple in Jerusalem, the meeting-place between God and his people, has been replaced by the risen Christ (John 2:19-22). Christ's sacrifice, offered once and for all, has fulfilled and so brought to a close the sacrifices ordered in the old covenant (Hebrews 10:18). The kingship of Christ, Israel's Messiah, has made theocracy in Israel obsolete. In other words, God has withdrawn his endorsement of Israel's political system; he no longer has his representative in it. The Kingdom of God cannot be identified with the country of Israel, nor with any country on earth (Matthew 22:21). It is a spiritual kingdom open to all the peoples of the earth (Matthew 8:11-12; 21:43; John 18:36). It does not advance by force but by the free decision of individuals (Matthew 26:52-53).

The Gospel of Jesus transcends and so makes obsolete the ritual law of the Old Testament, for instance the laws prohibiting certain foods (Mark 7:14-19). This law was 'only a shadow of things in the future' (Colossians 2:16-17). Most importantly, the fact that Jesus was the Word of God in bodily form means that there is no further use sending prophets after his time. Since God has fully revealed himself to men in Jesus Christ, what purpose would be served by any prophet sent later on? (Matthew 21:33-37; Hebrews 1:1-3). What is the use of a candle when the sun is shining?

So all the Scriptures point towards Jesus Christ. The Old and the New Testaments bear witness to him; he himself is the Word of God, alive and everlasting. This is why Christians are not first and foremost a *people of the Book*, but a *community of the Word of God*, that is, the very same Word which became flesh in the person of Jesus Christ.

Lastly, it is important to mention the clarity of the Scriptures. Of what use would they be if their message was difficult to decipher? And what purpose could God have had in mind were he to have revealed his Word in such a way that men were unable to grasp its meaning? The clarity of the Bible is a fulfilment of God's promise to reveal himself to those who earnestly seek him (Deuteronomy 4:7; Isaiah 55:6; Jeremiah 29:13; Psalm 145:18). Certainly the Bible contains passages which raise difficulties (for instance the two genealogies of Jesus in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke). We often encounter real problems in interpreting the writings in the Bible, yet more frequently these problems are due to our ignorance. In meeting them we receive a summons to a greater humility and to a greater trust in the Author of the Scriptures. We should not allow these difficulties to dim our vision of the clarity of the Gospel. The forest must not be hidden by the trees!

## **The authenticity of the Bible**

In our day and age much doubt is cast on the authenticity of the Bible. We must therefore consider whether the objections against the Bible are serious ones or whether they are founded on prejudice. We will proceed to examine the basis of these objections.

First of all, a number of these criticisms stem from ignorance or from people misunderstanding the Bible's concept of revelation. They take no account of the human element of the Bible, as if in order to be credible the Word of God had to, as it were, fall from Heaven onto those who received it. This almost mechanistic concept of revelation betrays a narrow conception of God and a woefully deficient conception of man.

Other objections proceed from false interpretations of the Bible. It is accused and placed on trial in order to denigrate it by submitting it to the verdict of reason, science, or history. Or a literal interpretation is given to a symbolic passage, or perhaps a story

is given a normative status, instead of being treated in its historical context. Most of these criticisms would not have come about if enough care had been taken to interpret the biblical text as it is actually set down.

Could the Bible have been corrupted with the passage of time? Could the Gospel of Christ have been poorly handed down in the four Gospels, the form of which was not finalized until a few decades after the events which they report? Obviously such a thesis cannot be dismissed *a priori*. Yet it is highly improbable for several reasons. Firstly, it would imply that God had failed in his desire to communicate his Word to mankind. This is incompatible with the sovereign nature of the God of the Bible (Isaiah 55:11). Secondly, we must ask how God could have taken the initiative in revealing himself, if all along he knew that in the end his Word would not be faithfully transmitted. Finally, God solemnly declares that he himself will guarantee the integrity of his Word in such a manner that it will be preserved from any alteration (Deuteronomy 4:2; Revelation 22:18-19). Surely God would be guilty of misleading mankind if he were nonetheless to allow his Word to be twisted? If that were the case, what could we make of God's faithfulness in keeping his promises?

Moreover, Jesus guarantees the authenticity of the Old Testament by his own authority: 'It is easier for Heaven and earth to pass away than for the smallest detail of the Law to be done away with' (Luke 16:17). With equal vigour Jesus commits himself to the preservation of the Gospel down through the generations: 'Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away' (Matthew 24:35). It is worth noting in passing that Jesus is unafraid to claim that he himself is the Word of God when he says *my words*. This is something none of the Prophets ever did! If we therefore maintain that God is faithful to his Word, which goes without saying, it becomes unreasonable to believe that the Scriptures have been falsified. And the Bible gives abundant proof of such faithfulness (Deuteronomy 7:9; Psalm 107:1,8,15,21,31; Psalm 118:2,3,4,29; Psalm 119:89-90; 1 Peter 1:24-25).

The study of biblical manuscripts confirms the authenticity of the Bible. In 1947, a large number of manuscripts were found in caves at Qumran on the shores of the Dead Sea. They date at the latest from the 1st century AD. Among them is the entire text of Isaiah and fragments of all the other books of the Old Testament except the Book of Esther. Until this discovery was made, the oldest manuscripts of the Old Testament dated from the 10th century AD. Here was a unique and unexpected opportunity to check, over a period of a thousand years, the accuracy of the transmission of the books of the Old Testament. All the experts who examined the texts (not all of them were Christians) judged that the copying was done with remarkable accuracy. The textual variations which were found, although relatively numerous, were in no way of a sort to call into question the integrity of the Old Testament texts.

Concerning the New Testament, the earliest fragments of the Gospels date back to the 2nd century. Some of these are stored, for example, in libraries in Geneva and Manchester. The Chester Beatty Library in Dublin possesses three papyri which cover most of the New Testament. The first manuscript, which includes the four Gospels and the Acts of the Apostles, dates from the first half of the 3rd century; the second, which contains the letters of Paul and the letter to the Hebrews, dates from the beginning of the 3rd century. The last, that of Revelation, dates from the second half of the 3rd century.

We also have Greek manuscripts of the whole Bible - The Old and the New Testaments - which are extremely old. The major manuscripts are:

- *The Codex Sinaiticus*, preserved in the British Museum in London, from the middle of the 4th century.
- *The Codex Vaticanus*, kept in the Vatican Library, from the 4th century; the end of the New Testament is missing from this manuscript (from the Letter to the Hebrews 9:14 to the end of the Book of Revelation).

- *The Codex Alexandrinus*, preserved in the British Museum, from the 5th century.

We also have available today thousands of manuscripts of the New Testament books. The quantity available, their relative age, and their widely diverse origins have enabled us to undertake a critical study of the New Testament text. The highly qualified specialists who carried out this work have shown that the New Testament has been astonishingly well preserved. It can even be said that no other comparable work of Antiquity has stood up as well to the test of time.

For the sake of comparison, let us consider a few examples of other famous writings:

- Thucydides, the Greek historian, lived in the 5th century BC. The earliest manuscripts of his *History of the Peloponnesian Wars* date from the 9th century AD.
- The same is true of *The History of the Persian Wars* by the great Greek historian Herodotus who also lived in the 5th century BC.
- Julius Caesar's *Gallic Wars*, written in the 1st century BC, has come down to us thanks to manuscripts the oldest of which dates from the 9th century AD.
- Of the 142 volumes of the *History of Rome* by the Roman writer Titus Livius who died in the year 17 AD, only 35 have survived. Only one manuscript of this work exists, and that is a very incomplete one which dates from the 4th century.
- Finally Tacitus, the great Latin historian, who wrote two major works at the end of the 1st century AD. Only 5 out of 14 volumes of his *Histories* remain, and of his *Annals*, which consisted of 16 volumes, we have only 12. Moreover, we owe our knowledge of both these works to manuscripts dating from the 9th and the 11th centuries respectively.

No serious historian today challenges the authenticity of any of these works. Yet the textual proofs for the authenticity of the Bible are far stronger. The enduring nature of the Bible is a proof that

God is sovereign and wise, and that he stands faithful to his Word.

God's faithfulness to his Word and his people implies that it was he who led the Israelites, and the Church of Jesus Christ after them, to discern and select from the very many religious writings of their period those which embodied Holy Scripture, and which were the Word of God. For it was not for the Jews and the Christians to judge on their own authority what was, and was not, the Word of God; rather, they recognised by the power of the Holy Spirit what he himself had inspired.

The God of the Bible makes covenants with his people and keeps his promises. He reveals himself as '... the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands and forgiving wickedness, rebellion, and sin. Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished...' (Exodus 34:6-7).

## **The message of the Bible**

If the Bible reveals God's character, it also contains his revelation concerning mankind. Created in the image of God (Genesis 1:26-27), and without sin, Adam was called to live in a personal and intimate relationship with his Creator. He was warned that his life depended on the attitude he took towards God. If he depended on him for the knowledge of good and evil he would live; but if he chose to live apart from God, he faced certain death. 'You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat of it you will surely die' (Genesis 2:16-17).

Adam disobeyed (Genesis 3:1-7). His sin brought about spiritual death and this in turn led to physical death. From Adam onwards, mankind have continued to sin and to die. By killing his brother Abel, Cain became the first murderer (Genesis 4). This event shows how deeply sin has stained the life of mankind since

Adam. Sin has become second nature. As we have seen, it did not even spare the prophets. But God loves mankind and did not resign himself to their fallen state. He was determined to save them. He called Abraham and made him a promise: through him all the nations on the earth would be blessed (Genesis 12:1-3; Galatians 3:8). Later he called Moses and gave him a promise that a prophet like him, one from the people of Israel, would come after him (Deuteronomy 18:15). Just like Moses, he would save his people from slavery. The similarity ceases at this point, for this prophet would save his people not from slavery to Egypt, but from sin and death, of which Egypt was the symbol.

After they came out of Egypt, the people of Israel committed a very serious sin, making for themselves an image of God in the form of a golden calf. What would be God's reaction? Would he forgive the people or punish them? At this point of crisis, a new revelation about God was given and is recorded for us in the passage quoted above (Exodus 34:6-7). In this crucial word, God makes himself known to Moses as having two apparently opposite character traits. He is a compassionate God who forgives the sinner; but he is also a holy God who does not leave the guilty unpunished. How is it possible for God to both forgive the sinner and punish his sin, both to act out of love and not to compromise his righteousness? The answer is given in the Gospel, and has a name: *Jesus*, 'for he will save his people from their sins' (Matthew 1:21). So it becomes apparent that not only is God *one* (there is no other God like him) but he is also *unique* (there is no God-like him). He is unique in the sense that he is both man's Creator and his Saviour: 'The Lord, the God who saves his people... there is no other God' (Isaiah 45:21).

The Law of Moses was intended as a preparation for the mission of Jesus Christ. It instituted a sacrificial system at the centre of Israel's worship. Three of the sacrifices in particular were offered for the forgiveness of sins. These were the *sin offering* (Leviticus 4), the *guilt offering* (Leviticus 5:14-26), and the *Passover lamb* offered once a year in memory of the escape from Egypt (Exodus 12). On the great Day of Atonement the Israelites offered two



goats: the first was slaughtered in the temple, while the second, called the scapegoat, was sent away into the desert having had the sins of the whole people symbolically loaded upon it (Leviticus 16). This system of sacrifices was intended to train the Israelites and to impress upon them the idea that, if God refrained from punishing their sins on the spot, it was only due to a substitutionary sacrifice which was still to come, and whose arrival was heralded by animal sacrifice.

The history of the Jewish people is rich in lessons. Although they possessed the Law of God, more often than not they disobeyed it. This shows us that the human predicament consists not so much of people's ignorance of God's will as their inability to submit to it, even in their refusal to do so. The prophets of Israel constantly called their people to return to God, but in vain. Worse still, several of these prophets were persecuted. In the end they proclaimed the judgement of God against the sin of their people. So Jerusalem and its temple were destroyed and the inhabitants led out as captives to Babylon. However, God's last word is never one of judgement.

The prophets also declared that the Jews would return from exile to rebuild their city and their temple. Most significantly they declared that the return from exile would be the prelude to a vastly more important event, the coming of the Messiah. The prophet Isaiah describes the Messiah as God's servant par excellence. Described as *a man of sorrows*, he would be persecuted and put to death by his own people. Yet it would be precisely in offering his life as a sacrifice for the salvation of mankind that the servant would fulfil the supreme plan of God (Isaiah 52:13 to 53:12).

The mission of John the Baptist, son of Zechariah, was to prepare the way for 'the one who was to come' (Matthew 11:3). In his preaching he heralded an all-important event: 'Turn away from your sins; because the Kingdom of Heaven is near!' (Matthew 3:2). No sooner had Jesus embarked upon his mission than John the Baptist pointed him out to the crowds, saying: 'There is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!'

(John 1:29,36). Jesus gathered around himself twelve apostles who gradually came to recognise their master as the promised Messiah. They hoped that he would soon set their country free from the Roman invaders (Luke 24:21). But Jesus had an altogether different view of his mission: 'The Son of Man must suffer much... he will be put to death, and on the third day he will rise again' (Luke 9:22). The disciples always found it hard to accept that their master would be put to death, and the idea of him rising from the dead seemed to them even stranger (Luke 18:34) - until the day when he was in fact killed, or rather until the day when he rose from the dead.

On that day Jesus suddenly appeared among the disciples. They could not believe their eyes and thought they were seeing a ghost. Jesus reassured them by asking them to touch him and by showing them his hands and feet so that they could fully appreciate that he who had been crucified was indeed he who was now standing before them. The disciples were overjoyed. They had never imagined that they would see Jesus alive again, yet that was precisely what was happening to them (Luke 24:36-43; John 20:19-29).

Jesus' appearances to his disciples were not designed to dazzle them. He wanted to convince them that his death and resurrection had really occurred, and to explain that these things were prophesied in the Scriptures. He also wanted to hand on to them the torch of the Gospel:

Then he (Jesus) said to them (the disciples), 'These are the very things I told you about while I was still with you: Everything written about me in the Law of Moses, the writings of the prophets, and the Psalms had to come true.' Then he opened their minds to understand the Scriptures, and said to them: 'This is what is written: The Messiah must suffer, and must rise from death three days later, and in his name the message about repentance and forgiveness of sins must be preached to all nations, beginning in Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things' (Luke 24:44-48; Matthew 28:16-20).

During their last meeting with him, Jesus repeated to the disciples a promise he had already made them: After going up to Heaven, he would send them the Paraclete (John 14:16; 15:26; 16:7). This Paraclete is the Holy Spirit (John 14:26) whom Jesus also refers to as the Spirit of Truth (John 14:17; 15:26; 16:13). His ministry would be to bear witness to Jesus and to make known to his disciples all the truth concerning him. The Holy Spirit would also be their guide and helper in fulfilling their task. Jesus told his disciples to remain in Jerusalem, for it was there that the promise would be fulfilled (Luke 24:49). It would also be from that city where Jesus died and rose again that the Gospel would be carried to the four corners of the earth:

When the Holy Spirit comes upon you, you will be filled with power and you will be witnesses for me in Jerusalem, in all Judea, and to the ends of the earth. (Acts 1:8).

Ten days after Jesus went up into Heaven, the Holy Spirit did indeed come upon the disciples as they were gathered in Jerusalem (Acts 2:1-4). It happened on the day of Pentecost, one of the great Jewish festivals. There were in the city that day vast crowds of people from all the surrounding nations, Jews by birth as well as people who had adopted the Jewish faith. Among the latter were even some Arabs. As soon as the disciples received the Holy Spirit, they immediately began to preach the Gospel. Then an extraordinary and highly significant event occurred: Everyone in the crowd heard the Gospel in their own language (Acts 2:5-13).

**For two thousand years the Word of God has never ceased to cross language barriers. Today the Bible (in part or as a whole) is available in over two thousand languages.**

**God wishes to speak to you in your mother tongue, just as a father speaks with his child. Will you listen to him?**

# WHY THE BIBLE?

No other book in the world is as widely available, as frequently read, or as widely translated as the Bible. Nevertheless, for many people it remains a misunderstood or even unknown book.

This short introduction to the Bible aims to dispel some misunderstandings and to answer the question: Why the Bible?

The author touches on various questions relevant to the Bible: its contents, inspiration, interpretation, and authenticity. These questions are valuable insofar as they help us to grasp the message of the Bible better. The last part of this introduction gives an outline of that message.

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