



# On the authority and credibility of Scripture



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The Bible is the most read and most influential book in human history. Yet people today read it ever less and less. The question, 'Why bother with the Bible?' is a live question even within churches, never mind beyond them. There are all sorts of reasons for this. The Bible can represent an establishment history from which some want to escape ('The Bible underwrote Christendom and empire and gender discrimination, and we've had it with all that!'). The content of the Bible can be considered boring and platitudinous ('Yeah, yeah, we know all that stuff about a loving God and being nice to each other. Time to get real!'). The Bible may be historically inaccurate, and anyway is addressed to alien cultures in a world of long ago, and so hardly to be relied on as a guide to life in the twenty-first century (In Gershwin's famous formulation: 'It ain't necessarily so, the things that you're li'ble to read in the Bible'). People who are interested in spirituality can find that there is much in the Bible that seems irrelevant ('Why should I have to bother with all that stuff from ancient history – kings, pigs, hats in church – if I want to be a spiritual person today?'). The time that it takes to read the Bible regularly may have been available in previous ages, but there are too many other demands on time today ('With so much of the world and its literature, art, music and movies available on apps, why should I give my limited time to the Bible?').

### Why bother with the Bible?

In order to answer this question, some Christians point to the fact that Scripture is inspired by God (2 Timothy 3.16) and shows God revealing himself

by speaking and acting in the world. If the Bible is from God, then it must be taken seriously. Yet the Qur'an also depicts God speaking and acting, and many Christians, like others, feel happy just to shrug that off ('OK, it makes the claim. But I don't believe it!'). But then why not shrug off the Bible in the same way as the Qur'an? We probably need to start somewhere else.

How do we, in practice, make sense of life and find our way in it? There is so much going on in the world that it can appear bewildering. We cannot possibly pay equal attention to everything around us. Whether consciously or not, we all select certain people, organisations, places and activities as a way of providing a focus that can make sense of things. We privilege these over others and choose to place our trust (in one form or another) and find our identity here rather than elsewhere in the hope that here we will flourish. Unless things go badly wrong, our early trust and focus in life start with our parents, school teachers and friends. As we grow and become more confident we start to align ourselves with groups, movements, activities or organisations that make sense to us – or at least offer the prospect of making a living and being able to keep going.

This process relates also to faith in God. Perhaps this is most obvious in relation to unfaith. Why do people not believe in God? Although there may be no particular reason, often there is one. People can be put off by particular individuals ('That vicar was so judgmental') or events ('How can I believe in a God who let this tragedy occur?') or

understandings ('Biological science shows how life has evolved, so how can I still take seriously what the Bible says about God as creator?'). Such factors can be decisive for unbelief, and factors that might perhaps suggest otherwise – wonder at beauty, revulsion from evil, the witness of a self-giving life – are then discounted. Some things count for more than others in the way we form our view of the world. (As Qui-Gon Jinn says to the young Anakin in *The Phantom Menace*, 'Always remember: Your focus determines your reality.')

### 'Not just another book'

Christian faith is a particular mode of this selecting, privileging, and trusting that everybody does. The object of focus makes it distinctive: we put our trust in God as known in Jesus. How do we know about God as known in Jesus, so as to be able to put our trust here? Because of the Bible.

The New Testament shows us Jesus. It shows a person who is astonishingly winsome. He cares for people whom others do not care about. When he speaks about life and God, people listen, for he speaks as someone who knows what he is speaking about. When nervous officials ask difficult questions, he has the alertness and the wit to reframe the issue, bounce it back at them and offer fresh insight. He challenges complacent assumptions and inverts familiar ideas of what counts as important in life.

In addition to all this, the New Testament sets out three particularly astonishing understandings of Jesus. First, the culmination of his life is his death, his intentional giving up his life for others, indeed for us. He suffers torture, execution, desolation, yet this is where God's forgiving and life-giving will is supremely realised. All routine assumptions about what God 'should' do to save the world are turned upside down.

Secondly, Jesus not only was, he also is. His death was not the end. Rather, God raised Jesus to a new kind of existence in which death no longer features (which is only really comparable to God's initial creation, the giving of existence rather than nothingness). The compelling figure of the Gospels is still living today.

Thirdly, Jesus is the human face of God. Jesus not only shows what it means to realise the potential of our human nature ('fully human') but also displays the character, purpose and priorities of God as far as these are humanly able to be grasped ('fully divine'). The ultimate mystery of life and the universe is made accessible in this particular person, who calls people to trust him and to follow him.

Yet Jesus is not around anywhere on earth to be seen, heard or touched. If what the New Testament says is true, how might such truth be accessed? Here we need to enlarge our frame of reference. To understand what the New Testament says about Jesus, we need the Old Testament also. For without the Old Testament, the nature and meaning of

'God' and of what it is to be human ('in the image of God') will not be understood. The Old Testament shows God giving himself and Israel learning what it means to know him. This happens over time, amidst the complexities of life in a world that was far less provisioned and less secure than the world of today (even, as I write, in the midst

## the Bible is our privileged guide for making sense of the world in which we live

of Covid-19 worldwide). This God is personal and relational, good and just, compassionate and severe. He calls Abraham and Israel to be his people and to learn a way of being in the world that runs counter to many natural assumptions about what matters most. The range and depth and complexity of the Old Testament reminds us that learning what matters most is not easy and takes time. Without this Old Testament context it is all too easy to misread Jesus's supreme revelation of God in narrow or unrealistic or self-serving ways (expecting God to 'fix it' or 'make it good for me' as the first priority).

Of course, the world of both the Old Testament and the New Testament is in many ways a more limited world than the world of today, not only in its extent (Middle East in the Old Testament, Mediterranean world in the New Testament) but especially in terms of knowledge about how the world works in scientific terms. However, despite all the immense differences between then and now, there is a fundamental continuity of human nature. The struggles to live well and responsibly, to trust, to find love, to resist evil and corruption, to handle prosperity and adversity, to recognise the uncertainties of life, to face suffering and death – all these things that still characterise us today can be recognised, identified with and learned about in the Bible, where they are set in relation to the purposes of a good, sovereign and trustworthy God.

Thus, Christian faith is a matter of looking to Jesus and the Bible as our key, our privileged guide for making sense of the world in which we live. This making sense is not primarily a matter of knowledge in a scientific sense, valuable though that is, but rather of wisdom, an existential and practically oriented knowledge of how to live well. Christians learn to focus here rather than elsewhere – not so as to ignore everything else in the world, but so as to frame it rightly and get it in perspective, so that it can be handled better than otherwise.

### Towards truth and trust

But how can one responsibly adopt Christian faith, with its focus on Jesus and the Bible, when there

## NOTES

1. I offer a fuller version of the argument of this essay in my *The Bible in a Disenchanted Age: The Enduring Possibility of Christian Faith* (Grand Rapids, Baker Academic: 2018). Important fresh vistas are also provided in Sandra Schneiders, *The Revelatory Text: Interpreting the New Testament as Sacred Scripture* (2nd ed.; Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1999).

are so many other religions and ideologies in the world? First, faith needs to make intuitive sense. That is, its upholding of life in terms of goodness and grace, justice and mercy, time and eternity, needs to resonate with our own deepest hopes and intuitions of what really matters. It does not all need to resonate, and indeed is unlikely to do so, as many aspects of the life of faith only make sense over time. However, one of the striking features of the Gospels is that people who were in significant ways compromised and corrupted ('tax collectors and sinners') still had dimensions of heart and

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mind that could recognise something different and better in Jesus when they encountered it ('grace and truth') and respond accordingly (though not all did, as response to grace and truth can be costly in practical terms).

Secondly, we must recognise the importance of our nature as social beings. Of course, as individuals we exercise our reasoned judgment and make choices about what to believe and how to live. But we do not do so in isolation. Sociologists have developed the notion of plausibility structures, which is a recognition that things make sense to us because they make sense also to those who are our significant others – those whom we like or respect or trust.

This modern notion of plausibility structures is a rediscovery of older understandings of the importance of others for our own identity and choices. St Augustine once famously said, 'I would not have believed the gospel if the authority of the catholic church had not moved me.' By this he did not mean that he discarded his own reasoned judgment and submitted to authority-claiming pronouncements. Rather, he meant that the gospel only made sense to him, and he only dared believe such an astonishing account of what human life and destiny really is, because of the persuasive power of faithful lives that had shown something of what the gospel means.

Today, people generally come to faith, or not, because of the impact of significant others. This is often parents, teachers, friends in the first instance, if they as believers persuasively make sense of life. Others can have impact also, in various and unpredictable ways: a youth group leader, Christian Union friends, a caring minister, street pastors, a debt adviser, food bank distributors ... or someone significant seen and heard on TV or other media, from Billy Graham to Pope Francis; or it might be through reading those whose writings make sense of faith. In all such cases, I/we can

reasonably reckon that, if these people trust in God through Jesus and take the Bible seriously, then it can make sense for me/us to do so also. I am moved by them to enter into something bigger than myself, the faith and life of the people of God (in its many forms), and make the ways of that people into my own ways. (Unbelief works similarly. Many, moved by a culture that does not care about God, reckon that that makes sense for them too. And for atheism, the work of Richard Dawkins and others can provide a requisite plausibility structure.)

Thirdly, the possible impact of significant others is not just a matter of the present, but also of the past. That is, although all the biblical documents were written some two to three thousand years ago, they have never just been left in the past. Rather in every generation from then until now there have been communities of believers who have sought to live by the content of the Bible. The Bible's language and images have been constantly used, set in fresh contexts and appropriated in the life and liturgies of believing communities down the ages. It has not always been done well (study of church history can often be a sobering experience). Yet when one sees the priority so regularly given to nurture and families, to learning and schools, to care and hospitals, to art and music, to dying and burial, and to the supreme value of faith, hope, and love, one sees a distinctive vision of life. The fact that so many people continuously down the ages have found wisdom and truth in the Bible gives us the expectation that it can do so for us too. We may no longer interpret the Bible identically to those in previous ages, yet there remains real continuity insofar as we still seek to engage those realities of God and life of which the Bible speaks.

Finally, for all the right and proper impact of significant others, we must not just 'go with the crowd', but rather enter for ourselves into the reality of which the Bible speaks. How can we ultimately know that what Jesus says, and by extension what the Bible says, is not just hopeful human imaginings? Jesus in John's Gospel raises this key issue (John 7.16–17). First he makes the claim of what he says originating not just in his human mind but also in the initiative of God: 'Then Jesus answered them, "My teaching is not mine but his who sent me." Then he gives a criterion for the all-important question of how one can validate such a claim: 'Anyone who resolves to do the will of God will know whether the teaching is from God or whether I am speaking on my own.' No amount of just thinking hard or studying extensively can do what is necessary. Rather, one must 'do the will of God' if one is to know. The most important truth cannot be known unless one is willing to engage it with one's whole person – the responsive heart, the believing mind, the faithful action. In the Bible and in God's world, truth and life inseparably belong together.<sup>1</sup>