

1

WHAT IS THE BIBLE ANYWAY?

The Bible is a dangerous book. It is without question one of the most misinterpreted, misunderstood, and misapplied books on the planet. Over the centuries, it has been used as a rationale for economic and social exploitation, the oppression of women and minorities, slavery, war, and genocide. It has fostered anti-Semitism, misogyny, racial animus, homophobia, a variety of extremist movements within Christianity, and every sort of crackpot cult imaginable. Yet the Bible has also been the driving force behind numerous social and political reform movements, as well as the inspiration for some of the greatest art, music, architecture, and literature ever produced. It has influenced our culture's legal codes, philosophy, and ethics, and it continues to be a spiritual and moral guide for millions of people. With such a checkered history, it seems clear that many people are confused about what the Bible is and how it should be used. Thus, before we embark on our journey through the biblical world, it's important and necessary to clarify what the Bible is (and is not), the nature of biblical revelation and biblical truth, and how we should approach the task of interpreting biblical texts.

Some Basic Facts about the Bible

The most obvious thing we know about the Bible is that it is a priceless cultural artifact. The Bible (a term taken from the Greek *ta biblia*, meaning “little scrolls”) is an ancient collection of texts composed principally in Hebrew and Greek with a smattering of Aramaic (a Hebrew dialect). Within its pages readers discover a variety of writings composed over many centuries by many different people in a variety of cultural contexts. The rich diversity of the biblical texts provides us with a unique window into the cultural institutions, values, lifestyles, and practices of the peoples of the ancient Near East. The Bible’s Old and New Testaments bear witness, for example, to the social and political evolution of the people of Israel, as well as the beginnings of the early Christian movement after the death of Jesus.

The Bible is also universally recognized as a classic collection of stories that offer profound insights into the human condition. The books abound with great tales of action, romance, political intrigue, war, and apocalyptic destruction. While the God of Israel is the Bible’s principal player (at least in the Old Testament), the men and women who populate the biblical world

are equally fascinating. They are cowardly and compassionate, barbaric and brilliant, tragic and triumphant. Yet they are not caricatures by any means. These are complex and full-blooded human beings who struggle with God and each other and in the process reveal fundamental truths about the human condition. In engaging their stories, we come to understand better who we are and why we do some of the crazy things we do.

Arguably the most significant (and potentially dangerous) thing we know about the Bible is its status as a divinely inspired text. For Christians, the Bible's authority is grounded in the fundamental belief that God's intentions for humanity are purposely and explicitly revealed there and that they should be honored and obeyed. We are all familiar with the Ten Commandments (or Decalogue), which list prohibitions against murder, theft, adultery, and so on, and there are literally hundreds of other prescriptions found throughout the biblical corpus—613 *mitzvot*, or commandments, to be exact. The Christian Church uses these and other biblical teachings to influence and shape the lives of the faithful, giving them a sense of identity, purpose, and certainty. They can be confident that the way of life presented there is authentic and true because it is revealed (and thus ordained) by God. The problem with this traditional view of the Bible's authority is that it often leads to the mistaken assumption that biblical teachings can be extracted and applied directly to contemporary situations. While a majority of Christian theologians and ethicists reject this approach as uncritical and illegitimate, many practicing Christians continue to use the Bible as a divinely sanctioned rulebook for contemporary morality, citing the biblical texts on questions of divorce, homosexuality, stem-cell research, the status of women in society and religious institutions, the validity of other religions, and other complex issues. Yet the will of God rarely comes to us with the clarity and force of the Decalogue; hence the danger, for the Bible is a notoriously ambiguous text that can be easily misconstrued.

The Ambiguity of the Bible

One of the main sources of ambiguity is the mixed nature of the biblical materials. In addition to narratives, the Bible offers an array of literary genres, including poetry, legal codes, letters, songs, proverbs, parables, and apocalyptic visions. Each genre has its own unique form and content, with the consequence that the messages generated are often contradictory. For example, the misfortunes of Job, a righteous and prosperous patriarch, radically challenge the central message of Proverbs, which teaches that if you “play by God’s rules” you will be blessed. Job and his friends are understandably perplexed because Job’s unjust suffering throws a sizeable monkey wrench into this religious worldview. The kind of tension found within these wisdom writings runs throughout the Bible, confusing many readers, and prompting some to practice “selective reading,” which excludes awkward or troublesome texts from consideration. Adding to the confusion is the biblical practice of mixing historical events with theological reflection.

Contrary to popular opinion, the Bible is not a history book. When we read histories of the Roman Empire, the American Civil War, or the Irish Rebellion, for example, we expect historians to present the material in an objective manner and to get the facts straight. The Bible cannot meet these standards because it is a theological work that is not objective or historically accurate and doesn’t pretend to be. On the contrary, the Bible is unapologetically biased. The authors of the book of Exodus, for instance, use their considerable literary and rhetorical skills to persuade their audience that *Yahweh*, Israel’s patron deity, is more powerful than any earthly ruler and is responsible for the Hebrews’ miraculous escape from Egyptian bondage. Similarly, the writers of the gospels use the basic facts of the life of Jesus and oral traditions about him to construct a religious biography that promotes their understanding of the significance of his life and mission. For these biblical writers, the *facts* of the events are not as important as their *meaning*.

This is not to suggest that the Bible is pure fiction, by any means. Trace memories of historical events are embedded in the biblical accounts. Most historians acknowledge, for example, that the exodus from Egypt, the Babylonian exile, and the crucifixion of Jesus did occur.¹ Yet few would suggest that the biblical writers depicted these events objectively and in historically accurate terms. The Bible, therefore, is not historical in the modern sense of the term. It is more accurately understood as a theological reflection on the divine-human relation in various historical and cultural contexts. The Bible does not present an objective statement of facts and does not strive for historical accuracy; rather, it strives to articulate the experience of God as lived by the people of Israel and the early Christian communities.

The mixed nature of the biblical materials raises the central issue of biblical revelation. Once again, the Bible has a knack for generating extremes. On the one hand, agnostics and atheists often argue that biblical revelation is nothing more than subjective speculation and that the biblical writers were simply deluding themselves—God doesn’t reveal himself in history, only in their fertile imaginations. On the other hand, many faithful readers of the Bible insist that God does communicate to human beings and that the miraculous events of the exodus and the miracles of Jesus occurred exactly as depicted in the Bible. In these cases, biblical revelation is reduced to either subjective fantasy or magic, neither of which is an accurate or acceptable position. In truth, biblical revelation is a much more complex phenomenon that involves intricate connections between faith, human knowing, religious experience, language, and the biblical canon.

The Intricacies of Biblical Revelation

A key component of biblical revelation is faith, which is a fascinating dimension of human subjectivity. Most people understand faith as a pious disposition of religious people, but religious faith is only one example of a complex and universal dimension of human existence. All human beings

display faith in one form or another. But what *is* faith, exactly? The always quotable H. L. Mencken once described faith as “an illogical belief in the occurrence of the improbable.” Many people would agree with that assessment, but a more positive and useful description of faith is a fundamental attitude of openness to reality. All of us are thrust into a dynamic and ever-changing environment that requires some degree of faith if we are to function in it. For instance, we all have faith that the sun will rise tomorrow and we plan our lives accordingly, but faith involves more than the confidence needed to get out of bed in the morning.

Roger Haight has explored the nature of faith and sheds some welcome light on the subject. He describes faith in more substantive terms as a human response to reality that signals “an acceptance of and loyalty to something that commands the whole of human personality in a central and centering way. Faith as such is an existential reality; it consists in the dynamic commitment of the entire person in action.”² Marriage is a good example of the kind of faith Haight is talking about.

When two people marry, they mutually commit themselves and their individual freedoms to the reality of marriage. They enter into the union with the expectation (i.e., with the faith) that the marriage will endure. From the moment they take their vows, they become part of this new reality and perceive the world and each other differently. As a married couple they must adjust their behaviors as individuals in light of the new reality of marriage. In other words, they must “act married.” No more singles bars and all-night parties for them! They must live, work, and plan together as a couple, make joint decisions about finances and family, fulfill each other’s emotional and physical needs, and accept each other’s weaknesses with patience and compassion. Their willingness to work with and accommodate each other indicates their commitment to the marriage, which is the object of their faith. The strength of their commitment will ultimately determine whether the marriage endures or becomes another unfortunate divorce statistic. Similar kinds of commitments are found in friendships, business partnerships, and creative collaborations. The length of the commitment may vary, but the essential structure of the faith response is the same. Thus, faith, at its very core signifies a *relational* mode of being in the world. Faith simply cannot exist without having a relationship of some kind with the object of faith.

Central to any kind of faith relation is knowledge. We have faith in something because we know things about it that warrant our trust. Knowledge of the object of faith is acquired through our engagement with the material world and with the people around us. We know the sun will rise tomorrow because it always has in the past, so we take a leap of faith and scamper (or trudge) out of bed in the morning. Many of us are willing to enter into committed relationships with others because experience has shown us that they are reliable and trustworthy and deserving of our loyalty. We thus enter into relationships in “good faith.” Religious faith is very

different in this regard. While the commitment is the same, the basis for the commitment is not. We can’t acquire knowledge of God in the traditional sense because God is not of this world, but that doesn’t mean that religious faith is pure fantasy or devoid of cognitive content. Knowledge of God’s reality comes to us in a unique way through the experience of revelation.

The Experience of Revelation

In its simplest terms, revelation is God’s self-disclosure and self-communication to human beings in history. God initiates the encounter and the effect on human beings is powerful indeed. In a classic statement on the subject, Rudolf Otto describes the *mysterium tremendum* that is the human encounter with the Wholly Other:

The feeling of it may at times come sweeping like a gentle tide, pervading the mind with a tranquil mood of deepest worship. It may pass over into a more set and lasting attitude of the soul, continuing, as it were, thrillingly vibrant and resonant, until at last it dies away and the soul resumes its “profane,” non-religious mood of everyday experience. It may burst in sudden eruption up from the depths of the soul with spasms and convulsions, or lead to the strangest excitements, to intoxicated frenzy, to transport, and to ecstasy. It has its wild and demonic forms and can sink to an almost grisly horror and shuddering. It has its crude, barbaric antecedents and early manifestations, and again it may be developed into something beautiful and pure and glorious. It may become the hushed, trembling, and speechless humility of the creature in the presence of—whom or what? In the presence of that which is a mystery inexpressible and above all creatures.³

As Otto’s description suggests, the experience of revelation takes many forms. God is revealed through nature, historical persons, and events. Revelation also finds expression in religious worship and in the symbolic language of oracles, songs, prayers, and written texts. What is important to understand here is that revelation doesn’t simply drop from the sky as a fully formed message. Human beings experience the divine and then try to make sense of it, articulating the meaning of the experience through language, art, music, dance, and other creative forms. The encounter is a dynamic and thoroughly historical one that involves reflection, articulation, dialogue, refining reflection, and so on until there is insight or “revelation.”

This process is found in all the major world religions. For Jews, God is disclosed in the long and turbulent history of their survival as a people. Christians believe that God is definitively revealed in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. For Taoists, divine revelation is equated with the all-encompassing reality of the Tao, whereas Muslims encounter the eternal word of Allah in the Qur'an. But how are human beings able to detect God’s self-communication? Is there a special kind of divine radar or

something? Well, the answer is yes and no. The ability of human beings to detect the divine requires a different kind of knowing that involves the human imagination and our lived experience. Roger Haight describes how the faith response to revelation interacts with the imagination.

Let us assume that imagination consists in the human mind forming and projecting images of reality, culled from experience of this world, in a creative way to illuminate further data of experience. Not to be equated with fancy or fantasy in any pejorative sense, imagination functions constructively to creatively react to the data of experience by interpretation of it. One cannot know the transcendent object of faith, but one necessarily forms images of it. There is no “pure” faith experience, for all experience is at the same time interpreting or interpreted experience. One cannot have faith in God without imagining or constructing images of God. . . . Through imagination all human knowledge about this world enters into the process of forming concepts of transcendence within consciousness, of construing, imagining, and interpreting what the object of faith is.⁴

In other words, when we encounter the divine, our imagination constructs images of this encounter with the materials at hand, making God conceptually present to us. In each case, revelation is never direct but is mediated through material objects and modes of expression that are historically and culturally conditioned. This is significant, because it means that the message of revelation is always influenced to some extent by the medium of communication. A useful analogy is found in the encounter with a work of art.

When we gaze upon Vincent van Gogh’s “The Potato Eaters,” for instance, the painting becomes the medium through which van Gogh communicates his vision of the world, but we also gain insight into van Gogh as a creative artist and as a human being. In interpreting his work, we quickly recognize the artistic talent and passionate nature that drove him to break free from the representational art of his day, but closer inspection also reveals his love and respect for common working people, as well as his own sense of sadness and despair. These insights are not revealed directly, but come to us indirectly through the medium of brush, paint, and canvas. In detecting the artist through these materials, our imagination conjures images of van Gogh laboring in his studio, or walking alone through the French countryside, or conversing with the local villagers who would eventually become “The Potato Eaters.” When we leave the art gallery, we feel that we know something about van Gogh, but our knowledge is far from complete. There are aspects to his personality that are not visible through his work but are revealed through other media, such as letters. Reading van Gogh’s many letters to his brother, Theo, would reveal more about the man, but our knowledge of him would still remain incomplete. Divine revelation works in a similar fashion. In encountering the divine, the world is God’s

brush, paint, and canvas, you might say, and our imagination constructs the images that make God conceptually present to us. The knowledge that we acquire about God is genuine, but it is always indirect, varied, and partial.

Acquiring knowledge of God in such a manner is unique, yet there is one more amazing aspect to this process. In detecting the divine in material objects, we perceive and understand the objects themselves differently. As Haight explains,

faith’s interpretation of its object bends back to interpret the world. Although the object of faith transcends the world, still, being in relation to this transcendent object floods light on one’s understanding of the world. Faith has implications not only for how one lives in the world, but also for a qualitative appreciation of the whole realm of finite reality that can be strictly speaking known. For example, from one point of view faith in God as personal does not change the content of one’s understandings of the workings of nature. But from another point of view the interpenetration of this faith with knowing can yield an entirely new context for appraising the same understanding. It is construed differently because of this new expanded horizon and content of consciousness.⁵

In essence, the eyes of faith transform our perception of the material world. It takes on a new appearance and a new significance. Suddenly, a patch of earth, a waterfall, a building, an event can acquire new meaning. For the thousands of men and women who contributed to the traditions of the Bible, their encounters with the divine helped them perceive, interpret, and understand the meaning of their liberation from Egyptian bondage, the horrors of the Babylonian exile, and the life and death of Jesus of Nazareth. Put another way, their encounters with the divine helped them make sense of the non-sense. Yet it’s important to understand that while the sacred is revealed through the material world, it can’t be equated with it—the sacred and the profane are two distinct realms that are held in tension, thus ensuring the integrity of each. Unfortunately, readers of the Bible often collapse this distinction, leading to serious misinterpretations. To understand how this happens, we must consider how language operates as a material medium and as a vehicle for revelation.

Language as a Material Medium and Vehicle for Revelation

One of our unique traits as human beings is our ability to develop and use language. English, Russian, Sanskrit, Swahili, and French are a few examples, and there are literally hundreds of regional dialects. From these languages, we construct verbal and written speech to communicate with each other. As the noted philosopher Paul Ricoeur so aptly phrased it, all human discourse has the intention or purpose of “saying something to someone

about something.”⁶ This common experience of language is what allows us to read an ancient text like the Bible and still have some sense of what the various authors intended to say. Yet our understanding of any text is greatly hampered if we don’t understand the form of discourse the author is using. Discourse is not uniform; it varies according to the subject matter. For instance, a scientist who wants to describe fluctuations in humidity, soil temperature, and plant growth in a field experiment will use a form of discourse very different from that of a poet who wishes to express his impressions of a rain-washed meadow. While both authors may communicate in English and observe the same object (the meadow), their subject matter is very different. The scientist wants to communicate facts about the meadow; the poet wants to communicate its meaning. Thus they use different styles, words, phrases, and sentence structures to communicate with their respective audiences. Similarly, the biblical writers use their own form of discourse to express their experiences of God to their audiences.

The kind of discourse used by the biblical writers is similar to the poet’s in that they both use symbolic forms to communicate meaning. We are all familiar with symbols. The American flag, a Christmas wreath, a totem pole, and a swastika are all symbols; yet we rarely give any thought to how they function or what they represent. Sandra M. Schneiders offers a helpful description.

It must be realized that symbol is not merely a sign, that is, an indicator of something that is other than itself, like an exit sign pointing to a door or a label identifying an object. Nor is a symbol a stand-in, a substitute, for an absent reality like a promissory note representing a future payment. A symbol is, rather, the mode of presence of something that cannot be encountered in any other way. The body, as a person’s way of being present, is a prime instance of a symbol. It focuses our attention on several important notes of the symbol, the most obvious of which is perceptibility. Whether a symbol appeals directly to the senses or is an idea or image in the mind, it is essentially a perceptible reality that mediates what is otherwise imperceptible.⁷

In a religious context, symbols are the linguistic medium through which God reveals God’s self to us. God becomes present—becomes perceptible—through the symbol.

The imperceptibility of God means that all discourse about God is necessarily symbolic. Statements about God are not statements of *fact* (what is perceptible in the material world); they are statements of *meaning* (what we experience and feel when we encounter God). In the Bible, knowledge of God is a symbolic knowledge that is revealed through engaging the symbolic language of the texts. To understand how this process works, we must once again consider the faith response, only this time in relation to the Bible.

THE SWISS ARMY KNIFE THEORY OF LANGUAGE

A Swiss Army Knife is a pocket knife that contains within its handle a number of special-purpose tools, such as a screwdriver, a nail file, a bottle opener, a wire stripper, a corkscrew, scissors, and so on. Each tool is specially designed to perform a specific task. For example, the corkscrew is designed to uncork wine bottles. Although we could cut away the cork with the knife blade, it wasn’t designed for that. The corkscrew is the proper and most efficient tool for that particular job.

Language is like a Swiss Army Knife. As a form of communication, language offers a variety of literary forms (poem, prose, farce, sermon, essay) and categories of discourse (scientific, historical, poetic, instructional, satirical, and so on). Each form uses an appropriate category of discourse to communicate its message. For example, satire is a literary form that uses comedic wit, irony, or sarcasm to expose and ridicule social hypocrisy and other human failings. While it may make interesting reading, we would never consider using satirical discourse for developing an instruction manual; it’s not designed for that purpose. Similarly, the biblical writers used religious literary forms (poem, prose, parable, apocalyptic) and categories of discourse (such as poetic, parabolic, prophetic) to communicate truths about God, the divine-human relation, the human condition, and the ultimate destiny of God’s creation. To read the Bible as literal history or as pure fantasy is to misconstrue the authors’ form of communication.

The Bible and Symbolic Knowing

Most of us read the Bible, and any religious text for that matter, because it purports to say something to us about God, human existence, and our ultimate destiny as human beings. We bring questions about these subjects to the texts and read them with the expectation that we’ll find some meaningful answers. Our willingness to engage the Bible indicates that we are open to—we have faith in—the subject matter presented in the text. Without some degree of openness to ultimate realities, religious discourse cannot speak to us; it becomes mute. If we enter into the symbolic world in “good faith,” however, we encounter a host of religious symbols (e.g., the creation accounts, the story of the exodus, the parables of Jesus, the cross and resurrection) that demand our participation and interpretation.

Our openness to and relationship with the biblical world allows the symbolic forms to draw us into their realm, energizing and activating our minds and our imaginations in the quest for meaning. The parables of Jesus,

for example, describe the kingdom of heaven in images of a mustard seed (Mt 13:31-32), baker's yeast (Mt 13:33), and a farmer's field (Mt 13:24-30). The kingdom of heaven *is like* these things, and our imagination works on the symbols, generating a variety of images and memories of mustard trees, baking bread, and pesky weeds, all of which reveal something about the kingdom. Yet there is always a surplus of meaning that escapes each symbol, revealing their individual inadequacy in expressing the divine. Thus, while we know symbolically that the kingdom of heaven *is like* a mustard seed, it is *more than* a mustard seed. It is also like baker's yeast and a farmer's field, and many other symbolic images that swirl within the biblical world. In each case, the "is" of the symbol is always shadowed by the "is not" that reveals its incompleteness.

In interpreting religious symbolism, we are thus confronted with many potential meanings, none of which are wholly adequate or definitive. Unfortunately, many readers of the Bible are unaware of the dynamics of religious discourse, and this often leads to literal readings of religious symbols. The miracle stories are the most obvious example. Interpreting biblical miracles as literal statements of fact ignores the manner in which knowledge of God is revealed to us. As was noted above, God's self-communication does not destroy the laws of nature; it transforms our perception of nature. Roger Haight explains this distinction in relation to Jesus of Nazareth.

Something becomes a hierophany, a revealer of the sacred, or a receptacle of the holy, and at the same time it continues to participate in its proper worldly environment.... Any attempt to break this tension, to resolve it in favor of either the sacrality or divinity of the symbol on the one hand, or the worldliness or humanity of the symbol on the other, will destroy it as a religious symbol. The theologian encounters God in Jesus; for the historian, Jesus is a human being. The mediating truth of these opposites lies in the symbolic interpretation of Jesus as the Christ.⁸

The dynamic interplay of the "is" and "is not" is clearly at work here. The exodus, the feeding of the five thousand, the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus—all of these events were experienced indirectly and expressed symbolically. They are grounded in history, yet they transcend the historical in their function as symbolic vehicles or receptacles of the divine. God was experienced in all of these events, but not in the literal, magical way that most people understand. Thus, properly understood, biblical revelation is neither fantasy nor magic. It is grounded in human experiences of the divine that are genuine and that do not defy the laws of nature. There is, however, one more dimension of biblical revelation that must be explored if we are to understand how the Bible communicates to us, and it involves the dynamic relationship among the many books that constitute the biblical canon.

Biblical Revelation and the Canon

Within a religious context, *canon* refers to a list of books that the religious community considers authentic and authoritative for their lives. There are several canons of the Bible, including the Jewish canon, the Protestant canon, and the Roman Catholic/Orthodox canon. Each canon arranges the biblical texts in a certain order and includes only those texts that the religious traditions consider authentic and authoritative.⁹ There are notable differences among the lists. The Jewish canon, for example, does not include the New Testament. For Jews, the Bible is the *Tanakh*, which consists of *Torah* (Law),¹⁰ *Nevi'im* (Prophets), and *Kethuvim* (Writings). The Catholic/Orthodox canon includes the texts of the Jewish canon and the New Testament, as well as apocryphal/deuterocanonical books (e.g., Tobit, Ecclesiasticus, Judith, 1 and 2 Maccabees) not included in the Jewish and Protestant canons. The reasons for these variations are complex and interesting, but are not pertinent to our study. What is important to understand, however, is how the canon influences biblical revelation.

As an authoritative list of sacred texts, the canon marks out the parameters of biblical revelation. In the Christian canons, biblical revelation begins with the book of Genesis and ends with the book of Revelation. These canonical boundaries influence biblical revelation by establishing a kind of "symbolic playground" in which the various texts interact. Paul Ricoeur, who has written extensively on this issue, explains that once the texts are apprehended as a canonical whole, "these texts of different origins and intentions work on one another, displacing their respective intentions and points, and they mutually borrow their dynamism from one another. So read, the Bible becomes a great living intertext, which is the place, the space for a labor of the text on itself."¹¹ Grasping the intertextuality of the Bible is important because it means that the tensions and textual contradictions that trouble so many readers are in fact part of the Bible's revelatory strategy.

To use yet another analogy, we could liken the global dimension of biblical revelation to an orchestra performing a symphonic work. Each of the instruments has a distinctive sound and makes a unique contribution to the music as a whole. The composer uses these differences to create certain effects and to communicate the message of the music. One moment we might hear the delicate sounds of flutes, cellos, and violins, blending their voices to create a melodious interlude; the next moment our senses are assaulted by the clash of trombones, clarinets, kettledrums, and piccolos as the orchestra races toward a thunderous crescendo. The interplay between harmony and discord are vital to the composer's musical message. But what if the brass section suddenly stopped playing during a performance? We would undoubtedly lose an important dimension of the work. Imagine Tchaikovsky's *1812 Overture* or Stravinsky's *Firebird Suite* without trombones and French

horns! The Bible is very much like a symphonic work in this regard. The canon is the musical score and the individual texts are the instruments that work together—in harmony and conflict—to tell us a story. Our study will focus on the story communicated in the Old and New Testaments of the Christian canon.

The Story of the Christian Canon

As noted above, the Christian canon begins with Genesis and ends with Revelation. They are the *alpha* and the *omega*, the beginning and the end of the biblical story. Within the biblical world resides an active and providential Creator God, who governs the universe and who takes an active interest in all the inhabitants of his creation. Among the human population there are a host of leading characters (e.g., Adam and Eve, Abraham and Sarah, David, Jesus, and Paul), with hundreds of lesser characters lending their voices to the narrative.

Like all great stories, the biblical narrative is energized by a central conflict that has important existential and ethical dimensions. The plot revolves around the ongoing struggle between God's authority as the creator and sustainer of the universe, and the freedom of his human creatures. While the Genesis creation accounts depict the human condition as one of essential goodness, the willful disobedience of Adam and Eve introduces the reality of sin, which requires God's redemptive activity (and human cooperation) to overcome. The central question that pushes the narrative along is: Will human beings be redeemed from their fallen state? The question hovers in the background as the narrative unfolds. With the first sin of Adam and Eve comes a long and tragic procession of human beings who perform all kinds of despicable deeds: Cain kills his brother Abel; Jacob tricks his brother out of his rightful inheritance; the people of Israel repeatedly commit idolatry; King David has one of his most loyal soldiers murdered so he can claim the man's wife; Judas Iscariot betrays his friend and teacher to the Jewish authorities. The possibilities for human redemption look pretty bleak, but the biblical God is not just the Creator God, he is also the God of hope.

Throughout the narrative, God offers human beings a variety of gifts to help them overcome their sinful tendencies. Paul Ricoeur calls this method of divine governance the *economy of the gift*.¹² In a religious context, “economy” denotes God's governance, maintenance, and ultimate transformation of creation in accordance with the divine plan. A gift economy is a governance structure of pure grace in which human beings receive God's unconditional love and care without a *quid pro quo* or equal exchange between God and human beings. In the Bible, God's unstinting generosity begins with the gift of creation and continues with the gifts of the covenant, the Law, the prophets, the gospel, and many others. All of the gifts are intended to help human beings learn how to be in right relation with God, with each other, and with the created order. For Christians,

God's quintessential gift is the sending of the Savior, Jesus Christ, who defeats death and returns at the *eschaton* (Gr. “the last thing”) to destroy evil, judge the living and the dead, and usher in a new age of righteousness and justice.

The central truth claim of the biblical narrative is a hopeful one, proclaiming that redemption will indeed be accomplished. The evil and sin that dominate the world will not defeat God's good intentions for creation, which are established in the Genesis creation accounts and renewed in the final pages of Revelation:

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away.” (Rev 21:1-4)¹³

This is the overarching narrative (complete with “happy ending”) that arises within the Christian canon. While the overall structure takes a narrative form, the canon does not prevent the voices of the individual genres from being heard. On the contrary, the canonical structure depends upon textual diversity—as well as textual harmony and conflict—to tell the whole story. After all, redemption is but one of the many truths proclaimed in the Bible's “musical score.” There are others, which we will explore in the chapters that follow. Before leaving the topic of biblical revelation, however, it is vital that we have an understanding of the nature of these biblical truths.

The Nature of Biblical Truth

Often people think that the “truth” of the Bible rests on whether the stories can be historically or scientifically verified, but such a standard is inappropriate for the Bible because of its symbolic nature. It would be like judging whether our poet's impressions of a rain-washed meadow are consistent with the scientist's data or whether the colors van Gogh uses to portray “The Potato Eaters” are true to their historical counterparts. So how do we assess the validity of the Bible? The answer lies in understanding the kinds of truth claims symbolic texts make.

As was mentioned above, we all use language with the understanding that its primary intention is to relate human existence to the world, that is, to say something to someone about something. While the literary genres of the Bible are quite diverse, they all speak about the lives of fallible human

beings who grapple with common experiences of suffering, death, fear, doubt, peace, and joy, and who recognize a transcendent source of value and goodness in their encounter with the Wholly Other. The significance or truth value of biblical revelation is based on how well their experiences speak to and illuminate our own struggle as human beings. Clarence Walhout explains the reasoning behind this comparative process:

Our interest in the people, places, and plots of stories is related to our insatiable curiosity about how people act in situations of conflict. That interest is natural, of course, because that is so much of what life is about: how to deal with problems and stressful situations that come our way. Our uncertainties and fears drive us to seek answers beyond ourselves and our immediate circumstances . . . , [thus] we look to fictional stories as well as to actual life and history to give us examples that will confirm or guide or explain or point out new directions for our actions. We read for many reasons, but underlying them all is that in fictional narratives we are encountering patterns of action that help us understand or come to grips with conflicts and issues that we face in real life.¹⁴

Although Walhout is speaking of fictional texts, his description pertains to the Bible as well. We continue to turn to the Bible as a spiritual and moral guide because the voices of the various characters “ring true” with our own experience, and the attitudes and behaviors of the characters (both good and bad) provide us with possible alternatives for our own lives. The Christian canonical narrative offers a helpful example.

The central message of the narrative is the promise of future redemption, which is based on the experience of biblical characters with their God. They have faith in their God and hope in future redemption because they have lived and fought and prayed with their God. They have come to *know* this God through their many encounters and are in a position to trust the promise. In engaging the biblical texts, we naturally compare and assess their experience of God with our own. Their God is our God; their experience is analogous with and illuminates our own experience. Thus we, too, can believe in God’s promise, because even though redemption is a future possibility, the experience of God we share with the biblical characters makes the promise worthy of belief. The biblical claim that human redemption will be accomplished is thus judged to be a truthful one.

Biblical truth is not always so comforting or pleasant, however. The Bible has a nasty habit of throwing a mirror up to the human condition and showing us some very ugly truths about ourselves. Our souls are also laid bare in the stories of Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel, Jacob, and David, showing us that we are just as selfish, cruel, and unjust as they were. Similarly, the teachings of Jesus often force us to see ourselves from a new and often unflattering perspective. Such is the nature of biblical truth. Whether the claims are

about God, good and evil, or the human condition, biblical truths are not statements of empirical fact that can be verified through scientific or historical data; rather, they are insights into human existence that we understand as true because we *recognize* their truth in our own experience.

The existential nature of biblical truth has important implications for understanding the nature of biblical authority. As was mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, Christians have traditionally recognized the Bible as authoritative because of its divine origin. The laws, values, and norms found in the Bible are regarded as normative in the strong sense, that is, they are intended to structure and guide the spiritual and moral lives of the faithful. Yet the dynamic nature of biblical truth suggests that the Bible’s authority is derived principally not from its normative function but from its illuminative function, from its ability to offer alternative visions of reality that have ultimate significance for human beings. When taken as a whole, these symbolic images establish the necessary foundation for other truth claims that have yet to be experienced by human beings, such as the final judgment and the resurrection. The existential truths proclaimed in the biblical texts thus pave the way for a life of faith and hope.

The existential nature of biblical truth also has important implications for the potential audience of the Bible. Can people from other faiths or people who have no particular spiritual sense engage the Bible in any meaningful way? The nature of biblical truth would seem to suggest that they can and should, because at its very core, the Bible reveals what it means to be fully human, despite the evil and suffering that afflict all human beings. While the Christian canons make very specific truth claims about the life and work of Jesus as prophet and Messiah, these claims cannot be assessed until readers encounter them in the biblical world and compare them with their own experience. Whether the readers are Christians, Jews, Buddhists, or Taoists is not as crucial as whether they trust in the ability of the biblical texts to disclose fundamental truths about the meaning of human existence. Thus, the Bible, the Tao Te Ching, the Qur'an, the Bhagavad Gita and other sacred texts are books that all people should read, reflect upon, and potentially appropriate for their spiritual and moral lives.

To summarize thus far, this chapter has attempted to liberate the Bible from the many misconceptions and misunderstandings people have about its revelatory content, its method of communication, its source of authority, and its truth claims. Of course, understanding the inner workings of the Bible raises the critical issue of interpretation. How do we approach such a complex and multi-dimensional text? The initial answer is simple: with the proper attitude! Given its controversial history, we must recognize and acknowledge that the Bible is indeed a dangerous book, and, as such, it confronts all readers with a challenge and an obligation. We’ll conclude the chapter with a brief discussion of these dimensions of biblical interpretation and how we will approach the Bible in the chapters that follow.

The Challenge of Biblical Interpretation

The challenge the Bible presents to all readers—regardless of interest, experience, or faith (or lack thereof)—is to interpret the texts thoroughly, which means not only understanding the nature of biblical revelation, but also employing some of the established tools of biblical criticism. In making this statement, we're not suggesting that all readers become fluent in the Bible's original languages of Greek, Hebrew, and Aramaic. On the contrary, many biblical interpreters depend on translations of the Bible, as well as on biblical commentaries, Bible dictionaries, and other resources for biblical interpretation. Armed with these tools, readers are ready to perform the first task of biblical interpretation, which is *exegesis*. Exegesis is a Greek word that means “to lead out.” It is an appropriate term, because the aim of biblical exegesis is to lead out or explain what the text meant for its original audience. Michael J. Gorman describes the nature of the work:

To engage in exegesis is to ask historical questions of the text, such as “What situation seems to have been the occasion for the writing of this text?” Exegesis also means asking literary questions of the text, such as “What kind of literature is this text, and what are its literary aims?” Furthermore, exegesis means asking questions about the religious, or theological, dimensions of the text, such as “What great theological question or issue does this text engage, and what claims on its readers does it make?” Exegesis means not being afraid of difficult questions such as “Why does this text seem to contradict that one?” Finally, exegesis means not fearing discovery of something new or puzzlement over something apparently insoluble. Sometimes doing exegesis means learning to ask the right questions, even if the questions are not immediately resolved. In fact, exegesis may lead to greater ambiguity in our understanding of the text itself, of its meaning for us, or both.¹⁵

As Gorman's summary suggests, the exegetical task can be a daunting one, but thorough exegesis is a critical first step in the interpretive process because understanding what a text meant for its original audience acts as a standard and check against *eisegesis* (from the Greek *eis* meaning “into”). Eisegesis occurs when an exegete (the one who is doing the “leading”) reads meaning into a text rather than allowing the text to reveal its own meaning, which is embedded in the historical, literary, and religious dimensions of the text. Eisegesis is one of the primary reasons why the Bible is misapplied; eisegesis should be avoided as much as possible.

With an adequate grounding in the meaning of the text for its original audience, the exegete then proceeds to the task of *hermeneutics*. The term is derived from the mythical character Hermes, the messenger of the Greek gods. Once again, the designation fits, for hermeneutics attempts to carry the meaning of the biblical text into a contemporary setting. The practice

combines exegetical investigation with critical reflection and imaginative construal to effect a “conversation” between the world generated by the biblical texts and the world of the reader. Although the text and the reader bring very different perspectives and questions to the encounter, the goal is to orchestrate a “fusion of horizons” between the two worlds, a fusion that generates meaning. For instance, a reader's conversation with the story of Cain and Abel would inquire into the historical, literary, and religious elements that produced the texts (the exegetical task), as well as introduce questions about sin, jealousy, pride, punishment, and mercy as they are experienced in Cain and Abel's world and in the world of the reader (the hermeneutical task). When the dialogue is completed, the reader then assesses the significance and relevance of the text's meaning for his or her life.

If the conversation with the text is performed properly, it is always lively and thought-provoking, but never “objective.” That is to say, all interpreters bring presuppositions to the text that invariably influence the result. Theologians and clergy, for example, often read the Bible through the lens of their theological traditions, feminists read it from a liberationist perspective, archaeologists from a historical viewpoint, and so on. Moreover, factors such as gender, race, age, education, political persuasion, and life experience all influence the conversation. Part of the challenge in reading the Bible is to be clear and forthcoming about what these presuppositions and factors are and how they will influence the interpretive process.

Two critical points must also be kept in mind. First, the symbolic nature of religious discourse and the diversity of interpretive perspectives mean that no person or religious tradition can lay claim to a definitive or “correct” reading of the Bible. That is not to suggest that all readings are created equal. On the contrary, judgments about legitimacy and adequacy must be made to guard against eisegesis and other abuses. Nevertheless, the exegete must be willing to acknowledge that the Bible has a revelatory integrity and autonomy that transcends all historical locations and individual perspectives. We encounter the biblical texts just as Moses encountered Yahweh in the burning bush—they are revealed at the very moment of encounter.

The second point is related to the first and has to do with interpreting the religious experience of others. Many of the contributors to the Bible were the recipients of original revelation, which they expressed through symbolic language. Thousands of years later, we, as interpreters, are reading and interpreting these symbolic forms. Although we are several steps removed from the original experience of revelation (as were many of the biblical writers), the process that accompanies symbolic knowledge still holds. In engaging the biblical texts, we are encountering God through the symbols, which are the material marks or traces that make God present to us. Although the original authors selected the symbols, our imagination plays with them, generating images from a twenty-first-century world, images that the authors may or may not have considered or even intended. This means that with each new reader comes the possibility of new insight within the symbolic playground of the canon. Such is the dynamic nature

of biblical revelation. It is always indirect, varied, partial, and *ongoing*. The challenge for all exegetes is to assess the validity of the new insight in light of the old and strike the proper balance between tradition and innovation.

The Obligation of Biblical Interpretation

The obligation that the Bible presents to all its readers is to apply the texts responsibly. Given the Bible's complexity, this is easier said than done. The difficulties in using the Bible as a moral source are numerous and complex. The most obvious difficulty is cultural. As an ancient text, the Bible is a product of its own time, customs, values, and religious perspectives that are quite different from our own. We have argued in this chapter that a responsible exegete cannot extract biblical morality from the Bible's literary and theological contexts and apply it directly to contemporary situations without considerable risk of misapplication. Complicating the task is the diversity of the ethical materials. The Bible's many legal codes, prophetic oracles, wisdom writings, and teachings are unique and often require different approaches to interpretation and use. The parables of Jesus, for example, cannot be interpreted and applied in the same manner as the commandments, and even they have their own theological and literary contexts that must be considered. Still another problem is the sheer number of ethical materials. Selections have to be made and reasons given as to why certain texts are chosen and others excluded. The danger, of course, is "selective reading" for the sake of theological or ethical consistency.

The Bible is also limited by the kinds of questions it can address. Scripture is simply not equipped to consider some contemporary issues, such as the morality of stem-cell research or same-sex unions—at least not directly. So, what are responsible exegetes to do? The answer lies in how we perform the hermeneutical task, because the results of the interpretive process largely determine the method we use to apply the texts.

Often when the Bible is used for moral guidance, readers bring an ethical issue to the text (such as war, divorce, sexuality), and then try to find relevant passages to determine what the Bible has to say on the matter. If pertinent passages are found, they are read and assessed and judged in conjunction with other acknowledged sources for moral reflection, such as reason, religious tradition, and human experience. The problem with this selective approach is that it does not adequately consider the symbolic and global nature of biblical revelation. Ethical content is still being extracted from its original context, with all the dangers and complications that such a move entails. In considering what the moral teachings of the Bible might mean for contemporary audiences, this study will employ a different approach.

Interpreting Scripture from a Global, Theocentric Perspective

In engaging the biblical texts, we shall shift our gaze away from specific moral issues and discrete texts and adopt a more global, theocentric (God-

centered) perspective. Paul Ricoeur provides the guiding principle for our analysis in his descriptions of the intertextuality of the Bible and its economy of the gift. As was noted above, he understands the biblical canon as a "great living intertext" that provides a space for "a labor of the text on itself." Our journey through the biblical world will focus on the intertextual dynamics of the Christian canon with the purpose of discovering God's intentions in the texts as a whole. In reviewing the canonical narrative, we know that God's ultimate intention for humanity is redemption, but there are other, more practical goals. God also enters into relationship with human beings to teach them how to live fully human lives with God, with each other, and in community. This divine strategy is revealed in the Bible's economy of the gift, which will be the subject for the chapters that follow.

The book will analyze major portions of the Bible's canonical narrative, including Genesis, Exodus, Isaiah, the Gospel of Matthew, Paul's letter to the Galatians, and key passages in Romans. As the narrative unfolds, the God of Israel offers Adam and Eve, Noah, Abraham, Moses, the Hebrew slaves, and the people of Israel a variety of gifts to help them overcome their sinful tendencies and achieve some degree of righteousness before God. In reading the texts, we will consider the meaning of the gifts for the Bible's original audience and for contemporary readers. We will reflect on the historical, theological, literary, ethical, and canonical dimensions as we wend our way through their stories. While our textual analyses consider the content ("the what") of biblical morality, our main focus will be on God's approach to developing biblical morality ("the how"). The central question guiding the reading is thus a methodological one: How does God develop and use these gifts to help human beings fulfill the divine intentions, grow and mature in their faith, and construct their own moralities within the biblical world? The basic strategy is to highlight the pedagogical dimensions of God's redemptive activity and then assess their value as a model and method for constructing contemporary Christian ethics.

Chapters 2 through 5 explore the divine gifts of creation, covenant, the Mosaic Law, and the prophets as presented in Genesis, Exodus, and Isaiah. The readings in the Old Testament focus on God's relationship with Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel, Noah and his progeny, Abraham, Moses, and the people of Israel. They reveal that Yahweh is a mysterious but accessible deity who creates and continually hones a progressive program for human development that coincides with the divine plan for salvation. This structural frame combines universal values and norms with concrete practical strategies to address the needs (and failings) of the biblical characters within their particular literary contexts. Although the framework is foundational, it's hardly static. Yahweh frequently revises the structure, offering, as the need arises, new gifts to guide and shape his creatures as they move toward spiritual and moral maturity. In each case, God presents them (either directly or through his agents) with an ethical ideal and then provides a practical program (a biblical morality) to help them realize it.

Moving to the New Testament, we find God's pedagogical strategies and plan for salvation jeopardized (at least momentarily) by the conflict between Jews and Jewish Christians over the identity of Jesus of Nazareth. This bitter and often violent family feud is reflected in the anti-Judaism of the New Testament and other Christian writings—a shameful legacy that continues to divide the human family today. To understand how the conflict influenced the formation and content of early Christian writings, chapter 6 explores the development of Palestinian Judaism, the emergence of the Jesus movement, and the breakdown in Jewish-Christian relations in the first centuries. Analysis of the conflict shows that the impasse between Jews and Christians is the result of their theological and interpretive biases, which blind both groups to the possibility that God's salvific initiative in Jesus might take multiple forms; that is to say, at one moment in time God calls the prophet, Jesus, to show his chosen people the path to true righteousness under the Law, and then, at another moment in time, God raises his dead prophet, transforming him into a concrete symbol of universal salvation—an initiative first introduced in Isaiah and extended in the prophetic mission and sacrificial death of Jesus.

Chapters 7 and 8 make this case, exploring the dual roles of Jesus as Jewish prophet and Christian Messiah as presented in the Gospel of Matthew and Paul's letters to the Galatians and Romans. Reading these texts from a global, theocentric perspective reveals how God's gift of the prophet-Messiah mediates their differences. In this configuration, the dual roles of Jesus are held in creative tension, extending their salvific power to both groups, offering Jews and Christians the possibility of salvation through faith in God, a faith that Abraham first introduced and modeled and that Jesus perfectly realized, a faith that makes both the Mosaic Law and the Christ-event effective vehicles of salvation, a faith that grounds and unites both traditions without privileging one over the other. The final chapter considers the implications of our study for the interpretation and use of the Bible for Christian ethics and for furthering interfaith dialogue.

Our journey of discovery will begin—as all things do—with Genesis and the divine gift of creation.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. Return to the brief paragraph you wrote after reading the Introduction. Now reconsider your answers. How has this chapter affirmed, challenged, or altered your understanding of the Bible and how it functions as a revelatory text? How do you understand the challenge and responsibility of biblical interpretation?

2. Roger Haight states that “One cannot have faith in God without imagining or constructing images of God.” What does he mean? What images of God have you constructed over the years? How have your images changed? What do these changes (or what does the lack of changes) suggest about your relationship with God?

Recommended Reading

Alter, Robert, and Frank Kermode, eds. *The Literary Guide to the Bible*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987. A valuable collection of essays from literary and biblical specialists that explores different literary approaches to reading the Bible.

Gorman, Michael J. *Elements of Biblical Exegesis: A Basic Guide for Students and Ministers*. Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 2001. A user-friendly introduction to the art and science of biblical interpretation.

Livingston, James C., ed. *Anatomy of the Sacred: An Introduction to Religion*. 5th ed. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Prentice Hall, 2005. A comprehensive, accessible, and well written introduction to the study of religion in a variety of cultural contexts.

McKim, Donald K. *Westminster Dictionary of Theological Terms*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996. A handy dictionary for biblical and theological study.

Schneiders, Sandra M. *The Revelatory Text: Interpreting the New Testament as Sacred Scripture*. New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1991. A highly regarded analysis of the process of biblical interpretation, the nature of religious language and scripture, and use of the Bible as a book of the church.