

The Bible – What is its Importance?

In this article we are going to explore the question: Is the bible written by humans reflecting their understanding of the sacred or is it the inerrant word of God?

Or as Shakespeare may have put it: “Is this a book I see before me”: “Nay Macbeth it is the Holy word, methinks it is a passport to heaven, a secret message from the lips of the divine.” A book or a holy word what shall we name it, does it matter, because a rose by any other name is still a rose.”

One of the first questions we must ask ourselves is: “Is the account of the Bible trustworthy? If we are searching for an authentic picture of Jesus of Nazareth then which translation of the Bible should we use? The King James Version or the New Revised Standard Version or the New International Version, perhaps we should be reading the Jerusalem Bible? Our tradition suggests that the Bible gives a coherent view of Jesus is this true?

The majority of Christian denominations be they Catholic or Protestant persist with an “unexamined Biblical literalism, which assumes the Bible to be an historically accurate document and that the gospels offer a coherent collective biography of Jesus.

Before we go any further; perhaps we have ask ourselves what is the most important influence in our belief; Is it the person of Jesus, or is it the being of God; or is it the Holy Spirit or is it the bible? Many studies report the bible is more precious to people than any other factor. Some preachers will tell you that they can be critical about the person of Jesus, but if the challenge the reliability of the bible the roof is likely to cave in. There are many stories in the bible that can of course be challenged, yet for many people today the inerrancy of the bible is still of prime importance.

If the bible is not literally true then how true is it? If scripture is not scientifically or historically reliable is it reliable in other ways? Is scripture inspired and is it inspired more than other writings? Closely related to these questions is the question regarding the authority of the canon? Is the canon a divine compilation? Why have these books been chosen whilst others have been rejected?

What many scholars have found in introducing the work of the Jesus Seminar is that we must be prepared to work through the issues raised by these questions both intellectually and emotionally. In Stephen Patterson’s examination of these questions he suggests that we must begin with the premise that ‘history’ and ‘truth’ are not necessarily the same thing. Whatever we might say about the historical accuracy of a ‘saying’ or ‘tradition’, will not necessarily mean we have said anything of value about the existence of God. Did others also speak profound truths, before and after Jesus?

Secondly, most orthodox believers hold that the bible has been divinely inspired by the Holy Spirit, yet this is not something the early Christians believed. They believed that the Holy Spirit inspired the Community of Faith. The early Christians located the Spirit activity not in the writings, but in the life of the community.

Thirdly the development of the canon was slow in coming. Before printing presses the concept of reproducing a book consistently was not possible. So the first decision on the contents of the bible was not made until 1546 at the Council of Trent. During the formation of the canon there were many changes, omissions and additions. As a result we need to conclude that the Bible is not the unchanging reality that our higher values of biblical authority might suggest.

When I was studying in college majority of my fellow students believed that the Bible was the inerrant word of God if not totally, certainly through divine inspiration of thought. Most believed that the bible contained no mistakes and to think otherwise was misguided or even heretical. This was difficult to accept, because we do not have the original manuscripts, but copies of copies of copies. Further more, each copy had the risk of being inaccurate, because the scribes who produced them inadvertently or intentionally changed them in places. So rather than having the inspired originals we actually have error ridden copies.

In the bible there are many situations where there are contradictions and mistakes, for instance in Mark's gospel when he refers to a situation with King David he confuses the high priest of the time with that person's father. Is it possible that Mark made a mistake? Further, did Jesus die on the day after the Passover as Mark suggests, or the day before as suggested by John? Did Mary and Joseph return to Nazareth as reported by Luke or did they flee to Egypt as Matthew indicates after the birth of Jesus?

Almost all credible New Testament scholars have come to the conclusion that the Bible is not the fully inspired inerrant word of God. They have come, some painfully, to the conclusion that the bible is a book written by fallible human beings. Just as human scribes had copied and changed the texts of scripture, so too have the human authors who originally wrote the texts of scripture. The bible was written by different human authors, at different times and in different places, to address different needs.

The Bible at the end of the day is a very human book, as it was at the beginning.

How difficult is it for us to accept the possibility that the words of scripture are human words? And what if the Bible is not a blueprint answer to all our needs, it simply means that we have to work out for ourselves how to respond to the questions of the modern age; such as our reaction to the wars in Afghanistan

or Iraq, or to abortion, women's rights, gay rights or the value of western democracy.

All of this suggests that whatever value and authority the bible has for us it is not because it is directly inspired by God, or without error in every respect, but because its texts have over time proven to be useful in the activation of the Christian faith. If the authority of the bible is in question today, it is not because of doubts about its historical accuracy, but because of doubts about its support for modern, enlightened Christian ideas and practices such as the assumed inferiority of women, or the sinfulness of homosexuality. The challenge for us in the future is to understand the bible and its role for us in the 21st century. The fact that it has been written by fallible human beings does not change its importance, but we cannot set the bible up as some false idol because it worked for us in the past.

Recommended further reading:

Marcus Borg "Reading the Bible Again for the First Time"

Bart Ehrman "Lost Christianities"