

CHAPTER 2

WHAT IS THE BIBLE? – HOW DID IT COME TO BE WRITTEN AND WHY SHOULD WE BELIEVE IT?

¹⁶All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, ¹⁷so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.

2 Timothy 3:16-17 (NIV)

For the word of God is living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword, and piercing as far as the division of soul and spirit, of both joints and marrow, and able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart.

Hebrews 4:12 (NASB)

Throughout this book there will be frequent quotations from the Bible. I have included these to explain and justify the points I am making. However, that begs the question “*Why should we believe what the Bible says?*” In part it is a matter of faith, but only in part. We can prove that the Bible is true. It is an extraordinary and unique book which came into existence by a series of miracles. Its contents are so amazing that they cannot be simply the words of men.

The Bible was physically written by men. Each book or letter reflects the different styles and personalities of those men. But each writer was inspired by God so that they were saying what God wanted to say to us through them. The Bible is therefore, in effect, written by God Himself. It is His own Word to us. That is why we must value it and devote our lives to learning it. It is infallible. Everything in it is true. It is not merely some men’s opinions. It is the truth, told to us by God Himself.

That puts it into a class of its own. By reading the Bible you can find out what God Himself wants to say to you. Once they realise that, how can any wise person not want to read it and reread it to find out what God wants to say? Therefore, I urge you to read the whole Bible for yourself. Look how it is amazingly interwoven, even though it was written in stages over about 1,500 years by 40 different people. Even a modern computer would not be able to arrange all the countless interconnections. It is like a “relational database” in computing terms. It is all cross referenced with itself and inter-related. There is no other book like it, anywhere in the world.

Who wrote the Bible and when?

The Bible consists of 66 separate books or letters written by 40 different men, starting with Moses in about 1,500 BC. He wrote the first five books of the Bible: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy. These five books are, together, called “*The Law of Moses*” or “*The Torah*”. In the book of Genesis, Moses gives the history of the world from the first moment of creation, right through to the formation of the Jewish nation, from the family line of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Then, in the second book, Exodus, Moses tells of how the Israelites were set free by God from Egypt where they had been kept as slaves.

These first five books are foundational to the whole Bible. Everything else builds on them. The sixth book is written by Joshua. He tells of how he took over the leadership of the nation of Israel after Moses died and then led the Israelites into the Promised Land, establishing the nation of Israel, which is at the very centre of God’s plan for our salvation and also for Jesus’ future Kingdom. It then continues, book by book, until we come to the book of Malachi, which is the last book of what we call the “Old Testament”.

When we refer to the “*Old Testament*”, we mean all those books from Genesis through to Malachi which are accepted as Scripture by the Jewish people. By “*Scripture*” we mean something which is

effectively written by God, because the human author is inspired by God to write it. That is what happened with each of the men who wrote the books of the Old and New Testaments. I have mentioned Moses and Joshua. Each of them were leaders of Israel. However, many different kinds of men wrote the other books.

Most of them were what we call “*Prophets*”. That means someone who was recognised by the Jewish people as having been sent by God to speak on God’s behalf to the people. In a certain sense, we can all do that from time to time. We can speak to our neighbours or to the people at work. God can use anyone to speak for Him. However, a prophet in the biblical sense is someone who does this on a much larger scale. Many of the men who wrote the Bible were prophets, such as Isaiah or Jeremiah. They told the Jewish people what God wanted to say and they wrote it down so that we can now all benefit from it.

One amazing thing the Bible does is to tell us about the future. A very high percentage of the Bible consists of prophecy. God does this for a number of reasons. Firstly, he wants us to understand what lies ahead so that we can be equipped and prepared to face it. Secondly, He wants to prove the truth of the Bible. He does this by giving hundreds of different prophecies about what will happen. Then, as those come to be fulfilled to the letter, it verifies the truth of the Bible generally. No other book in the history of the world has ever been able to do anything even remotely like this. Only the Bible can tell you what will happen in the future.

About 80% of the prophecies in the Bible have already been fulfilled. A large number of them had to do with the birth, life and death of Jesus Christ Himself. That is because He is the central figure of the whole Bible. Almost everything in it, from beginning to end is, in some way, pointing to Him. However, prophecies are also made about many other things to do with the future of Israel and of the whole world. Thus if 80% of the prophecies have been fulfilled exactly in every detail, then we ought to be interested in what the other 20% of the prophecies are about. We can expect them to be literally fulfilled as well. So, if you are wise, one of your purposes in reading the Bible will be to learn what it has to say about the future. Then you can know what history is leading towards.

The Bible is also about the whole history of God’s past dealings with the human race, but especially with His chosen people, Israel. That is a central theme. However, it also covers a whole range of other different subjects and types of writing, i.e. history, law, poetry, letters, instruction, doctrine and teaching/explanation.

There is also “*wisdom literature*”, such as the books of Proverbs and Ecclesiastes. These books contain a wealth of instruction on how to live successfully. They cover business, marriage, money, work, farming, education, commerce, military matters, civil government, village life, neighbourliness, health, and so on. The advice given will revolutionise your whole life if you follow it. People are willing to take advice from all sorts of different people, many of whom may not even be qualified to give it. Yet the advice given in Proverbs and Ecclesiastes comes from God Himself. If you listen to it and put it into practice, it is life changing. No other book can offer you that.

How to find references in the Bible

Underneath each Bible quotation I put what is called a “reference”. For example, at the beginning of this chapter there is a quotation, i.e. 2 Timothy 3:16-17. That means verses 16 and 17 from chapter three of apostle Paul’s second letter to a man called Timothy. We will look now at how a Bible reference is broken down so you can see what it means.

The first part of the reference gives you the name of the book or letter. For example, it might say “Genesis” or “Romans” or “Revelation”. Each of the 66 books of the Bible has got its own shorthand name like that which we use for convenience. So instead of saying “Apostle Paul’s letter to the Christians in Rome” we simply say “Romans”, i.e. naming it after the recipients of the letter. Many of

the books in the Old Testament are instead named after their human author, such as Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Daniel etc.

However if the author has written more than one book or letter, or if the recipient has been sent more than one letter, then you will find a number at the front. For example we say 1 Timothy and 2 Timothy. That number at the front tells you whether it is the first or second letter to Timothy. Likewise, where the letter is named after its author, but he has written more than one letter, then the number at the front tells you which letter it is. For example apostle Peter wrote two letters so we say “1 Peter” and “2 Peter”. The apostle John wrote three letters, so we call these “1 John”, “2 John” and “3 John”. However, John’s gospel is just called “John”.

The next part of the reference is the chapter number. So, if we say “Daniel 3” then we mean the 3rd chapter of Daniel. If however we extend the reference to say Daniel 3:1 then we mean verse 1 within chapter 3 of Daniel. When the Bible was first written each book or letter was just one continuous whole. They were not broken down into chapters or verses at all. Since then, for convenience, and so that we can quote more easily, men have artificially subdivided the Bible. It has been cut into large blocks which we call chapters and then into small chunks which are called verses. That is how you can now find anything that you want to quote from.

This has many advantages but it also has some disadvantages. The main problem of thinking in terms of quotations and references is that it encourages people just to read little snippets of the Bible in isolation. There is a danger in that. It is possible to take what is being said out of context and misunderstand it. The safest policy is to read the Bible in whole books or letters. Then you get the context and background and understand what is said in its proper setting.

Even the things we say in day to day life can only be properly understood if we hear the context and setting in which the statement was made. The same is true with the Bible. Therefore it is wise to try to read an entire letter in one sitting so that you get the full flow of what is being said. Often each part of the letter or book is drawing upon and referring to other parts of that letter or book. They hold together as a whole document. Isn’t that exactly how you would read a letter written to you today? You wouldn’t normally expect to just look at single sentences on their own. If you did, you could easily misunderstand things.

How to interpret the Bible – adopting “the golden rule” as our starting point

We can get ourselves into an awful mess by not knowing how to interpret the Bible. However, we can avoid most of those problems by adopting the following approach as our starting point. This is often referred to as “the golden rule”. That is to simply **take everything that is said at its literal, ordinary, face value meaning unless the words used, or the context, clearly indicate that you are meant to do otherwise.**

Most of the time the Bible simply means exactly what it is saying in plain and literal terms. That, therefore, is how it should usually be taken. However, there are other times when the Bible is obviously using metaphors, analogies or other figures of speech. You need to recognise devices like that or you will miss part of the meaning.

However, even when the Bible is using a figure of speech, the message being conveyed is still the truth. Even in our own everyday language we instinctively know when to take a thing literally and when devices like metaphors or analogies are being used. For example, if someone said to you “*It is raining very heavily*” you would know that that is a literal, face value statement which means exactly what it says. There is no literary technique or device being used there. It is plain speech.

If however that person said “*It is raining cats and dogs*”, you would know instinctively that in the English language that is a figure of speech. It is obviously not to be taken literally, because there are

no cats or dogs falling from the sky. However, that does not mean that the statement is untrue. It is still true that it is raining heavily. It is simply that the speaker has chosen to use a figure of speech to express that fact more vividly. Thus, in both cases, it is literally true that it is raining heavily.

Now let's look at some examples of different types of speech from the Bible: When Jesus said to a woman who was caught in adultery "*Neither do I condemn you. Go and sin no more*", He was just using simple direct speech. He meant exactly what He said and there were no figures of speech involved.

However, when Jesus said "*I am the door*" or "*I am the vine and you are the branches*" He was using figures of speech. Yet the meaning that He is conveying in those phrases is still true. Therefore it is not literally true that Jesus is a door, but it is true that He is "*the*" door. He means that He is the only way that we can get to God or find salvation.

Likewise, He is not literally a vine, and we are not literally branches, but it is factually true that He is what that figure of speech meant. It means He is the one and only source from which we can obtain eternal life. Apart from Him we cannot have that life, just as a branch cannot live unless it is attached to the vine.

If you apply the golden rule of interpretation as your starting point throughout the Bible, you will save yourself from a lot of mistakes and problems. Everything in the Bible is true. You simply need to use common sense and read everything in context in order to get the proper meaning.

The Bible is infallible

Beware of people who "explain away" the Bible or assume that it does not really mean what it says. The Bible always means what it says and is always true. There are no errors or contradictions in it. That is one of the reasons why we know that it is inspired by God, because it is 100% perfect. By that I mean that it is perfect in its original Hebrew or Greek, i.e. the languages it was written in. The Bible is not necessarily free of errors when we go on to translate it into English. When we translate it we can go wrong, unless we have good scholarship and follow the golden rule, as above, as our starting point for interpreting it.

The Bible is factually true and is meant to be taken literally. However, we *also* need to recognise things such as types and prophetic patterns when they arise.

Most of the time we are meant to take the Bible literally. We are supposed to accept the plain, everyday meaning of the words on the page, unless a figure of speech is clearly being used. That approach should always be our *starting point*. However, we should not *stop* there.

We need to be aware that the Bible was written by Jewish men, not by Westerners with a Greek way of thinking. The prophets and apostles had a Hebraic mind set and they engaged in what is known in Hebrew as '*midrash*'. Therefore they were very comfortable about seeing additional layers of meaning, over and above, *but not instead of*, the plain, literal meaning.

This Jewish approach to interpreting the Bible is explained more fully in Book Three, which deals with how we are meant to study the Bible as a whole. However, for our present purposes, let it suffice to say that *as well as* taking the Bible literally and accepting that the plain, everyday meaning is factually true, we *also* need to be alert to see *types* and *prophetic patterns* wherever they genuinely arise.

A '*type*' is where a person or event is a shadow or forerunner of some later person or event. So, the type illustrates something that is also going to be true of the later person or event. A classic example of this would be the many parallels between the lives of Joseph, the son of Jacob, and Jesus Christ.

I will give a few examples of what I am referring to. Firstly, Joseph and Jesus were both betrayed for pieces of silver. Secondly, Joseph was greatly loved by his father, just as Jesus was greatly loved by His Father. But, Joseph and Jesus were both rejected by their brothers. In Joseph's case it was his natural brothers. In the case of Jesus, it was His brothers in a much wider sense, i.e. the Jewish people.

Thirdly, Joseph's brothers did not recognise him when they first saw him, just as most of Jesus' brothers, the Jewish people, did not recognise Him when He was first amongst them. Yet, the second time they saw him, Joseph made himself known to his brothers. He revealed his true identity to them in an instant and they all immediately realised who he really was. They also repented of how they had treated him. Prior to that they were completely unaware that the person standing right in front of them was their own brother, Joseph.

That is very similar to what Jesus will do in the future when He makes Himself known to His brothers, the Jewish people. They will all suddenly recognize Him as their own Messiah. Then every Jewish person who is alive at that time will turn to Him in sorrow and repentance and they will all believe in Him. They will repent and believe in Him collectively, as a whole nation.

Fourthly, Joseph took a Gentile bride, called Asenath, just as Jesus takes a Gentile bride, namely the Church. There are very many more of these similarities. When seen in their entirety they are startling and we realise that we are meant to see Joseph as a type, shadow or forerunner of Jesus. The events of his life help to explain and clarify many things about the life and ministry of Jesus. Having said that, it is important to emphasise that we cannot base any *doctrine* on such types or patterns. However, they can certainly help to *illustrate* doctrines that are already expressly stated elsewhere.

One of the problems we face in the churches is that some of us make the major mistake of refusing to take the Bible literally. Others make the smaller, but still important, error of *only ever* seeing the literal meaning and never accepting that it contains anything *in addition to* the literal facts. The correct position is that the underlying facts are literally true, unless they are clearly a figure of speech. However, we can and should go further than that. We should be open minded to take note of these types and prophetic patterns, *over and above* accepting the plain, literal, factual meaning of the words used.

When you come across unusual things in the Bible such as miracles, demons, or anything supernatural, then accept them as literally true. Do not try to explain them away or assume that they did not really happen. Millions of people think that way because they have been trained to do so. For example, when Moses parted the Red sea, or Jesus fed 5000 men, (plus thousands of woman and children), using a boy's packed lunch of loaves and fishes, *that is exactly what happened*. The Bible means you to take that literally, as word for word what actually took place. There is no figure of speech involved, as you will see if you look at the plain text with common sense and honesty.

In this book, I have included a lot of quotations from the Bible. I often include a series of different passages all on the same issue or all proving the same point. If you have only got limited time it is possible in most cases to look at the first one or two passages in the list and skip over the rest. You will get the main meaning that way. However, if you do have enough time to do so then you will benefit from reading them all.

I frequently include multiple passages because I want to give you exposure to many parts of the Bible that you may never have come across. Sometimes I also just want to prove my point conclusively by showing several references to support it. However, it is also to get you to see how the Bible fits together and explains itself. You will see that best by reading all the quotations, rather than just the first one or two. However, please do not feel obliged to do so. It is not essential.

I also want to encourage you to begin to believe that it is realistic to think that you could read the whole Bible yourself. Many people never get to know the whole Bible. They assume that is for others to do. I know a person whom I challenged about reading the Bible for himself. He only dips into it in places

that he likes, and avoids the rest. His response was that other people, whom he trusts, have read those other books or letters and they can tell him what they are about.

That is not the right way to approach the Bible. You must tackle it for yourself. No matter what your level of education is, your aim should be to study, and become familiar with, the whole Bible. God wants you to read it all, and many times over, until you really know it. You may think at the moment that that is too ambitious, but you can achieve it, if you set your mind to it.

The Bible -v- men's ideas and traditions

I am going to urge you throughout this book always to focus on what the Bible says, not on what men say and not on what your denomination says either. If you form a view or believe something, let it be solely because the Bible says it. Do not believe anything merely because it is customary, traditional or cultural, or even because it is what your church leader or denomination says. Jesus had this to say to those who ignore the Bible and, instead, follow man-made traditions:

‘And He said to them, "Rightly did Isaiah prophesy of you hypocrites, as it is written: 'This people honours me with their lips, but their heart is far away from me.'⁷But in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the precepts of men.'⁸'Neglecting the commandment of God, you hold to the tradition of men.'⁹He was also saying to them, "You are experts at setting aside the commandment of God in order to keep your tradition."⁹ *Mark 7:6-9 (NASB)*

Many of us can easily see how the Pharisees of Jesus' day got things badly wrong by ignoring the Bible and instead focusing on men's ideas, customs and traditions. Yet, that is exactly what we do, even today. In fact, we probably do it more than the Pharisees did. Ask yourself in relation to any belief or opinion you hold, *"Where did I get this idea from? Was it from the Bible or from tradition?"* The answers may surprise you.

It is amazing how many things we say, do and think that we imagine to be biblical but which are, in fact, just man-made traditions adopted at various points in the history of the church. The most obvious example of that is the Roman Catholic Church. It has countless non-biblical traditions, such as penance, purgatory, saints, the Virgin Mary, confession, mass, priests, nuns, bishops, cardinals, popes, images, relics, rosary beads, holy days of obligation, sacraments, etc, etc. None of those things are in the Bible. Yet, millions believe and practice them and are quite unaware that they actually contradict what the Bible says.

In case anyone thinks that I am singling out the Roman Catholic Church for criticism, let me say that I have also found that same tendency to form non-biblical traditions and customs in every denomination I have ever come across, albeit on a lesser scale. And I have found it in myself too.

Every unbiblical idea or tradition has to be resisted and rejected. The best way to do that is to insist that every proposition be proved from the Bible, and not from any other authority, however eminent or famous. It doesn't matter what the church is or who the person is; if what is being said or done has no biblical basis, then reject it.