

Trinity 19 Bible Sunday 27 October 2019 All Saints Church, Castle Camps

Today is Bible Sunday. In the wider world today, I am afraid that the Bible does not always have a good reputation. At best it is regarded as a collection of ancient stories – some beautiful but belonging to a different bygone world; at worst it is full of factually incorrect stories about the creation of the world and a dangerous view of a tribal God who can be called on to destroy one's enemies and who often condones violent acts.

And yet, the Bible is our source of wisdom, our understanding of God's relationship to the world, morality, spirituality and the person of Jesus Christ. So, how are we to respond to the Bible's despisers and how do we cope with difficult passages?

The first point is always that the Bible was never written as a whole book but was, rather, stitched together over centuries. We don't have one author, we don't have one editor, what we have is, as the Letter to the Hebrews calls them, a 'cloud of witnesses' (Hebrews 12:1). The Bible is not literally the word of God, but the experiences of hundreds of people over at least a thousand years who have witnessed God's presence in the world and presented these experiences in their own ways.

But such a diverse variety of witnesses have presented Jewish and Christian teachers with the problem of what should or should not be included in the Bible.

Even in Jesus' day the contents of the Jewish scriptures was a matter of major dispute. When Jesus refers to 'the scriptures' he means the first five books of Moses, the prophets and the psalms but there was a great deal of disagreement over whether books such as Tobit, Maccabees, Wisdom of Solomon and Ecclesiasticus were or were not to be included as scripture. After Jesus' death these books were finally excluded by the rabbis from the Jewish Hebrew Bible – many of these excluded books we know as the Apocrypha. Protestant Christian Bibles tend not to contain the Apocrypha, but Catholic Christians do. Typically for Anglicans it is up to you whether you read a more Protestant or Catholic Bible. The Prayer Book says the Apocrypha may be studied 'for example and instructions of manners' (Article VI) but not for doctrine.

In the same way the New Testament did not suddenly come into being but evolved just as the OT did. For example, many earlier Christian communities included in their New Testament the Letters of Clement and a book of instruction called the Didache; it wasn't until 382 AD, at a Council in Rome, that the NT was finally established. Many letters and books were excluded only because they were either written in the late 1st century or because they contained very odd stories.

In the Gospel of Thomas for example, Jesus is playing with some children in the river making clay birds from the banks of the river. The children are not impressed by Jesus' efforts and mock him. But undeterred Jesus claps his hands where upon his birds flap their wings and they fly off. The other children are amazed and silenced. Interestingly the story is contained in the Qur'an, so it was a popular story even though it is not now in the NT.

So, where does all this leave us when answering our sceptical critics about the Bible's bloodthirsty passages or other problematic passages?

There are no simple answers and that is the glory of the Bible. What impresses me is that the compilers of the Bible, both Jewish and Christians could have removed all difficult passages, all contradictions, all obscure or confusing teachings, but what they left us with is a reflection of the world as it is – diverse, complex, rich in meaning and yes, often confusing.

Reading the Bible is like Jacob at the gorge at Jabbok (Genesis 32:22-30), when he struggled with the stranger, he was also struggling with God. For it is often the really challenging Bible passages which reveal far more to us about the nature of God than the uncontroversial passages such as loving one's neighbour or being humble.

A few weeks' ago I was reflecting on the Psalms with an Orthodox Jewish friend of mine. In both our traditions reading the psalms is part of our daily routine of morning prayer. We both agreed that the Psalms offer a deep well of human experiences from joy to despair, from cries to God for help to thanksgiving for his abundant gifts. 'But', I said, 'I find it very hard to reconcile all these experiences with Jesus' call to forgive one's enemies'. In Psalm 83, for example, the psalmist says this of his enemies:

O my God, make them like whirling dust, like chaff before the wind.
As fire consumes the forest, as the flames sets the mountains ablaze,
so pursue them with your tempest and terrify them with your hurricane. (Ps 83:13-14)

My friend didn't think these were problematic verses. 'Imagine you are King David', he said, 'you are ruling a small kingdom surrounded by enemies of all kinds. Wouldn't you want God to deliver you from fear and injustice of your enemies?'

It was a good point. However, his interpretation hasn't entirely resolved the problem of praying for revenge *for me* but it has added another level of interpretation so that when I now read the Psalms I see how more rich and complex the idea of God's justice is in the world as it really is and not an idealised version of it.

But our Bible despisers continue to reject it because they assume all Christians read it literally or naively. We must not let this happen!

In a little parable which summarised all his other parables Jesus said, 'Therefore every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like the master of a household who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old' (Mt 13:52). We must all be more like those trained scribes and present the Bible in all its rich and complex variety; don't let the despisers of the Bible get away with *their* naïve and sweeping criticisms.