



R E M E D I A L
Christianity

Correcting Deficiencies in Popular Christianity

#2 – The Bible – Just What is It?

With Study Questions

*Pastor Paul Viggiano
Branch of Hope Church
2370 W. Carson Street, #100
Torrance, CA 90501
(310) 212-6999
pastorpaul@integrity.com
www.branchofhope.org
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The Bible – Just What is It?

Years ago it was my privilege to be invited to a banquet for the Olympic Gold Medal-winning USA volleyball team. A few talks were given prior to bringing on their keynote speaker. This main speaker was arguably the finest college basketball coach in the history of the NCAA, John Wooden.

Retired, elderly, and eloquent, Coach Wooden began to challenge these Gold Medalists to pursue the finer things in life. He spoke of things like art, beauty, history, and the like. As his speech was coming to a close, he broached the subject of literature; “Read the classics,” I remember him saying. And then, as if he were speaking of a separate category altogether he said, “And read the greatest classic of all, the Bible.”

The tenor of his language gave the impression that their Gold Medals paled in comparison to what these young men would find contained within the pages of the Holy Scriptures. The aged Wizard of Westwood, who had won all his sport had to offer, when given the opportunity, spoke as one who had possession of that which transcended all human honor and glory – this great possession being found in the pages of Scripture.

Starting Point

Previously we established the necessity of determining our starting point of knowledge. Everybody has an opinion; everybody has some sense of right and wrong, truth and error. But very few people are epistemologically self-conscious; that is, most people don't know why they know what they know.

Recently PETA (the animal rights activist organization) was back in the news regarding the use of dolphins to find depth charges in the ocean. Many PETA enthusiasts are under the impression that the value of the life of an animal is equal to that of a human. A letter from a PETA member was written to the leader of a nation that courted terrorist activities. It seems they had sent a donkey, loaded with explosives, into a group of people. The explosion killed many people and, of course, the donkey. The writer was not so concerned about the people who died in the explosion as she was concerned about the innocent donkey who had died.

Is a human life inherently more valuable than an animal's life? If you were driving down the road and found yourself in a situation where you couldn't avoid either hitting a human or an animal with your car, would you choose to hit the human or the animal? Ninety-nine percent of people asked would clearly choose to save the human rather than the animal; but not everybody would agree with this decision. The real question is, “Where is the answer found?”

What is our starting place of ethics and truth? Is it the way we feel, or what our ancestors or culture has taught us? Is it mere convention or consensus – the majority makes it moral? Is it so woven into our nature that it is just blatantly obvious? It doesn't take too much ciphering to figure out that

none of these provide an objective basis for truth. What if someone else feels different than I? What if I feel different tomorrow? What if I find that my other ancestors (from my mother's side) believed completely opposite to my father's ancestors? What if the consensus changes? What if I'm the deciding vote? What if that which is woven into my nature is contrary to what is woven into my neighbor's nature?

How can we avoid making the type of nonsensical and contradictory statements made by Alan Dershowitz in his debate with Alan Keyes? In less than a ten minute period he said he doesn't know what goodness is, that his audience of about three thousand didn't know what it is either and never will, and that he is writing a book on it (something he will never know). But for a man who is incapable of defining goodness, he seemed to know enough about goodness to assert that it is absolutely wrong for religion to have an influence in governmental decision-making.

In order for there to be any sense of objective, absolute truth or ethics, we must recognize a source that transcends all of humanity. This source must be righteous and this source must communicate that righteousness to us in an objective and observable way. According to Christianity the source of truth is God and the means by which He conveys this truth is the Bible.

The Holy Bible

Just what is this best seller above all best sellers we call the Bible? It is not *one* book but 66 books written by 40 different authors of varying occupations over a 1500-year period. The 66 books of the Bible are broken into two large sections known as the Old Testament (39 books written between 1500 B. C. and 400 B. C.), and the New Testament (27 books written in the first century).

It's customary for these 66 books to be referred to as The Holy Bible. The word *Bible* merely means *book* or *roll* or *scroll*. *Holy* means *separate*, *sacred*, or *set apart*. The Bible is a holy book. Its Author is holy, its message is holy and its design is to make us holy!¹ The Bible is not merely a book *about* God, it is a book *from* God. The assertion is that God inspired the forty authors to infallibly and inerrantly record what He had determined to record. The Bible is, therefore, absolute in its authority. It is the standard of all standards. It is not confirmed by human investigation but just the opposite; human endeavors, be they scientific or philosophic, are judged by Scripture. For Christians, the Bible is the starting point of true knowledge. Later we will discuss why we should believe this.

Surveying Scripture

Here we will survey the contents and then the over-arching message of the 66 books. First the Old Testament:

¹ R. C. Sproul, *Geneva Study Bible* (Thomas Nelson, 1995) p. iv.

The Old Testament

Books 1-5

Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy

Narratives

There are varying types of books in the Bible. The first five books of the Bible (the Pentateuch), written by Moses, are narratives. They give an historical account of events from the beginning of creation until the delivery of the Israelites from slavery. These books convey the stories of Noah, Babel, Abraham, Joseph and his brothers, Pharaoh, etc. We learn of the beginning of the nation of Israel. They also give a record of the sacrificial and priestly systems designed to foreshadow the person and work of Christ.

Books 6-17

Joshua through Esther

Narratives

Books six through seventeen – Joshua through Esther – are also historical books. We read of Joshua entering the Promised Land and receiving all the land God had promised to Abraham. In these books we read of a period in history called Judges, where God ruled His people through these selected and inspired leaders. It is here that we read of Samson and Gideon.

This section of the Bible also contains the period called Kings (1, 2 Samuel; 1, 2 Kings; 1, 2 Chronicles). We learn here of King Saul, David, and Solomon and the eventual division of Israel as kingdom and its enslavement to foreign nations.

Book 19

Psalms

Poetry

Toward the center of your Bible you will find a book of 150 chapters known as the Psalms or Songs. These are mainly written by David and are poetic in nature. Being poetic, however, does not mean they are not rooted in historical fact. Many of the events we read of in the Kings portion of the Bible are the historical context for the Psalms. They often record David's passionate and personal responses to the toils in his life and the peace he finds in God.

Books 18, 20, 21, 22

Job, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon

Wisdom Literature

Three of these four books were written by Solomon, who was gifted by God to be the wisest man who would ever live. These books do not so much convey history as much as they impart specific truths and thoughts (often dealing with ethics) in particular situations. We are generally informed in these books what kind of behavior is foolish and what kind of behavior is wise.

Books 23-27

Isaiah, Jeremiah, Lamentations, Ezekiel, Daniel – Major Prophets

Prophetic

The Major Prophets give both warning and consolation to God's people. They warn Israel to repent lest they fall into judgment and they proclaim that God will deliver them from judgment and oppression. We learn much about the justice and deliverance of God in the Major Prophets. In these books you will find language that is apocalyptic (unveiling of future judgment through signs).

Books 28-39

Hosea through Malachi – Minor Prophets

Prophetic

The Minor Prophets generally address the issues of the divided Kingdom of Israel, which had come to be referred to as Israel and Judah. It is here in history (about 700 B.C. until 400 B.C.) that we learn of Israel's captivity to the Assyrians and Judah's captivity to the Babylonians. The Old Testament ends with God's people in captivity.

The New Testament

After about four hundred years of prophetic silence a new prophet arises in Israel whose name is John (the Baptist). It is his job to announce the coming of the Promised One of God, Jesus the Christ. He is the one who will bring freedom to God's captive people, although not in the way many people thought. This is the New Testament.

Books 1-4

Matthew, Mark, Luke and John – The Gospels

Narratives

The first four books of the New Testament are called Gospels (good news). The good news is that Jesus, God's promised Messiah, has come to seek and to save that which was lost. The four gospels give accounts of the birth, life, death, and resurrection of Christ from four different perspectives. Matthew, Mark, and Luke are very similar and are called the synoptic (to see the whole together) gospels.

Book 5

Acts

Narrative

Acts, written by Luke, is basically a continuation of the Gospel of Luke. It records the beginning of the Christian church. Though there is theology to be observed and learned in Acts, great confusion takes place when people use the events in Acts as if they are to be the perpetual norm for the church. In Acts we read of the ascension of Christ, Pentecost, Apostles raising people from the dead, speaking with absolute apostolic authority, etc. These are all part of the accomplished work of redemption and we must be careful not to expect all of these types of things to be present today.

Books 6–18

Romans through Philemon – Paul’s Epistles

Didactic (instructional – meant for teaching)

The epistles (letters) of the Apostle Paul make up the meat of theological instruction found in all of Scripture. It is their design to teach proper doctrine about God in a very direct manner. Many of the churches, or individuals, to whom Paul writes are churches he started or individuals he brought to Christ. These letters are generally correctional in nature and are addressing errors creeping into the church.

The difficulty here lies in seeking to assess what the problems were that Paul was addressing. In a way, we’re reading somebody else’s mail. These people and churches would have been directly taught by Paul prior to these letters and they, obviously, would have been quite familiar with the problems Paul is addressing – problems we are left to figure out.

Book 19

Hebrews

Didactic

Although many people believe Paul wrote Hebrews, there is no conclusive evidence in Scripture that he did. Hebrews is written to Jewish Christians who were tempted (often through fear of persecution) to leave Christianity and go back to Judaism.

Books 20-26

James through Jude – General Epistles

Didactic

The General Epistles were written by James, Peter, John (the Apostle), and Jude. Similar to Paul’s epistles, they are all addressing problems creeping into the church (often regarding false teachers) that would detract from the pure message of the gospel once for all delivered to the saints.

Book 27

The Revelation

Apocalyptic

The final, and perhaps most controversial, book in the Bible is the Revelation. It is a cyclical letter written to seven churches. It reveals to its readers (through signs) the judgment of God over the enemy of God’s people and God’s power to preserve His church with an accent on His eventual and ultimate judgment of evil and His deliverance of His people to eternal peace. Arguably, the Revelation is difficult to understand by design. Since it was likely a letter revealing to Christians the eventual destruction of Israel and the Roman Empire, it was written in such a way that only Christians familiar with the literary style of the Old Testament prophets would understand. If it fell into the hands of Rome, no one would be able to interpret the signs.

The Over-Arching Message

One might think that 66 books written by 40 different authors over a 1500 year period might be pretty scattered regarding its theme or message – after all, ten witnesses to an automobile accident can easily have nine different and contradictory accounts of the same event only hours later. Not so with the Scriptures.

The over-arching message of Scripture is quite clear. We see it all in seed form in the very first three chapters in Genesis. In short, there is a God who is good and holy. He created all things and created them good. God created man who rebelled against God and death entered. It did not please God to leave men at the mercy of death so God made a promise (a covenant) that through the seed of the woman (speaking of the eventual birth of Jesus), the enemy of God's people (Satan, sin, death, etc.) would be destroyed.

The rest of the Scripture unveils that simple message of redemption. The Bible is the story of the history of redemption. The Bible surely contains instructions in living, truth, reality, knowledge, ethics, etc. But all of these categories are there to buttress the primary message which is God's glorification of Himself through His redemptive plan to save sinners through the cross of Christ. This is what led Jesus to say, **"You search the Scriptures, for in them you think you have eternal life; and these are they which testify of Me" (John 5:39).**

And though we may not see Jesus in every jot, tittle, period, or comma in the Bible, to read too far in the Scriptures and miss the message that there is a God who judges sin and delivers sinners through the judgment of His own Son is to miss the point of Scripture. From Genesis to Revelation, that is the message.

Then the Lord God said, "Behold, the man has become like one of Us, to know good and evil. And now, lest he put out his hand and take also of the tree of life, and eat, and live forever"—²³ therefore the Lord God sent him out of the garden of Eden to till the ground from which he was taken. ²⁴ So He drove out the man; and He placed cherubim at the east of the garden of Eden, and a flaming sword which turned every way, to guard the way to the tree of life (Genesis 3:22-24).

And he showed me a pure river of water of life, clear as crystal, proceeding from the throne of God and of the Lamb. ² In the middle of its street, and on either side of the river, *was* the tree of life, which bore twelve fruits, each *tree* yielding its fruit every month. The leaves of the tree *were* for the healing of the nations. ³ And there shall be no more curse, but the throne of God and of the Lamb shall be in it, and His servants shall serve Him. ⁴ They shall see His face, and His name *shall be* on their foreheads. ⁵ There shall be no night there: They need no lamp nor light of the sun, for the Lord God gives them light. And they shall reign forever and ever (Revelation 22:1-5).

You may think, "This is all well and good, but why should I believe the Bible?" That is the subject we will take up next.

Questions for Study

1. What is your starting point of knowledge? Why do you think it's reliable (pages 1, 2)?
2. How many books make up the Bible? How many authors? When were the books written (page 2)?
3. What is meant by the title Holy Bible (page 2)?
4. How does the Christian view the Bible in terms of authority, authorship, etc. (page 2)?
5. Who wrote the first five books of the Bible (page 3)?
6. What is a narrative (page 3)?
7. If something is poetic, is it necessarily fiction (page 3)?
8. What are the books of wisdom (page 3)?
9. What are some of the main roles played by the prophets (page 4)?
10. What are the gospels and what do they convey (page 4)?
11. Who wrote Acts and what must we be careful of in studying Acts (page 4)?
12. What was Paul's purpose in writing his epistles (page 5)?
13. Why, do you suppose, the Revelation is such a difficult book (page 5)?
14. What is the over-arching message of Scripture (page 6)?