

QUANTUM LEAPS

Reasons for Reading

For some who grew up in the Bible Belt—who cut their teeth on the back of a church pew and who could make out like bandits in hymn-lyric Jeopardy—a chapter on why the Bible matters might seem unnecessary, and maybe even borderline heretical. But I'll let you in on a secret—you're not alone if you have doubts about the Bible's enduring cogency. A few weeks into teaching a class on interpreting the Bible, a woman who'd been a regular church attender for more than sixty years burst into my office. She threw her Bible on my desk, shouting, "I've been reading this, and it's outrageous! Do you even know what's in there?!" It turned out she'd just discovered the book of Joshua.

It's not uncommon for people to pull me aside and confess, with a spark of anger or tears in their eyes, that they gave up on the Bible years ago. Many of them are well-respected pastors and leaders in their local churches. The Bible's obscure laws and bloody tales seem irrelevant at best and offensive at worst. "Can't I just get on with loving God and doing good," they ask, "and let this outdated book go?" Perhaps the most common question teenagers ask me

about religion is, "Why should I even care what the Bible has to say?"

If you are one of those who quietly (or maybe not so quietly) wonder if this ancient book deserves its hype, know that there are many people out there who share your questions. But despite the undeniable challenges involved, I'd suggest at least a couple of key reasons why the Bible is still worth deep consideration.

First, seeking God without the Bible is sort of like trying to discover the principles of quantum physics . . . from scratch. Since God is always at work in the world, it is certainly possible to learn real things about God through direct, personal experience, whether through prayer or reflection on situations you've encountered, or simply by gazing on the mountains. There's no doubt about it—God shows up.

But here's the thing: if you started traveling today, using the fastest vehicle current technology can build, it would take you 225,000,000,000,000 years to reach the edge of the universe. And that's just the universe we know about. If it stopped expanding. If your mind rebels at even the suggestion of such vastness, consider this: it's safe to assume that the truth about God, well, is even bigger. Even if we somehow manage to be exactly right in every conclusion we draw about God and the cosmos from our own experience—and religious history suggests that is an unlikely prospect—in one short lifetime we'll never personally manage to see more than a few grains of sand in the ocean of God. There are aspects of this vast universe of God that will always lie far beyond human access unless God chooses to reveal them, to bring them out of the reaches of space and directly into our view.

If everyone had to rediscover gravity for themselves starting with Newton's apple, our knowledge of the world would be limited indeed. When we open the Bible, we stand on the shoulders of giants who have come before us. As science has Galileo, Curie, and Einstein, faith has Sarah, Ezekiel, and John—people who didn't just possess acute spiritual sensitivities but were active recipients of God's own self-revelation. Above all, we have the witness of Jesus, who was uniquely positioned to reveal the mind of God. When we come to the Bible, we have a chance to lay our own small grains of insight along this larger shoreline. Instead of struggling one by one, lifetime after lifetime, to draw together enough tiny scraps of insight to ascertain some small truth that merits confidence, we start out with the fundamental principles already known, with a whole wealth of knowledge already in hand.

Second, it's crucial to remember that every individual, every community, every culture, and every generation has its own biases and blind spots. Just as your own personal experience of God and the world opens you to particular insights, it closes you to others. Even pooling our experiences and ideas with a diverse group of friends is not enough to save us, because there are things in the water of history that all of us are drinking that affect us collectively whether we perceive their flavor or not. Those who set out in search of God independent of the Bible almost invariably end up finding a God who looks very much like themselves—a God who shares their tastes and politics, their assumptions and ambitions, the trending philosophies of their time.

When we come to the Bible, we look at God through the eyes of ages and cultures that don't share our own presumptions and preoccupations. When we interpret, we enter into

conversation not just with the biblical writers but with thousands of years of readers who have their own experiences, concerns, and perspectives. In doing this—in humbling ourselves to engage this conversation—we are checked in our temptation to bow to a god who is no more than the spirit of our age, a god made in the image of our own particular distortions. We glimpse truths that our companions-in-time, who are blinded by the same modern lights and myths that we are, are simply not in a position to tell us.

Finally, and hardest to pin down, is the naked power of the book itself. Literature attains status as "classic" when it speaks in such a way that generation after generation reading it gains insight into the world or the human condition. The Bible is somewhat like classic literature in this, yet also qualitatively more. Millennia of readers testify that those who listen carefully find themselves addressed by a voice beyond the page that somehow penetrates and breaks things open. God, in some strange and unique way, actually talks here. And where God starts talking, chains are broken, wounds are healed, and whole worlds are upended.

If you haven't experienced this phenomenon for yourself, hearing other people talk about their experience with the Bible can feel a lot like looking at an autostereogram. More commonly known as a "Magic Eye" image, an autostereogram is a two-dimensional image containing a buried 3-D scene that emerges when the page is viewed with two eyes properly aligned. It's as if everyone around you is saying "Look, there's a dolphin! Right there in front of you!" when all you can see is a blur of random colors.

You could, of course, doubt your witnesses, insist there's nothing here to see except what's inside people's own heads.

But consider—when person after person standing on the same plot of land feels the ground shift beneath them, it's reasonable to ask if there's a fault line lying under the surface. If enough people over enough time sit before the same book and feel the earth surge under them, it's at least worth asking whether there might be a powerful force moving beneath the pages.

If you haven't yet seen the Bible “pop”—if you haven't glimpsed the dolphin—it's at least worth considering that what you might need is not new friends but a new approach to looking.

On this count, all I can really do is add my own voice to the two-thousand-year-long chain of other witnesses. I have read many books in my life, some of them dozens of times apiece. But only one book has time and time again caused the earth to shift beneath me. Only one has made me laugh and cry and shout and fall in love. Only one has turned enemies into friends and fear into courage and despair into hope.

BEYOND BASIC INSTRUCTIONS

What Kind of Book

In a church I visited regularly as I was growing up, a large banner hung on the wall by the stage. It boldly proclaimed, “BIBLE: Basic Instructions Before Leaving Earth.” I stared at that banner for years and never thought to question its message. Its pithy statement captured exactly what I imagined the Bible to be—sort of like a Roomba owner's manual, only for the human soul. Applying the Bible was a matter of cracking the manufacturer's code so you knew which buttons to press, in exactly what sequence, to make this thing called life run right (and not choke and die on a rug).

The trouble was, like many Bible readers before me, I discovered over time that such a characterization of the Bible's nature was strangely mismatched with its contents. To begin with, it's hard to imagine any definition of “basic” that includes detailed directions for constructing gold lampstands or for determining the cud-chewing habits of your future steak. Yet both these subjects occupy significant sacred real estate. Meanwhile, topics that seem of rather fundamental relevance to faithful living—say, how to figure out what kind of work you were meant for, or how to raise a God-loving

kid who doesn't hate your guts—aren't covered in any direct way at all.

This isn't to suggest that the Bible contains no practical directives relevant to everyday living. The Bible offers many helpful insights on such important subjects as managing money, maintaining relationships, and keeping your tongue from wrecking your life (counsel surely as relevant in the age of Twitter as it ever was). But still, if the primary purpose of the Bible were to efficiently convey the most basic, universally relevant knowledge necessary to maintain a well-ordered life, most of us would expect a very different kind of book. We'd want a little more quick reference index, a little less poetry; a little more guidance on romance and dating, a little less detail on how to build a giant ark without power tools.

One of the strangest things about the Bible is that, instead of sticking to grand universals, the Bible is often shockingly particular. It regularly addresses *this* particular person in *this* specific situation, which might never again be precisely replicated. Exodus 23:4 explains what to do if your enemy loses his donkey—a situation that a resident of, say, Chicago, has only slightly better odds of experiencing than being gored to death by an ox (a scenario that Exodus 21 helpfully addresses). Both 1 Corinthians and Romans spill a great deal of ink exploring the ethics of eating meat that has been sacrificed to idols—a major dilemma for people navigating first-century Roman culture but not one likely to come up today in your average Brooklyn deli. The author of 1 Timothy instructs the recipient of his letter, “Don't drink water anymore, but use a little wine because of your stomach problems and your frequent illnesses” (1 Timothy 5:23)—a prescription whose universal applicability seems ambiguous at best.

Some of the Bible's clearest commands are patently impossible to obey. “Say hello to the brothers and sisters in Laodicea,” Colossians 4:15 instructs—a command difficult to comply with, as the referenced city was destroyed during the Middle Ages. The silent consensus of Christian history simply seems to give us permission to sidestep other commands—for example, the Deuteronomy 21:18-21 command to stone rebellious sons or the command given in 1 Peter 5:14 for Christians to “greet each other with the kiss of love.” While it might seem intuitively obvious that some commands in the Bible do not apply to us, in practice it's actually quite difficult to articulate how we know which ones do and which ones don't.

Then there are the difficulties with the term *instructions*. The Bible is broadly divided into two sections, commonly called the Old and New Testaments. Around 40 percent of the Old Testament and an even higher percentage of the New is made up of narrative. And nearly a third of the Bible is composed of poetry—including an entire book dedicated to lauding the goodness of sex (Song of Songs—yep, put this book down and go look it up). Yet very little biblical narrative or poetry is “instructional” in a clear and straightforward fashion.

Take the Judges 11 tale of a man who makes a wartime vow that he keeps by killing his own daughter. It is far from obvious what the directive of such a story might be. Are these parenting instructions? Is this advice on keeping your word? Or when to be smart enough to break it? Or consider the infamous conquest stories, in which God's people slaughter the populations of entire cities on their way to claiming divinely promised property. The movement from narrative to instruction here seems hazard prone at best. And following the example of Song of Songs by informing your beloved that

her hair is “like a flock of goats” and her teeth are “like newly shorn ewes” is unlikely to achieve your desired result.

Biblical passages like these might well serve a vital purpose, and we’ll explore some of the possibilities as we go forward in this book. But the pedagogical value they possess is quite distant from the clear directive of step-by-step instructions or from the prescriptive clarity of a universal law. The “point” in many cases is far from obvious. In fact, while some biblical texts offer answers, others simply seem to complicate the questions.¹

But if the shape of the Bible does not neatly conform to the paradigm of *Human Life for Dummies*, what does its unique combination of ancient laws, harrowing tales, private letters, and epic poetry actually add up to? What kind of book is this really? The reality is a bit more complex than that suggested by the five-word banner from my childhood. Perhaps the best place to begin exploring the Bible’s nature is with what seems most obvious: whatever else we may have in the Bible, at the broadest level what we find there is a story. The Bible tells the story of a series of encounters between God and humanity.

From the dawn of human existence, long before the Bible’s first pages were penned, God has been reaching toward human beings, and human beings back toward God. Humans have struggled to comprehend God’s character and being, God’s good desires for them, and God’s dreams for the whole created order. God has struggled to get humans to listen to the revelation of these things. Whatever else it does, the Bible witnesses to this bidirectional pursuit.

Not every story in the Bible reflects what ought to be. Not everything that happens in the pages of the Bible does so because it should. Not every word spoken by someone in

the Bible comes stamped with divine endorsement. This is no fairy-tale or snow-globe world. The Bible tells the story of what *is*. It’s the true story of a world where hearing is imperfect, where motives are mixed, where evil exists, where bias lingers, where good intentions can go wildly astray. And where God persists in showing up.

There is little question that the pursuit to which the Bible witnesses has met with mixed results. Sometimes the divine hand reaches down in a unilateral act of rescue. Sometimes it’s ignored or brushed away, with catastrophic results. Sometimes two reaching hands—God’s and a human’s—meet each other, and miracles are born. The Bible tells all of these kinds of stories. We hear what people speak to God. We learn what they hear back. We watch them try and fail and learn and start all over again. We see them searching and being found—sometimes even despite themselves.

The Bible’s story isn’t neat, because this kind of pursuit never is. It’s messy and confusing and frequently uncomfortable. But it’s precisely the blood and sweat and tears and questions that certify the Bible’s trustworthiness. This is the story of real life—raw and complicated and sacred. By immersing ourselves in Scripture’s messy stories, and by daring to call them God-breathed and holy, we are reminded that if God can be here, God can be anywhere. Even with broken people like us. Even in our cracked and jagged world. Even in our own up-and-down, back-and-forth, missing-and-reaching stories.

THE WORLD IN COLOR

Shaping Biblical Imagination

If the Bible is a story, it is also something more: it's a book that dares to make an authoritative claim on life. Between the poems and proverbs and parables, a portrait takes shape of who God is and what exactly God desires. The Bible suggests that to learn to walk with God and love the things that God loves is to begin to live in sync with the world's true design.

This description of the Bible—an introduction to God and to the shape of the “with God” life—is something rather different from “basic instructions.” From time to time I fantasize about possessing a handbook that would answer every problem with a clear three-step process. Secure a great husband, according to the book of Ruth: (1) don your best dress; (2) sneak up to a man's bed after he's spent a long evening partying with friends; (3) uncover his feet and lie down and wait to see what he says. (Check out Ruth 3 to catch that story.)

Of course, the trouble with instruction manuals is how quickly they go out of date. A 2018 atlas could offer you a detailed guide for driving from New York to Los Angeles. The instructions might be absolutely perfect on the day they were

laid out. But what happens when traffic patterns change? Or a tree falls in the way? Or when cars are replaced by hovercrafts? The precise sequence of turns that once would have carried you safely to your destination could now lead you far astray, even send you skidding into wreckage. The goal, the ultimate destination, remains exactly the same. But the ability to get there safely requires a certain ingenuity—the ability to navigate previously unknown obstacles and adapt to new terrain.

The Bible's opening sequence in Genesis 1, which describes God's creation of the world, could leave some readers with the impression that everything is finished, tied off, completed—like a highway laid down once, never to be altered again: “God said, ‘Let there be light.’ And so light appeared” (verse 3). If this is the case, turn-by-turn directions would seem the perfect communication tool. But Genesis 2 immediately complicates this picture of creation by depicting God playing in the mud of the newly minted earth. Humans are on the scene now, but God remains in the world as well, and the creative work is still unfolding.

The scene in Genesis 2 always reminds me a bit of kids tinkering in a sandbox. God forms a creature and hands it to Adam and asks, “What do you think we should call it?” Adam replies, “It's a spiny lumpsucker!” And that becomes its name. Presumably this is about the moment God decides it might be time to bring Eve around, if only for a second opinion.

In Genesis 2, human beings are not merely passive observers of God's work in the world; they are active participants in the creative vocation of God. They—and we—are assigned the task of cultivating soil that is pregnant with divine possibilities (“The Lord God took the human and settled him in the garden of Eden to farm it and take care of it”). This

vocation, given humanity in Genesis 2:15, is not mechanical assembly line work—that of stamping identical cogs pumping out of a machine. It's creative, nurturing work. It's the vocation of a gardener who tends living, growing things—a vocation not just of preservation but of emergence.

The number and complexity of tasks and the variability of conditions demand that a gardener have a far more intimate knowledge of her soil than a finite list of instructions would ever contain. The gardener must understand her soil's potential and vulnerabilities enough to recognize potential new threats, adapt to changing conditions, and cultivate flourishing in all seasons. What she needs is a mind that is attuned to the nature of the earth itself.

This is why, I believe, the Bible takes a much more ambitious approach to human formation than a simple rule book could provide. God is shaping not automated drones but artists in the image of a Master. Now, an artist must begin by learning the essential rules of her craft. A sculptor won't get far if she denies the nature of clay, refusing to keep it moist, firing it in ways that make it crack. Similarly, there are basic rules for how God's world operates—principles of moral gravity, if you will, whose defiance is quite costly. Infidelity, to word or relationship, breaks things. Webs of deception trap the weaver. The Bible points out some of these essential principles so that we can work with the nature of our clay rather than against it.

But rules alone are not enough! An artist needs imagination, a vision of what can be. The Bible is more than only a story—it's a story moving us and the world somewhere. It's a revelation of who God is, of what God loves, of how the world is shaped. It's an invitation to a relationship, an apprenticeship

in God's creative, nurturing vocation. The Bible provides the essential information we need to creatively lean in. We were made for so much more than paint-by-number religion. We were made to cast the dreams of God on many different canvases, in all the diverse shapes and vibrant, Spirit-saturated colors of true life. The Bible trains our eye for the divine aesthetic and then sends us out with a brush in hand to paint with the help of the Master.

Between the lines of its obscure laws and strange and unexpected stories, the Bible forms inspired imagination for the God-shaped possibilities of the world. In it we learn what God's activity has looked like in the past so that we will recognize it when it is unfolding right in front of us. We discover what God sounds like so that we can hear when God continues to speak. We learn what God loves so we can be alert for opportunities to stir that delight. We learn what God dreams of so we can begin to live that dream. The Bible shapes imagination for how God can be encountered in ordinary life and for how we can cooperate with God in encouraging the flourishing of all creation.

It turns out that the strange particularity of the Bible's address that we noted earlier—God's word to this person, in this place, at this time, in this specific situation—is powerful precisely because it is the particular that shapes imagination for the universal. The same God who talked to ancient farmers about paying their day laborers before sunset so their families would have dinner that night (Deuteronomy 24:14-15) has something to say as well to modern office managers about how they care for the needs of the temp. God is at work not just everywhere but *somewhere in particular*. God tends not just every bloom but *this one*, in its unique soil and shape and

condition. We are being formed by the Bible to join God not just in general but in the specificity of genuine care, in all the hereness and nowness of the particular bit of creation with which we have been uniquely entrusted.

In Romans 12:2, an early Christian leader named Paul writes, “Don’t be conformed to the patterns of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds so that you can figure out what God’s will is—what is good and pleasing and mature.” The patterns of this world run across our news feed every minute of the day—cycles of fear, greed, isolation, and violence that all the intellect of all the nations can’t seem to find a way beyond. But those who are shaped by the Bible are formed for a more beautiful imagination. We imagine a community where no one is poor, because what belongs to one is a gift for all. We imagine conflict where enemies defend each other’s interests. We imagine marriage—and sex—characterized by mutual submission, where each partner guards the other’s joy as if it were their own. We imagine a justice defined not by matching wounds but by the healing of what’s broken. We dare to imagine a genuine friendship, a true companionship with God.

Through Scripture our imaginations are shaped, page by page, into the imagination of Christ. We learn to see past the surface of the broken soil around us to the small but potent seeds of divine possibility, which have been planted within and are waiting to be cultivated. This vision of faithful living is so much bigger than a rote performance of a finite set of religious rules. The Bible’s invitation is to a life of creative, risk-taking engagement. Its movement drives us toward a relationship still unfolding and a story still being written—in us, in our children’s children, and in generations yet to come.

STORYTIME

Unwrapping Joshua 5:13–6:27

JOSHUA IS A young man whose star is clearly on the rise.

Joshua’s mentor, Moses, is a living legend, the greatest leader in his people’s history. Moses challenged the pharaoh of Egypt to a duel—and won! He rescued hundreds of thousands of people from slavery. He parted a body of water just by holding out his walking stick. He delivered the Ten Commandments after speaking face-to-face with God. And Joshua has been handpicked as his successor.

When the time finally comes for Moses to pass the baton, he commissions Joshua in front of everyone: “I got them out of Egypt; now you’ll get them into the Promised Land.” Then Moses dies, and the community offers him this modest eulogy: “No one has ever shown the mighty power or performed the awesome deeds that Moses did in the sight of all Israel.” All right then, Joshua—you’re up! It’s like being asked to solo right after Pavarotti.

Joshua’s first task is to claim the city of Jericho, the gateway to the land he plans to conquer for his people. This is no small challenge, as Jericho, like most ancient cities of any importance, is surrounded by enormous walls that are meant to shield it from exactly the kind of invasion that Joshua is planning.

have even gone to church. You rescued cats from trees and carried people's groceries.

But after a while you started to worry about the lack of discernable results. There seemed to be little proof of return on all that effort and investment. Perhaps you started to feel that you were mostly just going in circles, treading the same old ground again and again without getting anywhere. Maybe you were tempted to give up. Maybe you actually did.

Here's the thing: God does not seem to share our preoccupation with efficiency. A life of faith is much like a great road trip—the point isn't just where you're going but whom you're going with and the relationships that form on the journey. Sometimes the long way around is the most direct path to the true end.

Spiritual practices like prayer or worship or reading the Bible are exercises in walking circles, round and round, wearing deep grooves in the sidewalk. They often seem at first—even for a long time—to be achieving nothing at all.

But there's something worth noting . . .

Earthquakes (some of them, at least) happen when two tectonic plates that have been pushing against each other for ages without moving finally build up enough pressure that rock abruptly breaks. Entire cities crumble with the force of the sudden movement. Life with God is a lot like that. You don't have to know where you are going. You don't have to see where the pathway leads. You don't have to be certain of what difference it makes. Sometimes all that is required is to just keep walking, keep reading, keep talking, just keep pressing against the rock.

Twelve times you may walk around that circle with God and feel that you've gotten absolutely nowhere. But remember Joshua's story, and take heart: sometimes, on the thirteenth time around, walls really do fall down.

BECOMING BATMAN

Biblical Origins

I've always been a sucker for a good origin story—how Batman became Batman, who decided “blue raspberry” was a flavor, what sequence of tragically misguided thoughts led to the invention of the crinoline. Many people, if they've thought about it at all, suppose the Bible's origin story must involve something along the lines of a few religiously super-powered men equipped with James Bond-style earpieces sitting alone in a darkened room and receiving divine dictation.

But in fact, between the two covers of the Bible we have sixty-six books, each with its own origin story of who put it to paper and when and how. The Ten Commandments are boldly described in the book of Exodus as carved into stone by the finger of God. However, this wasn't exactly the standard mode of receiving divine mail. For other parts of the Bible, God's communication travels along paths of transmission that appear a bit more winding.

The Bible's oldest stories were first transmitted orally. They were family stories, the sort passed around the holiday table, one generation to the next, about how great-great-grandfather Methuselah (you know, the one with the weird big toe)

had once seen God act. Of course, most of us as moderns have played enough games of “telephone” to develop reasonable concerns about the reliability of messages passed by word of mouth. But preliterate cultures had a knack for memorization that those of us who take for granted perennial access to all the knowledge in the universe as recalled by Google can hardly even conceive. Stories were told with rhythms and repetitions and other memory patterns built in, enabling them to be transmitted over time with an incredible level of accuracy.¹ As centuries passed and literacy increased, editors eventually wove these ancient memories into written collections, some of which are included in the Old Testament.

These stories are therefore not the product of the hand of a single author but of generations of people who recounted again and again particular tales about God’s activity that continued to influence their real lives. The stories they retold were the ones that made a difference, the ones so big, so defining, and sometimes so dramatic that they could not be forgotten. Each new generation saw the significance and application of the stories slightly differently, and in some cases their distinct insights helped shape how the story was told. In this entire process in which stories were told and retold under the stars and around campfires, God was present, speaking.

Some books of the Bible explicitly state that they are drawing on material derived from other written sources. Kings and Chronicles, for example, assess the monarchical periods of the nations of Judah and Israel using historical records derived from “the annals of the kings” (see one such reference in 1 Kings 14:19 NIV). In the prologue to his gospel, Luke describes the extensive research process he undertook to ensure that the stories of Jesus he records are reliable and

authentic—a process that included looking at other written compilations (see Luke 1:1-4). In this process of careful research and reflective study, God was present, speaking.

The book of Psalms contains prayers composed by individuals at the end of their rope, as well as songs that communities sang on their way to worship or at the ascension of a new king. Some of the biblical proverbs are quite similar to sayings circulating in other ancient Near Eastern countries like Egypt. In this process—by which certain songs captured the hearts of generations and certain wisdom sayings emerged from the rest bearing a spark of divinely generated insight about the world’s true shape—God was present, speaking.

The biblical prophets assert themselves boldly as messengers endued with divine authority—“Thus says the Lord,” they often declare. But most prophets functioned in their own time primarily as preachers rather than writers. Many of their “books” come to us through the pens of generations of their students. The prophets’ messages, delivered in previous historical contexts, interacted with the new historical situations of these students to produce an explosion of fresh prophetic insights. All of this is woven together in the final biblical tapestry. A conversation between generations of the faith community is unfolding inside the text itself. In this process of addressing and readdressing divine messages in a direct and timely way for each generation of hearers, God was present, speaking.

The stories and teachings of Jesus recorded in the Gospels first traveled orally through the eyewitness testimony of those whom Jesus taught or healed. The New Testament epistles (letters) started out as personal mail, passed along hand to

hand through a network of friends. Christian leaders wrote to communities with whom they had some connection, addressing rumors, correcting problems, sharing news, and commending action. Those communities, who were helped by these letters, shared them with other communities who were facing similar struggles. In this process of sharing stories and mail, of working out how the teachings of Jesus applied to different cultures and situations, God was present, speaking.

The final book of the Bible, Revelation, describes a mystical sort of visionary experience. The imagery of the vision draws on seer John's intimate background knowledge of older books of the Bible like Daniel and Ezekiel to communicate deep truths about the cosmic stakes behind the scene of history. In this complex interplay of supernatural experience and biblically formed imagination, God was present, speaking.

Perhaps like me you've encountered a podcaster who punctuates every thought with the same catchphrase, like "Am I right?" Or perhaps you know a preacher whose sermon metaphors run too often to football and children for you to believe he's a bachelor whose main hobby is calligraphy. The biblical writers, just like the rest of us, have real personalities, life experiences, and voices and preferences and concerns that inevitably influence their work. Amos, a shepherd, uses metaphors of rescuing sheep from lions (Amos 3:12) and of locust consuming grass (Amos 7:1-2)—images as close to his daily life as hunting tacos or navigating traffic is to mine. Mark uses the word *immediately* with the kind of frequency that makes you suspect he's the sort of guy who owns several fidget spinners. Paul favors athletic and military metaphors and isn't opposed to a scathing verbal cut-down when occa-

sion seems to warrant. The individual, fully human personhood of the writers has shaped in visible ways the message we possess.

But Christians also make a more radical claim about this book. Christians claim that the voices of the individual authors are not the only voices heard here. The words may come through human minds and lips, but there is divine breath behind them. In this collection of songs, laws, proverbs, and stories, God is at work with wisdom and intent that goes beyond the human authors alone. The name given to God's involvement in this process is "inspiration."

Overall, the Bible makes surprisingly few direct claims about its own nature and composition. It claims that its words are more than ancient inkblots on a page and are actually alive and up to things—exposing secrets, cutting to the heart of matters, judging thoughts and intentions (Hebrews 4:12-13). It claims to be useful for teaching, showing mistakes, and equipping people to do good (2 Timothy 3:16-17). It claims that the prophets specifically were led by the Spirit of God in what they understood (2 Peter 1:20-21). But perhaps the most notable claim the Bible makes about itself is that Scripture is divinely inspired—a phrase which literally means "God-breathed" (see 2 Timothy 3:16).

Strangely enough, this term, *God-breathed*, is not a word for which we have any record prior to its appearance in the letter of 2 Timothy. Some scholars suggest this might be because the author of the letter invented the term to establish a deliberate contrast with the beliefs of other religions of his day.² Other religious groups in the Roman world believed that a spirit could possess the body of a worshiper, overriding the person's mind and speaking directly through the

worshiper's lips. This phenomenon was often called "ecstatic speech." But unlike the gods of these pagan religious cults, the God of Christians did not short-circuit the human brain, take over the mouth, or override the human personality. Rather, the human writers of the Bible brought their whole selves to the work—their personalities, their experiences, their concerns—and God brought God's self—God's insights, God's clarity, God's life. Where these two elements come together, incredible things result. Frail, clumsy human words, imperfect vessels that they are, fill up with the powerful, living address of God.

The story of how each book in the Bible moved from thought to word to page is as unique as the message within it. But however a book came to be, whether it was touched by few hands or many, whether it was written overnight or told and retold and edited over centuries, inspiration is the claim that God was involved in each step of the process, ensuring that what came out was more than the sum of the human parts. People speak in the Bible, and their unique voices and perspectives can be heard. But so can the distinctive voice of a communicating God.

6

THE BREATH TEST

The Process of Canonization

Of course, it's one thing to suggest that the God of the universe might theoretically have something to say, whether thousands of years ago or today. It's another thing to figure out exactly where God has really spoken. We've all probably met people who claimed to be hearing from God but who we suspected might simply be channeling the thoughts of their favorite news pundit. It's enough to make you wish there were some sort of divine breathalyzer test to definitively measure the amount of Spirit a person (or book) has partaken of.

This was, in essence, the challenge that faced the very first Christians. They knew that something amazing and completely unprecedented had occurred in Jesus. Word of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection began to spread as witnesses took their story to the streets. Documents describing these world-changing events started to circulate. But the early Jesus followers quickly recognized that not all storytellers or story interpreters were equally trustworthy. One group called the Gnostics claimed that Jesus had brought special revelation that was available only to a few initiated elites; you had to

drink the Kool-Aid, so to speak, to be let in on the secrets. Other people, called Docetists, suggested that Jesus was not truly human, that his body was only an illusion. The more time passed and the further the Christian community got from the defining Jesus events, the more urgent it became to identify which voices could be trusted to recount those all-important events reliably.

It's popular today to imagine that the process of choosing which books ended up in the Bible involved some kind of Hollywood-worthy conspiracy. Some picture a small group of men in a room late at night, whispering plots to stamp out truths they found bothersome and feeding the fire, page by page, with all the books they didn't like. But the truth is, the early Christians involved in the process of canonization didn't see themselves as "choosing" an authoritative set of books. Rather, they simply saw themselves as recognizing which books were already functioning authoritatively in actual communities of real Christians.

The Christian church had inherited the Old Testament from their Jewish predecessors. The details of the Old Testament's compilation stretch back too far in history to be fully known with certainty, but it appears that the first books officially accepted as an authoritative collection were the first five books of the Bible—a set of books Jews called the Torah, or the Law. The next collection of books gathered seem to have been the Prophets, followed finally by a diverse class of books known as the Writings. Scripture, as Jesus and his followers knew it in the first century, probably contained all the books currently included in the Protestant Old Testament as well as an additional collection of books called the Apocrypha.

You might wonder where exactly this extra set of books went. Their status was the subject of intense debate at various points in history. The books of the Apocrypha were written slightly later than the rest of the Old Testament, after the period of the biblical prophets, and were generally judged to be valuable for Christians to read but less authoritative than the other scriptural books. The early church debated whether such a set of "second tier" books should be included in the formal Christian collection that was taking shape. The arguments in favor of their inclusion in the Bible, as an edifying but less authoritative collection than the rest, ultimately won out until the Protestant Reformation in the 1500s, when the Protestant reformers decided to remove these books. The Roman Catholic Church chose at that time to keep the Apocrypha in their Bible—while still maintaining the Apocrypha's secondary status. This is why, depending on what Bible you happen to be reading, you may or may not find this set of books within it.

The story of the New Testament's formation is better documented than that of the Old. The apostle Paul, who wrote much of the New Testament, was aware even in his own lifetime that many of his letters were being circulated beyond the communities to which he had addressed them (see Colossians 4:16). The apostles, who had followed Jesus and seen him after his resurrection, were judged by the early Christians to have at least as strong a case for authority as the Old Testament prophets did—after all, they'd been in position to hear firsthand from God-in-flesh! Their teachings were therefore given significant weight.

By the second century, a collection of Paul's letters was widely in use, and by the late second century, the four gospels

we now have in our Bibles were circulating together as a set. The first attempt to establish a formal list of which books functioned as Christian authority came in 200 CE and was called the Muratorian Canon. It included all our current New Testament books except Hebrews, 1 & 2 Peter, and 3 John.

In considering which books should be included in the Christian canon, the early church weighed several key factors. They looked for books whose authors were reliable—in particular, people who knew Jesus firsthand or who had learned under someone who knew him. In keeping with their conviction that they weren't "establishing" authority but simply recognizing it, they looked for books that were widely accepted by Christians across the world, books that diverse churches were already reading and finding genuinely helpful. In terms of content, they looked for books aligned with what was known as "the rule of faith"—the fundamentals of the good news about Jesus that Christians had believed and preached as the heart of their message since the very first days after his resurrection.

The entire process of forming an authoritative collection of books took centuries. When the Christian canon was finally established in 397 CE, it was the result of generations of diverse communities testing documents for evidence that they witnessed to the truth about Jesus and that God was working in them to change hearts and lives.¹

This process of canonization suggests one big, significant question: Why on one random day in 397 CE (or on whatever unknown date the Bible's last sentence was written) did God abruptly stop talking the way God had before? Did people just collectively and suddenly lose access to some divine radio signal that no one since that day has managed to pick up?

The truth is, God didn't stop talking. The signal is still going strong. History since 397 CE is full of stories of saints and martyrs, teenage girls and elderly farmers, who heard the voice of God addressing them and responded with acts of radical courage, faithfulness, and sacrifice. The closing of the biblical canon did not represent an end to God's capacity to speak to people, nor did it represent the end of people's capacity to listen. What the closing of the canon did was safeguard the essentials of the Christian story.

The foundation of the Christian faith is not a set of abstract philosophical or ethical ideas but a set of real historical events, God's definitive action in the world in Jesus Christ. This part of the story doesn't change and cannot be somehow "improved upon," because no one will ever be in a better position to describe these defining events, what happened and what it meant, than Peter, James, John, and friends—the people who were actually present as witnesses and interacted with Jesus himself. The closing of the canon preserved the integrity of their testimony, the integrity of the part of the story that sets the stage for all that follows.

But the first Christians also fully expected that God would continue to talk. The early church did not restrict the notion of "inspiration" to the Bible alone but applied the term to Christian leaders, to the decisions of councils, and even to tomb inscriptions.² The purpose of establishing a written canon was not to claim that the Bible was the only place God would ever communicate again, would ever fill words with Spirit-breath. The world never stops needing God's insights, and a living God never stops breathing. What the church needed was a way to measure how what people in the future believed God was saying lined up with who God had

definitively revealed God's self in Jesus to be. That's what the Bible gave them.

The canon wasn't meant to eliminate all other voices; rather, it marked where God had been clearly heard and experienced in the past. By doing this, it provided a measuring stick by which to evaluate all other claims going forward. This is what a canon is—a ruler, a yardstick. While situations might change, God's essential character will not, nor will what God had done for the world in Jesus.

In forming the canon, the church certified, "We hear God here"—precisely so we would be able to hear God reliably everywhere God speaks. The church certified, "We saw God act then and there," so that we will know with confidence when we see God acting here and now.

7

WHEN PETS RAIN

Selecting a Translation

The experience of shopping for a Bible, whether online or in the aisle of your local bookstore, bears a distinct resemblance to perusing the topping bar at a froyo joint. The display of colors and textures can be both dazzling and overwhelming. Some call themselves "New" and others "Revised" or even "Amplified." They come in camouflage and Barbie pink. Some boldly claim to be for cowboys and others for soon-to-be brides. Perhaps like me you've stood there puzzling over the nuanced distinction between chocolate balls, chocolate drops, and chocolate chips, vaguely terrified you'll make a mistake and end up with a chocolate cricket. I mean, what could the difference between all these Bibles actually be, and which one will just tell you the straight-up truth about what God really said?

Here's the first thing to understand about the abundance of Bibles out there: God is committed to speaking the language of those whom God addresses. To a Mandarin speaker, God speaks Mandarin. To the Sentinelese, God speaks Sentinelese. To a twenty-first-century speaker of English, God speaks twenty-first-century English and not the language of

Beowulf that stymied many of us in high school. If a new language someday forms based entirely on emojis, then God will speak that too. The people of Israel, whose story the Bible tells, originally spoke Hebrew, and therefore Hebrew is the language in which most of the Old Testament is composed. Parts of two of the later Old Testament books—Daniel and Ezra—are written in Aramaic, the everyday language of Jesus himself. The New Testament is written in Greek, one of the official languages of the first-century Roman Empire.

The good news is that God speaks the lingua franca of every place and age. Unless you have years to devote to learning multiple new languages, however, the odds are high that when you come to the Bible, you'll be reading a translation of words first spoken in someone else's native tongue. There are a number of factors involved in moving thoughts from one language to another that make translation challenging—especially when at least one of the languages involved is ancient.

First, the vocabularies of different languages never overlap precisely. The Georgian language usefully has a word for when you keep on eating despite being stuffed to explosion. In English, somewhat surprisingly, we have no similar term for that familiar holiday sensation of helplessly consuming a second slice of pie after that third helping of turkey. The Greek language of the New Testament possesses different words for sexual love and for love in friendship and for the selfless love of humankind. Sadly, in English, we possess just one term to cover all these things—not to mention our love for puppies and the smell of a new car.

Second, languages are often full of idioms. An idiom is a combination of words that has taken on a distinctive meaning that native speakers of the language take for granted but

that wouldn't be obvious to a non-native speaker who simply knows the words' individual definitions. We know what we mean when we say in English, "It's raining cats and dogs out there!" but a Japanese speaker might well wonder why we think pets are falling from the sky. Or I might complain, "Food at Disneyland costs an arm and a leg!" leaving a Swahili speaker baffled about why I'm trading limbs for churros. In the biblical language of Hebrew, a person "hot in the nostrils" is angry. A translator must decide whether to translate the words as they stand or to try to sum up the meaning, like "It's raining hard" or "Food at Disneyland is very expensive."

Gender presents a particular challenge in crossing languages, as various languages use gendered terms differently. Even within the same language, treatment can change over time. Just a generation ago, it was normal for English speakers to use the word *man* to speak generically of humans; today, upon hearing that a trait is "common to men," most assume that this trait—like beards—is common to half the population. On the other hand, when I yell "Hurry up, you guys!" my friends easily understand me as beckoning men and women both, despite there having been a time when *guys* was clearly a masculine indicator. When a biblical writer uses a term like *brothers* or *men*, translators of the Bible must try to determine whether in the writer's own language and context that word would have been heard as gendered (that is, exclusive to males) or as encompassing men and women both (as in the phrase "you guys").

None of these challenges are insurmountable, and in fact the vast majority of English translations are remarkably good at finding ways to address them and communicate the Bible's message clearly. It's important to recognize, however, that

every translation is also an interpretation. The individual or group who translated any Bible has made decisions about what they think the authors were trying to say and how those ideas should best be conveyed in English. Understanding this can help us be a little more cautious about placing too much theological freight on a single English word or short phrase. However good and reliable the translation, there is always some element of distance between the word that we see in English and the word originally written. When reading a translation, meaning tends to become clearer and more reliable as we look at larger thought units, such as sentences and paragraphs.

The specific challenges of translation just named here account for many small differences between Bibles. But the biggest reason that translations of the Bible differ from each other is that translators have different overall philosophies on how best to move between languages. Some translations practice what is called “formal” or “word-for-word” equivalence, trying to stick as closely as possible to the original language’s words, grammar, and syntax. The benefit to this approach is that you get the most literal possible picture of the original text. The downside is it can be quite difficult to understand in English. At the other end of the spectrum are “functional” or “thought-for-thought” translations, in which translators focus on trying to capture the author’s concept or idea in ways we would normally say it in English. These translations are willing to make some sacrifices in the literalness of individual words in order to provide greater clarity on the meaning of the author’s whole thought.

Every Bible lands somewhere on this spectrum between formal and functional equivalence, and there is no single

right or wrong place to be. The best Bible for you will depend in part on your needs as a reader. A literal translation can be useful if you’re digging in for serious study. A functional translation might help the Bible feel more accessible. For readers who are new to the Bible, it’s a good idea to start somewhere in the middle. The Common English Bible (CEB) is a strong midrange translation that I recommend, but the New International Version (NIV) and New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) are other popular midrange options.

If you are interested in discovering where your own current Bible falls along the translation spectrum, a quick online search of the phrase “Bible translation chart” will bring up many diagrams that will help you locate the most popular English Bibles according to their translation philosophy. If you’ve been reading the Bible for a long time, one of the best ways to refresh your reading is to try a new translation—especially one from a different part of the spectrum than where you’re accustomed to reading.