

The Christian's Bible

DON FLEMING

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BRIDGEWAY

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What the Bible is

Hope for the world

The Bible is a book that tells us about God and shows us his plan for the human race. It starts by telling us about his creation of the world and the people for whom he prepared it. These people began life in a state of perfection and lived in harmony with God, but when they rebelled against him the harmony was lost. From that point on, the Bible's story is a record of human-kind's repeated failures and God's constant help.

All wrongdoing is in some way a rebellion against God. It is what the Bible calls sin, and all people are guilty of it. Therefore, they are liable to God's punishment, but God in his love provides a way of escape, or salvation, for them. He makes it possible for them to be saved from the consequences of sin and find true life.

God offers this salvation to all. When people turn from their sin and ask for his mercy, they are assured of his forgiveness. But his forgiveness is not irresponsible; his salvation is not haphazard. He has a careful plan that gives meaning to the history of the human race. The Bible shows how that plan developed.

God's plan

To begin with, God chose one person (Abraham), and from that person he made a nation (Israel). He gave that nation a land to live in (Palestine, or Canaan) and a code of behaviour to live by (the law of Moses).

This law-code was given not to threaten or burden people, but to regulate life for the maximum benefit of everyone. Israel was a privileged nation in being chosen to demonstrate God's standards to the world. At the same time it was, in a sense, a sample of the world's people, and therefore a sort of test case to show how people responded to God's law.

Israel soon showed that people were unable to live up to God's standards. The law-code, though good in itself, showed up human sin, as a light shows up the dirt in a dark and filthy room. But just as the light cannot remove the dirt, so no set of laws could remove sin. People needed more than a set of laws. They needed a saviour, someone to cleanse them from sin and save them from its consequences.

God then showed the chief purpose for which he had chosen Abraham and preserved Israel, namely, to produce a saviour for the fallen human race. God actually entered the human race through one of Abraham's descendants, Jesus Christ. Jesus also lived under God's law, and that law showed him to be sinless. Then, willingly, he died on behalf of the sinful, to bear God's judgment for them. More than that, he rose to new life to give people new hope. Those who turned from their sin and accepted his salvation then took the news of that salvation everywhere.

One book in two parts

The part of the Bible that covers the story before the time of Christ is called the Old Testament. It was written originally in the Hebrew language and is a collection of thirty-nine books of varying sizes and styles. Among the books in this collection are historical books, wisdom books, songbooks, prophetic books, law books, and short stories.

With the coming of Jesus Christ, a new era dawned. The latter portion of the Bible, which begins with the birth of Jesus, is therefore called the New Testament. It was written originally in the Greek language and is a collection of twenty-seven books, all written within the first century of the Christian era. Some of the books are historical, but most are letters that leading Christians wrote to churches or individuals, giving instruction concerning Christian belief and practice.

In most Bibles today, the books are divided into chapters, and the chapters into verses. These divisions were not part of the original writings, but were put in centuries later by well-meaning

Jewish and Christian leaders. The divisions can be a help, because they enable readers to find a particular place more readily; but they can also be a hindrance, because they break up the continuity of the writing.

The sixty-six books of the Bible were written over a period of perhaps 1400 years by about forty authors. In spite of this, there is an underlying unity to the Bible. Each of the sixty-six books can be understood by itself, yet each has greater meaning when seen as part of the whole. God's plan of salvation, centred on Jesus Christ, gives unity to the Bible. It is one book.

From God through ordinary people

One reason for the Bible's unity is that it is more than just a collection of writings. The entire book comes from God; he is the source of its authority. The writers wrote what God wanted them to write, so that the Bible carries with it the authority of God. It is therefore called the Word of God, or Scripture. The activity of God upon the writers that caused them to write his Word is called inspiration. 'All Scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching the truth, rebuking error, correcting faults and giving instruction for right living' (2 Timothy 3:16).

The word 'inspired' is not able to indicate fully how God used people to write his message, but it is the best word the translators could find. The Greek word was literally 'God-breathed'. God 'breathed out' his truth through the writers. The word means more than that the writers were inspired as a poet or musician might at times be inspired. It means that in some special way the writers were 'under the control of God's Spirit as they spoke the message that came from God' (2 Peter 1:21).

This does not mean that God used the writers without their personality or understanding playing a part. God did not use them as a person might use a typewriter. They wrote intelligently out of circumstances that prompted them to write.

Paul, for example, wrote to the church in Corinth partly because he had heard of problems there and partly because the

Corinthians had asked his advice on certain matters. Luke wrote an account of the beginnings of Christianity to provide a high-ranking official with a reliable record. In doing so, he gathered his material from secular documents, conversations and other sources, and arranged it into an orderly presentation. Whatever the process may have been, God was working along with the writer so that the completed work was also God's Word.

Human and divine

Different books of the Bible are written in different styles, and reflect the different personalities of the authors. Among the authors are lawyers, farmers, historians, doctors, fishermen, preachers, government officials and musicians. With each book, God chose the person whose personality, background and training suited his purposes at the time. He used a downtrodden farmer such as Amos to denounce the oppression and corruption of Israel's upper classes. He used a university-trained person such as Paul to develop and apply Christ's teaching to the early Christian church.

The writers of the books of the Bible may not have been aware that their writing would one day be part of the Bible. But their writing was God-directed, whether they knew it or not.

Every part of the Bible is human and divine – not one or the other, but both together. It is God's message in human language for the human race. Each book says what God wanted to say, and at the same time says what the author wanted to say.

A variety of teaching methods

Through the Bible, God shows not only what is right but also what is wrong. The Bible therefore records things of which God disapproves. It may even contain statements that sound impressively religious but are wrong. In the book of Job, various orthodox believers in God argued at length with Job about his beliefs, but the book points out at the end that their overall argument was faulty. The person inspired by God was not the debater who spoke the words, but the writer who recorded the

words. God inspired the writers to record those things that would make his truth plain.

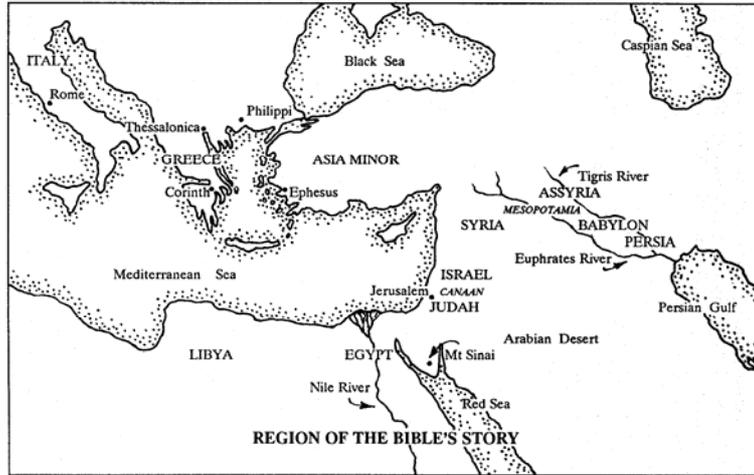
The Bible is not a collection of holy sayings. God does not necessarily teach people by using one-line instructions or simple proverb-like statements. Certainly, some books of the Bible give direct instruction, perhaps through a teacher or perhaps through the lessons of history. Others, however, contain stories without any direct religious teaching, and some, such as Job, teach what is right by exposing what is wrong.

Authoritative and living

No matter how the Scriptures present their teaching, Jesus and his followers regarded them as an authority against which there could be no argument. Repeatedly they referred people to the Scriptures with words such as, 'It is written in the Scriptures' or 'Have you not read in the Scriptures?' The Bible's authority was absolute. It could not be lessened or cancelled. What the Scriptures said, God said.

Christians are likewise aware that as they read the Bible, God speaks to them through it. The Bible is more than just a sacred book from a former era. It is something 'alive and active, sharper than any double-edged sword. It cuts all the way through, to where soul and spirit meet' (Hebrews 4:12).

The Bible's work is not merely negative in exposing sin, but is positive in pointing to a better way. It is food for the spiritual life. Only as Christians read it, understand it and put its teachings into practice will they develop into the sorts of people God wants them to be. It is possible to become a Christian through only a small part of the Bible, but to grow as a Christian requires much more. If people want a fuller understanding of the sort of person God is and the kind of life he requires them to live, they will need all God's Word, both Old Testament and New.



What the Bible contains

Birth of a nation

Genesis, the first book of the Bible, opens with a brief account of the creation of the world, as an introduction to the story of the people who live in the world. In spite of their repeated failures, God still loved them and initiated a plan for their salvation. He chose Abraham, a man from Mesopotamia, promising to make his descendants into a nation and to give them Canaan as a national homeland. The book of Genesis deals with Abraham's descendants over the next two or three hundred years, and closes with them settling down to a reasonably comfortable life in Egypt. This was the beginning of the nation Israel.

During the next four hundred years the Israelites so increased in numbers that the Egyptian government saw them as a threat and issued a law that made them slaves. The book of Exodus describes how Moses became the Israelites' leader, overthrew Egyptian domination and led his people out to freedom (about 1280 BC). Their goal was Canaan, but they stopped first at Mt Sinai. There, over the next year, they received God's law and organized themselves before moving on. Many of the laws are recorded in the latter part of Exodus and in the next book, Leviticus.

Additional laws, along with details of arrangements for the journey to Canaan, are recorded in the book of Numbers. But the people rebelled against God, and entry into Canaan was delayed forty years as a punishment. During those years the generation of rebels died and a new generation grew up. When the time approached to enter Canaan, Moses repeated, and in some ways expanded, the law for the benefit of this new generation. The book that records this is Deuteronomy. Moses died before Israel entered Canaan, and Joshua became the new leader.

Israel established in Canaan

The book of Joshua records Israel's conquest of Canaan and the division of the land among its twelve tribes. Over the generations that followed, Israel became increasingly rebellious against God. The book of Judges shows how the people introduced foreign religious practices and brought God's judgment upon themselves in the form of invasions from neighbouring countries. There was no centrally organized government during this period, but certain people (whom the Israelites called judges) rose to positions of leadership because of their ability to settle disputes and overthrow foreign oppressors. The story of one family that lived during this time is told in the book of Ruth.

In an attempt to improve national stability, the people decided to establish a monarchy. Their spiritual leader, Samuel, advised against this, for their troubles had arisen because of their unfaithfulness to God, not because of the system of government. But the people rejected Samuel's advice, with the result that Israel got its first king, Saul (about 1050 BC). Saul was a failure, and the story of events before and during his reign is told in the book of 1 Samuel.

David was Israel's next king, and the story of his reign is recorded in 2 Samuel. In spite of some mistakes, he was a great and powerful king. He established a dynasty through which God promised to produce a king who would be saviour of the world. This promised king was known as 'Messiah' in the Hebrew language (or 'Christ', in the Greek).

A divided nation

The books of 1 and 2 Kings record the history of the Israelite kingdom after the death of David. Solomon succeeded David, but his extravagant program for the development of the national capital, Jerusalem, created widespread unrest among his people. Soon after his death, the ten northern tribes broke away from the dynasty of David and established their own monarchy. The northern tribes still called themselves Israel, and after some early

temporary arrangements established their capital in Samaria. The people of the south remained loyal to the dynasty of David, whose kings continued to reign in Jerusalem. The southern kingdom was called Judah, after its leading tribe.

During the time of the divided kingdom, Israel and Judah fought with each other and with neighbouring countries. Political and social conditions in both kingdoms steadily worsened. Few people trusted God or lived to please him, but from those who did, God chose some to be his messengers to his people. These preachers condemned the people's sin and warned that judgment was certain if they did not turn to God. They were known as prophets, and some of their writings have been grouped together in a separate section of the Old Testament.

Captivity and return

As the prophets had warned, both kingdoms were finally destroyed. In 722 BC Assyria conquered the northern kingdom and took its people captive into foreign lands. Assyria, in turn, was conquered by Babylon, who then advanced into the Palestine region. In a series of attacks starting in 605 BC, Babylon gained control of Judah and took its people into captivity, destroying Jerusalem in 587 BC.

There is a parallel account of 1 and 2 Samuel in the book of 1 Chronicles, and a parallel account of 1 and 2 Kings in 2 Chronicles. However, the books of Chronicles differ from the books of Samuel and Kings in their length, style, content and purpose. They were written much later, after Israel and Judah had been taken into captivity. The books helped preserve the national history and family records, so that they might assist people of a later generation when they re-established the nation.

When Persia conquered Babylon in 539 BC, the Persian king immediately gave permission for captive peoples to return to their homelands. As a result, the nation Israel was rebuilt, with Jerusalem as its capital. No longer was there a division between north and south. But since most of those who returned to

Palestine belonged to the former southern kingdom Judah, the name Jew (short for Judean) was used for Israelites in general, and has been ever since.

The books of Ezra, Nehemiah and Esther deal with the period of reconstruction that began with Israel's return to its homeland in 538 BC. The three books cover about one hundred years, and with them the historical section of the Old Testament comes to a close.

Wisdom teachers and songwriters

After the historical section of the Old Testament is a group of five books, all of them markedly different from the previous books. The first of these, Job, is what is called a wisdom book. Wisdom teachers were people who examined the common affairs and problems of life with the aim of teaching people how to live rightly. The book of Job consists mainly of a debate between Job and his friends about God's direction of affairs in people's lives.

The book of Psalms is a collection of 150 songs and poems that express the writers' feelings during their many and varied experiences. David wrote almost half the psalms, but the authors of many others are unknown.

Proverbs is a collection of wise sayings, most of them from Solomon. Ecclesiastes, another wisdom book, is concerned with the search for life's meaning. The Song of Songs (also called the Song of Solomon) is a collection of love poems recounting the exchanges of love between a young man and a young woman.

Words of the preachers

The final section of the Old Testament contains the writings of the prophets. These were the preachers who brought God's message to his people during the periods of the monarchy, the captivity and the later re-establishment of Israel. Each book is named after the person who wrote it.

Isaiah and Jeremiah were probably the two most important prophets. Isaiah brought God's message to the people during the

time of the divided kingdom; Jeremiah preached during the forty years leading up to and including the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians. The horrors of the final siege of Jerusalem are the subject of the small book of Lamentations.

Ezekiel and Daniel were among those Jerusalemites taken captive to Babylon; but whereas Ezekiel lived in one of the workers' camps, Daniel was taken into the palace and trained to be an administrator. Each served God where he was and brought God's message to those who needed it.

The next twelve prophets are sometimes called the Minor Prophets, not because they were junior to, or less important than, the previous four (the so-called Major Prophets), but because their books are shorter. Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk and Zephaniah all belong to the period that began with the division of the kingdom and ended with the destruction of Jerusalem. The final three, Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi, belong to the period of national reconstruction that followed Israel's return to Palestine as recorded in Ezra, Nehemiah and Esther.

At the time the Old Testament story closes, Israel, though back in its land, was still under foreign rule, namely, the rule of Persia. When Greece conquered Persia (334-331 BC), Israel fell under the rule of Greece, and in the second century BC regained its independence. But in 63 BC it lost its independence to Rome, and was still under Roman rule when Jesus Christ was born.

Jesus and the early Christians

The books Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, known as the four Gospels, are concerned with the life and teaching of Jesus Christ. They do not cover the whole of his life, but mainly his birth and the last three years or so, which concluded with his death and resurrection. Sometimes they tell the same stories, but always the individual writers record events and teachings in a way fitted to their separate purposes and to the needs of those for whom they write.

After the resurrection and ascension of Jesus, his chosen messengers (called apostles), with other enthusiastic Christians, spread the good news of the salvation he had brought. This is recorded in the book of Acts, sometimes called The Acts of the Apostles. The first part of the book is mainly concerned with the work of Peter, John and others in Jerusalem and surrounding areas. The second and larger part of the book is concerned with the work of Paul, who made missionary journeys through Asia Minor and Greece, and finally reached Rome.

Letters to churches and individuals

Most of the remainder of the New Testament consists of letters by some of the leading Christians of the first century AD. These have been arranged in separate sections. First are the letters that Paul wrote to various churches in the course of his missionary activity. The letters are named after the churches to whom they were written, and are arranged in order of length, with the longest first – Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, 1 and 2 Thesalonians.

Then come the letters Paul wrote to individuals. They are named after the people to whom they were written, and again are in order of length – 1 and 2 Timothy, Titus and Philemon.

The next group consists of eight letters from five writers. An unknown author wrote a letter (which we call Hebrews) and sent it to Hebrew Christians who were being tempted to give up their belief in Jesus. The other seven are named after their authors. James the brother of Jesus wrote a letter, Peter the apostle wrote two, John the apostle wrote three, and Jude (probably another brother of Jesus) wrote one.

Finally, there is a book called The Revelation. Though also containing letters to churches, it is different in style from all the other books of the New Testament. It is largely a book of visions intended to reassure persecuted Christians that Jesus Christ is still in control and that final victory for his people is certain.

How the Bible was formed

The Old Testament collection

God's control in human affairs is clearly seen in the way the books of the Bible were collected into one volume which was accepted as Scripture. This collection of books is commonly called the canon (a word that originally meant 'rule', 'standard', 'measure' or 'list'). Books accepted as the inspired Word of God are said to be in the canon. Books not accepted as the inspired Word of God, though they may have been written by good men of the biblical era, are not in the canon. They are not acknowledged as the voice of God; they are not Scripture.

No person or group decided to form the canon. In Old Testament times a recognized body of sacred writings had been developing. From the time of Moses, people accepted certain writings as the voice of God speaking to them, and as the years passed the collection of authoritative books grew. No one gave the books authority. The books had authority within themselves, and people could do no more than acknowledge this.

There is no record that states exactly when the Old Testament collection reached the full number of thirty-nine books. Clearly, however, the collection was firmly established as the Jewish Bible by the time of Christ. In other words, the Bible that Jesus used was what we call the Old Testament. Other Jewish writings of the pre-Christian era, collectively called the Apocrypha, were well known to orthodox Jews and the early Christians, but neither group accepted them into the canon.

The New Testament collection

Since the apostles appointed by Jesus Christ had God-given authority, their teachings and writings carried the same authority as the Old Testament. Jesus had promised them that after his

departure, his Spirit within them would enable them to recall, interpret and apply his teachings. Their writings were part of the fulfilment of that promise. From the beginning, Christians accepted as authoritative the letters and books written by the apostles or those who had the apostles' approval.

As the writings of the early Christian leaders circulated, they grew into a collection equal to the Old Testament Scriptures. Peter referred to Paul's letters as Scripture, and Paul referred to Luke's Gospel as Scripture (2 Peter 3:15-16; 1 Timothy 5:18).

In an age when travel was slow, these writings took time to circulate. Also, if letters were concerned with isolated problems, or were very short or personal, they took longer to become widely known. Other Christian writings also circulated, but they did not win wide acceptance and never became part of the canon.

By the middle of the second century, churches in some places had a collection of books similar to our New Testament. In other places there was less certainty, partly because of the activity of false teachers. Church Councils met at various times to discuss the value of certain books, and by the end of the fourth century there was general agreement that the New Testament consists of the twenty-seven books we recognize today.

As with the Old Testament, so with the New, no Council created the canon or gave it authority. The authority was within the books themselves. The benefit of the Councils was their formal recognition that Christians everywhere acknowledged the books as God's living and authoritative Word.

Writing and copying

So far as we know, the books of the Bible were written originally on scrolls of papyrus, a material made from dried and flattened strips of papyrus reed. Papyrus did not last well, and all the original manuscripts perished long ago. From the beginning, however, people made copies of the original writings, and others continued to make copies down through the centuries. These copies are known as manuscripts.

Mechanical printing was unknown in the ancient world, and people made copies of the Scriptures by hand. Those who did this work were known as scribes, or copyists. Hebrew copyists were so passionate about preserving every letter of Scripture exactly as it was that they made very few errors. New Testament copyists were less conscientious. They sometimes misread or misplaced words, or even adjusted the wording to 'improve' it. But variations in the Greek manuscripts are no great hindrance. Thousands of manuscripts are available, and this enables experts to determine the original wording fairly accurately.

The most valuable New Testament manuscripts come from the fourth to sixth centuries AD, though earlier ones exist. The most valuable Old Testament manuscripts come from the ninth to eleventh centuries AD. The reason earlier Hebrew manuscripts did not survive was that the Hebrews, out of reverence for their Scriptures, buried manuscripts honourably once they were too old or worn to use. Other ancient documents, such as the Dead Sea Scrolls (which contain Old Testament manuscripts from the period 130 BC to AD 70) confirm the accuracy of the existing manuscripts. So do early translations.

God, as always, guided affairs to preserve his Word, both in the formation of the canon and in the preservation of the manuscripts. In spite of damage through age, misuse, copyists' errors and government attacks, the Scriptures are still intact, essentially as they were when first written. All the areas of uncertainty are little more than one percent of the whole, and are largely concerned with minor issues. God preserved his Word in such a way that no important teaching is affected.

Translating the Scriptures

Using all the material available, experts in ancient languages and documents are able to prepare accurate editions of the Hebrew Old Testament and the Greek New Testament. These books are called texts. Translations are made from these texts, not from the ancient manuscripts themselves. Those manuscripts are carefully preserved in safe places such as museums.

When the early English translations of the Bible were made, translators had a more difficult task than translators have today. Good manuscripts were fewer, texts were not as reliable, and knowledge of the ancient languages was less developed. Those who translated the King James Version in 1611 admitted they did not know how to translate certain words and phrases, but they expressed the hope that some day others would produce a better translation. Although they did a remarkable job, some later versions are better representations of the original writing. The Revised Version of 1885, for example, was a careful revision of the King James Version. It, in turn, was revised to produce the Revised Standard Version of 1952, a more wide-ranging revision and a more readable translation.

No translation of any book can claim to be the only equivalent of the original, no matter which book or language. There are great differences in the structure and grammar of languages, so that a sentence may be translated several ways, all of them correct. The translators' task is to produce something that is true to the original and understandable to the reader. Modern translations such as the Good News Bible and the New International Version differ from each other in style, but both are good readable translations.

Naturally, some people like one translation, others another. Readers must remember, however, that the test of a translation is not whether they like it, but whether it is accurate.

Even if a translation has deficiencies, people can still hear the voice of God's through it. The Bible is no ordinary book. It is God's message, and it has a unity that consists of more than mere similarity between words. The occasional differences of opinion among translators cannot stop the truth of God from expressing itself through the book as a whole. Readers can get some understanding of God's Word from any version, but those who use several versions will get a better understanding.

How the Bible speaks

The duty of the reader

One assurance that Christians have is that God lives within them and teaches them. Paul once said, 'We have received the Spirit sent by God so that we may know all that God has given us' (1 Corinthians 2:12).

This work of the Spirit of God within them does not mean that God's people have no need to read and understand the Bible. If that were so, God need not have preserved the Bible. But God has preserved it, so that the Spirit has something objective, historical and factual to use in teaching his people. God gave the Holy Spirit to his people not to make Bible study unnecessary, but to make it meaningful.

Once readers understand the circumstances in which God's Spirit inspired the original writings, they are in a good position to understand the Spirit's up-to-date application to them. The Bible has a living power within it, and will make its meaning relevant to its readers once the readers understand it. Readers, then, have a duty if they are to benefit from the Bible: they must work to understand what they are reading. And if they ask God's help in this, they can be assured they will receive it.

To help Christians understand his Word, God has given teachers, people he has equipped for this work. They may teach by means of their spoken words or their writings, as did teachers in New Testament times. However, Christians must test all that they hear and read, and if they are to do this satisfactorily, they must know how to interpret the Bible.

The Bible in its setting

Some people think that the Bible is nothing more than a collection of moral rules and abstract religious ideas. On the

contrary, it is a very down-to-earth book containing all sorts of writings, most of them set in the everyday world. God made himself known through things that happened in history. The part of the world where most of those events occurred was the region of Western Asia and Eastern Europe.

Readers of the Bible will be helped by any encyclopaedia, directory, atlas, dictionary or handbook that gives information about the regions and eras covered by the Bible story. They will more readily understand what they read when they have a knowledge of such things as locations of countries and towns, climatic conditions, agricultural practices, local customs and ancient religious rituals.

Another requirement is a knowledge of the historical setting of whatever biblical book they are reading. With most of the Old Testament prophets and New Testament letter writers, readers will understand the books properly only when they know when and where they were written, under what circumstances and for what purposes. In some cases the books themselves announce these details clearly, but in others readers may have to spend some time searching for them.

Variety yet unity

Within the Bible there are many kinds of literature, and readers must interpret each according to the kind of literature it is. A straightforward story is different from a poem and must be interpreted differently. The prophet's style of preaching is different from the wisdom teacher's. Israel's Old Testament law books must not be read as if they are the same kind of literature as the New Testament Gospels. Present-day readers must consider all these matters, for if they misunderstand the writer's standpoint, they will misunderstand what he has said.

Occasionally readers of the Bible will meet what is known as an apocalyptic writing. This kind of literature was popular during the centuries immediately before and after the time of Christ. It featured visions involving fearsome beasts and mysterious

numbers, and was usually concerned with great conflicts out of which God and his people were victorious. If readers interpret the symbolism of the visions literally, they will misunderstand the writer's meaning.

In spite of the variety in its contents, the Bible is one book, a unity. Each book within the Bible, though understood in its own setting, must also be understood as part of the Bible as a whole.

Unity, however, does not mean sameness. One word will not have the same meaning wherever it is used. Different writers may use the same word in different ways. A statement from an Old Testament wisdom book must not be interpreted in the same way as a statement from a New Testament letter. People must be careful when linking statements from various books. They must always consider the original setting and never force the Bible to say what the writer never intended.

A full and complete revelation

God's activity in making himself known to the people of the world is called revelation. This revelation is progressive. God did not reveal his total plan for the world all at once at the beginning of human history, but revealed it stage by stage as he prepared people for the fuller revelation through Jesus Christ.

That is why readers today must understand each part of the Bible in relation to its own era. The Old Testament, for example, contains things that look strange to today's readers, but that is because the revelation was still developing. The Old Testament was not incorrect, but it was incomplete. The New Testament does not correct the Old, but completes it. Yet it also depends on it, just as God's revelation at every stage depended on what had gone before. Readers will understand the Old Testament better when they see it pointing to the New. They will understand the New Testament better when they are more familiar with the Old.

This Bible of sixty-six books is the full written revelation God has given. Its authority is absolute. It will not answer every question that people like to ask, for that is not its purpose. It is

not a book of answers to puzzles, but a revelation from God to ordinary men and women, showing them who he is, what he has done and what he requires of them.

Human beings do not and cannot know everything, and the Bible gives them no magical answers or supernatural knowledge. What it does is encourage the life of faith, whereby people know God and live by trusting in his wisdom, power and love.

Although it contains more than the human mind can fully understand, the Bible is not a handbook on every subject. People do not honour it when they try to make it teach farming, geology or medicine. God showed from the beginning that if people want to find out how the physical world functions and how it can benefit them, they must do so 'by hard work and sweat'. God does not usually give such knowledge by revelation.

Learning, then doing

True Christians read the Bible as those who acknowledge its authority and submit to its teachings. They have a respect for it. They are not the Bible's master, using it as they like, but its servants, doing what it says. They come to the Bible not to force it to support their opinions, but to learn from it. They may want the Bible to give them teaching that is relevant to life in today's world, but that is no reason to ignore what it meant in its original setting. Readers should not impatiently force the Bible to teach them a certain number of lessons each day, but let it say whatever it wants to say in its own way and in its own time.

By doing this, Christians allow the Word of God to mould their character, as the Bible itself says: 'Let God transform you inwardly by a complete change of your mind' (Romans 12:2). And if attitudes change, behaviour also must change. Christianity has no place for those who know the Bible but do not live by its teachings. Jesus said of his teaching, 'Now that you know this truth, how happy you will be if you put it into practice' (John 13:17).