



BIBLE



God

Bible

Suffering

Jesus

Faith

BC is a series of five studies that parallel a faith journey toward Jesus Christ. Each builds on the one before, and interested readers will find themselves somewhere on the path.

This second study assumes the existence of God and explores why it makes sense to study the Bible for truth about him.

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*The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field.
When a man found it, he hid it again, and then in his joy
went and sold all he had and bought that field.*

Matthew 13:44

“What is truth?” Pilate asked.

John 18:38

Truth. What is it? Is it a treasure to be sought and found, waiting to be discovered? Or is truth ultimately unknowable?

Our postmodern society has all but despaired of being able to know truth. Especially in the West, our hard-won political tolerance has been thoroughly confused with the nature of truth. We think that because the State should not enforce an idea on everyone, then there cannot actually be truths that are objectively right and wrong.

One exception is mathematics. Most people still believe that $1+1=2$ always and for everyone. Therefore, there is no practical need for the State to protect individual opinions about math. Most would agree that sciences based on mathematics still deal with “truth.” In fact, differences of scientific opinion are tolerated because of a general belief that there is a real truth out there to be found. It is only when we move beyond such science that the State protects a broad freedom to think and worship as we wish. In the U.S., we forbid the State establishment of any religion. This is a very good thing.

It does not follow, however, that political freedom to believe and worship as we wish necessarily implies that there is no objective religious truth out there. Perhaps there is no truth to find. But perhaps there is. As important as they are for society, our political freedoms have nothing to do with it.

And yet, there is a growing insistence that truths about God are unknowable. After all, we are told, we each see things according to our individual and unique point of view. Since perceptions are relative to each person, we can never find something that is true for everyone, everywhere.

How ironic that this notion was inadvertently promoted by the most significant scientific discovery of modern times. Einstein's theories gave the word *relativity* tremendous weight. They were seized upon by popular culture to "prove" that every truth is relative to the person considering it. "That may be true for you, but not for me" is now a commonplace response in every context.

But is that what Einstein's theories demonstrate?

$E=mc^2$

The idea that a person's position or situation affects his perception of reality did not begin with Einstein. People realized long ago that if you move north at 5 miles an hour, a southbound traveler moving toward you at the same speed would, from your point of view, appear to approach at 10 miles per hour. This observation can, indeed, be applied with some success to matters of culture. Where we are and where we are going does, indeed, influence our perception of reality in many different ways.

But what Einstein mathematically demonstrated was that in relative motions approaching the speed of light, the most bizarre perceptions are possible—objects flatten and grow more massive, while time slows down. Since Einstein, modern men and women have found it fashionable to conclude that *any* notion about *anything*, however bizarre, may be acceptable on the basis of relativity. "Anything is possible."

This is unfortunate because the theory of relativity could just as well have been named the theory of *absolutivity*. Einstein's brilliant discoveries rest upon the unexpected, unexplainable, amazing but repeatedly observable fact that the speed of light remains constant regardless of the relative situation of the observer.

That is, it doesn't matter how fast you are going relative to a beam of light—toward it, away from it, sideways to it—you will always measure it as exactly 299,792 km/sec. The speed of light is a constant around which all our observations must adapt and bend, an unmovable anchor of reference for all perceptions. The bizarre effects predicted at huge speeds happen only because the speed of light will not budge. It is an absolute fact to be discovered, not at all dependent on an observer's relative point of view.

Granted that many matters of personal and cultural taste are relative to the individual or society, but may there not be fundamental realities which are objectively true—absolutes which will not budge, forcing everything else to adapt and bend around it? Such truths, if they exist, would certainly go to the root of existence and human meaning. If they exist, they would describe God.

Consider how we learn the things we believe are really true. One way is to use careful observation and logical reasoning (like Einstein). That is, after all, how the speed of light was discovered to be an unerring constant. I have elsewhere noted that careful observation and logical reasoning demonstrates not only that the Creator God exists, but also that he is a Person.¹

But observation and reasoning will only take us so far when we are dealing with persons, even the Person of God. A person's inner thoughts and purposes are not the sort of truths that science is designed to discover. That is not to say that the pursuit of God must be irrational, but simply that science is not the only rational path that will give answers. The scientific method is designed to answer questions of the *who*, *what*, *where*, *when* and *how* variety. It is not equipped to answer *why* to anything. This is not some fault of science. If we want to know why a person does something, we must do more than observe. We must communicate.

In fact, communication is how we learn the vast bulk of everything we know and believe. This is true not only regarding the *why* questions, but also the *who*, *what*, *where*, *when* and *how* matters that have been observed not by us, but by others who then

tell us what they experienced.

So, why can't we reliably learn about God by him communicating with us, and from others with whom he has communicated?

Exodus 3

Moses could barely get the words out. At the best of times he stuttered. In all his youth as an adopted son of Pharaoh's daughter, he had never mastered the art of public speaking. And forty years as an outcast shepherd on the far side of nowhere had done nothing for his public presence.

But what training or natural poise could have prepared him for this? He had been attracted by the sight of a bush up on the mountain that burned ... and burned and burned. Hours went by and the bush kept burning, as if its source of energy were inexhaustible. Eventually, sheer curiosity forced him to make the climb.

When he approached the bush, a voice spoke that changed his life forever. Even if the voice had not told him to remove his sandals out of respect, he would have still sensed that the place was holy. You can wonder whether you hear the voice of God in the wind or in your dreams, but when he actually speaks, there is no mistaking who it is.

God had just told Moses to return to Egypt to rescue the Hebrew people from harsh slavery. It was part of a larger plan. Moses was tasked to represent God both to the Hebrews and to Pharaoh. The shepherd's doubt of his own abilities had been waved aside by the mighty divine arm which would accomplish all that needed to be done.

A thousand questions pushed and shoved for attention, but only one made its way to Moses' stammering lips, "Suppose I go to the Israelites and say to them, 'The God of your fathers has sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What is his name?' Then what shall I tell them?"

Moses needed to know who this God is, who claimed all his life and obedience. He remembered stories of Abraham from his childhood, but there was so much more, so many questions—questions he might be expected to answer as God’s spokesman. It was a long standing Hebrew tradition to encapsulate a person’s qualities in his name, so that was the question he blurted out.

I AM WHO I AM.

What? What did God say?

This is what you are to say to the Israelites: “I AM has sent me to you.”

So that is his name! I AM WHO I AM ...

How the Bible is Unique

Moses was the first author of the Bible. The encounter he described with God (recorded in Chapters 3-4 of Exodus) sets the tone for all that is to follow and makes biblical religion unique among all the religions of the world.

All other scriptures of the world’s major religions embody the accumulated philosophies of various cultures and peoples. The Tripitika of Buddhism retains the core of Siddhartha Gautama’s personal philosophy along with the rules, sermons and doctrines added by many followers over time. Buddha, himself, pointed not to truth per se, but rather to a path which he hoped would guide each seeker. The Vedas, Bhagavad-Gita and related writings record the foundational stories and teachings behind the cultural polytheism which is Hinduism. Simpler religions rely on oral traditions instead of writing to pass along the basic philosophy common to that people.

The modern mind prefers to speak of “ideologies” (humanism, existentialism, etc.) rather than religion. But all these paths share a common nature: each represents a different philosophical perspective, a different attempt by men and women to answer the questions of meaning as best they can. They claim to be nothing else. None of them rest universal claims on historical fact.

The Bible, however, claims to be quite different. The God who spoke to Moses introduced himself as a God of *revelation*. I AM WHO I AM is not a say-nothing joke; it is a direct answer to the question Moses was trying to ask. Moses would come to know who God is, as God revealed himself to Moses. God's name proclaimed that he is not defined by what Moses (or anyone else) conceives him to be. He is not who Moses may think he is. He is not defined by any human being's philosophy. *He is who he is*—objectively real, and not a composite of human imaginings. The only way we can reliably know God is for him to tell us who he is.

Moses was being called to act as God's instrument in history, and it would be in human history that God would reveal truth about himself. Creation stories and accumulated cultural wisdom are one thing. A record of historical intervention is another. The God who spoke to Moses said that he would reveal himself in a way that only God could, not in philosophical propositions and moral proverbs alone, but by molding the history of a specific people chosen for that purpose.

After Moses had seen God perform the saving miracle of the exodus, he wrote:

Ask now about the former days, long before your time, from the day God created man on the earth; ask from one end of the heavens to the other. Has anything so great as this ever happened, or has anything like it ever been heard of? Has any other people heard the voice of God speaking out of fire, as you have, and lived? Has any god ever tried to take for himself one nation out of another nation, by testiness, by miraculous signs and wonders, by war, by a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, or by great and awesome deeds, like all the things the LORD your God did for you in Egypt before your very eyes? You were shown these things so that you might know that the LORD is God; besides him there is no other.

Deuteronomy 4:32-35

This is the theme of the entire Bible: God revealing himself in history. Only God can shape human events as a potter shapes clay. The history of Israel that culminated in Jesus Christ became a canvas upon which God painted who he is, the reason we are alienated from him, and what he has done to overcome the alienation. By detailing God's special intervention in history, the Bible records a God who exists independently of the prophet, a God who is who he is and who makes himself known through revelation.

Earlier I pointed out that when it comes to learning, communication is a valid alternative to scientific method. A fancy word for communication is "revelation". The word may call to mind transcendental trances and ecstatic experiences, but the word does not mean that at all. Revelation is nothing more than someone telling you something true that you don't already know.

Except for a few fun experiments in school, virtually all the scientific knowledge most people possess is based on human revelation—what someone has told them. You probably believe the theory of relativity, but why? Did you perform an experiment to prove it? Probably not; you trusted your teacher. The same is true for history. The same is true for just about everything. We trust parents and teachers to tell us the truth. We trust Mom to teach us the alphabet correctly, Dad to properly explain how the garden hose works and Mr. Ferguson to give us the real low-down on physics (teaching us to trust in experiments not even he has performed). Most of what we know about our friends and family comes from what they reveal, or tell us, of their thoughts and personal history. Revelation, or communication, is not the exception for learning; it is the rule.

Of course, human revelation is only as reliable as the one doing the revealing. People can lie, be prejudiced or misinformed. Generally speaking, however, the process is quite effective, and it is most certainly rational. Civilization is built upon learning from others who learned from others who learned from others ... something that someone once experienced.

God, too, can reliably reveal his thoughts by telling us who he is—and while he is at it, who we are or are supposed to be. The crucial requirement is that we have a reliable source, a good reason to believe that the information is, in fact, from God. The self-generated wisdom of philosophers and sages may indeed be wise, but it is not enough. What we need is not what someone thinks God is, but rather who God says he is.

This is why the Bible is unique: it actually claims to be from God, and it rests that claim upon history, not philosophy. If Isaiah did not predict the Babylonian exile or if Jesus Christ did not rise from the dead, then the Bible would fail its own test for true revelation.² If historical foretelling and objective miracles did not happen, then Isaiah, Jesus and the others were either deluded or deceptive. That is why criticisms of the Bible's reliability must be taken seriously.³ But if accurate prophecy and miracles carved a consistent message out of our very history, then the Bible truly is the word of God, an authenticated and reliable communication from him to us.⁴

Since the Bible claims to be divine revelation, we have in our possession a *possible* answer to our questions about God—a real, objective and rational answer. Its unique claims, and the way it develops themes across centuries as if from a single mind, make it truly fascinating, if not compelling—like a burning bush on a mountainside which simply must be investigated.

Perhaps the Bible's claims will turn out to be false. Perhaps on inquiry the burning bush will turn out to be just a trick of the light. But there is no underlying reason why the Bible has to be false. If God is real and personal, why should we be surprised that he would communicate with us in human language? And how else would we know that this revelation is truly from God unless he revealed it in a way that only God could, by miraculous signs and wonders, by a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, or by great and awesome deeds, like all the things the LORD God did ... before human eyes?

And what, after all, is the alternative? If the Bible is not what it claims to be, then it would seem that God has not communicated with us in any way we could reasonably authenticate. We would be left knowing that God exists, that he is real and is a Person, but having no way to know for sure who he is and what his purposes are. More ominously, we would have no way of knowing why we are not on very good speaking terms.

The purpose of this little study is not to prove the Bible, or even to say very much about its message. The purpose is to explain why I will explore the Bible for answers to the difficult questions that are raised once we acknowledge God's personal existence. We may not like all we find there. I didn't. But God does not require my approval. Like objects approaching the speed of light, I must bend myself around truths that will not budge.

In a way unique in all religion, the Bible claims to be divine revelation. If it is what it claims to be, then there really is a way to know the Living God.

Let's see what it says ...

The next pamphlet in this series is entitled "Suffering," and explores how God can be good, given the mass of pain and evil in the world.

(Endnotes)

- 1 These themes were addressed in the first BC series pamphlet, The Reality of God.
- 2 cf. Isaiah 43:8-13; 44:6-8, 24-28; 46:8-10; 1 Corinthians 15:12-20.
- 3 Of course, simply denying the Bible's validity does not, in itself, constitute a valid criticism. One cannot say, "Isaiah obviously did not prophesy the Babylonian exile because it is impossible to predict the future," or "Jesus obviously did not literally rise from the dead because nobody can rise from the dead." Such comments are not valid criticisms; they are arbitrary statements of unbelief.

- 4 There are, of course, two religions other than Christianity which could reasonably make this claim of being founded on history-based revelation. Judaism is founded on what Christians call the Old Testament. Islam essentially kept the Old Testament, but replaced the apostolic understanding of Jesus with writings of Mohammed to create the Koran. I imagine that evaluating which is valid would be very challenging for anyone brought up in one of these three religions. As one who grew up an atheist, the solution seemed straightforward to me: how essential is the New Testament understanding of Jesus Christ for completing the historical message of the Old Testament? I discuss that question in a later booklet in this series, called Jesus Christ.