



THE BIBLE



The Reality
of God

The Bible

The Human
Condition

Jesus
Christ

Christian
Faith

BC booklets are a series of brief studies by Dr. Glenn Parkinson examining the essentials of Biblical Christianity. These pamphlets are a series, meaning that each one builds upon the content of earlier ones. They do not have to read as a series, however. The reader should feel free to dip into the progression of thought at any point of interest.

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, an objective goal to be sought and found, waiting to be discovered? Or is truth an opinion or feeling defined by the seeker, more of a question than an answer?

Our culture is fast trading the first option for the second. Historically, society sought objective answers – answers equally true for everyone. Our increasingly postmodern society seeks answers too, but expects them to be found individually and subjectively, so that truth is thought to vary from person to person.

Einstein’s famous theory gave the word *relativity* tremendous weight. Today, most people believe that every truth is relative to the person considering it. “That may be true for you, but not for me” is a commonplace response thought to make sense in almost every context.

But does it always make sense?

$$E=MC^2$$

The idea that a person’s position or situation affected his perception of reality did not begin with Einstein. People realized long ago that if you travel north at 5 miles an hour, a southbound traveler walking at the same pace would appear to approach you at 10 miles per hour. This self evident truth 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. 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.

But is it appropriate to apply near-the-speed-of-light physics to the basic philosophical questions of life in this way? Consider, for example, that the special theory of *relativity* could just as well have been named the theory of *absolutivity*. Einstein's brilliant work rests 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 to which all perceptions are relative. The bizarre effects predicted at huge speeds become necessary only because the speed of light will not budge. It is an absolute, non-relative fact to be discovered, not defined by an observer's 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 have to do with God, and therefore go to the root of human meaning and purpose.

How does one learn about objective truth, truth that is true regardless of my individual opinions? One way is to use careful observation and logical reasoning. 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, at least capable of thought, feeling and expression.¹

But observation and reasoning will only take you so far when you are dealing with a person, 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 particular 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, just a limitation. One may scientifically measure a person's height and weight, but no amount of measurement will reliably uncover his thoughts.

Fortunately, science is not the only form of rational learning. In fact, it is not even the most important. The vast bulk of everything you and I know and believe to be true we have discovered, not through personal experience or experimentation, but from being instructed by an authority we trust. So, why shouldn't we expect God to instruct us about himself?

EXODUS 3

Moses could barely get the words out. At the best of times he stuttered and stammered. 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 effect a literal rescue of the Hebrew people from harsh slavery. It was part of some larger plan. Moses was 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. Maybe he should have ...

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 and 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 the 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” (communism, existentialism, etc.) rather than religion. All these paths, however, 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 their 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. The name communicated that 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 culminating in Jesus Christ became a canvas upon which God would paint 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 suggested that when it comes to learning, there is a rational alternative to scientific method. That alternative is revelation. The word *revelation* 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 that you don't already know. Except for a few fun chemistry demonstrations in high school, virtually all the scientific knowledge most people possess is based on human revelation—what they have been told. The same is true for history. The same is true for just about everything. We trust parents and teachers and writers 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 somebody else did). Most of what we know even about our friends and family comes from what they reveal, or tell us, of their thoughts and personal history.

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 it.

God, too, can rationally reveal his thoughts by telling us who he is. The crucial requirement is that we have a reliable source, a good reason

to believe that the information is, in fact, from God. The wisdom of philosophers and sages is not enough. We are not interested in the God somebody thinks is, but the God who is who 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 nothing more than philosophers with vivid imaginations. That is why criticisms of the Bible's reliability must be taken seriously.³ But if those things and all the others did happen, carving a meaningful message out of our very history, then the Bible is truly 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. Maybe it is nothing, but once it catches your attention, curiosity demands a closer look.

Perhaps the Bible's claims will turn out to be false. Perhaps on investigation 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 war, 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 who he is and what his purposes are. Certainly, the Bible is worth a look.

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 point to the Bible for answers to the difficult questions that are raised once we acknowledge God's personal existence. 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.

(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 criticisms; they are simply statements of unbelief. It is similarly absurd to point to ancient books which were not included in the Bible and claim that because they teach something different, that the Bible itself cannot be reliable. Such "arguments" are the stuff of popular fiction and movie contracts, and should not cloud such an important issue.
- 4 There are, of course, two religions other than Christianity which could reasonably make this claim of being based on history-based revelation. Judaism is founded on what Christians call the Old Testament. Islam essentially kept the Old Testament, but replaced the New Testament with writings concerning Mohammed to create the Koran. I imagine that evaluating which is valid would be very challenging for anyone brought up in one of those religions. As one who grew up an atheist, the solution seemed straightforward to me: how essential is Jesus Christ to the historical message of the Old Testament? I discuss that question in a later booklet in this series, called *Jesus Christ*.



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