

We read the Bible in our own tongue, but it came to us from another age and culture. Readers need to know its background and origins to make sense of it, and find out how useful it is to them.

THE BIBLE IS NOT JUST ONE BOOK, ITS A PORTABLE LIBRARY. There are two main collections of writings, translations from the original languages, Hebrew and Greek. To help a first-time reader trying to make sense of a text, translations keep being updated, as everyday language used keeps changing.

The longer and first collection of writings originated with the Jews. It is 2-3,000 years old. The second, shorter collection is of writings from the earliest Christian community, during the 70 year period after the time of Jesus. The content of the Bible is very mixed. It isn't a collection to be read straight through from start to finish. It tells us what religious people thought about life and the world at different times in history. Nobody reads their way through a library of books from A-Z, we look out for subjects that interest us.

The world changes constantly, yet there are aspects of life in the past which haven't changed, despite appearances. That's what makes history fascinating. Read as an historical document, the Bible contains much of interest. Archaeology shows that it describes real customs and events of the time. Life portrayed in biblical stories was not a story-teller's fiction. Many places, events and people portrayed in Bible stories existed. If lessons about life can be learned

from history, they can be learned from studying the Bible too.

THE BIBLE IS ABOUT IS RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN GOD AND PEOPLE. Also it's about how people relate to each other in the light of what they think about God. Christian writings present the life of Jesus of Nazareth and his teaching. He was a man of Jewish religion and culture in Palestine under the Roman Empire. His 'Gospel' message was derived from the Jewish teachings he grew up with.

Christians find the background to Jesus' teaching in that collection of Hebrew texts which Jews call 'The Law, Prophets and Writings'. This contains mythology, history, politics, wise sayings, stories, oracles, hymns and prayers used in worship. Christians name this 'the Old Testament', seeing it as the Jewish account of their relationship with God from ancient times. This paved the way for the 'New Testament' collection of Greek texts about Jesus' life and teaching.

Old Testament books are not in the order in which they were written. Ancient myth and legend are followed by the story of the birth of the people of Israel as a nation in the Exodus story, and an account of its sacred law. There is an 'official' history of the rise and fall of the nation, written well after events depicted. The books of wise sayings, prayers, hymns of praise and the writings of the prophets over a six hundred year period, leading up to the time just before Jesus.

The New Testament presents four accounts of the life and work of Jesus of Nazareth. Each has some stories and sayings in common, but each portrays the man and his message in a distinctive way. There are also letters from disciples of Jesus to other believers, an account of how Christianity spread, and a book of Christian visions and oracles. These give us an idea of how people took the teaching of Jesus, then developed and applied it in their own situations.

CHRISTIANS USE THE BIBLE AS THEIR MAIN SOURCE for teaching about God and life. As guide and inspiration, it has endured 2,000 years because earlier generations of believers gave authority to its writings as a key influence on their lives. Christians believe their forefathers were inspired by God to do this, and wish to follow suit by using the texts with the same attitude of reverence and enquiry. They translate their understanding into new ideas and action, just as they translate the Bible into many languages. Studying the Bible and discussing what its authors meant, permits exploration of its deeper meaning and how it relates to life and growth in faith today. Just as reading a visitor guidebook helps us make the most of the opportunity of being on holiday, so reading a Bible commentary gives background to the story, or explains words and phrases foreign to us.

The Old Testament offers a wealth of insight into the way Jewish ideas of God and humanity developed from primitive origins, up to the time of the Roman empire. At first, God is portrayed as an exclusive tribal deity, protective of loyal subjects,

punishing any rebellion. This changes to an image of One who is patient, merciful, wise, passionate about justice, truth, and fidelity.

PEOPLE CHANGE : WAYS OF THINKING ABOUT GOD CHANGE. We cannot really know if God changes, but we do know that human understanding and perceptions of God have changed. This is seen in Bible history. Human beings pass from relying on tribal identity in relation to God to a point where everyone is responsible for their actions and must make their own personal relationship with God. Evil and suffering is understood, not as God's will, but as the outcome of sin, mankind's rebellion against God. Human history is a story of rebellion, estrangement, then rescue and restoration through God's merciful compassion.

The books of the Gospel tell of good news from God in the story of Jesus. He declares God's unconditional love for all humankind, without discrimination. God is less a law-enforcing judge and more a compassionate Father wanting to heal his children wounded by sin, and free them to live together fearlessly in loving trust with God.

Competence in interpreting the Bible and its intentions belongs first to Jews and Christians. It belongs to them. This doesn't prevent others who believe differently from interpreting it their own way, but a breadth of understanding flows from the accumulated wisdom of the mainstream of believers of synagogue and church traditions. Though Jews and Christians dispute vigorously over interpreting some texts, there is nevertheless, agreement on a great deal.

Differences of understanding are natural when the Bible is studied by believers around the world from different cultures. But, these are insignificant compared to what they agree on. The Bible is a witness to human relationships with God, it is trusted to disclose God's Word, and his purpose for the world. Making the Bible's message known, debating it, relating it to everyday life and to our ultimate human destiny is a vital task for disciples of faith in every age.

What authority do you give the Bible in your thinking and decisions?

Christianity for 21st century people

2. How useful is the Bible as a guide for life today ?

The writings of the Bible remain among the most widely distributed, examined and discussed in the world. There are many opinions about what its real message is, and how it should be interpreted in contemporary life. Many who claim to be Christians have failed to read it, or if they have tried to read it have failed to understand it properly, or follow its teaching.

Is the Bible's message relevant to the modern world?

Can non-experts make sense of it?

In the light of conflicting opinions about its meaning - who is right?

Any questions or comments arising from this leaflet? Please contact the Revd. Keith Kimber, 029 2022 0375 or <keith.kimber@tesco.net>

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