

“What Is the Bible?”

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Scripture: 2 Kings 22:3-20

Hymns: God of the Bible - VT 420; Lord, You Sometimes Speak – VT 537; Open, Lord, My Inward Ear VT 548

Hilkiah Finds the Book of the Law

³ In the eighteenth year of King Josiah, the king sent Shaphan son of Azaliah, son of Meshullam, the secretary, to the house of the LORD, saying, ⁴ ‘Go up to the high priest Hilkiah, and have him count the entire sum of the money that has been brought into the house of the LORD, which the keepers of the threshold have collected from the people; ⁵ let it be given into the hand of the workers who have the oversight of the house of the LORD; let them give it to the workers who are at the house of the LORD, repairing the house, ⁶ that is, to the carpenters, to the builders, to the masons; and let them use it to buy timber and quarried stone to repair the house. ⁷ But no account shall be asked from them for the money that is delivered into their hand, for they deal honestly.’

⁸ The high priest Hilkiah said to Shaphan the secretary, ‘I have found the book of the law in the house of the LORD.’ When Hilkiah gave the book to Shaphan, he read it. ⁹ Then Shaphan the secretary came to the king, and reported to the king, ‘Your servants have emptied out the money that was found in the house, and have delivered it into the hand of the workers who have oversight of the house of the LORD.’ ¹⁰ Shaphan the secretary informed the king, ‘The priest Hilkiah has given me a book.’ Shaphan then read it aloud to the king.

¹¹ When the king heard the words of the book of the law, he tore his clothes. ¹² Then the king commanded the priest Hilkiah, Ahikam son of Shaphan, Achbor son of Micaiah, Shaphan the secretary, and the king’s servant Asaiah, saying, ¹³ ‘Go, inquire of the LORD for me, for the people, and for all Judah, concerning the words of this book that has been found; for great is the wrath of the LORD that is kindled against us, because our ancestors did not obey the words of this book, to do according to all that is written concerning us.’

¹⁴ So the priest Hilkiah, Ahikam, Achbor, Shaphan, and Asaiah went to the prophetess Huldah the wife of Shallum son of Tikvah, son of Harhas, keeper of the wardrobe; she resided in Jerusalem in the Second Quarter, where they consulted her. ¹⁵ She declared to them, ‘Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel: Tell the man who sent you to me, ¹⁶ Thus says the LORD, I will indeed bring disaster on this place and on its inhabitants—all the words of the book that the king of Judah has read. ¹⁷ Because they have abandoned me and have made offerings to other gods, so that they have provoked me to anger with all the work of their hands, therefore my wrath will be kindled against this place, and it will not be quenched. ¹⁸ But as to the king of Judah, who sent you to inquire of the LORD, thus shall you say to him, Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel: Regarding the words that you have heard, ¹⁹ because your heart was penitent, and you humbled yourself before the LORD, when you heard how I spoke against this place, and against its inhabitants, that they should become a desolation and a curse, and because you have torn your clothes and wept before me, I also have heard you, says the LORD. ²⁰ Therefore, I will gather you to your ancestors, and you shall be gathered to your grave in peace; your eyes shall not see all the disaster that I will bring on this place.’ They took the message back to the king.

It’s ten years ago now since I had the pleasure of attending the 2012 Mennonite Church Canada Assembly in Vancouver. The theme was “Dusting Off the Bible for the Twenty-First Century.” Aside from several presentations by Bible scholars like Gerald Gerbrandt and Sheila Klassen-Wiebe, one of the resources that was developed for this particular assembly was a series of short videos by theatre company Ted & Co. that reimagined

the biblical passages in dramatic form. One of them was about our passage from 2 Kings.¹

Now this story occurs at a very central time, when the book of the Law is found or rediscovered in the ruins of the Temple by the exiles, who have returned from Babylon to Israel and are in the midst of rebuilding the Temple. This video reimagines the book of biblical law being literally “dusted off” as it’s found in the basement of the half-reconstructed Temple. In the video it’s found by two unassuming Temple workers who are a bit intimidated by the high priest, “Hilkiah” – a guy they say “always looks mad, whose favourite word is no.” The one worker, Sarah, makes her way through the dark and cluttered stone basement to find her colleague Malachi copying out some scrolls and minding his own business. As they talk, she notices an old book on the shelf. “What’s this?” She asks. When she opens it, she immediately says, “I think it’s important.” “Yeah,” Malachi replies, “it’s a hot pad for the tea!” They discover it contains the words of the book of Deuteronomy, and they begin to read:

“Now this is the commandment—the statutes and the ordinances—that the LORD your God charged me to teach you to observe in the land that you are about to cross into and occupy, ² so that you and your children and your children’s children may fear the LORD your God all the days of your life and keep all his decrees and his commandments that I am commanding you, so that your days may be long. ³ Hear therefore, O Israel, and observe them diligently, so that it may go well with you and so that you may multiply greatly in a land flowing with milk and honey, as the LORD, the God of your ancestors, has promised you” (Deut. 6:1-3).

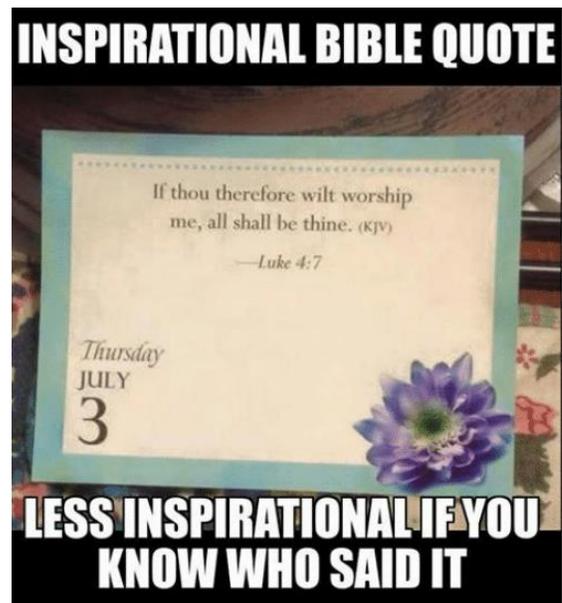
They panic a little – “We have laws, but not these laws!” Having been exiled for so long, the people are more used to Babylonian ways than to those of the God of Israel. These laws are both ancient and brand new to them! The Temple workers eventually conclude

¹ To view the video, go to: <https://www.tedandcompany.com/product/whats-this/> (Ted & Co. “What’s This?” video, recorded 2012, 8:32).

that they must bring the book to Hilkiah, the high priest (their perpetually angry boss) – even though it’s going to change everything. And from there follows our Scripture passage of 2 Kings 22, where the king hears these words from the long lost book of the Law and immediately begins the process of reformation – of relearning how to live according to these commandments.

Isn’t it fascinating that there’s a biblical story about a time in Israelite history when the Bible was lost and then rediscovered? How “meta” is that – to have a story in the Bible about finding the Bible (or at least, the book of Deuteronomy)? At that 2012

Assembly, they used this story to speak about “dusting off the Bible” for our day and age. The sense is that while North American Christians hold a lot of “reverence” for the Bible, they don’t actually spend a lot of time reading it! This leads to some at times amusing misreadings – (ex. of the quote in an inspirational calendar that was actually quoting Satan during Jesus’ temptation in the wilderness!). What’s not so amusing is



[#InspirationalQuoteFail](#)

when appeals to the Bible – or supposed “biblical” values – are used in attempts to exclude or oppress certain groups of people. This kind of misreading can be downright dangerous. And according to Bible scholar Peter Enns, it’s also based on a misunderstanding of what the Bible even is!

As Patrick mentioned last week, we are using Enns’s book *How the Bible Actually Works* as a guide for this series on Making Sense of the Bible. One of the key

ideas in this book is about what the Bible is – and what it isn't. When asked to describe the Bible, we might think of the words “holy, perfect, and clear.” But Enns reaches for different, maybe unexpected descriptors. For him, the Bible is “ancient, ambiguous, and diverse” – and what's more, he makes the case that this is actually a good thing!²

So what does he mean by “ancient, ambiguous, and diverse”? Let's look at each of these. **1. Ancient** – Even though we read the Bible for its relevance to our questions and needs, there is no escaping that the Bible is a very ancient text. Enns writes, “We are as distant from the time of King David (three thousand years ago, about 1000 BCE) as we are from the far distant future time of 5000 CE. Go back another thousand years earlier if you want to start at the time of Israel's most ancient ancestors, Abraham and Sarah. ... We can open the Bible almost at random and begin reading, and it won't take long before we see how deeply embedded the Bible is in this distant and utterly foreign world.”³ The way the Bible describes the world as waters above and below a dome, for example, don't make any sense to us with our modern scientific knowledge of the universe. Talk about selling one's daughters into polygamous marriages, slavery, and death by stoning as a form of justice make us deeply uncomfortable – as they should. These are really, really, really old texts, written down from even older stories that were passed around for a while before being recorded onto scrolls.

Enns says that that we can't simply gloss over this historical distance; we have to recognize that the “writers of the Bible lived long ago and far away, intent on asking *their* questions and seeking *their* answers, oblivious to our own questions and

² Peter Enns, *How the Bible Actually Works: In Which I Explain How an Ancient, Ambiguous, and Diverse Book Leads Us to Wisdom Rather than Answers - and Why That's Great News* (New York: Harper One, 2019), 5.

³ Enns, 7.

concerns.”⁴ And yet this isn’t any old historical document. It’s Scripture, which means we’ve decided that its meaning overflows the time and place in which it was written. It’s not stuck in the past, but in some way continues to speak to us and be relevant for our understanding of who God is and how we are to live. We might have to, as Enns puts it, “transpose it into another key if we hope to connect with it,” but this (very) ancient book has “*value beyond the reason for which it was originally written.*”⁵

2. Ambiguous – Enns’s second word for the Bible is that it’s ambiguous, or it doesn’t have one clear meaning on most topics. Let me point to a few of the more obvious examples to get at this one. Enns points out back-to-back contradictory parables in Proverbs 26:4-5: “Do not answer fools according to their folly, or you will be a fool yourself. Answer fools according to their folly, or they will be wise in their own eyes.” So, which is it? Are we to answer fools or not? Take another example – our beloved passage from Isaiah 2:4 “They shall beat their swords into ploughshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more.” But did you know the Bible also contains the opposite passage? Joel 3:10 says, “Beat your plowshares into swords, and your pruning hooks into spears.” And then, of course, we have the Apostle Paul’s statements about women being silent in church in one of his New Testament letters (1 Corinthians 14:34), while in another, he sends hearty greetings to women apostles like Junia, or leaders like Pricilla who are working with him in ministry (Romans 16). What is with these contradictions? What are we supposed to do with them?

⁴ Enns, 7.

⁵ Enns, 37.

Blatant contradictions like these remind us that we don't treat everything in the Bible exactly the same. It's not a list of rules that are all equally important. Instead, we interpret some things based on "reading the *situation*" (the contradictory Proverbs);⁶ or measured against the example and teachings of Jesus (swords into plowshares, not the other way around; and encouraging women to exercise all their gifts in the churches). This ambiguity in the Bible means that we're actually invited to interpret what we read and grown in wisdom, not just submit to it and obey. Here's Enns again: "If God were a helicopter parent, our sacred book would be full of clear, consistent, unambiguous information to take in. In other words, it wouldn't look anything like it does. But if the Bible's main purpose is to form us, to grow us to maturity, to teach us the sacred responsibility of communing with the Spirit by walking the path of wisdom, it would leave plenty of room for pondering, debating, thinking, and the freedom to fail. And that is what it does."⁷

If we think of Jesus' own teachings, they also reflect this wisdom approach, especially the parables. How often does Jesus answer questions posed to him with a parable or story? What an ambiguous, roundabout way of answering – and one that requires his listeners to think and discern for themselves. So much of the Bible is likewise made up not of rules or how-to instructions, but of stories. In one of his novels, Chaim Potok writes, "Did he believe that God wrote stories with only one kind of meaning? It seemed to me that a story that had only one kind of meaning was not very interesting or worth remembering for too long."⁸

⁶ Enns, 31.

⁷ Enns, 14-15.

⁸ Quoted by Rachel Held Evans, in *Inspired: Slaying Giants, Walking on Water, and Loving the Bible Again* (Nashville, TN: Nelson Books, 2018), viii.

Finally, the Bible is **3. Diverse**. Enns says, “This diversity exists for a simple reason: the Bible was written by various writers who lived at different times, in different places, and under different circumstances and who wrote for different purposes.” We not only have the Scriptures of two major world religions within our Bible (Judaism and Christianity), we also know that the Bible contains many different genres or types of writing – from letters to Gospels, from prophetic books to poetic psalms, books of the law, stories of Israelite history, and books of wise proverbs. The Bible – which literally means “the books,” plural, in Greek⁹ – is really less of a book and more of a library! It’s a collection of the ancient writings that have been declared meaningful and formative for our faith tradition, sometimes called the “canon.”

What’s interesting is that the Jewish “canon” – the list that would make up the Hebrew Bible – wasn’t yet fully chosen by the time of Jesus. That’s why he sometimes speaks of the “Law and the Prophets” – the Wisdom writings had not yet been added, plus everything was on scrolls rather than bound into one book, like we have. When the early church was forming its own canon of Scriptures in the first few centuries CE, it had to choose writings about Jesus from among many – some were chosen because they’d become well used in Christian worship, for instance. (I was reminded of the recent process for creating our new Mennonite hymnal, *Voices Together!*) But the *Epistle of Barnabas*, the *Gospel of Mary*, and the *Gospel of Peter*, among others, didn’t make the cut. Yet it’s always striking to notice that four Gospels were kept, not just one. This reveals a very deliberate choice to include a diversity of portrayals of Jesus in the biblical canon.

⁹ Alister E. McGrath, *Christianity: An Introduction*, 2nd ed. (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 36.

This diversity, again, shows us what the Bible is and what it is not. It's a discussion about God and faith spanning millennia; it's about wisdom, not pat answers; it's about faith as a search for God's face in our time and place – or, in Enns's terms, "*the need to ponder God anew in our here and now.*" The funny thing is, this exact process is portrayed in the Bible itself! The Bible contains stories of people interpreting and applying and reinterpreting the Bible, such as our example from 2 Kings 22. When they rediscovered the book of Deuteronomy, their immediate reaction was, 'Hey, this is relevant to what we're going through! There are life-giving things in here that can speak to us as we figure out who we want to be after being exiles in Babylon for so long.' So digging up that dusty old book is an invitation to "work things out for ourselves."¹⁰ This isn't an accident, but part of how the Bible – that "ancient, ambiguous, and diverse" library – actually works. Trust in us to do that wisely is built right in.

I want to close with a quote from Rachel Held Evans's book about the Bible, *Inspired*, which Geraldine Balzer used as a devotional for our opening gathering of Women's Bible Study. Held Evans begins by talking about her toddler son who is at the stage of asking hundreds of questions: "Psychologists say the best way to handle children at this stage of development is not to answer their questions directly, but instead to tell them a story. As pediatrician Alan Greene explained, 'After conversing with thousands of children, I've decided that what they really mean is, 'That's interesting to me. Let's talk about it together. Tell me more, please?'' Questions are a child's way of expressing love and trust. They are a child's way of starting a conversation." She goes on to talk about how she has started responding to her toddler's many questions by telling him a story. "Sometimes, as I'm doing this, my son will crawl into my lap, put his

¹⁰ Enns, 8.

head on my chest, and listen to the story, his questions quieted, his body relaxed. And I realize this is all he wanted to begin with – to be near me, to hear the familiar cadence of my voice, to know he's safe and not alone. We grown-ups aren't so different We may wish for answers, but God rarely gives us answers. Instead, God gathers us up into soft, familiar arms and says, 'Let me tell you a story.'¹¹ AMEN

¹¹ Held Evans, *Inspired*, 220-221.