

HOW

DO

YOU

KNOW?

MIKE WOODRUFF

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CHAPTER ONE

Take Another Look

*No educated man can afford to be ignorant of the Bible.
Theodore Roosevelt*

*Since Moses descended from the mountain with two loose-leaf stones
under his arm, all literature can be divided into two genres:
Genre A – The Bible. Genre B – all other books.
Tony Reinke*

I want to encourage you to take another look at the Bible. I say another because I am pretty sure you've seen one before. There are 5 billion in print and most U.S. homes have several copies lying around.

It's a hard book to avoid.

Even if you've never held one in your hands, you've been influenced by it. You've heard Linus read the nativity story in Charlie Brown's Christmas Special, listened to Saint Paul's description of love recited at a wedding, or heard King David's reflections on death at a funeral.¹

¹ Paul's description of love is found in 1 Corinthians 13. David's reflection on death is located in Psalm 23.

And even if I'm wrong about these examples, I'm sure you've heard it cited, because it's the basis of hundreds of today's figures of speech. Some – such as, “it's better to give than receive” and “pride goes before the fall” – have a religious ring to them and you might know that they are from the Bible. But not all do. “Turn the world upside down,” “broken heart,” “an eye for an eye,” “put words in my mouth” and “the kiss of death” are just a few of the hundreds of biblical phrases that pepper modern speech.

And then there are the stories. You might not choose “Bible for 400” if you're on Jeopardy, but you know something about Jonah and the fish, Noah and the flood, and Moses and the Red Sea.

You also know that Job had a rough go of it, and you can name several of the Ten Commandments and recite a few lines from the Lord's Prayer, “Our Father who art in Heaven...”

Who knows, maybe you know more than that. Perhaps you attended Sunday School as a kid or were invited to a pre-game prayer meeting by a high school coach. You may have even made a New Year's resolution to read the entire Bible in a year and made it all the way to Leviticus before you quit.

My point is, you are not starting at zero. You know something about the Bible already. But I want you to take another look.

Many otherwise educated adults have a third grade understanding of the Bible. They know a lot about other things – say finance, football or organic gardening – but not much about the most significant book of all time. Perhaps this is you.

If it is, I have five reasons why you should give *The Book*² another look.

² The English term Bible is derived from the Greek word *biblios*, which means *books*. In light of this, I refer to the Bible as both the Bible and *The Book*.

Reason One: It's Not Just a Book, It's The Book

When I'm asked to describe the Bible, I usually say that it's a collection of 66 books that were written over 1,600 years by 40 different authors in three different languages and on three different continents. If people are still paying attention, I note that it offers insights on everything from the nature of God and the human condition to marriage, war, childrearing and money. I then explain that its big focus is Jesus.

Sometimes, however, I go in a different direction. Rather than describe the Bible, I start by listing its accolades. They are impressive.

- The Bible is the bestselling book of all time.
- The Bible has been translated into more languages than any other book.³
- The Bible has shaped more governments, inspired more art and fueled more hope than any other work of any type.
- More books have been written about the Bible than have been written about any other book.
- The Bible has been banned, burned and mocked more than any other book.
- And at any moment, millions of people are reading it because they find it an unparalleled source of inspiration, hope and wisdom.

³ According to the bold vision of Wycliffe Bible Translators, by 2025, some portion of the Bible will have a translation project in process for every known language in the world. To date, of the 7,300 known languages, 1,400 still need translation work to begin. In many cases, Wycliffe translators have moved to remote areas and friended small people-groups, learned their oral language, developed a written script for it, translated the Bible into that language and then taught it to the people so that they could read the Bible in their own language. In most of these cases, the only book in that language is the Bible.

As I said, it's quite a list. But there is more. Consider this: the Bible's impact continues to grow 2,000 years after it first appeared.

You've likely heard that "organized religion" is in decline and you may have assumed that sales of the Bible had fallen off. Not so. Sales of the Bible continue to climb.

Of the 600,000 books published every year, over 90 percent sell less than 500 copies before quickly fading.⁴ To say they have a short shelf life is being generous. The time between their press release and the moment they're selling for 10 cents at a garage sale is a matter of months. The few books that do make a splash sell 100,000 copies, climb the best-seller lists and are discussed on broadcasts and podcasts. We might even measure their shelf lives in terms of years rather than months.

And at the tip of the spear are the true classics. I'm not talking about those that sell several million copies – like Rick Warren's *The Purpose Driven Life* or Michelle Obama's *Becoming*. I'm thinking of works like Homer's *Iliad*, Plato's *Republic* or Shakespeare's plays. Once every 50 years a book enters the Western canon and becomes a "must read." Some of these works remain in print for hundreds of years. A few have done so for a thousand.

But here's my point: none of these compare with the Bible. For starters, their current sales are very low. Secondly, their sales are flat. During 2022, classics like *The Iliad* or *the Republic* sold a few thousand copies, mostly as college textbooks. In contrast, last year, 80 million copies of the Bible were printed.⁵

⁴ It's a challenge to determine how many books are published and sold in America, but it appears as though: 1) the average book sells 500 copies; 2) about 10 books sell 1 million; and 3) fewer than 500 sell more than 100,000.

⁵ There are several matters to note here: 1) I am comparing the sales of other books with the printing of the Bible because this is the data I can find, in part because many Bibles are given away; 2) I have seen the number of Bibles printed as low as 20 million (per year) and as high as 100 million (per year). I am

This number is not only impressive because it is bigger than 1 million. It is also impressive because it is nearly six times larger than last year's three best sellers combined, all of which were written by Colleen Hoover.

Stop and think about this. Most books sell a few hundred copies and then fade away. A few thousand sell 100,000 copies and survive a few years. But then they fade away. There are a handful of books that are impressive either because they sell a few million copies during their five years of fame, or because they continue to sell several thousand copies year after year. But there is nothing that compares with the Bible. Two thousand years after entering circulation, sales continue to climb. And last year, 80 million new copies joined the 5 billion already in circulation.⁶

There is no G.O.A.T. debate to be had among books. The Bible holds every record. I stopped playing football in eighth grade, but I have more in common with Tom Brady than any other book has with the Bible.

There is no G.O.A.T. debate to be had among books. The Bible holds every record. I stopped playing football in eighth grade, but I have more in common with Tom Brady than any other book has with the Bible.

using the figure of 80 million because it is from the Guinness Book of World Records (www.guinnessworldrecords.com/world-records/best-selling-book-of-non-fiction), accessed July 2023); 3) Different sources cite different books in ranks second through fifth. Most list The Quran as second, with 800 million copies printed; followed by Mao's Book of Quotations (The Little Red Book) at 720 million, followed by The Book of Mormon at 120 million.

⁶ The Bible does not appear on the New York Times best seller list because: 1) Those who track sales, divide the Bible by version and language. Given that there are hundreds of versions and thousands of languages, the number of Bibles sold is divided; 2) Every week tens of thousands of Bibles are given away instead of being sold. In most cases, these are not counted; and 3) It would be boring. On just about any given week, the number of Bibles printed would far eclipse any other book. The contest would always be for second place.

The first reason you need to give The Book another chance is because if ever a book was The Book, this book is that book.

You need to take another look at The Book because it's the most important book ever written.

To be clear, at this point I am not arguing that the Bible is true or divinely inspired. I am simply noting that in order to be well educated, you need a working understanding of what the most significant book ever written is all about – an understanding you might not have.⁷

The first reason you need to give The Book another chance is because if ever a book was The Book, this book is that book.

Reason Two: It Makes Important Claims

The second reason you need to read the Bible is because it makes shocking and scandalous claims about itself – some of which are so outrageous that if The Book were human, he (or she) would either be celebrated as the greatest person to ever live or dismissed as a profoundly deluded megalomaniac.

If these claims were recorded in a book that only sold a few hundred copies, or if the claims revolved around inconsequential matters, we would be justified in ignoring them. But when the world's most influential book makes shocking claims about critical topics, we need to pay attention.

What claims am I talking about? Four stand out.

- First, the Bible claims to be the Truth. The Bible not only claims to be true in all it teaches, it claims to be the standard against

⁷ For over a dozen years I served as a college pastor. During that time, I would often ask students what the Bible was about. Few could give even a grade-school answer.

which other claims of truth are to be measured.⁸

- Second, the Bible claims to reveal critical information about God. While affirming that we can learn certain things about the Creator by looking at the creation, the Bible claims that we must read it if we want to understand God's nature and plan.⁹
- Third, the Bible claims to be co-authored by God. The Bible claims to know about God because it claims to have been inspired by God. The claim is not that He physically wrote it and then dropped it from heaven, but that He worked through human authors to deliver the information He wanted us to know.¹⁰
- Finally, the Bible claims to be "living and active." The Bible does not claim to be just a book. It claims to be authoritative and interactive in a way no other set of words ever could be.

⁸ In John 17, Jesus states, "thy word is truth." This is a much bigger claim than "thy word is true." The Bible claims to be the standard against which other claims of truth are measured. It does not claim to be one person's opinion, true most of the time or true for some of the people but not all. The Bible claims to be Truth.

⁹ The Bible teaches that God reveals Himself in both natural and supernatural ways. It is important to note two things about the natural ways – i.e., the things we can learn about God via history, creation or our conscience: 1) It is celebrated in the Bible (e.g., Psalm 19 and Romans 1); 2) It is limited. Natural Revelation provides us with enough information to know that there is a god, but not enough for us to rightly know Him. Because of this, God has reached out in supernatural ways as well. In the Old Testament, we find Him speaking audibly from heaven, performing miracles, providing the Law and speaking through His prophets. In the New Testament, Special Revelation is on display most fully in Jesus.

¹⁰ This point is developed by Paul in his second letter to Timothy, when he writes, "All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness." The key word here is "God-breathed," which in the original script is *theopneustos* – a combination of *theos* (the Greek word for God) and *pneustos* (the Greek word for breathing). Some have translated *theopneustos* as inspiration, but a more accurate translation would be expiration. The gist is not that the words of Scripture are inspirational in the way a football coach's half-time speech might be. The claim is that these words are expirational – i.e., they are the breath of God.

The Bible makes other claims as well – such as the claim of having authority over us and the claim of containing information we need to know in order to live well – but you get the point. The most important book ever written makes a number of profoundly consequential claims.¹¹

We are free to disagree with them, but we shouldn't do so without understanding what they are.¹²

Reason Three: You May Have Missed the Main Point Last Time

The third reason I'm suggesting that you take another look at the Bible is because you may not understand the point it's trying to make. The Book is long, old and odd, little of which plays well with readers weaned on USA Today and X (formerly Twitter).

I am going to assume that the challenges raised by “long” and “old” are obvious enough and focus on the other ways the Bible makes unusual demands on readers. When you pick up a copy of the New York Times, no one needs to tell you to interpret ads differently than you do the headlines or that China refers to a communist country not fancy tableware. The same cannot be said for the Bible.

My experience is that although some people know bits and pieces of several Bible stories, few have invested enough time to understand the storyline.

¹¹ Especially when one of the things The Book suggests is that we are likely to be more interested in ESPN than things of infinitely greater importance.

¹² Of course, just because the Bible makes certain claims does not mean these claims are true. Furthermore, there is an element of circular reasoning in play here. I will address both of these issues later in this book. Right now, I'm simply explaining why you should take another look at the Bible. It is not only the best-selling book of all time, it makes very important claims.

You likely know very little about ancient Babylon, cannot explain the difference between a pharaoh and a tetrarch, and are more comfortable dealing with memes than parables. For that matter, while you have some idea what schoolteachers, IT workers and nurse practitioners do, you probably know very little about shepherds, centurions or tanners.

My point is, understanding the Bible takes effort not required by modern books. I do not want to overstate my point. It's not theoretical-physics-hard. In fact, I believe in the doctrine of perspicuity, which teaches that the Bible's main points are clear to those who engage with it.¹³ But understanding the Bible takes effort you may not have invested in the past.

My experience is that although some people know bits and pieces of several Bible stories, few have invested enough time to understand the storyline. To them, the Bible is a loose collection of religious lessons and motivational tales, not a grand, expansive story of God's unfolding kingdom.

The third reason you need to take another look at the book is because you may not understand it as well as you think.

Reason Four: It Answers Question Seven

The fourth reason you need to take another look at the Bible involves a bit of philosophy.

As you know, everyone has a particular cultural and philosophical lens that shapes their understanding of the world. I'm referring

¹³ The claim that the Bible is perspicacious – which was a point that the 16th century Protestant Reformers made – means that: 1) the central message of the Bible is clear and understandable; and 2) the Bible can be properly interpreted in a normal, literal sense. It should be noted that: 1) the Bible makes this claim about itself – e.g., Deuteronomy 6:6, Psalm 19:7, 2 Timothy 3:14, Psalm 119:130; and 2) the doctrine of perspicuity does not mean that every passage of Scripture is equally clear, nor does it eliminate the need for interpretation, explanation and exposition of the Bible by diligent students.

to the intellectual grid we develop to help us process information and make sense of life. This worldview – which is part culture, part parental influence, part religious orientation, and a few other factors mixed in – acts like a pair of eyeglasses that bring everything we see into focus. The fourth reason I'm suggesting you take another look at the Bible is because you may be wearing the wrong glasses.

I will say more about worldviews in Chapter Five. I am introducing them here to note that they are shaped by our answers to common life questions called, The Seven Life Questions, and to highlight the importance of Question Seven.

If you're not familiar with The Seven Life Questions, let me assure you, you answered them long ago. As I will argue, we all qualify as theologians and philosophers, because we all have thoughts and opinions about God. The question is not whether we've answered The Seven Questions, the question is whether our answers are any good.

What are these questions?¹⁴

Question One: What matters most? Who – or what – is of ultimate importance? Is it me? Is it my happiness, or is there something greater? Is there a god whose will and honor should matter more to me than my own? Should the good of my family (or tribe) be more important to me than anything else? What matters most? What is the summum bonum?

Question Two: Who am I? What is my ultimate identity? How should I understand myself? Am I a child of God with an eternal soul and profound value, or am I the accidental exhaust of the collision of space, time and chance? Am I neither? Am I both? Does it matter? Who – or what – am I?

Question Three: Where did I come from? To what do I owe my

¹⁴ I realize that some of you would rather chew a spoonful of sand than think about your own thinking, but the latter is actually a very important thing to do.

existence? While I'm at it, why is there something instead of nothing? Why does anything exist and how did it come about? What set things in motion and how should my answer to this question shape my answers to Questions One and Two?

Question Four: What went wrong? Why is there so much pain and injustice in the world? Why all the death and suffering? Is this just the way it is, or did something go wrong? And if something went wrong, what was it and who is to blame? Is God to blame? Am I?

Question Five: What is expected of me? Am I free to do whatever I please, or is there someone or some power to whom I am accountable? Do others have legitimate claims on my life? Does my family? Does the government? Will I be held accountable for my actions, and if so, to what standards? What does it look like to be a good person?

Question Six: What happens when I die? Is what I see all I get, or do I live on? And if I live on, do I come back in a different form or the same one? Will I eventually meet God, will I advance through a series of lives until I arrive at Nirvana? Neither?

Question Seven: Where do I look for answers? Am I to look inside myself? Trust tradition? Use reason? Is there some kind of answer key – i.e., has God weighed in?

As I already implied, all seven questions are significant. But as soon as we read through the first six, we realize how important Question Seven is.

I am not going to walk you through a course on epistemology.¹⁵ If you've done any thinking on this topic, you know that everyone has a working answer to Question Seven, and that their approach is shaped by appeals to reason,¹⁶ revelation, experience and

¹⁵ Epistemology is the study of knowing.

¹⁶ Some associate reason with the Greek philosophers, and some to everything from simple thinking to complex syllogisms. In scholarly circles, reason

tradition,¹⁷ also known as the four sources of authority. You also know that much depends on the way people work out the priority of those sources.¹⁸

I am arguing that the fourth reason you need to take another look at the Bible is because I believe it is the key to rightly answering The Seven Life Questions.

Reason Five: The Ground Is Moving

The final reason I'm asking you to take another look at The Book is because you need a stable reference point during this season of churn in the world.

I am going to assume you've noticed the harsh words being exchanged, the lack of trust being displayed and the charges of "fake news" and "conspiracy theory" being bandied about.

I am going to also assume that you've noticed people assigning

generally refers to the synthesis of rationalism and empiricism that emerges after Kant, and is associated with the Enlightenment. Those who embrace this approach generally hold a high view of human nature and are committed to the scientific method.

¹⁷ As with the other terms, tradition holds different meanings for different people. I use it to refer to the wisdom we gain from our ancestors. Note: G.K. Chesterton – who called "tradition" the "democracy of the dead" – noted that in previous ages, we assumed that the insights of our forebears were good. It is since the rise of Modernity – and our belief that things will be better in the future – that we have begun to view tradition as stodgy and backward.

¹⁸ Twenty-five hundred years ago, those living in the West ordered the four sources of authority in roughly the same way—i.e., Revelation (the Bible) and Reason (science) were first, followed closely by Tradition, with Experience in fourth. At some point during the late Middle Ages, Tradition moved ahead of Revelation, with Reason and Experience staying in place. During the Scientific Revolution, Reason climbed, and Revelation waned. And as we entered the 18th century, Romanticism began pushing Intuition forward. Of course, this description is quite crude, but it points to the changes that have been underfoot, noting as well that while epistemic change is uncommon, it is not unprecedented.

blame in just about every direction, starting with politics and religion and quickly moving on to higher education, the media, technology, the markets and a half-dozen other things. What is going on?

The short answer is, we are fighting over Question Seven.

There is more to it, of course. But for our purposes we need to realize that we have descended into a knowledge crisis, and it's a deep one. Not only can't we agree on how to move forward, we can't even agree on a definition for forward. Nor can we agree on a host of other basic matters, such as what is true or even what is meant by truth.

As I said, we cannot agree on what we know or how we know it.¹⁹

Why all the confusion? The reason is because an epistemic shift is taking place, and it's of such size that it is impacting most parts of the world. For most of the last 2,000 years, Reason and Revelation have been the dominant players in Europe and North America. But in the recent past, the number of Westerners being shaped by Reason and Tradition has been going down, and the number elevating Experience has been going up.²⁰

Of course, changes of this sort are not unheard of. Indeed, they have happened a half-dozen times in the West, including during the last part of the Middle Ages, at the beginning of the Reformation and in the run-up to the Enlightenment. But the magnitude of the adjustments we are living through are significant and disorienting.²¹

¹⁹ Bonnie Kristian develops this point very well in *Untrustworthy: The Knowledge Crisis Breaking Our Brains, Polluting our Politics, and Corrupting Christian Community* (Brazos, 2022). I am indebted to David French's introduction as well.

²⁰ It has been suggested that if Rodin were sculpting today, he would not have crafted The Thinker. Instead, he would have shaped The Feeler.

²¹ Consider the way the elevation of Experience impacts our answer to Question Three: Who am I?

Which is why the fifth reason I believe you need to take another look at the Bible is because most everything else is in motion. It's not just that what is celebrated as true today is different than what was celebrated as true last week. It's that what is being celebrated as true today might get you cancelled tomorrow.

In a sea of chaos,
we need islands
of stability.

In a sea of chaos, we need islands of stability. I believe the Bible is uniquely qualified to serve as the reference we need.²²

There are Other Reasons

There are other reasons that I think you should take another look at the Bible.

For starters, I believe it explains ultimate reality and that if you embrace its wisdom, you are more likely to enjoy a good life. Secondly, I believe that reading the Bible will dispel some of the questions you have about it. As a 19th century writer noted, the best way to defend the Bible is to realize that it doesn't need to be defended. It is like a caged lion. Once you open the cage it defends itself.²³ I think this is true. Indeed, my experience is that many who start to read it, find that it reads them.

Finally, the main reason you should read the Bible is because it directs us to Jesus. He is the ultimate goal. The Bible is not a

²² In *The Weight of Glory*, Lewis wrote, "A man who has lived in many places is not likely to be deceived by the local errors of his native village." He goes on to explain that one of the ways we can travel is to read. In his introduction to Athanasius's *Incarnation*, which is available online (Google, *On the Reading of Old Books*), he argues that by reading old books, we not only see their assumptions, we also see our own.

²³ I am citing Charles Spurgeon here. He is the one who suggested that "The Word of God is like a lion. You don't have to defend a lion. All you have to do is let the lion loose, and the lion will defend itself."

destination, just a path that leads us there.

I could go on, but you get the point. Suffice it to say, I think you should take another look at *The Book*. The pages ahead are designed to set you up for that.

What's Coming

In Chapter Two, I am going to summarize the story that unfolds across the 39 books of the Old Testament. In Chapter Three, I will do the same for the 27 books that make up the New Testament. As you will see, although the Bible is more than just an unfolding drama of God's rescue efforts, it is never less than that.

In Chapter Four, I'm going to share the reasons I trust the Bible and believe you should as well.²⁴ In Chapter Five, I am going to answer the questions that I receive most often about it. And in Chapter Six, I am going to suggest ways that you can integrate the Bible into your life.

Throughout it all I will make liberal use of footnotes. I understand their very presence makes some of your eyes glaze over. Humor me. I do so because I want to keep the main text light while providing some directives for those who want to go deeper.

It's time to take another look at *The Book*.

²⁴ As I have already noted, I cannot prove that the Bible is true in the ways the word prove is commonly used today. But as you will see, we are not asked to take a "blind leap of faith." There are good reasons to think it is what it claims to be.