

## Take Another Look

I want to encourage you to take another look at the Bible. I say *another* look because I am pretty sure you've seen one before. There are five 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 watched as 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.<sup>1</sup>

And even if I'm wrong about those, I'm sure you've heard it cited, because hundreds of today's figures of speech come directly from the Bible. Some – such as *it's better to give than receive* and *pride goes before the fall* – have a religious ring to them. But many do not. *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 English 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, can name several of the Ten Commandments and can recite a few lines from the Lord's Prayer, “Our Father who art in Heaven...”.

Who knows, maybe you know a lot more than that. Perhaps you attended Sunday School as a kid or were invited to a few pre-game prayer meetings 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 gave up.

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 rather limited 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 need to give *The Book*<sup>2</sup> another chance.

### **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 sixty-six books that were written over 1,600 years by forty 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.<sup>3</sup>
- 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.

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

You've likely heard that "organized religion" is in decline and may have assumed that sales of the Bible had fallen off. No. Sales continue to climb.

Of the 600,000 books published every year, over ninety percent sell less than five hundred copies and then quickly fade.<sup>4</sup> To say they have a short shelf-life is to overstate their impact. The time between their release and the moment they go on sale at a garage sale for ten cents is a matter of months.

A few books – far less than one percent - make a significant splash. They sell a hundred thousand copies, climb the best-seller lists and are discussed on radio and TV. Instead of a shelf life of several months, they survive several years. But then they also fade. Their half-life may be measured in years, but it is not measured in decades.

At the tip of the spear are the classics. I'm not referring to those that claim as much on their book jacket. I'm not even 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 fifty years a book enters the Western canon and becomes a “must read.” Some of these works have remained 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 at best.

During 2021, classics like *The Iliad* or the *Republic* sold a few thousand copies, mostly as college text books. In contrast, last year 80 million copies of the Bible were printed.<sup>5</sup>

This number is not only impressive because it is bigger than one million. It is also impressive because it is nearly eighty times larger than the number of copies that Dav Pilkey’s *Mothering Heights* or Mark Levin’s *American Marxism* sold last year, and they were the two best selling books according to the New York Times.

Stop and think about this. Most books sell a few hundred copies and then fade away. A few thousand books sell one-hundred thousand copies and survive a few years. But then they also fade away. There are a handful of books that are impressive either because sell a few million copies during their five years of fame, or because they continue to sell several thousand copies year after year – thereby remain in print for decades.

But there is nothing that compares with the Bible. Two thousand years after entering circulation sales continue to climb. And last year eighty million new copies joined the five billion already in circulation.<sup>6</sup>

There is no GOAT 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.

You need to take another look at the Bible because it’s the most important book ever written. It is not even close.

To be clear, at this point I am not necessarily claiming that the Bible is true. Indeed, the fact that 80 million copies were printed last year does not mean that it is. But I am claiming that in order to be well educated you need a working understanding of what it’s about.

The first reason you need to give the book another chance is because if ever *a* book deserved to be called *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 – 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 deluded megalomaniac.

If these claims were recorded in a book that had sold a few hundred copies and then faded away, we would be justified in ignoring them. Likewise, if the claims revolved around inconsequential matters, we could move on even if the book was a perennial best seller. But when the world's most influential book makes shocking claims about life's most important 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 which other claims of truth are to be measured.<sup>7</sup>
- **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.<sup>8</sup>
- **Third, the Bible claims to be co-authored by God.** The Bible claims to know about God because it claims to have been written 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 exact information he wanted us to know.<sup>9</sup>
- **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.

The Bible makes a few other claims, such as having authority over us and 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 the most consequential claims possible.<sup>10</sup>

We are free to disagree with them, but we shouldn't do so without understanding what they are.<sup>11</sup>

## Reason Three: You May Have Missed The Main Point Last Time

The third reason I'm suggesting 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 Twitter.

I am going to assume that the challenges raised by “long” and “old” are obvious enough and focus on the way it is odd. What I want you to know is that the Bible makes unusual demands on the reader. When you pick up a copy of the *New York Times*, you know how to treat it. No one needs to tell you to interpret ads differently than headlines, that China refers to a communist country not fancy tableware, or that Apple might refer to a tech company not a piece of fruit.

The same cannot be said for the Bible. 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 know very little about shepherds, centurions or tanners.

My point is, understanding the Bible takes effort not required by many other books. I do not want to overstate my point. Reading it is not theoretical-physics-hard. In fact, I believe in the doctrine of the perspicuity of Scripture, which teaches that the Bible's main points are clear to those who engage with it.<sup>12</sup> But understanding the Bible takes effort you may not have invested in the past.

My experience is that while many people know bits and pieces about a few Bible stories, they have not invested enough time to understand or appreciate the main message. To them the Bible is a loose collection of religious lessons and motivational tales, not the grand, expansive story of God's unfolding kingdom.

The third reason you need to take another look at the book is because you may understand it less well than 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 to the intellectual grid we develop to help us process information and make sense of life. This worldview – which is one part culture, one part parental influence and one part religious orientation, with 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 the Seven Life Questions, and to highlight the importance of the very last one.

I realize this may be new for some of you. You're quite certain that you've never heard of the Seven Questions before and are wondering if you are behind. Let me assure you, you filled in the blanks long ago. Everyone has. It turns out that we are all theologians and philosophers because we all have thoughts and opinions about God. The question is not whether we've answered Questions One through Seven, the question is whether our answers are any good.

If you've never consciously wrestled with them - i.e., if you've lived what Socrates called the "unexamined life" – your answers may not be as thoughtful as you might hope. You also may not appreciate how important your answer to Question Seven actually is.

What are the Seven Life Questions?<sup>13</sup>

**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 I do to myself? Should the good of my family or tribe be more important to me than anything else? What matters most?

**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?<sup>14</sup> Am I both? Does it matter? Who – or what - am I?

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

**Question Seven: Where do I look for answers?** Am I to look inside myself? Trust tradition? Use reason? Have I been given an answer key to help answer these questions? Has God weighed in?

As I implied, all seven of these questions are significant. But as soon as we start engaging with them we realize just how important Question Seven is. Deciding how “we know what we know”<sup>15</sup> determines how we will answer questions one through six.

Some people answer Question Seven by looking inside themselves – i.e., they “trust their gut.” We label this approach “intuition.”<sup>16</sup> A second group chooses to embrace the time-tested insights of the past. We name this approach “tradition.”<sup>17</sup> The third group defaults to science and logic. Those in this camp operate under the banner of “reason.”<sup>18</sup> The last group operates under the banner of “revelation.” Those in this camp believe that God reveals key insights to us.

This book explores the Bible's claim to have been given to us by God to help us answer questions one through six.

The fourth reason you need to take another look at the Bible is because it helps you appropriately frame Question Seven.

## Reason Five: The Ground Is Moving

The final reason I am suggesting you take another look at the Bible is because you need a stable reference point during this season of churn.

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" that are being bandied about.

I am going to also assume that you've noticed people assigning blame in every direction. Politicians, universities and the media are the favorite targets, but I've heard attacks on technology, capitalism, Putin, demographic changes and Tik Tok's algorithm.

What is going on?

The short answer is, we're having a knowledge crisis. We cannot agree on what we know or how we know it. To put a sharper point on it, we cannot agree on what is real or how to discover what reality is.<sup>19</sup>

I believe a big reason for our confusion is that an epistemic shift is taking place at the foundation of Western Culture. For most of the last two thousand years, reason and revelation have been the dominant players in the West. To the extent that we have had a "collective worldview" it has been molded by their influence. In the recent past, the number of people who are being shaped by reason and tradition is going down, and the number elevating intuition is going up.<sup>20</sup>

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.<sup>21</sup> But these kinds of deep adjustments are always disruptive, and I suspect this one may be uniquely unsettling.<sup>22</sup>

Where am I going with this? I am arguing that you need to take another look at the Bible because just about everything else around you is in motion. The Bible is uniquely qualified to serve as a stable reference point to assess what is going on.<sup>23</sup>

In several places in his writings, Oxford scholar C.S. Lewis argued that old books help us see our own setting more clearly.<sup>24</sup> Others have made a related point about the study history. I am pointing to the Bible because it is both old and historical.<sup>25</sup>

The fifth reason I believe you should give the Bible another chance is because it provides you with a perspective on today that is tragically rare.

## There are Other Reasons

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

For starters, because I believe it explains ultimate reality, I believe that if you embrace its wisdom you are more likely to enjoy a good life.<sup>26</sup> Secondly, I believe that reading the Bible will dispel some of the questions you have about it. As a 19<sup>th</sup> 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.<sup>27</sup> 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 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. 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. As I have already noted, I cannot prove that it 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.

In chapter five I am going to answer the questions I receive most often about the Bible and belief.

In chapter six I am going to share the ways you can integrate the Bible into your life.

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

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

<sup>2</sup> In addition to referring to the Bible as "the Bible" – the English term that evolves from the Greek word *biblios*, which means "books" – I will also simply refer to it as The Book.

<sup>3</sup> According to Wycliffe Bible Translators, by 2025, some portion of the Bible will have been translated into over 5,500 of the 6,802 known languages in the world. Nothing else comes close. In many cases, Wycliffe translators have moved in with small people groups, learned their oral language, developed a written script for it, translated the Bible into that language and then taught the people how to read and write so they could read the Bible in their own language. In most of these cases, the only book in that language is the Bible.

<sup>4</sup> It is a challenge to determine exactly how many books are published in America or how many they sell, but it appears as though the average book sells about 500 copies, with about ten approaching one million and fewer than 500 selling more than 100,000.

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<sup>5</sup> I have seen numbers for the Bible as low as 20 million per year to as high as 95 million. The figure of 80 million is from the Guinness Book of World Records.

<https://www.guinnessworldrecords.com/world-records/best-selling-book-of-non-fiction>

<sup>6</sup> There are three reasons why the Bible does not appear first on the *New York Times* best seller list: 1) Those who track book 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.

<sup>7</sup> 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. The Bible 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.

<sup>8</sup> The Bible teaches that God reveals himself in both natural and supernatural ways. The natural ways – which theologians refer to as Natural or General Revelation - refer to the things we can learn about God via history, creation or our conscience. King David is pointing to Natural Revelation in Psalm 19 when he writes, “The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands. Day after day they pour forth speech; night after night they reveal knowledge.” The Apostle Paul goes in a slightly different direction in Romans 1 when he argues that although people may suppress the truth, we all know that there is a god: ... “since what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them. For since the creation of the world God’s invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that people are without excuse.” In other words, there are things about God that we cannot not know because God has written them on our hearts. But Natural Revelation does not tell us everything we need to know. It 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.

<sup>9</sup> 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.

<sup>10</sup> Especially when one of the things the book suggest is that we are more likely to be more interested in ESPN than things of infinitely greater importance.

<sup>11</sup> 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

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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.

<sup>12</sup> The claim that the Bible is perspicacious – which was a point the 16<sup>th</sup> century Protestant Reformers made – means that: 1) the central message of the Bible is clear and understandable; and 2) that 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., Deut. 6:6, Psalm 19:7; 2 Tim. 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 scholars.

<sup>13</sup> I realize that some of you would rather chew a spoonful of sand than think about your own thinking, but it is actually a very important thing to do.

<sup>14</sup> These Seven Questions are stated differently by different writers.

<sup>15</sup> The question “How do we know what we know?” is the animating question in the field of epistemology. Though not many give this field much thought, it is very important. We need to carefully ask ourselves what we know for sure and how we know it.

<sup>16</sup> There are several things to note here: 1) I almost went with the term “experience” instead of “intuition,” because of the phrase, currently quite common, “you can’t invalidate my experience.” I also considered using the term “emotions.” I went with intuition instead. To be clear, none are ideal, but I think Intuition is best; and 2) As American culture atomizes - and as more people understand personal freedom as the highest good - an increasing number of people look inside themselves for truth.

<sup>17</sup> As with the other terms, tradition has different meanings for different people – especially Roman Catholics. I use it to refer to the generic insights 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.

<sup>18</sup> Some associate *reason* with the Greek philosophers, and some use it to refer to everything from simple thinking to complex syllogisms. However, in discussions about knowing it generally refers to the synthesis of rationalism and empiricism that emerges after Kant and is associated with the Enlightenment mindset of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Those who embrace this approach generally hold a high view of human nature and are committed to the scientific method.

<sup>19</sup> 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.

<sup>20</sup> It has been suggested that if Rodin were sculpting today, he would not have crafted the thinker. Instead he would have shaped the “feeler.”

<sup>21</sup> Twenty-five hundred years ago, those who associated with the West ordered the four sources of authority in roughly the same way. Revelation (the Bible) and Reason (science) came first, Tradition

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followed closely behind, and Intuition was fourth. At some point during the late Middle Ages, Tradition moved ahead of Revelation with Reason and Intuition staying in place. Around the time of the Scientific Revolution, Reason climbed and Revelation waned. And as we entered the 18<sup>th</sup> 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.

<sup>22</sup> Consider the way the elevation of Intuition is impacting the way we answer Question Three: *Who am I?* In the past, our identity was primarily shaped by tradition. That is to say, the family we were born into determined the job we held, the people we associated with and our place in society. Today what others think about us – including our family members – matters much less. What matters instead is what *we* think about ourselves. *We* are being encouraged to choose our own truth and path, and *we* are taught to do this not by looking to our past but by looking inside ourselves. Whether taking a job, pursuing a marriage, or determining a gender – our culture tells us to make these decisions in the light of our own intuition. When compared to the “tradition-based identity” model of the past, today’s approach gives us much greater autonomy but less stability.

<sup>23</sup> Our new environment is putting pressure on individuals and fomenting social unrest. Our teenagers feel immense pressure to craft their identities from within; so much pressure that they don’t know how to handle it. When we are led to believe that we can rely on *only* ourselves to discover truth and to manage life, we become quite lonely and quite discouraged. Not only that, but people’s internal voices say a lot of different things. Some individuals’ experience tells them that all our institutions are corrupted by pervasive racism. Other persons’ intuition lead them to believe there is no racism and those who prosper do so because of their work ethic. How do you weigh which is true and which is not in a world where intuition is king?

<sup>24</sup> 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 on line (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.

<sup>25</sup> Thus “long” and “old” may present challenges, but these are among the characteristics that make it so valuable today.

<sup>26</sup> I do not mean this as an endorsement of utilitarianism. I do not believe we should celebrate the Bible just because it “works.” I believe the Bible works because it is true.

<sup>27</sup> 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.”