

BRIEF  BOOKS

THE BOOK OF BOOKS

A short guide to reading the Bible

GEOFF ROBSON



At one level, the Bible is such an outstanding publishing success story that, just by the sheer scale of its translation and the quantities printed, it calls out to every person on the planet: “Read me!”

Add to that the profound impact the Bible has had on our culture, and the personal testimony of the many who claim it has transformed their lives, and the case to open and read it surely becomes compelling.

But... the barriers to doing so can be off-putting.

It’s a big book, written a long time ago, with words and ideas that may be unfamiliar to us. Where do I start? How do I go about it? Can I trust that what I am reading is the original, uncompromised Bible? How do all the different sections fit together and relate to each other?

Geoff Robson writes to help you read the Bible, answering these and other common questions and explaining how to go about it and get the most out of it.



B R I E F  B O O K S

THE BOOK OF BOOKS

A short guide to reading the Bible

GEOFF ROBSON



matthiasmedia

SYDNEY • YOUNGSTOWN

The Book of Books

© Geoff Robson 2015

All rights reserved. Except as may be permitted by the Copyright Act, no part of this publication may be reproduced in any form or by any means without prior permission from the publisher. Please direct all copyright enquiries and permission requests to the publisher.

Matthias Media

(St Matthias Press Ltd ACN 067 558 365)

Email: info@matthiasmedia.com.au

Internet: www.matthiasmedia.com.au

Please visit our website for current postal and telephone contact information.

Matthias Media (USA)

Email: sales@matthiasmedia.com

Internet: www.matthiasmedia.com

Please visit our website for current postal and telephone contact information.

Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from the Holy Bible, English Standard Version® (ESV®), copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Scripture marked 'NIV1984' taken from the Holy Bible, NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION®. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984 by Biblica, Inc. All rights reserved worldwide. Used by permission.

Scripture marked 'NIV2011' taken from the Holy Bible, NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION®, NIV®. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc. All rights reserved worldwide. Used by permission.

ISBN 978 1 922206 82 4

Cover design and typesetting by affiniT Design.

CONTENTS

1. The book that changes lives.	5
2. The Book of books.	13
3. What's it all about?	17
4. How to read the Bible.	33
Appendix A: Why bother with the Bible?	49
Appendix B: Overview of the 66 books	63
Appendix C: A 6-month introductory reading plan	69

1. THE BOOK THAT CHANGES LIVES

Gaylord Kambarami, the former General Secretary of the Bible Society of Zimbabwe, once offered a man a copy of the New Testament. But this man wasn't interested, and assured Kambarami he'd only use the pages of the Bible to roll cigarettes. "I will make a deal with you", Kambarami replied. "I will give you this book if you promise to read every page before you smoke it." He handed over the New Testament and hoped for the best, and the men parted ways.

More than a decade later, Kambarami was attending a conference when, to his surprise, the speaker on the platform suddenly pointed him out to the audience. "This man doesn't remember me, but I remember him", the speaker said. "About 15

THE BOOK OF BOOKS

years ago he tried to sell me a New Testament. When I refused to buy it he gave it to me, even though I told him I would use the pages to roll cigarettes. He made me promise to read the pages before I smoked them. Well, I smoked Matthew. I smoked Mark. Then I smoked Luke. But when I got to John 3:16, I couldn't smoke any more. My life was changed from that moment!" This man, like countless millions before and after him, had been captured by the message of the Bible. He became a Christian, and devoted his life to spreading the good news of Jesus Christ that he had first encountered in the pages of that New Testament.¹

That incredible story offers a tiny glimpse into the power of the Bible. By any measure, it is a book like no other. Well over six billion copies have been printed worldwide, and it continues to top global bestseller lists every year.² Wycliffe Bible Translators estimate that at least a portion of the Bible has

1 This story is recounted in HJ Sala, *Why You Can Have Confidence in the Bible: Bridging the Distance Between Your Heart and God's Word*, Harvest House, Eugene, 2008, pp. 203-4.

2 The only possible exception is 2007, when the final *Harry Potter* book sold 44 million copies.

1. THE BOOK THAT CHANGES LIVES

been translated into 2883 languages,³ and Gideons International (a Bible distribution ministry) has given away more than two billion copies of the good book on its own. A single printing press in Nanjing, China, produces 12 million Bibles annually—that’s 23 Bibles per minute, every single minute of the year.

Of course, facts and figures alone don’t tell the whole story, and the Bible’s impact goes way beyond mere statistics. Its influence on modern Western culture, for example, is incalculable. In *The Book That Made Your World: How the Bible Created the Soul of Western Civilization*, Indian philosopher and theologian Vishal Mangalwadi offers a sweeping account of the differences between the history and culture of his home nation, and the history and culture of Western society. Mangalwadi chronicles countless ways in which the Bible has positively shaped the Western world’s attitudes in such diverse areas as education, technology, service, science, money, language, compassion and freedom. He concludes: “The Bible is not merely a handbook of private piety. It is the very foundation of Western

³ Wycliffe Bible Translators, *Our Vision*, Wycliffe UK Ltd, High Wycombe, 2015 (viewed 7 August 2015): <http://wycliffe.org.uk/wycliffe/about/vision.html>.

THE BOOK OF BOOKS

civilization.”⁴ Even a towering figure like Mahatma Gandhi—a man who was fascinated by Jesus Christ yet never became a Christian—recognized the Bible’s uniqueness. Speaking to a group of missionaries, he is said to have remarked: “You Christians look after a document containing enough dynamite to blow all civilization to pieces, turn the world upside down and bring peace to a battle-torn planet”.

In short, the Bible is far and away the most printed, the most sold, the most given away, the most read, and the most influential book in history.

But times have changed. Our world and our attitudes have changed. Clearly, the Bible is not treated with the same reverence and respect that it once was. Some see this as a positive development—the shedding of old-fashioned cultural baggage and antiquated thinking. Many people find it painfully easy to dismiss the Bible out of hand, like the young woman I recently met on a university campus. When I asked whether she had read the Bible for herself as an adult, this woman—who clearly regarded herself as an enlightened, educated person—replied

4 V Mangalwadi, *The Book That Made Your World: How the Bible Created the Soul of Western Civilization*, Thomas Nelson, Nashville, 2011, p. 387.

1. THE BOOK THAT CHANGES LIVES

(without any hint of irony), “No, but a friend of mine read some of it, and she told me it’s stupid”. For her, that was reason enough to ignore it entirely.

Others, meanwhile, lament the Bible’s waning influence and hope to see its message delivered afresh to a new generation. They recognize countless ways in which it has transformed their own life, and they long to see others experience something similar (maybe that’s why you’ve been given this book).

But whatever we make of our history or the changes happening around us, one thing is clear: the mind-boggling statistics and unrivalled cultural impact remind us that the Bible can’t be easily ignored.

Yet all this is only part of the story. For the Bible boasts much more than impressive statistics and cultural importance. At its core, the Bible is an intensely personal book, reaching off the page to make the biggest possible claims about the purpose and meaning of our own lives.

If we approach the Bible simply as a kind of cultural artifact, we’re in danger of missing the heart of its message and stripping away its greatest power. For the Bible boldly claims to unveil the heart of the human condition and the very meaning of life. It claims to introduce us to the God who made us and

THE BOOK OF BOOKS

who is at the heart of the universe. In fact, it claims to be a direct message of self-revelation *from* the God who made us, and who longs to relate to us personally.

In a sense, reading the Bible is not for the faint-hearted. You don't exactly curl up in your favourite armchair with a Bible and a cup of tea for some nice, restful escapism. It's a challenging, sometimes confronting book. And of course, as a book that has come to us from very different times and places, reading it requires some patience and effort—maybe even some guidance and input from a trusted friend.

Yet when it comes to the Bible, the effort we put in will be repaid many, many times over. As countless millions of individuals (not to mention entire societies) can testify, this book changes lives for the better. Reading it, heeding its message, and following it may do more to impact you and your world than you could imagine, just as it did for Gaylord Kambarami's smoking friend. To put it another way: as you read the Bible for yourself, you may just find that the Bible reads you.

Why? Why has the Bible transformed so many lives and had such a far-reaching, deep impact? What is it actually all about, and what makes this book so special?

1. THE BOOK THAT CHANGES LIVES

Before we address those questions directly, let's clear the ground and get ourselves oriented with some basics.

2. THE BOOK OF BOOKS

The word ‘Bible’ simply means ‘book’. It is, quite literally, *the book*. But a quick flick through its pages will tell you that ‘the book’ is actually a collection of books. To be more precise, it’s a collection of 66 documents, ranging in length from one page through to small books in their own right. These 66 documents were written over a period of around 1,500 years by around 40 different authors, who wrote in Hebrew (almost all of the Old Testament), Aramaic (a very short section of the Old Testament), and Greek (the entire New Testament). The Bibles we read today are based on careful translations of the original Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek texts. To make it easier to navigate our way around the Bible, divisions known as chapters (the big numbers) and verses (the small numbers) have been added to each book over

THE BOOK OF BOOKS

the years. So, for example, John 3:16 means the book of John, chapter 3, verse 16.⁵

The Bible's 66 documents are written in a variety of genres, including poetry, historical narrative, prophecy, law, letters, historical biography, and the vivid imagery and symbolism of what's called 'apocalyptic literature'. So reading and understanding the Bible properly means paying attention to what genre you're reading. Think of a newspaper—hopefully you don't read the comics or the horoscopes in the same way that you read the front page! In a similar way, you don't read biblical poetry in the same way that you read biblical history, law or a biography.

The books of the Bible are arranged roughly (though not precisely) in chronological order, and are

5 While chapters and verses are really helpful for navigating the Bible (imagine finding your way around without them!), they carry with them a possible danger: readers sometimes get the impression that each verse stands alone and (if you're lucky) contains an isolated nugget of wisdom or insight. However, it's important to remember that each verse is just like a sentence in most other books we might read—so in order to properly understand what it means, you need to know what comes before it and what comes after it. It's why 'context' is such a buzz word among Christians. It's also worth noting that, just like chapters and verses, the subheadings and paragraph breaks in our modern Bibles were added later and aren't part of the original text.

2. THE BOOK OF BOOKS

separated into two sections, or ‘testaments’. Thirty-nine of these documents form the Old Testament, which tells the story of the creation of the world, and of God’s dealings with humanity prior to the coming of Jesus Christ. In particular, the Old Testament focuses on the history of the ancient nation of Israel across many hundreds of years. The second section, the New Testament, contains 27 documents. These documents provide the historical record of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ (which happened around 2,000 years ago), as well as the birth of Christianity in the decades immediately following Jesus’ resurrection from death.

While there is a time gap of around 450 years between the close of the Old Testament and the beginning of the New, these two sections are intimately connected. In fact, it’s best to think of the whole Bible as one unfolding story centred on the man Jesus Christ. We’ll see more of that in a moment, but for now it’s worth noting that the Bible, unlike some other ‘holy books’, is not simply a collection of ancient wisdom or religious philosophies. It is a collection of historical documents, describing real events in real times and places, and helping us to see the significance and meaning of these events.

THE BOOK OF BOOKS

So what are those events, and why are they significant for us?

It's possible that before you'll feel ready to consider those questions, you'll want to look at some of the background issues. You might be asking questions like: How do we know that the Bible can be trusted? *Can* we know? Is there any way to be sure that the Bible's claims are reliable and meaningful, or is reading this book just one giant leap of 'blind faith'? Is the Bible even worth reading?

If those are your questions, and you know you'll struggle to listen to the Bible until they're answered, now is a good time to turn ahead to appendix A, 'Why bother with the Bible?' The very short answer is that, thankfully, when it comes to the Bible, we find ourselves on the firmest possible historical ground. You can read your Bible with the highest level of confidence that it's an accurate, reliable record of what really happened. You can also be confident that it contains a message of vital interest to every reader.

But maybe you're ready to simply dive in and get started on the Bible itself, happy to leave the historical questions until later. If that's you, let's keep moving by getting a quick bird's-eye view of what the whole Bible is about.