

How to Read the Bible

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R.W.Bro. John Forster, District Deputy Grand Master, Ottawa District 2

The great lights of Masonry include the Volume of the Sacred Law. In Canada this is almost always the Christian Bible. Many lodges present a copy to the candidate after his initiation. In the last charge in the first degree we learn the following "*as a mason I would first recommend to your most serious contemplation the volume of the sacred law, charging you to consider it the unerring standard of truth and justice and regulate your life by the Divine precepts which it contains*"

But how should we read this book?

I recommend that you get a copy of "How to read the Bible" by Richard Holloway, who was the Episcopalian Bishop of Edinburgh and a teacher and writer. He states, "The Bible is too important to leave to nonbelievers"

The Bible is a defining text in Western culture even though many are non-believers. The Bible is a human text: it contains myths, metaphors, and stories that are highly and profoundly important human issues. It reflects back human ideals. It is about human goodness and human struggle with meaning and values, it represents a profound exposition of human's struggle to understand community goodness and how best to relate and respond to people of different races and religions or have different values. It is humanity wrestling with the big issues.

It can be read as literature, for example the King James Version and this will lead you to some of magnificent prose, for example the 23rd Psalm.

There are two ways to approach the Bible many of the books of the Bible can be described as either mythos or logos. Logos means scientifically accurate and historically correct. This has less value than mythos, which means fictional or metaphorical or spiritual. Mythos is the way most stories were written hundreds and thousands of years ago. It is longer lasting than logos: for example the story of Adam and Eve and the fall and expulsion from Eden. It's a glorious myth. It shows that humans mess up in their search for a promised land. The story of Moses and that of Martin Luther King are the same story. It's been the quest of leaders and politicians throughout history. But we mess it up.

It is irrelevant whether the Bible is literally true and whether Adam and Eve really existed. I exist and you exist and we have lived this story ourselves. It is profoundly and humanly true.

Man has evolved greatly since the Book of Genesis was written and so has his concept of God. Is God therefore a great human creation or a real entity outside of human creation? I'll come back to this later

Is the God we worship the one who, in antiquity, stoned sodomites or suppressed women? All cultures have ascribed their particular attitudes to the "will of God".

What do you believe God is? The best answer is "I don't know" or "I cannot know". The greatest danger is saying that you know. The Bible concerns itself more with what God is not rather than what he is. You can easily persuade bad people to do bad things. But only religion can persuade good people to do bad things.

In the book of Exodus the children of Israel fail when they reach the Promised Land. This is a

permanent human reality. All promised lands are spoiled; Eden and man's banishment, the serpent always slithers in because humans bring the snake with them. This is the essential human experience.

"Utopia" means "no place". The Bible says, "we are fallen", we get things wrong: we can be so passionate as to get cruel in our delusions e.g., communism, which led to mass exterminations. We obliterate opposition and therefore create hell in our quest for the Promised Land.

The Bible tells us to be very wary of this. There is no perfect promised land because you are going to be there and you will bring the snake with you.

I want to talk a little bit about suffering. Life is about suffering. The Book of Job is crucial to the Bible. An old and discredited belief is that suffering is punishment. This belief has not been discredited enough and hasn't disappeared.

Job is a good man and he knows it. The official theologians insist that he must've done something wrong. But he has done nothing wrong: there is something wrong with the official theologians. However God does not give a reason for Job's (and human) suffering but does destroy the bad answer: the answer that man has done something wrong and earned the miseries (Jerry Fallwell and Pat Robertson still drive to promulgate the view that Hurricane Katrina and 911 were punishments for homosexuality & same-sex marriage. This cretinous and ugly view was quashed in the book of Job.

I want to turn now to a new and somewhat different view of the nature of God. You have heard me refer in my talks to the rapid and geometric increase in computing power, which doubles every year. This has led us to being on the verge or even past the verge, of creating artificial intelligence, which some authors termed "artilect". Recently, I read an essay that suggested within the not too distant future, but perhaps in only 25 to 35 years, we will have created an artilect that will allow the capacity to create a universe. If this is indeed so, then it may well be, that out there in the endless regions of space, where there are billions and billions of stars, it is not hard to imagine that such an artilect may already have been created on another galaxy and that indeed this universe in which we live has been created by a superior intelligence. Thus creating a quasi-scientific hypothesis for the existence of God.

The author of the essay believes that this has indeed happened: that our current situation is the work of a superior intelligence. However he does not believe that this superior intelligence cares one whit about an individual human being on this planet. Perhaps on another occasion I could discuss how this resonates with Masonry. In the early days of speculative masonry, namely in the 16th Century one of the principal causes of schism among Masons was the dialectic between theism and deism.

By whatever means we were created it is obvious to me that we were created with free will and the ability to make decisions to build and to advance. We also have the capacity to make mistakes, which can lead us into danger and even imperil or end lives. The creator therefore has enabled us to advance but has not provided a safety net. If it was so we probably would not have been as successful as we have been and the World would be a much duller place.

The Bible is all about this. It has shown that we are frail error prone creatures, and that whatever we do we bring the snake with us and we mess up. The Bible teaches us that we are human. The Bible, and now a little science, shows us that our belief in a Supreme Being is true and that the Supreme Being will not protect us from harm and suffering.

That is up to us.