

BIBLE OVERVIEW FOR TODAY

INTRODUCTION

What is the most important information you could have? More important than how to cure cancer, or deeper knowledge of the scientific laws of nature, or the future of the financial system, or whether your country will lose or win its next war? We are used to paying large sums of money for specialist advice about parts of our lives. But the best advice – infallible, in fact – is available for free. More remarkable still is that we often do not take it, because we do not like it. Yet this information is more important to your personal life than the future of your relationships, your finances or your health, or even when you will die. The things written in the Bible are even more important than those. That is because the Bible is written by God for us. Your parents probably told you the ‘facts of life’ about how you came into being and who you are. In this book, God does the same for the whole human race, which he brought into being. Like our own fathers, he tells us these things because he cares about us, and he knows us better than we know ourselves. Any book is a labour of love by its author, none more so than the Bible.

The Bible (meaning “the book”) is God’s history of the world. He explains why we behave badly and he offers us a solution, at great cost to himself. The Bible runs into the future, because God knows where the world is heading. We live in the middle of a story, but we are privileged to know how it will end, because God tells us. God uses human authors, but nobody who didn’t believe in God would portray such a relationship between God and man, and nobody who did would dare put words in God’s mouth. (Of course, God does not discuss whether he exists!) The New Testament speaks of Jesus, who started Christianity with his public ministry – not (like other religions) with a private revelation which he then made public. The New Testament tells of the church and the future. The Old Testament speaks of origins: of the God whom Jesus called Father, and of the Jews whom God forged into a people with a unique vision, setting the stage for Jesus. The Old Testament is unique in being a national literature of criticism rather than of triumph – although always constructive criticism. Here are seven reasons to study the Old Testament today alongside the New:

1. God made the world and made man, who rebelled against God in a prehistoric treason and polluted himself. The rest is about God moving to restore things.
2. The Old Testament contains prophecies that have not come true yet.
3. The Old Testament prophesies Jesus; he said that the scriptures of his day spoke about him. (A Bible with cross-references is helpful.)
4. The New Testament explains how God relates to individuals; the Old Testament reveals more how he relates to nations.
5. The Old Testament tells how the Jews agreed to obey laws that God gave. Those laws are for running a nation in the ancient Near East (Israel), not a church comprising volunteers, so Christians need obey mainly only those laws relating to interpersonal morality. Nevertheless the original laws are God’s guide to sin and righteousness. We can learn a lot about God and man from the Jewish law and

how difficult it was to obey; people in the Bible have the same concerns as ourselves.

6. Bible study is the study of one's own story, and how can one not wish to learn that – the Old Testament as well as the New, for Christians are grafted spiritually into Israel.
7. Jesus' words are nearly all easy to understand, because he spoke most of them to everyday folk; but a few of his sayings are hard for us to understand, because his culture is different from ours. Then you need to know what his words would have meant to his listeners – who were mainly Jews soaked in the Old Testament. (For example: 'god' means something different to Hindus, who believe in many gods that did not create the world.)

God gave the Bible as more than sixty distinct 'books'. These were written down by men as diverse as prophets, kings and statesmen, doctors, theologians and fishermen. They include laws which God gave, histories, stories about people, a hymn book, a collection of advice and aphorisms, God's words of warning and of comfort, biographies of Jesus containing his words, prophecies that came true and some yet to happen, and letters giving pastoral advice for congregations and for individuals. Yet it is consistent throughout, because God is consistent. Jesus and the prophets often said the same thing in various ways – as in differing parables – because different people think in different ways, so that any individual is more likely to get the message from one of those ways. The Bible starts from the creation of the world and the beginning of the human race, so it sets its own context. There is one meaning, with many applications. The notion of 'interpretation' (and 'hermeneutics') arises only in relation to the few difficult passages; in the main, you need only bring a dictionary and be aware of some history of the ancient world and of pre-industrial pastoral life.

If you read the Bible in bad faith, you will not find it hard to mock. It is not written in the same way as a watertight contract between two businessmen, each having something that the other wants but who do not trust each other. It is an invitation. Man needs God but does not want him; God wants man but does not need him. The Bible is the only place where the Creator of man and of the universe addresses the whole human race in the first person. By listening to the Bible in faith, we can know and apply God's meaning. We have more early copies of New Testament passages, from nearer the events they describe, than of other ancient (and undisputed) writings; and of the Old Testament, a copy from Jesus' time of the prophecies of Isaiah (one of the 'Dead Sea scrolls') is almost identical to modern copies.

This overview shows how the books of the Bible came about, summarises what they say, and explains how they fit together.

THE OLD TESTAMENT

Genesis

We call the first book in the Bible 'Genesis'. God created the universe, heaven (the skies) and the earth; also, the spiritual and material. (How else did the universe, the laws of nature, and time itself, come about?) He made it, so it belongs to him – just as a sonata is Bach's or a painting is Titian's, no matter who plays or owns it. A storm reflects God's power. The sky, landscapes and waterfalls are beautiful because God loves beauty. The intricacy of a leaf, under a microscope, reflects God's intelligence; he follows everything and everyone. God knows the right and wrong workings and relations of all things, all people. He is passionately concerned with all he has made, for making it was a labour of love. He is good, and he made the world good.

God made the universe in six *Yom*, a Hebrew word with the same ambiguity as 'day' in English: 24 hours, or 'era' (as in 'the day of steam power is over'). Science affirms that the universe had a beginning. God made laws of science (software) to put order in his creation, though he may intervene with miracles. Order is associated with beauty.

God brought life into being, plants and animals with all their activity and tenacity. There is a deep order in the things that different animals have in common, yet their diversity is also real. Next, God made man – so he has rights over man. While the cosmos, earth and life reflect God's power, intelligence and goodness, man reflects God himself. Man carries God's stamp or 'image'. Man is not a puppet but knows he can make choices, and this gift reflects God's love ('if you love something, give it freedom'). Man has creativity (music and poetry, and gadgets and machines since the Industrial Revolution) and words (notably 'why?' – reason, and 'I' – self-awareness). Man has a conscience, understanding justice and mercy. Man has feelings. This likeness to God allows us personal relationship with him, and God wants a relationship of love. He made the first woman from the first man, Adam, to be a partner and helper; they are ancestors of us all. They had no design flaw.

Material and spiritual unite in man, whose task was to look after the world on God's behalf. We are not to neglect it or pillage it. But God also created angels, powerful spirit beings usually unseen by us. One of them led an uprising of many angels against God. He is now known as Satan, or 'attacker'. In disguise he tempted the first couple into doing the one thing that God had told them not to do (for their own good): learn by contrasting good and evil for themselves. In abusing the freedom that God had given them, they lost it, for experiencing evil changed them permanently as they gained an appetite for it. Cruelty, poverty and war all began here. They felt guilt, and they tried to cover up and hide parts of their bodies and souls: from themselves (denial), from each other (separation) and from God (futile). We, their descendants, are all like this; our 'factory settings' have been changed. Children freely lie but must be taught truthfulness. We are less sensitive if we wrong others than if we are wronged. Collectively and individually, we act self-destructively and destructively. We are addicted to sin. We cannot kick this habit without help. Would God help?

Limiting his dealings with sinners, God would now be heard but not seen. He had provided food that would keep people alive indefinitely, but he barred humanity from

it to curtail personal sin. Bodily decline and death are a humiliation; the richest and mightiest ruler must yield to death, and unlike animals we know that we must die, casting a shadow over every life, every relationship. Also, men must now toil against weeds to grow food, or for wages to buy it: a treadmill that limits idleness and mischief. But the web of sin continues to grow with human knowledge; technology is largely weapons-driven. For women, God made childbirth (a fulfilment) harder – hard labour of another kind. Women would also resent the male role of leadership.

The depth of suffering in the world stems from God's commitment to human freedom – to sin or not – plus our wrong choices. Evildoing is the cost of our bad choices. One day, when we have pushed God too far, he will enact righteous government over his creation, restoring it, banishing evil and punishing all who did not turn to him. Until then, or until you die, he is willing to help you strive against evil – in yourself and in the world, to be tackled together. Society is obviously far from perfect, but it is not so easy to accept that the same problem is in yourself as in society's leaders.

God showed his feelings in the Hebrew poetry. To get an idea of his feelings, suppose you build a magnificent house, with gold walls and crystal chandeliers. You bring people to life as your tenants. But they break your one house rule and trash the place. Because you don't put it right instantly, many blame you for the mess or say you do not care or are powerless; others forget or deny that you exist; some even bow to the lights. God is also like an author or playwright, with *authority* to set the story. Within the story he lets his actors *ad lib*, but we abuse this freedom and turn the production to filth and violence. God could dismiss the cast, but mercifully he offers them the chance to work with him to restore the project and themselves. Parents whose children keep doing something forbidden that is bad for all of them also know how God feels.

God accepted the sacrifice of animals in apology. Even this led to a murder among Adam's sons. Cities, musical instruments (arts) and metalworking (technology) are from the killer's line; all human creativity needs redeeming. The population grew, and eventually rebel angels began fathering powerful hybrids by women. So degenerate was it all that God regretted ever making man. He cleansed the world by flooding it: all life died, except a man called Noah whom God warned, and Noah's family and the animals he saved by building a great lifeboat or 'ark'. In many pagan myths (Greek, Norse, Indian), heroes like Hercules are fathered by 'gods', so this went on later as well. Those gods are evil angels who seek worship.

After this, God gave Noah assurance of day, night and the seasons (*i.e.*, the relation between the sun and the earth), for farming. The rainbow, sun shining through rain, signifies that God will never flood the earth again. God decreed the death penalty for the shedding of human blood (murder); this statute stands today, for it applies to all descendants of Noah, everybody, and God has never set it aside. Numbers soon grew again but, rather than spread and manage the earth, men began work on a city with a floodproof tower to heaven, the tower of Babel. God responded by giving the families differing languages, causing them to scatter; linguistic diversity came before dispersion. God could now curb one nation by another. Mankind united against God is worse than nationalism.

God then chose one family line as his witness. In a test of faith, Avraham was willing to sacrifice his son Yitzak (Isaac) to God at the hill where 2000 years later Jesus was

crucified. Importantly, God accepts Avraham's trust as counting against his sins. God spared Isaac, who fathered Ya'acov ('Jacob'), later called Israel; the rest of the Old Testament is about his descendants. These three men are called the patriarchs, or 'fathers'. The descendants of Ya'acov/Israel are the Israelites, or *Hebrews* after their language, spoken today in the land of Israel. Other lines of the family became their enemies; Arabs stem from Avraham through Isaac's half-brother Ishmael.

Ya'acov/Israel had twelve sons, by several wives at once; God allowed polygamy at this time, though he intended monogamy. These twelve sons fathered the twelve tribes of Israel. The tribe fathered by Yahuda (Judah) are the Jews. In a famine, the whole family went to Egypt, against God's word. There, Joseph, the finest of the brothers, saved them, but God warned that their descendants would be made slaves in Egypt.

Exodus; the Law

The second book in the Bible tells the tale of the Exodus, or ‘coming out’ from Egypt. Several centuries later the Hebrews had been reduced to slave labour in Egypt. Their children were put to death, but an Egyptian princess adopted one boy, Moshe (Moses) and brought him up in the royal palace. God spoke to Moses, promising to rescue his people and give them their own land. Moses is told to tell the Pharaoh (king) to let the Hebrews go, or Egypt will suffer disasters. The disasters begin, and Pharaoh vacillates. Finally God tells the Hebrews to kill a lamb in each household, daub its blood on the doorpost, and eat it quickly, ready to go. God will kill the heir (the oldest son) in every household in Egypt except those with lamb’s blood, which he will pass over. This is the Passover feast, which the Jews still commemorate annually.

After this disaster, Pharaoh tells Moses and his people to go – but pursues them. God rescues the Israelites. In the desert on the way to Canaan, the promised land, he provides food and water. God proposes a covenant: he will look after the Israelites, and they will obey laws he gives and worship him. They accept. God has no need to propose any covenant; it is for their benefit, and for the sake of accountability.

God planned a model society that would bear witness to him, peaceful, stable and happy. Others could come to live in it. This blueprint was a unique gift to the Israelites, setting out right and wrong in all areas of life. Christians should be familiar with it – especially Christian politicians, who influence the laws of their lands. It is the only constitution God has given and, although legislation cannot change the heart, good laws can restrain the wicked. Comparison with other legal systems shows how radically God’s values differ from man’s. Roman law put greater priority on personal property, less on persons; modern secular law is based on the notion of human rights rather than rightful relationships, encouraging selfishness; Sharia financial principles are closer to Mosaic ones (from which they probably derive) than is secular banking.

This system kick-started Israeli national life, for as slaves the Israelites had few traditions of their own. All other socio-legal systems have grown in parallel with the life of a nation; this unique set of regulations made the Israelites different. A culture is defined by its socio-legal system, including its laws and how they are obeyed and enforced. Arts and technology reflect only the intelligentsia and the wealthy. Much can be inferred from how the poor are treated. Israel's constitution prioritised people

and relationships, and showed unique concern for the poor. The law was simple enough for people to know by heart, as it should be. It was simple enough for people to argue their own case; lawyers (in the sense of professional advocates) were not contemplated. The law applied to individuals, not families or businesses; every man and woman is responsible personally to God.

Jesus said that the law rested on its commands to love God wholeheartedly (with 'commitment-love'), for then you will *want* to obey him; and also love people you encounter, doing as you would be done by (the 'golden rule'). Penalties are specified; these deter by fear, and educate by fitting the crime. They include limited corporal punishment, but no monetary fines paid to the authorities and no jails (even after entry into Canaan); jails are schools of corruption that penalise inmates' dependants and cost the community in upkeep. Capital punishment was enacted (mostly communally, by stoning) to 'purge evil'. Provision was made to wind down blood feuds: the law was not to be taken into one's own hands. As incentive to cool off, or to take care, injuries received could be inflicted on the perpetrator ("an eye for an eye"). This applied to injuries received not only deliberately, but recklessly; here is God's succinct and effective health and safety legislation. Kidnapping (mainly for slave trading) was a capital crime. Deadly force could be used against intruders in the dark. Theft must be made good, with damages (more sensible than jailing offenders), and a thief with no prospect of repaying was to be sold as a bonded labourer.

The law was administered by a hierarchy of judging elders; one bottom-level judge oversaw ten men and their families, and would have personal knowledge of the people in a case. The judge made the decision, not a jury. Persons who came off worse were free to appeal to the next level of judge (who was, however, free not to listen). Anybody could notify of transgressions, but at least two witnesses or involved accusers were needed in any conviction; God preferred to let guilty people off (in this life) than convict on one person's word. There was no plea of insanity or statute of limitation; time does not erase sin. Perjury carried the penalty faced by the accused. No procedure was laid down: no mandatory plea or inadmissible evidence. The law applied to all, regardless of station, for all are in God's image. Laws unrelated to the distinct roles of men and women treated them equally. A fundamental principle is that respect is owed each way in every relationship. For fidelity, God will bless Israel with security and prosperity, while curses for gross non-compliance include national exile. Core laws are given as commands, then restated with penalties for violators. God's prohibitions are always for the welfare of people, although he hopes for trust and he does not always explain himself.

The law opens with ten commands of relationship, between people and God and among people, interweaving 'religion' and 'morality'. (Our criminal law corresponds to offences directly against God, and civil law to offences against other people.) These commands forbid dealings with other gods (the 'small print' forbids occult dealings and even speaking the names of pagan gods), visual representations of God (man is God's image), speaking against God, working on the weekly national 'sabbath' day of rest, disrespect to parents, murder, adultery, stealing, lying about people, and envy. Some of these laws are backed by capital punishment. Prohibition of enviousness is obviously not a court matter, and slander was forbidden but with no prescribed penalty. (Judges did have some powers of corporal punishment.) Actions that bring their own penalty (such as drunkenness) are condemned elsewhere in

scripture. The family, one's deepest set of relationships, is upheld. Sex is for marriage, a committed relationship between man and woman; God intends children to be brought up by their parents together. Moral injunctions carry over for Christians, and nine of the Ten Commandments. The exception is the Sabbath and the various holiday festivals. These are good for relationships but are not binding outside Israel. The weekly day of rest is a day of joy (not long faces!) God enforced it like the fiercest of Trade Unionists.

Living under God's law was a terrible privilege; could sinful man keep the many dos and don'ts that make a just society, when sinless man had been tempted into breaking just one? When the Israelites failed, the teachers tightened the laws (as in the many 'kosher' food regulations). These unauthorised changes curb legitimate freedom without addressing why people sin. God would finally send his son to show them how to live under the law, and to be the sacrifice for their failure and for sin more widely.

Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy

These books complete the Torah or Law. They give further laws and tell of forty years wasted in the desert, for the Israelites faithlessly feared the battle for Canaan. The Old Testament is no Israelite pageant of triumphalism, and only two men who left Egypt would enter Canaan. Deuteronomy restates many laws for the new generation. It is also Moses' moving farewell, for he knew he would die before the Israelites went in.

In the desert, God told the Israelites to make him a regal tent, or 'Tabernacle'. The male line from Moses' brother A'aron, the first 'high priest', would be priests (*cohen*) in the Tabernacle, maintained by other men of their tribe (Levi). In concert with an expert judge, they would also act as a high court. God tells the people his name: "YAHUWEH, your God", a verb indicating his eternal nature – "Forever-I-Am your God." As nobody gave God that name, it is how he thinks of himself. He gives detailed instructions for spiritual and physical cleanliness. God also told how to atone for sins, by sacrifice to him. A lamb or calf with its throat cut and its life-blood pumping out shows the value God puts on us. Your sins cost you part of your livestock, and an animal's life.

In the Promised Land

Canaan is a diverse region, with coast, plains, desert, snowy peaks and a rift valley with lakes and the Jordan River. The Canaanites had become so degenerate that Yahuweh ('Jehovah') commanded ethnic cleansing; the Israelites overcame them. All Israelite families were given land to live on and to live off (via crops and livestock); passages include detailed legal records of who took which land. Land passed down a family; there was no social order based on land ownership and its exploitation, in contrast to the mediaeval feudal system; Israel was not run for the benefit of any clique. A tax in kind on land produce (the 'tithe') was levied at a fixed percentage, to maintain the priesthood and the Tabernacle and help the poor; criteria for who was needy were not specified, so this was decided by the community. Charity was a moral obligation. A destitute family might sell itself as bonded labour or rent out its land, but the land must revert after a fixed time and outstanding debt be erased – a

bankruptcy law. (Non-Israelite bonded labour could be bought in, but such 'slaves' must have the Sabbath rest day and be treated well.) Israel had a free market in goods but regulated markets in labour, land and money. Interest on loans was forbidden among Israelites. Your word must be kept; penalties for breach of contract would be those for theft if goods were not supplied after payment. Army service was voluntary, with no conscription. But the Israelites did not clear Canaan fully, and some of them turned to Canaanite gods. Israel ran into trouble whenever it disobeyed God. This land lay at the border between Europe, Africa, Arabia and Asia, so that Israel could show God's way to the world – but its neighbours included powerful nations bent on conquest. God could also discipline Israel through 'natural' events such as drought.

When the law or a prophet did not settle an issue, Israel was to use lots, by which God showed his decision. Israel was a theocracy; judges alone were needed, not lawmakers, but after some centuries the people wanted an earthly king, to be like other nations. God allowed this, but he warned through the prophet Samuel of the extra cost of a royal court. A king might also create *fiat* currency (although Israel was not primarily a cash economy). That risks counterfeiting, but allows the king to enrich himself at his subjects' expense.

Saul was the first king, but he came to a bad end. The next king was David, a man of faith. He had been a shepherd, and he was a musician who wrote many Psalms, reflecting many moods. Under David the Israelites conquered much of the land that God had promised. (Conquest outside its borders was not sanctioned.) But David seduced the wife of a soldier, whom he then left exposed in battle. This started a decline in David's life and Israel's, and in repentance he wrote Psalm 51. ('Pensive' means thoughtful, so to re-pent is to re-think, and be sorry for your sins.)

The next king was David's son Shlomo ('Solomon'). He replaced the moveable Tabernacle with a Temple in the capital, Jerusalem, in Judah's territory. He wrote three books in the Bible. The *Song of Songs* is a love song indicating that the relationship between God and his faithful should have a spiritual intensity as great as sexual love between man and wife. Solomon also wrote a book of wise Proverbs. Finally he wrote *Ecclesiastes* as an old man who, despite his power and wisdom in helping others, found life empty after leaving God out of his life. His foreign wives even led him into idolatry, for he should not have married outside Israel.

After Solomon's death the northern tribes, led by Ephraim, rebelled at the cost of running the Temple and royal court in distant Jerusalem. Calling themselves Israel, they set up their own unauthorised religious centres and, in a squalid civil war, fought Judah and the small tribe of Benjamin. The northern kingdom suffered growing turmoil; its kings were corrupt, and none of them found God's favour. Finally in 722BC [Before Christ] Assyria overran it, leaving only a remnant of those tribes. God stopped the Assyrian army at the gates of Jerusalem, apparently by plague.

Exile and Return; Israel's great prophets

The southern kingdom of (mainly) Judah carried on, with good kings and bad. But the people fell into idol-worship and forgot about the law. The courts were corrupt. One good king was shocked when the laws were rediscovered and read to him. (They

should have been read out to the people every seven years.) Finally God let the invading Babylonians do more than the Assyrians – they took the royal court off into slavery, then the skilled professions, and in 586BC they destroyed Jerusalem and the Temple, leaving the land desolate. The Jews tasted slavery afresh – for one lifetime, so that the new generation would experience God’s power, justice and commitment for themselves. Persecution at the hands of idolaters rammed home the fact that the Israelites were different, and the idols they lived among showed them what they were different from; never since have they corporately worshipped false gods or idols.

God showed his feelings through prophets. Some prophets deal with more than one situation; you need to know whom a prophet is addressing. The histories of the northern and southern kingdoms in the book of Kings, and the southern kingdom in the book of Chronicles, provide a backbone. God mingled words about the immediate situation with events further ahead; the words of Isai-yah (Isaiah) about a ‘suffering servant’ look ahead to Jesus. Other prophecies spoke of a Messiah, an ‘anointed one’ or saviour (saver) who would Israel’s troubles.

Yahuweh felt pain, anger, love and sadness all together. Hosea, the final prophet sent to the northern kingdom, had to marry a prostitute and speak from his feelings that God felt the same way. Repeatedly God called his people to return to him. He reminded them of their covenant with its penalty clauses. Finally, when he knew they would not repent, God enacted those penalties. He used the Assyrians to destroy the northern kingdom, and the Babylonians to carry the southern tribes into exile 136 years later. In the book of Lamentations, the prophet Jeremai-yah wanders in tears round broken Jerusalem. Ezekiel tells how Yahuweh himself left the Temple. But he would still keep his side of the covenant, for he is consistent. God has feelings but not moods. And so in Babylon, hundreds of miles from home, the people heard words of comfort and hope to help them endure. Lacking the Temple system, they met in groups for prayer, worship and teaching. After their return they kept this up as well as the Temple, in the synagogue system.

In 539BC the Persians conquered Babylon, and their king freed the Jews to go home. Nudged by prophets, the resettlers rebuilt the Temple. It was ready 70 years after its destruction; Ezra and Nehemai-yah tell of the return. In the next centuries, to Jesus’ time, the land was often occupied – so the Jews were not particularly law-abiding. But they avoided idolatry, and except under a particularly evil invader (prophesied by Daniel) 170 years before Jesus’ birth – fought off in the Maccabean wars – they were free to worship Yahuweh. When Jesus’ ministry began, the Jews had been part of the Empire of ancient Rome, with its Latin language and Greek culture, for nine decades.

Isai-yah spoke of a second return, and of a return from all regions (not just Babylon). The return from Babylon would prove to be temporary, but Amos spoke of permanent return. These words must mean not less than what a faithful Jew hearing the prophet would take them to mean, or God would be a trickster. In 1948 the Jews regained the land they had been promised through Avraham, ending a second exile of more than 1800 years; they came (and come) from all parts of the world. Babylon and the Assyrian capital, Nineveh, are rubble, but Jerusalem stands. This return will allow other unfulfilled prophecies to come true. Wars will be fought in the Middle East (as we see), and a great era will dawn for Jerusalem. 2000 years after Jesus trod the earth, the drama of redemption is moving to fulfilment.

THE NEW TESTAMENT

We now reach the time of Jesus, or correctly Ya'shooa (according to the Greek of the New Testament and with the 'Y' mutated into 'J'). He spoke to other Jews in their own tongue, so we have his words in translation. His name means 'Yahuweh saves' or, since Yahuweh means "I am", it can mean "I am saviour". The Jews were almost the only Israelite tribe left, and they were expecting God to send a messiah to kick out the Roman occupiers. Jesus was a greater Messiah ('Christ' in Greek), who could solve *all* of Israel's problems – but it required them to change. Again God performs a great rescue, gives an invitation, and makes the people who accept it different.

Jesus; the Gospels

The New Testament opens with four complementary accounts of Jesus' origins and ministry, or *gospels* ("good news" in old English). Matthew wrote for Jews, and Jesus' disciple John for believers; Mark and Luke are best for evangelism. Jesus was born in Bethlehem, near Jerusalem, to a virgin called Mariam ('Mary'). An angel told her she would become miraculously pregnant with God's son. Her fiancé Joseph, a joiner, was reassured in a dream about her pregnancy and became Jesus' foster-father. So God became one of us and shared life in the flesh: the ultimate act of identification and service. Jesus is not God acting human, nor just a godly man; he is fully God *and* fully man. He never yielded to sin, although he knows what it is to be tempted. He speaks to us with total authority and total empathy.

Jesus was a healthy Jewish male, with a beard and no sin in his face. His family were poor but he was from Israel's royal line. After a genocidal attempt on his life he grew up in Nazareth, in the north. He would have worked, and no marriage is mentioned by anyone who knew him. Then, at 30, he began a travelling ministry with twelve core disciples which changed the world. Jesus, unlike Adam, rejected Satan's overtures. Satan aims to drive and crush people into automatons; Jesus calls and lets people choose. He was deeply compassionate, healing the sick and doing other miracles. He told people to keep the covenant for love of God, and kept all the laws himself. He asked higher standards from his followers, but he never coerced. He taught people how to live under God, often by tales: forgive those who wrong you, to disarm hatred and not get bitter; show love even to your opponents; don't sin, as it does harm. Jesus did not set up a religious commune or political movement but aided people, pointing to God and challenging evil. He wanted people to grasp who he was for themselves. Imagine if your Head of State came to serve his people by living among them!

Jesus told the repentant that their sins were forgiven, but to the hard-hearted he gave blunt warning. Most people let their daily lives mask worries about the questions of meaning which they asked as children, and which recur as death nears: identity, purpose, destiny. Jesus has the answer, for he is the answer. You are not competent to run your life; he is. Every life is a great drama when viewed from the inside, no matter how dull it appears from outside, and nobody knows what its end will be. Death is a separation from your body and from this world, not the end of your awareness. If you admitted your sins to God and served in his redemptive movement, you will live with him forever. Others go to God's spiritual rubbish dump, a place of endless fire. The rebel angels will suffer there too; they do not run it.

If you accept your future judge's authority, being sorry for and pleading guilty to your sins, he will pardon you. If not, he will convict you after you die – perhaps tomorrow. God views people as forgiven or unforgiven, not good or bad, for although earthly justice must be done we all deserve the same end, Nazis and nurses, convicts and conformists alike. ('Respectable' people who keep the social laws quietly harden, as Jesus found.) A single sin unforgiven is enough to keep you out of heaven, for one sin led to the wrecking of this world and God will not let it happen again. The State punishes you for breaking a single law, and God is the same; it is not about doing more good than bad. God also judges your motives and thoughts, where sin begins. If you have realised that you are unfit to stand before a holy God because your inside is dirty, if the prospect of standing before God puts you in fear of him, then God will accept your repentance and set your faith against your sin. Through his son he can deal with your character, putting you at peace with him through his forgiveness and with yourself through a clear conscience. Then he can work through you.

The place we await resurrection after death, where the faithful have it better than here, is called Hades in Greek; 'hell' properly means the fire after judgement for those who died not acknowledging God. The Bible also uses heaven to mean the spiritual realms rather than a future paradise; at present there is good and evil in heaven, as on earth.

God's law was a straight edge which pointed out people's crookedness; Jesus was a living straight edge, who helped straighten people out. This showed up the crooked and the unrepentant, who hated him. And the Jewish leaders, deaf to God's concerns behind the laws, spurned their king. When Jesus did not challenge the Romans (whose presence was divine reprimand), the Passover crowd in Jerusalem turned on him. The Jewish leaders accused him of heresy and bribed one of his disciples to betray him. But the Romans took a say in capital cases, and their concerns were collecting taxes and keeping order. Jewish leaders claimed to the Roman governor, Pilate, that Jesus was opposing the Emperor. Finally Pilate let Jesus be crucified, to pacify the mob. He who will one day judge the world submitted to corrupt judgement by Jew and gentile. He could have set himself in the Temple and crushed them, but he chose instead to die for others: the archetypal heroic act. Nailed to the cross, his innards were torn in two, just as God felt about sinful man. His self-sacrifice can put us right with God, for he is human (unlike animal sacrifices) and perfect (unlike other humans). Like the Passover lamb, his blood causes God to pass over believers when reckoning sins. The night before, Jesus shared a last supper with his disciples (the first Communion) at which he confirmed the new covenant God makes through him, and he felt the awful weight of the world's sins. The crucifixion shows God's great love for the world and his commitment to salvage it. Now God pays the price for our sins. We need only believe.

The Holy Spirit and 'Acts'; the corporate faith and its spread

Jesus' death shattered the disciples. But his tomb was found empty, and after three days he returned to them alive, turning the tables on Satan. Many people saw him, galvanising them; if they made it up, would many have died for it as history records? Jesus knows all about life after death and, after briefing his disciples, he went up to rejoin his Father in heaven. Had he stayed here indefinitely, he would be worshipped for his power, not out of love. He now leads his believers from (and to) heaven.

The first believers had known Jesus personally. How could later ones do this, after he ascended to heaven? The gospels let you know about Jesus but the Holy Spirit lets you *know* Jesus, coming to live within his faithful. Salvation is due to who you know; not what. The Holy Spirit gives believers supernatural gifts: some are teachers, some can heal, some recognise spirits that people carry, prophets speak words from God that specific believers need to know. A healthy congregation will include each gift, making up a picture of Christ. All believers are priests, servant ambassadors of Christ, living temples. The Temple in Jerusalem was redundant, and four decades later it was destroyed when the Romans put down a Jewish uprising. Jesus, his Father and the Holy Spirit are three divine persons, with identical personality – the Trinity (meaning ‘three’). God was his own company, but we can see why he created humanity and the world from our own joy in families and in craftsmanship. Jesus and his Father are not playing ‘good cop, bad cop’; one day the world will see the wrath of Jesus.

Acts of the Apostles takes up Luke’s gospel to tell how the church spread: among Jews, to whom Jesus’ impulsive senior disciple Peter preached, then to gentiles in the Roman Empire. For showing up evil and spurning pagan gods (supposedly bringing trouble by offending them), Christians face persecution. If you accept Christ as your king, you are in his kingdom. But you still live in the world, in which God lets Satan act for the time being. Christians are infiltrators of Satan’s realm, upholding righteousness and spreading word of Christ at grassroots level. Genuine Christianity is a counter-culture – the power of love confronting love of power. Christ died for you, and his cause is worth giving your life to (and *for*; martyrdom is an eloquent witness, and Christians alone do it with love). You will always get fresh life from God.

The witness and miracles of the early Christians were so striking that, despite the deterrent of persecution, and a call to mend one’s ways, the faith spread rapidly. People are attracted by healings and miracles done by the Holy Spirit or by the love that believers show, giving a personal introduction to Jesus. Preaching tells of God’s sovereignty as creator, his character and the need for repentance, then the good news of forgiveness through Jesus, validated by his resurrection. Coercion does not induce conversion, for you can bribe or bully people to behave but not to believe. Initiation involves baptism, indicating death and burial of your old self (going under the water), spiritual cleansing, and rebirth (emerging ‘born again’ as a citizen of heaven, although still living on earth). Even then you still have an appetite to do wrong, a legacy of our ancestors’ claim to decide good and bad for themselves. But you will be given a helper inside yourself to overcome that appetite – the Holy Spirit. So you need not sin or feel guilty again, and if you do you are forgiven. Sinful appetites dwindle (although not to zero in this life). This feels like an inner crucifixion and resurrection, as more and more of you is put to death and reborn like Christ. If you have ever thought of fleeing your old life and starting afresh somewhere new, you do – except that you cannot flee God, but now his son answers for your sins and his Holy Spirit helps you. You should consider your old life as someone else’s. You will want to talk to God in prayer (‘thank you’, ‘sorry’, ‘please’, ‘hail’); he comes as close as you let him. The Holy Spirit normally comes into committed believers sometime after water baptism. This is a felt experience, assuring you of your covenant with God; we may not be sure who else is accepted by God, but we can be sure of our own salvation. No satisfaction matches having a clear conscience and living out your purpose with God.

Paul's letters and others; how the New Testament was collected

After *Acts* come letters, to congregations and persons. Many are by Paul, an Israelite theologian or rabbi (unlike Jesus' disciples), who preached round the Mediterranean. He persecuted Christians as heretics until Jesus confronted him in an overwhelming vision. Paul tells at first-hand what it is to be transformed by Christ. The letters deal with pastoral and theological problems that arose in the churches, and are prophetic. Paul expounds Jesus as the solution to God's call to holiness; Christianity is not about struggling to live a moral life, but about being changed and given the help to make it possible, and then living that way. Paul is also acutely aware that he is writing to Christians both Jewish and gentile. The church is a messianic branch of Judaism widened to all, so that Israel's is the tradition in which to view the gospel. The Jews themselves, a century after Jesus, proclaimed a messiah who was defeated by the Romans, triggering 18 centuries of exile during which Judaism was defined by rejection of Jesus as much as by its ancient laws. What else could so offend God as to exile the Jews for that long? Yet the promise to their ancestors remains, so that they remarkably held on to their identity during that long exile. They have been influential, despite shocking persecution (as 'Christ-killers') by self-proclaimed Christians.

'Church' in scripture is a collective word for Christians, worldwide or in a town (it is not a building). The Bible describes a congregation in each area, each run once its founder had moved on by its own council (of 'bishops' in the biblical meaning). As the Roman Empire fragmented, the church shifted to a hierarchical system claiming divine right to rule, in an uneasy alliance with Europe's princes. But Christ covenants with individuals, not gentile nations (although by God's grace some nations have had laws governing morality similar to Mosaic Law which were broadly respected). 'Ordination' denied in effect that all Christians are priests. This system even executed as heretics many scripture-based dissenters – so were persecutors or persecuted the real church? Competing hierarchies entrenched division. Loyalty to Christ is often directed through the church but, unless people are in direct relationship with him, the result is a culture of assent that the Bible is true, of lip service rather than life service.

The church went into a polytheistic Greek world in which philosophers imputed word and deed to Jesus according to their own ideas or what would impress. That is how Greek myths grew around real events, but the church needed the truth and froze the process by collecting the early writings as the New Testament. Today, though, doubt about the supernatural is widened into doubt that many Old Testament figures were real people (even though much irrelevant detail is given about their lives); holds that prophets spoke *after* the things they warn of, and that Israel's law was not finalised before prophets warned of its violation. This view paints Jesus as just a great moral teacher, with the gospels reworked to make him appear a divine miracle-doer. But Jesus accepted worship and claimed authority to forgive sins (God's prerogative) so if he was not divine then he was an impostor, mad or bad. His resurrection settles which.

Globalisation and the climax of history: the Book of Revelation

The last book in the Bible, the Apocalypse or book of Revelation, reveals the ultimate future and the road to it. Jesus said that the church and evil would both spread, until

all peoples have had the choice. Then comes the reckoning as God reasserts himself over his ravaged creation to end what Paul called this 'present evil age'. The book switches between heaven (the spiritual realms) and earth, so it is not 'all spiritual'. The earthly parts do not match historical events, so they lie ahead. Warfare will escalate, and plagues and 'natural' disasters (showing God's anger) bring chaos. The world's peoples, sick of conflict over national or religious differences, unite; but even with no borders, greed and envy remain. As at Babel, man is united only in sin and pride. A dictator rises to world power and sets up a cult of himself, as Stalin and Mao did. Christians who dissent are seen as troublemakers and excluded from trading, then killed for refusing to worship him, in an echo of the Roman emperors. This man exploits occult religion and technology for control of minds and bodies, helped by a false prophet; many religions have a messianic facet, which the two exploit to unite the world around the dictator. (Beware of claims that all religions say the same thing.) Naïve Christians will be taken in. The dictator heads an alliance that destroys the world's greatest city by (nuclear?) fire. This could be a religious war, for Satan manifests in a dragon-cult, which he might pit against dictator-worship to bring chaos and misery. The dictator falls when he sends a world army against Jerusalem, where he once proclaimed his own cult. These events parallel World War I (the 'war to end wars'), then the rise of a rebuilding dictator in an era of idealistic internationalism, who foments a further war climaxing in genocide against the Jews. This time, though, the Jews cry out to Jesus. He has waited 2000 years for that, and he comes down from heaven to Jerusalem and destroys this army, whose leaders gather near Nazareth (at 'Armageddon'). He destroys it simply by decree. What restraint he showed on the way to the cross! His return fulfils Israel's autumn harvest festival of Tabernacles.

How well does this match our world? Just 250 years ago, most people lived off the land locally and hardly travelled. With the industrial revolution, urbanisation grew. Mobility and media are dissolving local identity. We can fly round the world and contact people anywhere instantly. The global banking system lends far more than it holds, creating an unstable web of debt that mires individuals and entire nations. A United Nations organisation exists and treaties become 'international law'. Most peoples have heard of Jesus (millions in China have recently become believers), and his followers face rising persecution in many lands. The Jews came back, after the Holocaust, to their ancient land, where interest in Jesus is slowly rising. The UN picks on Israel. We have seen world wars, and man can forge weapons of mass destruction by plague and fire. Ancient prophecy and news headlines are visibly converging.

As for the world's belief systems, secular humanism is dominant in 'the West' (mainly America and Europe) and in its competitor, China. Secular humanism is 'the blessing of the flesh'; it acknowledges no authority over man, who idolises himself as the measure of all things. (Look at Olympic opening ceremonies.) Supposedly man invented God, not vice-versa, but people find their meaning in giving themselves over to something greater than themselves, and secular man finds life meaningless. The secular West focuses on the idea of human rights, and denies human sin. This idea comes from the 'Enlightenment' movement in 18th century Europe, which held that man can be made good by his own means rather than by divine cleansing, and is competent to solve his own problems. Problems are supposedly due to ignorance, bad luck, or poor social institutions, which must be redesigned; the secular State is interventionist. But when secularists first won political power in the French Revolution, blood flowed freely. Communism, still the official ideology of China, is a

secular humanist faith system and just as bloodsoaked. Secular humanism has technological mastery, but the West is seeing family and social order break down under the rejection of male and female roles, and promiscuity. Islam might be God's judgement on it. Islam's god claims to have created the world yet denies Jesus' sonship, and demands obedience by force if not by choice. Islam hates Israel, and the Islamic bloc, although divided, trades oil for weaponry. A global clash is looming between power blocs, and many flashpoints exist today. Jerusalem would survive a war, as it means little to secularists and is coveted by Islam, but war would bring down the unstable financial system upon which the secular order rests, while destruction of Mecca would deflate Islam, as its god would be seen to be unable to guard his own. From the chaos of war comes a dictator...

When Jesus saves Israel from the dictator, he leads down his faithful, resurrected like him to eternal life and with taint of their sins removed. Believers alive on earth are 'raptured' to join Jesus at this time (not earlier) and are remade similarly. Jesus leads a Christian revolution in which the meek inherit the earth. All religious debate will end. Jesus claims his inheritance as king of Israel and emperor of the world, which he rules from Jerusalem for a millennium. No political system run by humans is proof against human corruption; at last the world will be run justly. Satan is chained, unable to make mischief. Christ's faithful act as empire administrators, like early Israel's hierarchy of judges but presumably in their own lands. Jesus mediates international disputes – there are no wars. He will decree on all of energy, the environment, finance and so on; the Torah is the model for the way of life. Animal life is redeemed too; savagery ends as lions go vegetarian and befriend their former prey, and children play with snakes – Disney time! If you have thought how lovely this world could be, that is the Millennium. Israel's prophets glimpsed this era.

But fallen man still has freedom to sin (even perfect government can do little about domestic cruelty), and there is still toil. This era ends when Satan is freed and stirs up a last revolt. It is quashed, and Satan put finally in the lake of fire. Then the rest of the dead are raised and Jesus soberly judges all, peasants and kings alike – an unedited 'This is Your Life'. We face either the lake of fire, as divine justice; or life with Jesus, as his mercy. It is not corrupt for him to pardon his friends, as he paid the price for their crimes himself. We shall then live wedded to him forever in a new Jerusalem. It is part of a new heaven and earth, matching our transformation at our resurrection. It is a city-sized palace complex that God makes for his son, for himself, and for us. Set free from sin, we may gaze on God directly. Only those who love God and love others are there, so there is joy without strife. Satan is gone, so there is no threat. There is no thought of sin, so no laws. God provides everything, and every tear is wiped away. Your knowledge will be obsolete, your possessions will be left behind, but your relationship with God goes on, blossoming beyond all dreams. It is what he made you for. You will also meet prophets and martyrs you have read of. The great drama of fall and redemption runs from before human record to the final fate of us all. *AMEN!*