

The Bible - God's Way Of Revealing Himself To Man Down Through The Ages

Recently figures were given out that some portion of the Bible, whether just a few chapters, the Psalms or one of the Gospels, is now available in an incredible 1,763 languages. The New Testament is reportedly available in 551 languages. And the entire Bible in any one of 279 tongues. For years now the Bible has been the world's best selling book and it continues to retain that position.

But few people would deny the difficulties it holds for them, the problems they encounter, the contradictions which they come across, and the things in it which they feel they just cannot believe. Therefore we thought it would be useful to talk about the Bible in the hope that things said might help you come to terms with it better and so that it might serve more effectively its intended use with you.

People have problems with the Bible usually in connection with three things.

First, there are the contradictions. In one place the Bible seems to be saying one thing and in another place something else. For example, in the well known words which come at the end of the first Commandment in Exodus Chapter 20, 5 we read "You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me". Yet, in the prophecy through Ezekiel, it is said to be altogether otherwise. In fact, it's almost as if the point made in those words just quoted from Exodus is openly disputed. Here is what we find in Ezekiel. It's at the beginning of chapter 18. "What do you people mean by quoting this proverb about the land of Israel: "The fathers eat sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge"? "As surely as I live, declares the Sovereign Lord, you will no longer quote this proverb in Israel. For every living soul belongs to me, the father as well as the son - both alike belong to me. The soul who sins is the one who will die".

Just as markedly, we have what is virtually a contradiction where God Himself is concerned. In many places He speaks of Himself, or He is spoken of, as a God capable of anger, of causing destruction, of bringing upon punishment. In other places it is altogether different. Just listen to these words from Isaiah, for example. These are from Chapter 45, and it is God speaking. "I form the light and create darkness, I bring prosperity and create disaster; I, the Lord, do all these things". But then there are these words which we find in the prophecy through Habbakuk concerning God: "Your eyes are too pure to look on evil; you cannot tolerate wrong." (Habbakuk 1,13).

In Isaiah you have a talk about a God who can get in amongst evil, even that He creates it. In Habbakuk, God is spoken of as altogether remote from such things.

However, apart from such contrasts in things said in the Bible about God, there is the overall contrast in the way God is perceived to be. A contrast most marked when we put the Old Testament alongside the New. In the Old Testament God is stern and aloof and capable of punishment and of visiting calamity upon people. In the New Testament this changes and the emphasis is different. It's an emphasis on a God of Love who asks of us an altogether different approach to our life and religion than what He asked, or even demanded, in the Old Testament.

In addition to these contrasts, the second thing which causes people to have difficulty with the Bible is the irrelevance, or apparent irrelevance of so very much that is recorded, especially in the Old Testament. In the historical books it is the political intrigues and bad behaviour of many of the leading figures that is talked about. Earlier on, you have, in some ways, quite petty domestic upheavals of people described. Much of what is said in connection with Esau and Jacob falls into this category. And then there is all the blood letting of the times of the "Judges" and during the early years of the monarchy, under king Saul and king David. Why should we want to know about this? people ask. Must I read it? How does this help me?

The third thing which gives rise to people's difficulty with regard to the Bible is the question of the literal accuracy of many of the things mentioned. For example, was there a Flood which actually, or literally, covered the whole earth? Were people so foolish as to actually try to build a tower whose top reached to heaven? Is the description of Creation in the early chapters of Genesis literally correct? And what of the apparently inflated numbers of fighting men going to war?

We run the risk of being accused of undermining people's faith in the Bible. Be assured that this is not our intention. We would submit that there is nothing achieved in running away from the doubts and difficulties people have and openly express. As well as this, we would question whether He who gave us minds to think and explore would want us to blindly accept what we otherwise cannot understand. More than this, by acknowledging the questions that are asked and providing at least some of the answers, we would hope to show the way to a deeper appreciation of the Bible and of the role it is meant to play in our lives. Our aim is a constructive one, not a destructive one.

The first thing we talked about as causing difficulties, where the Bible is concerned, are the contrasts we find there. Things said in one place seem to be contradicted in another. As well, there is the contrast, particularly noticeable between the Old and New Testaments, as to the way in which God "comes over" - stern and aloof in the Old Testament and so much more approachable and so much more loving, in a sense, in the New. What accounts for this?

What we have to understand is the parallel which exists between the human race, or mankind generally and an individual person. Each of us progresses through stages. Through infancy, childhood, youth and young adulthood. And there is no question that our parents and teachers accommodate what they want to say to us according to the state we are in. So it is with the human race which similarly, has passed through different stages - through infancy, childhood, youth, and young adulthood. And as parents and teachers need to accommodate what they want to say to the level of comprehension of a child, so it has been with the Lord. He too has had to accommodate what He wished to say to people to the level of comprehension they were in at the time. And this is why in Old Testament times, which was the childhood stage of the human race, He came over and needed to come over, in a fairly stern and aloof manner. Later as the human race progressed and its level of comprehension of these things matured, He could present Himself as the much more loving and approachable God He is.

Just pausing for a moment on the parallel which exists between the human race and the individual person. A similar progression is involved. If you are a parent or have anything to do with children, you will know how you have to threaten anger and punishment. Threats, of course, are inappropriate at a later date when the child is a young adult. In the same way, and in the childhood stage of the human race, the Lord had to threaten anger and punishments as the appropriate level of development for people at that time.

Swedenborg talks of such threats as "appearances" of the truth, rather than as being the truth itself. He wrote in one place. "Many things are said in the Word according to appearances and according to the fallacies of the senses, as that Jehovah is in anger, wrath, and fury against the wicked... (The point is that) to speak otherwise than as people comprehend, would be to sow seeds in the waters." (*Arcana Caelestia* 1874). And he goes on to say, elsewhere, that "it is a Divine Truth that the Lord is never angry, never punishes anyone, still less does evil to anyone" (*Arcana Caelestia* 3131³). But when it was appropriate for Him to speak as if He would be, He did do.

We take up then those other causes of difficulty people have with the Bible. These being the irrelevance, or apparent irrelevance of much that we find there and the strict, literal, accuracy of other things. Undoubtedly the greatest contribution of our understanding of the Bible which we have in Swedenborg's theological writings, is the revelation of its internal, or spiritual, meaning.

Swedenborg showed the Bible is all the way through, a parable, or a series of many parables. There are stories, histories, descriptions of wars and conquests, and so on, but within them all lies a deeper, heavenly, meaning. People complain of the descriptions of battles and blood letting. But those stories looked at within, teach us about the battles we must expect to wage in our own lives against twisted thinking and selfishness.

Well, what about the question of accuracy? Literal and factual accuracy? Whether a flood ever actually covered the earth? So far as that particular story is concerned there must have been a flood of considerable magnitude which left a deep impact on the minds of people and formed the basis of the story we have in Genesis. But proving whether it actually happened or not is not what matters or is important. What is important about the story and what matters, is that here the Lord warns us of the way we can be "swept"away, as by a flood of strong feelings and emotions. At the same time we can rise above these.

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