

What Makes the Bible So Important?
II Kings 22:8-13; 23:1-3
Acts 8:26-40

“...he read in their hearing the words of the book of the covenant that had been found in the house of the Lord.”

“What makes the Bible so important?” Why was it that King Josiah tore his clothes when he heard the words of the book of the covenant that had been unearthed in the Temple, words he then read to a people that long since had forgotten who they were and to whom they belonged? And how was it that an Ethiopian eunuch came to read and hear the words of the prophet Isaiah as God’s word to him about Jesus, prompting him that very moment to be baptized by water and the Spirit?

If I may begin this morning with a word of personal privilege, thirty-eight years ago today, I was ordained as a Minister of the Word and Sacrament. Of the half-dozen questions I was asked, before I knelt for the laying on of hands that had gone before me, the question that has changed my life and is at the heart of my ministry is this: *Do you accept the Scriptures of the Old and New Testament to be, by the Holy Spirit, the unique and authoritative witness to Jesus Christ in the Church universal, and God’s Word to you?*

What makes the Bible so important? Let me begin by construing your question to be a question about the texts of religious communities in general. “A religious community’s scripture,” writes Robert Jenson in *Canon and Creed*, “is a body of literature that is fixed in some medium that preserves it—which may simply be trained memories—and that precisely in that fixity is necessary for the perdurance [the lasting-ness] of the community.”

This general observation makes your particular question even more pointed: What makes *the Bible*, of all possible pieces of literature, so important? Why not, of a Sunday morning, read a Shakespeare sonnet or a poem by e.e. cummings or a passage from the Gospel of Thomas, for

that matter, as a text that can tell us something about what it means to be human? Moreover in the case of Jewish and Christian communities: why words? Why not gather as the Quakers do (as some of you once did before you married a Presbyterian) and experience meaning in silence broken only by the spirit-inspired reflections of a friend? Or why not listen to a symphony and let its wordless beauty send us back to the world refreshed? Or why not dance our way through the morning as other communities have done to tribal rhythms and ancient chants? “The presupposition of the Bible,” said Karl Barth to a classroom of seminarians, “is...that [God] *spoke*.” Deus dixit: the Word of God.

Yet here we must be very careful to insist that the words of Scripture are not identical with the words or the Word of God. Barth all but foams at the pen as he writes of the damage done in the 19th century when the doctrine of inspiration-trumped-by-inerrancy missed the paradox of God’s Word concealed in the human words of Scripture; when it made the writers of Scripture into scribes of God’s dictation. “To deny the hiddenness of revelation even in scripture is to deny revelation itself,” he roared, “and with it the Word of God. For God’s Word is no longer God’s word when the truth that is new every morning is made into a sacred reality, when the miracle of God that is encircled with the possibility of offence is made into a marvel to which one may quietly point.” What makes the Bible so important is not that we have in Scripture a direct communication from on high. Rather through the words of Scripture and the intercession of God’s Spirit, God has, for three and a half millennia, continued to communicate himself in legend and story, in law and prophetic speech, in wisdom and poetry, to a people called out and together to listen anew for God’s address.

Still your question is begged. If God communicates himself through words, why are these particular words--the words of the Old and New Testament as we receive them--so important?

“The church reads her Scripture as a single plotted succession of events, stretching from creation to consummation, plotted around Exodus and Resurrection,” says Jenson. It goes without saying that the writings of what we now call the Old Testament functioned as Scripture for Jesus and for the followers of Jesus before they were the followers of Jesus. Through the law and the prophets, the history and the wisdom of Israel, a people was constituted and continued to be addressed by the sort of God who made promises to them. No doubt for centuries the words were spoken, handed down orally from generation to generation, taught to children when at home and away, when lying down and rising.

But the written words literally became a matter of life and death, of identity and endurance, after the exile when a scattered people had either to remember who they were and whose they were or cease to be. In an incredible book of essays by Jonathan Rosen entitled *The Talmud and the Internet*, Rosen writes that “Destruction—or at least the response to it—was woven into the very fabric of Judaism back in 586 B.C.E. when the first Temple was razed by Babylonians. The exile and return that followed transformed Judaism from a local religion into one that could cross borders, that was preparing itself to live without a land. During the resettlement of the land of Israel, the Temple was rebuilt but—*far more important*—Ezra the Scribe began to transcribe the fragments that were gathered into what became the Bible. The realization that only words were durable had dawned on the Jewish people.”

Though here is an interesting parenthesis. Contrary to general understanding, Rosen writes, Jews “have a New Testament—it is called the Talmud.” The Talmud was the response of what became rabbinic Judaism to the destruction of the Second Temple “...it is, in fact, numerous new testaments all unfolding into the other and circling back to that first biblical testament so that knowing which came first, the verse or the commentary can become obscured.”

Likewise Jenson observes that both the Talmud of rabbinic Judaism and the New Testament of Christianity supersede the community that came to an end in the destruction of the Second Temple. Each in their own way added a second volume that determined their community's reading of the Hebrew Scriptures and ongoing identity.

In the church's New Testament, God's self-communication continues to be mediated through words that bear witness to the Word that was in the beginning (the Word that determines our reading of the Old Testament) and is made flesh in the fullness of time. Paul's letters were the earliest to circulate among the nascent Jesus movement, along with Mark's Gospel written around the fall of Jerusalem, followed by the other three Gospels before the end of the century. The writings that made it into the New Testament by the 4th century were the writings deemed closest to the apostolic witness, to the witness of those who were either contemporaries of Jesus or who were, at most, a few decades removed from his death and resurrection. Or put another way, the books in the New Testament witnessed to the apostolic faith as it was already being lived out in the life of the church and, in turn, began to function going forward as a norm for the word the church had to say in order to be the church.

This is also why (to sneak in another often asked question) we do not keep adding to the Bible. Go back to Jenson's general observation: the importance of Scripture has something to do with what he called "fixity." If the church had not fixed the collection of writings that became the canon, "no one would be reading it," says Jenson "nor would I be writing about it. Apart from the fact that Israel's Scripture funded the initial church and apart from the fact that the church collected writings of its own in one book with this Scripture, there would have been no 'Holy Bible,' and there would be no reason to treat the documents now bound together under that title as anything but sundry relics of two or more ancient Mideastern religions. It is only because

the church maintains the collection of these documents, with the text they present as the book she needs, that we are concerned for their interpretation.”

What makes the Bible so important? After attention is paid to why a text is important in general for a community’s identity and continuance, and why the words of Scripture are the primary means of God’s address, fixed words that tell the story of God’s promises to Israel, words that bear witness to the promise made complete in the Word made flesh that is Jesus Christ, one question remains: Why is the Bible so important to you? Even if you think it not, here you are in the community that would not exist without Scripture. Do you accept the Scriptures to be, by the Holy Spirit, God’s Word to you? Thirty-eight years ago I said, “I do” and had no earthly idea of what I meant by my assent. Thirty-eight years later, I do believe with all my heart and mind that what I struggle to hear in the words of Scripture is God’s address to me for you. Scripture has become the air I breathe. You could say, every Friday and Saturday, I tear my garment as I listen for God’s word, as I wrestle these words to the ground in the middle of the night for a blessing.

One way or another, with all the caveats and conditions that you might want to place on your relationship to the Bible given your enlightened reason, I expect each of you once was told the old, old story by a saint whose faith you have been struggling to make your own ever since. Like the Ethiopian eunuch, you may have tried to understand it on your own and found that only when you were joined by another did the words come alive. The text gives up its truth only in community. Whether because of your parents or a grandmother or a friend named Philip sent to you by God, your baptism has placed you in the middle of a story that has been passed from generation to generation for 3500 years. Should this end with you? Should our generation be the generation to decide that we are smarter than our primitive relatives and busier and that our

legacy had best be left to institutions that tell us who we are because they issue diplomas or grant degrees or trace our blood to the Mayflower or promise life after death on a plaque in a building bearing our name?

“We here, we Christians,” writes Marilynne Robinson “have accepted the stewardship of this remarkable narrative....If [it should be that] we have entertained the questions we moderns must pose to ourselves about the plausibility of incarnation, if we have sometimes paused to consider the other ancient stories of miraculous birth, this is no great matter. But if we let these things distract us, we have lost the main point of the narrative, which is that God is of a kind to love the world extravagantly, wondrously, and the world is of a kind to be worth, which is not to say worthy of, this pained and rapturous love. This is the essence of the story that forever eludes telling. It lives in the world not as myth or history but as a saturating light....” May it live as a light on the Hill at the top of Germantown Avenue because this generation has accepted the stewardship of the story for the sake of generations yet unborn. Thanks be to God!