



# Editorial



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One of the unexpected but wonderful things I have learnt in my time as a researcher for Bible Society is that people, whether active Christian, spiritually curious, or ardent atheist, generally enjoy the opportunity to talk about faith, God and, yes, even the Bible. The kind of questions we ask in surveys and focus groups – ‘describe your spiritual journey so far’, ‘what is your relationship with the Bible’, and even ‘what do you think the Bible is’ – are the kind of questions we rarely give time to in the daily hubbub of life. Yet making space for reflection and conversation on these deceptively simple questions is often deeply affirming, fruitful and even, as a non-Christian researcher described to me recently when reporting back to us, ‘life giving’.

It is in this ‘back to basics’ spirit that this edition of *The Bible in Transmission* focuses on the important issue, ‘What is the Bible?’. As we shall see through the contributions to this journal, this is a fundamental question for Christians, with significant consequences for how we practise and understand our faith. Before delving into these, however, I wish to share with you some data that suggests how this question is approached by the population at large.

In Autumn 2018, Bible Society commissioned what we believe to be the largest survey of attitudes to Christianity and the Bible undertaken in England and Wales. Working with respected research agency YouGov, we interviewed 19,875 adults, asking them over 100 questions on their spiritual

practices, thoughts about Christianity and beliefs about the Bible.<sup>1</sup>

The results were simultaneously affirming and, as we have to come to expect from faith-focused surveys, significantly challenging. It will probably come as little surprise to you that over the population, comparatively few read (or listen to) the Bible regularly – just 6 per cent of those surveyed say they read the Bible weekly or more outside of church services, while 84 per cent say they ‘hardly ever’ or ‘never’ read it. Significantly, the vast majority have no interest in changing this – 71 per cent say they are not interested in discovering more about the Bible, although an encouraging 23 per cent – far more than the number of regular churchgoers – say they *are* interested.

We think this lack of Bible interest and engagement is driven by a number of factors: accessibility, poor experience in the past and, most significantly, perception of what they think the Bible is and its place in the world. Relevancy is a key perception issue. For many, the Bible does have some value culturally and in education – 61 per cent of those surveyed agree ‘it’s good for children to know at least some Bible stories’. Far fewer, however, see the Bible as something for their own lives – 18 per cent agree with the statement ‘the Bible is relevant to me personally’, while 59 per cent actively disagreed. The respondents were split on whether the Bible has something meaningful to say about life today (35 per cent agree, 27 per cent neither agree nor disagree and 30 per cent disagree).

## NOTES

1. For context, a typical poll reported in the media will have about 1000–3000 respondents.

Perhaps unsurprisingly given these responses, the word most frequently picked to describe the Bible in our survey was 'outdated' – approximately a third (36 per cent) of respondents selected this. This was followed by 'contradictory' (32 per cent), 'judgemental' (25 per cent), 'guidance' (22 per cent) and 'complex' (19 per cent). There is no reason to think these perspectives will change in the future. Ask the 5671 18–34 year olds in our study what words they would use to describe the Bible and the results are more sobering again. Just under half (47 per cent) describe the Bible as 'outdated', while 39 per cent describe it as 'contradictory'. A quarter (24 per cent) describe it as homophobic. In contrast, the most frequently selected word by those aged over 65 is 'guidance' (29 per cent).

An invitation for a new way of seeing the Bible lies at the heart of much of our work in England and Wales. Our hope is that through high quality missional work we will provoke and inspire those at a distance from the Bible to encounter it anew, experiencing and coming to understand it in a way they perhaps had not before. Fresh encounter is, of course, not limited to those at a distance from the Bible and, indeed, new perspective is a theme which runs throughout this edition of *Transmission*, as well as warnings against dichotomy, and fractured and narrow approaches to Scripture.

One perspective on what the Bible is is offered by Leland Ryken, who challenges us to take seriously the Bible as a work of literature. It is not uncommon to hear the Bible described as literature in the general population, particularly from those who are interested in cultural and historical value of the Bible, although this is typically as far as their interest goes. Leland, however, leads us to see that approaching the Bible as literature need not confine us to the profane or fictional, realms. Rather, it is methodologically appropriate and deeply experientially enriching. In dialogue with this, a close read of the relationship between literature and sacred text is given by Fleur Dorrell in her contribution on Tobit. Drawing out the literary qualities of Tobit, Fleur takes us through a textual journey, showing how literary devices and biblical intents are intertwined to reveal theological insights with continuing power to speak to readers today.

The themes of literature and experience similarly run through Andrew Ollerton's article on the unfolding story of Scripture. Tasked with the not inconsiderable challenge of defining 'what is the Bible' in a way that reflects Bible Society's commitment to generous orthodoxy across Christian traditions, Andrew summarises for us his threefold model of the Bible (literature, story and revelation), with focus on the second dimension, story. 'Stories' are one of the most common words associated with the Bible in our research. Andrew, however, demonstrates that the Bible is not just a collection of stories or indeed sayings and moral lessons. Rather, it is an anthology of literature

forming *one* coherent and all-encompassing story. Compellingly, Andrew outlines that while its end is foretold, the story is not yet finished. It is our task to immerse ourselves in the story of the Bible, becoming part of this great unfolding drama.

Connection and integration through the Scriptures is also addressed by David Allen in his article on the continuity and discontinuity between the Testaments. As we have seen above 'contradiction' is a common perception of the Bible, as indeed is the view that the Old and New Testaments present quite different portraits of God. David deftly demonstrates that we need not choose between a reading of the Bible as entirely continuous or full of discontinuity, or indeed fear this tension. Both are present in the Scriptures, and both must be acknowledged for a truly holistic, and enriching, reading of the Bible.

Another powerful argument against dichotomy is given by Jerry Hwang in his paper on textuality and orality in the Bible. Addressing the question of whether the Bible is in character oral or textual, Jerry argues that it is necessarily both. To focus on one dimension to the detriment of the other not only neglects a significant dimension of the gift of Scripture and the human experience it speaks to, but risks addressing 'limits' the Bible does not actually have.

Walter Moberly addresses the theme of this edition with a nuanced paper of the authority and credibility of the Bible. Outlining that 'the Bible is our privileged guide for making sense of the world in which we live', Walter calls us to reflect that we can trust the Bible, not through intellectual argument (or at least just alone), but because it resonates with our deepest intuitions, the lived actions of others, and through our own lived experience.

Finally, Peter Brignall shares with us the background to the hugely ambitious celebration campaign *The God Who Speaks*, a campaign designed to inspire the Catholic community in use of the Scriptures. Using art, music, prayer and liturgy resources in schools, nationwide tours, and innovative grassroots networks, the scale of the campaign is truly incredible and is sure touch thousands of lives through 2021 and beyond.

My hope for this edition is that it will inspire you to reflect on what you think the Bible is. Perhaps you will be able to do this with a friend or family member and share with each other also your journey in the Scriptures so far. I hope also that, in some small way it will equip you. The tragedy wreaked by Covid-19 only continues to grow. While we cannot know the full impact the pandemic will have on faith and spirituality, we do know bereavement, illness and major life change such as job loss are significant triggers for spiritually open people to explore faith more deeply. If, in this time, they turn to the Church, we need to be able to answer and, in turn, invite an answer back, to the question, 'What is the Bible?'