

Swedenborg Theology Course

Session 6

What Is the Bible?

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Why read the Bible? The Swedenborgian Church offers a very simple and very traditional answer: We read the Bible in order to hear God's word for us. We read the Bible to find guidance for our lives. Yet at the same time, Swedenborg offered a highly distinctive approach for finding God's word for us within the Bible, and Bible interpretation is one of the things that most distinguishes Swedenborgianism from other branches of Christianity.

For Swedenborgians, there is an important distinction to be drawn between saying that the Bible *is* the Word of God, and saying that it *contains* the Word of God. God's Word in its broadest sense is God's total wisdom; as such God's Word is infinite and goes beyond our human grasp. Our grasp of God's Word is always partial and provisional. God's Word as it stands before God cannot take on a final or complete expression in the Bible or any other text written in a human language. Rather than say that the Bible is the Word of God, we say that God's Word for us comes to us through the Bible.

The question of Bible interpretation, therefore, is best seen as part of a larger question: What is God's Word and how does this Word come to us? In order to better present Swedenborg's views, in the next sections I will offer a brief historical overview of Biblical interpretation.

Traditional Readings of the Bible

In the early centuries of Judaism and Christianity, the books of the Bible were understood to be the writings of divinely inspired men. The first five books of the Bible were thought to be written by Moses, the Psalms by David, the wisdom books by Solomon, the historical and prophetic books by various prophets. The New Testament writings were thought to be written by the apostles or their close associates. Early readers did not usually question the historical accuracy of the Bible stories, but neither did they limit themselves to what today we would call "literal interpretation." They often developed elaborate theories of different levels of interpretation, including symbolism and allegory. Early on, Christians came to see in the Old Testament from beginning to end messages about Christ and prophecies of his coming. These readings are known as "typological."

It should be remembered that in ancient times, the books of the Bible were written in the form of scrolls. The Bible, originally, was not a single bound book (or "codex") as we now know it, but a collection of scrolls. There were many scrolls of prophecy, wisdom,

sacred history and the like, and there was no agreement as to which ones made up Holy Scripture. Later, the rabbis (in Judaism) and the bishops (Christianity) decided which books were "canonical," that is, part of authorized Holy Scripture. As the books of the Bible came to be gathered in one bound volume (or codex) they were put into a canonical order as well. To this day, there are differences in the Jewish, Catholic, Protestant, and Orthodox canons. Also, the books of the Jewish Hebrew Scriptures are in a somewhat different order from the Christian Old Testament.

Critical Approaches to the Bible

Starting in the Renaissance, scholars came to apply historical methods to the Biblical texts. Scholars have tried to reconstruct the history of how the text of the Bible took shape. In doing this, they use mostly internal evidence, such as language and style, apparent inconsistencies and the like. But they also use independent sources of history and archaeological evidence where these are available.

A major turning point in this process was the development of the "Documentary Hypothesis" in the late 18th century. According to this view the "books of Moses" and many of the historical books of the Old Testament had their origin in several independent accounts, which were later collated to make one continuous story. This hypothesis, which has been debated and refined to this day, is invoked to explain the odd repetitions, the different names for God, the inconsistencies in detail, and the conflicting viewpoints to be found in the Old Testament text as it has come down to us.

Since then a number of historical critical approaches have been developed in an attempt to explain not only how the Bible took shape, but also how the religion and culture of Israel grew and developed over history. These topics can, of course, be studied purely out of academic interest. But believers who have accepted (at least in general) the results of historical criticism have been faced with an important and difficult question: how do we distinguish what is a reflection of the mores of an ancient culture no longer applying to us from what is a reflection of God's enduring purpose, which applies now as well as then?

Fundamentalism

In the early years of the twentieth century, more conservatively minded Christians published a 12 volume series of articles known as "The Fundamentals" in which they set forth what they understood to be the fundamental doctrines of Christianity, doctrines they felt were endangered by Biblical Criticism and Liberal Protestant theology. This is the origins of what we know today as Fundamentalism. For Fundamentalists, the Bible is "inerrant", that is, free from error, and when the Bible disagrees with the results of science and historical scholarship, it is the Bible that should be believed.

Swedenborg's Approach

Where does Swedenborg fit into this history? First, Swedenborg published his exegetical works shortly before the development of the documentary hypothesis. So he comes before both modern historical criticism and the Fundamentalist reaction to it. While Swedenborg does not in general question the historical accuracy of the Bible, his views are not consistent with those of modern Fundamentalism. He considers the first 11 chapters of Genesis (roughly everything that comes before a certain point in the ancestry of Abraham) to be what we would call today pure mythology. That is, he reads the early chapters of Genesis as an account of the early spiritual history of the human race expressed in symbolic language, rather than as a literal account of creation. He also rejects a number of the statements that the Bible makes about God, saying that these Biblical statements indeed express how God appeared to be for the writers of the Bible, but God is in truth otherwise. On the other hand, whether and how Swedenborg's approach to the Bible can be reconciled with modern historical criticism remains an open question, one on which present day Swedenborgians can differ. Finally, in so far as Swedenborg taught that the Bible has several levels of interpretation, his approach is reminiscent of some of the ancient and medieval approaches. But he differs from them in the degree and consistency with which he worked out the "inner" meanings of the Bible.

The Word

As we noted above, 'The Word' for Swedenborg is in its broadest sense God's infinite truth. This Word is, of course, in its completeness beyond the grasp of any finite being. For finite beings in different realms of existence or living in different eras, there are different vessels or containers of God's infinite truth, adapted to the spiritual psychology of their recipients. For instance, the Word comes to the angels in the heavens, not in terms of historical events or personalities, but in terms of a symbolic representation of spiritual states and changes of state. The earliest people, who lived in an era that Swedenborg called the Most Ancient Church, had a direct perception of God's will for them. And God would sometimes appear to them in human form. At this stage there was no need for a codified Word. At a later era, which Swedenborg called the Ancient Church, people had a written scripture, which he called the Ancient Word, written entirely in symbolic language. Swedenborg says that the first eleven or so chapters of Genesis are a fragment of the Ancient Word. And he hinted that other fragments of the Ancient Word are to be found among the older religions of the world.

This fragment of the Ancient Word found in Genesis goes from Adam and Eve through Noah's flood, the Tower of Babel and up to the birth of Eber, the ancestor of the Hebrews. None of the characters before Eber stand for historical individuals, but rather each one stands for the human race as a whole. The story chronicles among other things the transformations of human consciousness from the unitive awareness and conscious communion with God found in the Most Ancient Church, to the divided and alienated consciousness which characterizes humanity today. Starting with Eber, says Swedenborg, the Bible refers to historical personages and events. However, at a deeper level of meaning it continues to use a kind of spiritual symbolism, which Swedenborg

calls correspondence, to chronical inner reality.

When it comes to the Bible as we know it today, Swedenborg held that there is a series of books within the Protestant canon which tell a continuous story at the level of inner meaning. These books are as follows:

- The Pentateuch (or "Books of Moses"): Genesis through Deuteronomy
- The historical books: Joshua through II Kings
- The Psalms
- The Prophets: Isaiah through Malachi
- The four Gospels: Matthew, Mark, Luke and John
- The Book of Revelation

These books constitute 'The Word' for Swedenborg in a way that the others don't. The most notable exclusion from the Word, in this sense, is perhaps the Epistles of Paul. However, to be clear we must emphasize that he is not saying that the others books of the Protestant canon are not inspired or that they shouldn't be read and studied. He is simply saying that they do not have an inner sense in the same way that the books which make up The Word do.

The continuous story found in the (Natural) Word has several "inner" or correspondential senses, that unfold in parallel. The most important are:

1. The spiritual history of the human race.
2. The story of Jesus' spiritual development. (Glorification)
3. The story of our own spiritual development. (Regeneration)

In the Bible studies I lead here at the Chapel, I usually place the focus on the last of these inner senses, namely the story of our regeneration. The Bible is talking about the spiritual journey that each of us is travelling as a living, learning, growing human being. Every character of the Bible stands for some part of our hearts and minds. Everything that happens to a Biblical character stands for something that we may experience in our spiritual lives. All the places, all the plants, animals, birds, gem stones, numbers, times, seasons, etc. mentioned in the Bible stories symbolize spiritual realities we encounter in our journeys.

Reading the Bible as a Spiritual Practice

Swedenborg recommends regular Bible reading as a spiritual practice. His whole purpose in writing Bible commentary was to help us to "open the inner sense of the Word," as he put it. I fear that this is sometimes made to appear to be much more complex than it really needs to be. While his system of correspondences and parallel inner senses can get quite elaborate, he also insists that those who read the Bible with a

sincere desire to get guidance for their lives will get the guidance they need. For my part, when I am reading the Bible, I consider the inner sense of the Word to be open whenever I am able to see how the Bible is talking about me and my spiritual life. In a discussion group, the inner sense is open whenever the participants can make these connections for themselves.

This does not have to be complex. Many of the Bible stories portray universal human situations. People are born and grow up. They marry and have children, or marry and fail to have children. They make their livings and face setbacks and adversity. Sometimes they live in peace and prosperity. Other times they face war, famine and pestilence. The powerful treat their fellows with honor and integrity, or they become corrupt and abuse their power. The characters of the Bible love and they hate. They fear and they hope. They hurt and they heal. They display great faith and courage, or they lose heart and despair. They grow old and pass on their heritage to descendants. The fact that the Bible took shape over many centuries helps guarantee that it covers the full gamut of the human experience.

The stories that were remembered, passed down and gathered together are archetypal of human situations and human responses to them. Technology and culture have changed since Biblical times, but human nature has not. Very often we spontaneously identify with Biblical characters and their plights. When we do, the Word is open. To my mind Swedenborg's system of correspondences and levels of meaning are tools to aid and deepen the process of finding our own spiritual journeys described in the Bible.

Bible reading as spiritual practice can be outlined as follows:

1. Read the Bible with a sincere desire to get guidance for your life.
2. Imagine that its stories are meant for you personally.
3. Picture yourself in the situation and take all the characters in turn:
 1. Imagine the events from their point of view.
 2. How do they feel?
 3. When have you felt the same?
4. Ask: Why is God telling me this story?
Psalm: How is this my song?
Parable or saying of Jesus: Why is Jesus saying this to me? What does he mean?
What should I do?