

# What Makes the Bible Special?

Psalm 119:33-40

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My New Testament professor remains one of the best teachers I've ever had. Diane possesses a thorough knowledge of the text, a passionate curiosity that keeps her asking more and more questions, and a challenging but gentle classroom demeanor that immediately engages her students and pushes them to keep learning. I took one of her classes every semester I was in divinity school.

I came to her classroom with an English major background. I had learned how to read a text and to pay attention to character growth, plot development, and symbolic imagery. I was taught to do these things with pretty much all forms of literature: fiction, history, poetry, biography...I've even—many, many times—read *Calvin & Hobbes* this way. As a result, my approach to the Bible was similarly literary. One of the reasons Diane and I connected is that she also has a love of great literature, and she encouraged me to read, interpret, analyze, and apply the Bible this way.

After I had graduated, Diane added a ministerial position to her academic work, and she ended up seeking ordination in the process. I was fortunate enough to be invited to sit on her ordination council, which was a little intimidating, both because of my immense respect for Diane and because about half of the group consisted of my other former professors. It was also perhaps the most perfunctory ordination council I've ever been a part of: everyone in the room knew that we wanted to ordain Diane, knew that she would make an extraordinary minister, and knew that she had ministered to each of us repeatedly in the past and this was frankly long overdue.

An ordination council is supposed to encourage, uplift, and affirm an ordinand, but perhaps more than anything it is an opportunity to prepare the candidate for ministerial service. It's a chance to ask questions that haven't been posed before, to nudge the ordinand toward a place of contemplation and personal reflection. Sitting on a council, even when you're intimidated, you have a responsibility to be thought-provoking. This is what I asked Diane:

Diane, we both really appreciate the Bible as a great work of literature and have connected over discussing it this way. We've also connected over talking about other great works of literature in a similar way. For you, what (if anything) separates the Bible from these other great literary works? What makes the Bible special?

Having lunch with one of my former youth this week, I told her about our five-week series and that this week was "the Bible." Offering her own reflections, she said, "The Bible isn't just another book. If someone were to rip a page out of it, it would upset me more than ripping a page from any other book would."

I agreed with her, but my question was the same: *why* would it upset us more? What makes this book special?

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I feel like I should warn you now that I don't expect to answer this question satisfactorily, certainly not in a twenty-minute sermon...and perhaps not within my lifetime. I feel confident that I will go to my grave asserting that the Bible *is* special, but being able to articulate why it is special is another question entirely.

Part of why it's another question entirely is that for me the "why" answer has changed, at least somewhat, over the course of my lifetime. The very first memories I have of the Bible being special are connected to others believing it was special. I'm fairly certain the first book I was ever given was a Bible, inscribed by my grandmother, one story per page with an illustration on the left and words on the right. As I grew, I remember my own parents reading from those pages with a qualified and specific reverence. I remember getting in trouble when I left a Bible on the floor of my room—not because the room was messy but because the Bible especially shouldn't be on the floor.

Arguably more than any other text, the Bible connects us with our predecessors. It connects us through family, but it also connects us beyond family. The Protestant tradition exists largely because the Bible started to become accessible to the masses—we owe our very existence as this particular vein of Christian in part to the printing press and the Bible itself. The Bible has been connecting us for hundreds, nearly thousands, of years.

Of course, the Bible isn't the oldest text that we continue to read. *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* are both older than anything we find in our Bible, and a number of other non-Christian religious texts predate our Bible as well. If we are simply evaluating the Bible's specialness based on its age, on its ability to cement us with previous generations, there are other contenders. Age doesn't seem like a right or complete answer.

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As I grew older, I found value in the stories and lessons in the Bible for myself. A sense of history and my parents' and mentors' reverence continued to be significant, but reading the verses of our Bible meant that I would develop my own appreciation. The stories of the Bible reach into the cosmos of our world. They deal with the matters of the heavens, the expanse of the stars, the depths of the seas. The Bible addresses—in a way that really seems to matter, even to a child reading the stories for the first time—the majesty and glory of the world, through word and character, poetry and legend.

And, likely more importantly, it also deals with the cosmos of the heart. It illustrates the value of grace and forgiveness, the importance of justice and righteousness, the beauty of love. It tells about characters who fight for and with each other, about locations that charm and mystify, about items that become imbued with power and sentiment and spectacle. The Bible speaks to our souls.

Sting, the English singer-songwriter, wrote in his liner notes to one album that only in the Bible can you get stories that speak to the most basic attributes of human quality in such extreme terms, and he found himself greatly inspired by the biblical text as a result.<sup>1</sup>

Of course, despite what Sting may say, other people might argue that the works of a host of other authors—from William Shakespeare to Toni Morrison and beyond—offer us stories that amplify the most basic attributes of human quality and speak to the cosmos both of the world

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<sup>1</sup> Sting, "Mad About You" sting.com. <https://www.sting.com/discography/album/208/Singles>

and of our hearts. As an English major, it's impossible for me to contend that only the Bible possesses artistic value and fascinating characters, that only these testaments hold stories and poems of such beauty and power. Again, if we are evaluating the Bible's specialness based on its artistry, on its ability to speak to our souls, that too doesn't seem like a right or complete answer.

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Somewhere along the way, I learned to read the Bible as an instruction manual in addition to a storybook. Mentors pushed me to examine the text and look for its moral imperatives. Sometimes, like reading the Ten Commandments or the Sermon on the Mount, that was pretty easy. Sometimes, reading a story where Jesus curses a fig tree and it dies, finding the moral imperative was a lot harder...but either way, the idea was that the Bible is special because it contains instructions about how we are to live our lives. It is more than just a collection of fascinating, evocative stories and characters and poems; it is a template to try to follow.

A few hundred years ago, this was the answer we were taught to give when asked "What makes the Bible special?" We were told to say, "It is the *infallible* guide for how we are to live." That was a neat and clean answer...but it wasn't an answer that did right by the complexity of the Bible itself, which is not a neat and clean book. Still, we like neat and clean, and some people leaned into those qualities.

Once, talking with a group of students who really wanted the Bible to be neat and clean and literal, I told them, "Raise your hand if you believe that the story of the Good Samaritan really, actually happened." Everyone in the room raised their hands except for one boy, whose jaw dropped as he stared around the room at all of the hands raised. I asked him why he didn't think it really happened, and he stammered out, "Because...because it didn't!"

The Good Samaritan, of course, is a parable, a story that Jesus told, not a historical recounting...but when we try to make the Bible fit into certain categories or descriptors, we often end up smoothing over parts that should remain a little bit rougher.

So it was that the word "infallible" became a loaded word, a dividing line as thick as any in our country. "Do you think the Bible is infallible?" is a litmus test question, one meant to trap the answerer in the same way that the Pharisees attempted to trap Jesus. As a result, I have a hard time thinking that "infallibility" is what makes the Bible special.

This book is, indisputably, a book of wisdom. It does contain lessons that we are meant to learn, sometimes lessons that come forth with a certain directness and clarity but more often lessons that are a little harder to apply. Part of why we keep returning to this book over the centuries, part of why we hold it in such esteem, is that it does indeed guide and direct and instruct us, regardless of which side of the litmus test we come down on. But...once more...there are plenty of other examples of great literature that offer us wisdom: the philosophy of Plato, the essays of Thoreau, the humor of Mark Twain, the fiction of Harper Lee. The Bible does not hold a monopoly on wisdom, and it becomes difficult to argue that wisdom is what makes it special.

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Some might argue that the Bible's wisdom is different—that it is “inspired,” writings that come from God. These folks might say that *To Kill A Mockingbird* is Harper Lee's wisdom, but the Bible contains *God's* wisdom. I'd agree that the Bible is inspired, that it comes from God...but I'd say that many great works of literature—and many theological writings beyond our Bible—come from God, that all wisdom and all that is good ultimately comes from God.

The Bible is inspired—and *inspiring*, and thought-provoking, and comforting, and encouraging—and that is certainly part of why it sits here in the center of our sanctuary. We turn to it when we are in mourning or uncertain. We use it to celebrate and to rejoice. Some of the value of this holy text seems to lie in its ability to uplift us when we are faltering and to take us to new heights when we think we have peaked. But...one last time...I can name dozens of non-biblical authors who have offered me comfort and inspiration, and I'm not quite sure that this alone is what makes the Bible special.

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In all 66 books of the Bible, you will (of course) not find the word “Bible.” Because of this, it's somewhat tricky to know what the Bible says about the Bible...but as I looked to the scripture to guide this sermon, I found myself gravitating toward the Psalms.

The reading from today, a short section from the longest Psalm in our Bible, reflects a desire to follow the law of the text. There are references throughout to decrees and commands and statutes. It's impossible to read this passage and not sense that there's some value in law. But there are also pleas for understanding, the expression of one striving not only to abide by the law but also to comprehend goodness. The writer of this Psalm is devoted in heart and mind and soul, writing poetry that attempts to speak to both the law and the spirit: “the psalmist is open in the broadest sense to God's instruction.”<sup>2</sup>

This Psalm is written by someone who is aware of his past, reminiscent of “figures like Jeremiah and Elijah” and their faithfulness.<sup>3</sup> And this Psalm is an expression from one who is committed in his faith, a soul yearning for God. These eight verses, even isolated, give us a sense of the Bible's impressive history, grounding us on a solid foundation and connecting us to our predecessors; they speak to the magnificence of our world and the goodness sought by the human heart; they embrace the wisdom of poetry and the righteousness of law; they are inspired and inspiring.

Maybe—*maybe*—just a little part of what makes the Bible special isn't any one of these things. Rather, it's that this text, more than any other for nearly two thousand years of Christian community, does all of these things.

And maybe—*maybe*—just a little part of what makes the Bible special is that it is a fixed tome that has sustained us for two millennia through changes in the Church and in the world...but it is also a living tome, worthy of our desire to reinterpret and reapply, worthy of our desire to find new meaning in ancient words. It is ancient, but it is alive...and in this way, it reflects our faith (which is also ancient and living, fixed and changing) like no other book can.

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<sup>2</sup> J. Clinton McCann, Jr., “Psalms,” *The New Interpreter's Bible Commentary: Volume 4* (Nashville: Abingdon Press), 1175.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

I don't remember how Diane answered when I asked her ordination question. What I remember is that afterwards she told me she wasn't satisfied with her answer. It left me feeling perversely proud to have stumped her, comforted to know that even one of the most articulate people I know couldn't quite articulate that answer, and continually curious about what kind of answer might be satisfying. I can't tell you why, exactly, the Bible is special, or significant, or sacred. I can only cling ardently to the idea that it undeniably is special (and significant, and sacred).

In the meantime, I will tell you what I preached to one of my daughters when she was given a Bible in church as a first-grader:

The book you are given today is your best tool for...wrestling with God. It is filled with stories that are so vivid and striking that they have inspired artists for centuries. The narratives of that book make their way into award-winning films, classic novels, and the dreams of children and saints. Its poetry serves as the foundation for our understanding of lyrical beauty and wisdom. And the directives penned by sages and prophets that you find in those pages make up the verses that the faithful memorize at a young age and cling to late in life. You first-graders are holding in your hands an inspired text—a living, breathing collection of myth and miracle, poem and parable, dream and history. The only possible way to engage with a book like that is to wrestle with it.

Wrestle with this book...and by doing so, know that it is special.