

The Bible: Curious Relic Or Ever-Relevant Word Of God?

Controversy raged recently over possible changes to the law affecting what we know as 'de-facto' relationships and a proposal that to all intents and purposes so far as the law is concerned, these be regarded as marriages. Understandably Churchmen reacted because of the threat this suggests to marriage, and to the status of marriage as we have long regarded it. And, as if to undermine the Church's moral authority to speak on the subject, it was said, by way of a retort and possibly partly in jest, that were we to take the Old Testament as some sort of a guide in the matter, then we would be looking at polygamy as the norm.

I mention this, not because I am going to talk about polygamy, but because it serves to illustrate the confusion that surrounds the Bible, particularly the Old Testament, as to what it is saying and as to its relevance to our lives, and our approach to life in 1981. The Psalms are one thing, but so much of the rest seems to have so little to say to us. The whole of the Book of Leviticus, for example, is just so full of the most detailed laws and instructions about Old Testament worship and sacrifices and, as it stands, holds such little interest for people today. And it's the same when you come to the prophecies, many of which talk in terms of the politics of the day and can only be understood after detailed study of the history of the nations referred to.

But it doesn't stop there, as we have already noted. Not only were things done and condoned which, from a Christian viewpoint, we are most uncomfortable with, but we wonder why they ever found their way into the Bible at all; why they had to be remembered; what purpose is served by it all. The most obscure, unhappy, and betterforgotten details of the lives of some of the great Old Testament characters are described. Abraham lied about his wife Sarah. Lot was prepared to surrender his daughters to be used by the men of Sodom. Jacob deceived his brother Esau. And so we could go on. It's not the most inspiring reading. Sometimes we feel we would rather not read these things at all. And many people don't.

Even the way God comes over, troubles us. He is said to "form the light, and create darkness", to "make peace and create evil." (Isaiah 45:7). He promises to visit the iniquity of the fathers upon their sons and the generations which follow afterwards. According to Exodus Chapter 4, if a person is dumb, or deaf, or blind, it is because God has caused them to be dumb or deaf and blind. It's as simple, and as frightening,

as that.

Perhaps we should not be surprised that one of Australia's leading Bible scholars should write of, and I quote "those people, perhaps the majority in the western world, who are dogmatically certain that the Bible is a collection of old wives' tales, unworthy of serious study and certainly irrelevant to our contemporary situation. Many of the Bibles in circulation are treated like so many 'heirlooms', as curious relics of a day gone by, to be seen but never to be used." (Dr. Alan Crown, "Biblical Studies Today," page 2).

In fact, and as the author of those words I have just quoted goes on, there has been a revival of interest in Biblical study in recent years, although that interest seems to stem, as much as anything, from a renewal of interest in antiquity and is part of the search for the roots of our culture. Few people, though there are some, of course, go to the Bible, particularly to the Old Testament, in the belief that God is talking to them there. It has indeed come to be regarded as a relic, albeit an important relic, of the past. And that's as far as it goes.

Swedenborg, who wrote 200 years ago and well before the disenchantment of which we are speaking really set in, was acutely aware of the problems with which we are confronted where the Bible is concerned. "There are" he wrote "many things there that (in themselves and as they stand) are not worthy of mention" (see *Arcana Caelestia* 3993), and he refers to the 'abominable' matter of Lot's daughters, and Jacob's peeling the rods and stripping them to the white, and placing them in the water-troughs, so that the flock might bring forth young of different colours, speckled and spotted, as amongst those things just not worthy, in themselves, of mention.

At the same time, he wrote of the Bible in such a way that we come to see it in a completely new light, no longer a relic of the past, or something of interest only to archeologists and sociologists, but as a document vibrant with meaning and a vehicle through which God reaches men and women, and speaks to them, in whatever age they may be living.

Whilst the Bible was compiled now thousands of years ago, and whilst the writers of the different books in the Bible drew upon contemporary events and happenings, often describing them, as Swedenborg writes of the process, the Lord in His Divine

Providence, was there directing the outcome, causing the writers to record certain things while discarding others; to present events as they did do and not in some other way. And all this for a most important purpose. The Lord intended that what was finally written, and that what we now have in our Bibles, should be capable of carrying a deeper and what we might describe as a 'parabolic' meaning. He intended that what ultimately became the written Word should serve as a vehicle for conveying truth and teaching which would always be relevant to the human situation and to life as we experience it. The writers of the Bible thought they were writing history or describing the politics of the day or the shortcomings of some king. And this is true. They were. But, and though they weren't conscious of it, they were doing something else.

They were providing words and details which the Lord could use, like a parable, to convey truths which would always be of importance to us all.

Perhaps it would help if we stopped over an example of what is meant here.

Take the story of the people of Israel under the leadership of Moses as they escaped from the slavery to which they had been subjected in Egypt. "Let my people go" Moses demanded of the Pharaoh. But he wouldn't, and in the end they had to make the break themselves. Even then, they wondered if they had done the right thing and they thought about turning back. But they persevered; and for all the complaining and back sliding eventually arrived in the Promised Land. You, perhaps, know the story well.

We do not doubt the significance of these events where the Old Testament Jews are concerned. Indeed, they are still commemorated to this day. But the events which are described have a significance and meaning which far transcends any one group of people. At a deeper level this story is intended to bring home to us, and to teach us, about our need to break free from the bondage of self-interest and self-regard which holds such sway with us in our early adulthood. We are all bondmen and bondwomen at first, dictated to, and ordered around by our selfish impulses and our desire for pleasure, reputation, glory and power. And there comes a time when we too, like the people of Israel, must make a bold bid for freedom. To be sure, there will be obstacles to be overcome. Setbacks; times of dryness and hunger; periods of despair and back-sliding; just as it was with the people of Israel as they wandered through the wilderness. But if we, like them, persevere, we will at last arrive at the promised land

of unselfish attitudes and disinterested service to others. The story is telling us, it's not impossible. It can be done.

Perhaps the most uninteresting parts of the Old Testament are all those laws and instructions given about sacrifices. They just seem to have nothing to do with us at all. But if we can remember this one point, all this changes. These things said about sacrifices refer to the way in which we should dedicate ourselves in service to God and others. The Old Testament Jews were given the most detailed instructions as to how they must select the best of their flocks or whatever to sacrifice to the Lord. We must, on our part, offer in service to the Lord and to others only the very best of the thoughts and actions we are capable of. Once we get beneath the surface there is teaching there, as you can see, which very much touches upon the lives of us all.

"The Christian world" wrote Swedenborg, "is as yet profoundly ignorant of the fact that all things in the Word both in general and in particular, indeed, the very smallest particulars, down to the least iota, signify and enfold within them spiritual and heavenly things; and for this reason the Old Testament is but little cared for. Yet that the Word is really of this character might be known from the single consideration that, being the Lord's and from the Lord, it could not possibly be given unless it contained within it such things as belong to heaven, to the Church, and to faith, and that unless it did so it could not be called the Lord's Word, nor could it be said to have any life in it." (*Arcana Caelestia* 1).

And, elsewhere,

"There is not a syllable or jot in the Word that does not have an internal sense." (*Arcana Caelestia* 1429).

Not a syllable or jot in the Word, you will notice, does not have an internal sense. Everything.. .every story.. .everything written there has a deeper, internal, meaning. Whether it is the story of Cain and Abel, or the story of the Tower of Babel, or David's victory over Goliath, or whatever, the really important thing is the deeper meaning involved which goes directly to the heart of our own experiences in life. The Lord is speaking to us through these stories. Teaching us. Warning us. Exhorting us. Encouraging us. Telling us things about ourselves we would never know otherwise. Fore warning and fore arming us. The Word is a living document. It throbs with significance

and meaning for us.

"Let him who wishes to be eternally happy, know and believe that the Word is the one only doctrine which teaches how a man must live in the world in order to be happy to eternity." (*Arcana Caelestia* 8939).

Transcript of The Swedenborg Programme – Number 13.

<http://www.swedenborg.com.au>