

# Taking the Bible Seriously



by Lloyd Arnett



Anglican Agenda Series ♦ J.I. Packer, editor

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by  
*Lloyd A. Arnett*

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## Preface To The Series

The Anglican Agenda series of publications aims to open up current questions that call for thought, discussion, prayer and decision among members of the Anglican Church of Canada at this time. The series is sponsored by the Essentials movement, which seeks all-round renewal of life and strength in the Anglican Church, and its writers are Anglican Church personnel speaking out of their loyalty to the Church and their acute sense of its present needs. It is hoped that the series will spark deep personal reflection and group discussion within and between parishes, so that we all may be better prepared for the difficult and demanding era into which, as it seems, our Church is now entering.

J.I.PACKER  
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### **Taking the Bible Seriously**

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# Taking the Bible Seriously

Lloyd A. Arnett

*“...I have given them the words that you gave me, and they have received them...”*

(John 17: 8a)

“**T**he Bible,” from the Greek *ta biblia*, means simply *the books*. The Holy Bible, therefore, means *The Holy Books*. In the Judeo-Christian tradition the name is synonymous with *Scripture* and its plural, *the Scriptures*, from the Latin *scriptura*, meaning *the writings*. The Bible, then, is that wondrous book-of-all-books, that collection of holy writings that chronicle the words and acts of God in relationship to humankind throughout the panorama of all history.

It is disappointing, therefore, that there are voices today, in the nominal, “institutional church,” that are trying to make this word of God accommodate popular pagan trends in culture. We have even been treated to the spectacle of interpretations of passages which are the exact opposite of what they actually say. Such mishandling is nothing new; Christ faced biblical distortions in his day, too. For him there were those who wanted to *add* to Scripture a long list of burdensome works: these were the traditional legalists, the Pharisees. There were also those who wanted to *subtract* from Scripture any possibility of the supernatural: angels, resurrection of the dead, the spirit world (Acts 23:8). These were the liberal Sadducees. Such voices are always with us. Above the din, however, Jesus called his listeners to take the Bible seriously, to restore the Scriptures to their proper place. It is appropriate, then, that his sincere, committed followers allow him to speak his own mind on the subject still, so as to be reminded of his teaching. That will be the purpose of these pages.

What are we to make of this, our Book? What are we supposed to do with it?

It would be informative to go into Church history, to see how the canon of books which makes up our Old and New Testaments was

formed, to talk about methods of Bible reading and study, biblical interpretation, and so forth. But these things are all secondary to what are the most important understandings we can have about the Bible: its place in the life of Jesus Christ and his teaching about its place in ours.... Let us turn first to his own life and look at:

### **The Bible in the Pre-Ministry Period of the Young Christ**

Captain Dave Denault of the Anglican Church Army recently reminded me of the old adage: "Today we prepare for three years for a ministry of 30; Jesus prepared for 30 years for a ministry of three." And that's true. And however much we might like to know about Christ's youth, God has sheltered the "Silent Years," keeping them secret to both him and those who shared them. They are as unknown as his adult years are known. The Gospels tell us very little of that time, concentrating as they do on Christ's ministry and Passion. There are, however, some facts from the Gospels and from the Jewish history of Christ's time, that are quite intriguing, are validated by his later life, and open some doors which give us as much of a peek at his youth as God has allowed. And those special facts are about Christ and the Bible.

There was a saying in the literature of the Jewish traditions in Jesus' time, which reflects the significance of Scripture study in his day. It reads:

These are the things of which a man enjoys the fruit in this world, but their possession continueth for the next: to honour father and mother, pious works, peacemaking between man and man, and the study of the law, which is equivalent to them all. (Peah I.I-a Talmudic tractate, Edersheim, 158)

And, in the providence of God, just before the birth of the Christ, for the average Jew, studying the Law was easier to do than it had been earlier, on two counts. First, after the Maccabean wars, in the period between the Old and New Testaments, since there had been an earlier attempt to suppress the Hebrew Scriptures, there was a great increase in the copying and dissemination of them.

Secondly, while we do not know how Christ was schooled, at that time the regular instruction of children was introduced into every town. Education at synagogue-school was compulsory and began at age five or six, depending on the strength of the child. School hours

were fixed and attendance was shortened during the summer months (Edersheim, 160).

From ages six-to-ten the exclusive textbook was the Scripture. Every school had a copy of the entire Old Testament. Small portions of the Scriptures were made for homes and the training of children. Among them were the Genesis accounts from the Creation to the Flood, the laws for religious observance (Leviticus chapters 1-9) and passages about the establishment of the priesthood and the tabernacle (Numbers 1-10:35).

It is therefore not surprising that some years later, St. Paul, writing to Timothy (whose mother was Jewish), could note of him something from Jewish culture that they both undoubtedly shared with Christ. He wrote, "...from childhood you have been acquainted with the sacred writings" (2 Tim. 3:15 ESV).

While it may seem strange to us, the study of the Scripture for little minds at school began with the Book of Leviticus. It treated all the religious ordinances with which every Jew needed to be acquainted. Then study passed to the other parts of the Pentateuch (the books of Moses), then to the prophets, and finally to the "writings": the histories, the Psalms, and Wisdom literature.

After the age of ten, study progressed to the Mishnah, or traditions of the Jewish elders, and at fifteen on to the discussions which preoccupied the higher academies of Rabbis. This is the reason I believe that Jesus studied in just such a school, namely because he was so well-versed in all these things.

I find it fascinating, therefore, that the only thing in the gospels which we are told directly of Christ's "Silent Years" is about the Bible: the story of Jesus at the Temple. St. Luke says that his family went up to Jerusalem every year at Passover with relatives (Lk. 2:44). At the age of 12, when boys first went to the Temple, Jesus traveled with them. Having been entrusted with the Son of God, the young Messiah, Joseph and Mary, in the whirl of activity, experienced the fear of every loving parent: they lost him—for three days! We can only imagine what those 72 hours must have been like for them. Finally, they went to the Temple, perhaps to pray for his safe return, or to seek help from the priestly authorities, or both. And there he was, among the teachers of the Scriptures and traditions, listening to them, asking them questions, and amazing everyone who heard him by his answers and understanding. His answers, I say, because

that's what the Gospel reports and because the educational culture of his day was one of memorization. Given the system just outlined, he had probably been studying the Scripture for seven years and the traditions of the elders for two (Lk. 2:41-52) and was interacting from memory.

Ever wonder where a 12-year-old from a small town, now in the big city, spent the night? Or how he ate? We're not told. We just see that he was willing to be lost, not just lost in the Holy City, or in God's house, but lost to a passion for his Father's word. Nevertheless, obedient to that word, he returned to Nazareth, honoring and submitting to his parents. And "he increased in wisdom and in stature and in favor with God and man" (Lk. 2:52).

Thus, from Gospel history we know that Jesus of Nazareth could read and write, had an early passion for the word of God, had access to the Scriptures, and had been taught them. Though he was a carpenter's son of the tribe of David, he had family relations in the Jerusalem priesthood from the tribe of Aaron, Zechariah and his family (Lk. 1:36), including John the Baptist, Jesus' age, who was also well-versed in Scripture from *his* youth.

While it is difficult to pierce the veil of the next eighteen years before his ministry, it seems clear that Jesus continued to study and memorize the Scripture. We are given a tantalizing glimpse, through the prophet Isaiah, of the Messiah as the Obedient Servant. In chapter 50 we read:

The Lord God has given me the tongue of those who are taught, that I may know how to sustain with a word him who is weary. Morning by morning he awakens; he awakens my ear to hear as those who are taught. The Lord God has opened my ear, and I was not rebellious; I turned not backward. (Is. 50:4-5 ESV)

The words "those who are taught" in this passage are sometimes translated "of a disciple." "The Lord has given me the tongue of a disciple... he awakens my ear to hear as a disciple." Jesus' discipleship was one of daily time with God, in the Scripture, and was a walk of obedience to it.

One last surprising bit of evidence of his preparation-years comes to us through the Gospels of Matthew and Luke. They tell us something about Christ's personal scrolls of Scripture; his Bible. Both

Gospel writers record Jesus' saying that "until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished" (Matt. 5:18 ESV; see also Lk. 16:17). From this statement we learn that Jesus' ongoing study of Scripture, from among the languages of his place and time, was in the original Hebrew from a text in the square or Assyrian letters which produced, literally, "iotas and hooks" or "dots" (Edersheim, 162). And, for the rest of his brief life, as recorded in the Gospels, for every task, for every conflict—human or demonic—he had *memory* command of these Scriptures and spoke them directly and effectively to every situation. This leads us naturally to ask about:

### **Christ's Teachings concerning the Old Testament**

"You search the Scriptures\*," the adult Jesus told the religious establishment of Jerusalem, "because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness about me, yet you refuse to come to me that you may have life" (John 5:39-40 ESV).

John R.W. Stott rightly notes that in this passage our Lord tells us two very important things. The **first** is that *the purpose of Scripture is to bear witness to Christ* (Stott, 26). In other passages Jesus said: "Abraham rejoiced... to see my day" (John 8:56), and "Moses... wrote of me" (John 5:46).

In the nineteenth century a Jewish-Christian scholar, Alfred Edersheim, searched the principal Hebrew traditions for Old Testament verses the rabbis said were about the Messiah. Most of us are familiar with the few key ones noted in the Gospels. Edersheim found over 450. Whether or not it appears so to the casual reader, the Old Testament is constantly speaking about Christ and his coming.

No one was more sure of this than Christ, himself, from the outset. At the beginning of his ministry he went into the synagogue at Nazareth, "where he had been brought up" (Luke 4:16), and where he had probably studied the Scriptures, opened a scroll to Isaiah 61 in

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\*When Jesus talks about "the Scriptures" he is referring to the 39 books of the Palestinian canon, which we call the Old Testament to distinguish it from the 27 Christian writings that make up the New Testament. Other Jewish religious writings were in existence, and some of these had found a place in the Greek Translation of the Old Testament (the Septuagint) that was made and used at Alexandria, but these additions were not counted as Scripture in Palestine; so the Apocrypha, as we call them, were no part of Jesus' Bible.



the course of a service, and read the words put into the mouth of the long-awaited Messiah:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor. (Lk. 4:18-19 ESV)

He then announced to everyone present, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing" (Lk. 4:21). Do we fully understand what he did here? He literally spoke the words prophesied for him 700 years before! Well, that must have rocked his family and the hometown folks. Can you imagine the emotional electricity of such a bold moment?

At Christ's post-resurrection appearance on the road to Emmaus, we read,

And he said to them, "O foolish ones, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and enter into his glory?" And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself. (Lk. 24:25-27 ESV)

With John Stott we can only conclude, "It was the consistent teaching of Jesus that Old Testament Scripture was God's word bearing witness to him" (Stott, 27).

**Secondly**, we see, with Stott, that *Christ bears witness to Scripture*. We're still talking here about the Hebrew Scriptures, the Old Testament. Jesus said, "Scripture cannot be broken" (John 10:35). And in the Sermon on the Mount he declared,

Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. For truly, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished. Therefore whoever relaxes one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever does

them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. (Matt. 5:17-19 ESV)

When in the same sermon Jesus gave his sequence of “You have heard it said... but I tell you this” lessons, he was not *contradicting* Scripture. The “You have heard it said...” referred to the sayings of the elders as they declared what they took Scripture to be teaching. What he was trying to correct was wrong interpretation of Scripture (Stott, 33).

Writes one scholar, “Jesus taught his disciples the need for obedience to the law, first and foremost in spirit, but also in letter” (Wenham, 17).

Christians did soon realize that with the coming of Christ’s covenant or new testament (I Cor. 11:25) some things were fulfilled that were part of the Old Testament. Gentiles were admitted to the people of God on an equal footing; the Jewish ceremonial system with its dietary laws and sacrificial system was now “obsolete” (Heb. 8:13), because all was fulfilled in Christ (Mk. 1:14, 15; 7:19). But Jesus accepted the narrative, moral, and doctrinal teachings of Scripture and criticized the Pharisees and Sadducees for misrepresenting, distorting, and encrusting them (Stott, 33). The Lord did not set aside the Old Testament; he endorsed it.

Jesus said emphatically that the Old Testament was his “Father’s words” (John 5:38). Many liberal theologians and churchmen have failed in much the same manner as the religious leaders who criticized Christ. Jesus accused them of not having God’s word abiding in them. It is not our job to change, contradict, or sit in judgment on Scripture, because its origins are divine. It is not we who are the authorities on Scripture; it is the Scripture that is the authority on us, as the word of God.

As to the historicity of Scripture, Jesus consistently treats “the historical narratives as straightforward records of fact” (Wenham, 12). He refers to Abel, Noah, Abraham, Sodom and Gomorrah, Lot, Isaac, Jacob, the wilderness serpent, David eating the consecrated bread, Solomon, Elijah and Elisha, Jonah, and Zechariah the prophet, not as myths or metaphors, but all as historic, factual realities (Lk. 11:51; Matt. 24: 37-39; John 8:56; Matt. 10:15; Lk. 17:28-32; Matt. 8:11; Lk. 13:28; John 3:14; Matt. 12:3; Matt. 6:29; Lk. 4:25; 4:27; Matt. 12:39-41; Lk. 11:51; Wenham, 12).

“Jesus’ personal attitude toward the Old Testament Scriptures,” writes John Stott, “was one of reverent submission, for he believed that in submitting to the written word he was submitting to his Father’s Word. Since he believed in its divine origin, he interpreted his own messianic mission in light of its prophetic testimony and added that certain things *must* come to pass because the Scripture *must* be fulfilled. Further,” says Stott, “Jesus obeyed the moral injunctions of the Old Testament, so that in the temptations in the Judean wilderness he commanded the devil to leave him because of what stood written in Scripture. However subtle Satan’s insinuations might be, Jesus was prepared neither to listen nor to negotiate [as our first parents did—note mine]. He was determined to obey God, not the devil, and what stood written in Scripture settled the issue for him” (see Lk. 4:4, 8, 12) (Stott, 32).

Theologian Geerhardus Vos has written: “He once more made the voice of the law the voice of the living God, who is present in every commandment, so absolute in his demands, so personally interested in man’s conduct, so all-observant, that the thought of yielding to him less than the whole inner life, the heart, the soul, the mind, the strength, can no longer be tolerated. Thus quickened by the spirit of God’s personality, the law becomes in our Lord’s hands a living organism...” (G. Vos, in Wenham, 20).

Scholar John Wenham has summed up Christ’s position on the Old Testament with these words:

To Christ the Old Testament was true, authoritative, inspired.  
To him the God of the Old Testament was the living God,  
and the teaching of the Old Testament was the teaching of  
the living God. To him, what Scripture said, God said.

(Wenham, 37)

Given this, what about:

### **Christ’s Teachings Concerning His Own Words in the Gospels**

Not only did Jesus accept the Hebrew Scriptures as the word of God, but claimed the same for his own words. He said, “Heaven and earth will pass away, but *my* words will not pass away” (Lk. 21:33). He further noted, “the word that you hear is not mine but the Father’s who sent me” (John 14:24). But he wasn’t a writer. The only accounts of

his words we have were written by his disciples. How is it that they agree so well and what confidence can we have in them?

You may have noticed in the Gospels that Jesus is often referred to as “Teacher” and “Rabbi,” (John 1:38). Jesus accepted this acknowledgment in John 13:13 when he said, “You call me Teacher and Lord, and you are right, for so I am.” In Jesus’ time, “The rabbis considered themselves to be the bearers of a ‘tradition’, which they had ‘taken over’ and which it was their task to ‘hand over’ to approved pupils who committed it to memory” (Wenham, 111). In quoting Jesus’ words the gospel writers were not just vaguely remembering things Christ said years earlier. As disciples of a rabbi, it is natural to suppose that they wrote down at an early stage things they had memorized, as pupils of other rabbis both memorized and wrote down their teacher’s teaching. Because Jesus carried his message of the Kingdom to many places, the disciples heard it repeatedly for three years. They were trained by Jesus daily. Further, they were, themselves, sent out to preach his message during his own lifetime and ministry. Before his death and resurrection, Jesus promised the twelve: “These things I have spoken to you while I am still with you. But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things and *bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you*” (John 14:25-26, italics mine).

His last instructions were to “make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you” (Matt. 28:19). Here was an incentive to persons with a literary gift, both apostles (Matthew and John) and members of the apostolic inner circle (Mark and Luke) to write up the apostles’ reminiscences and records in book form for use as teaching tools. Some, it seems, did a less than satisfactory job (Lk. 1:1 implies this), but the four named above succeeded brilliantly. And so, we have the Gospels. Modern scholars have produced theories galore about how the Gospels came to be written, but what has just been said still seems to make the best sense.

And what about the rest of the New Testament? What about:

### **Christ and the Apostolic Epistles**

Jesus gave selected followers the special designation “Apostles,” which means “sent ones” (Lk. 6:13). Along with the twelve, the group of

apostles later included (among others) St. James, the Lord's half-brother, and St. Paul (whose teaching Luke's Gospel reflects, as Mark's reflects Peter's). In order to secure the apostles a serious hearing, Jesus vested them with his own authority. He told them,

He who listens to you listens to me; he who receives you receives me; he who rejects you rejects me.

(see Matt. 10:40; Lk. 10:16; John 13:20, Stott, 34-35)

The apostles had a similar understanding of their message to that which the Old Testament prophets had of theirs. The apostles' spoken words and writings and those of their fellow-apostles were referred to, by them, as "the word of God" (I Thes. 2:13) and they gave instruction that their epistles should be read aloud in worship as the Old Testament was read (Col. 4:16; I Thess. 5:27). "Not only did the apostles understand the teaching authority they had been given, but the early church understood it, too. When the Church deliberated as to which writings should be included in the New Testament canon we have today, the principal criterion was 'Had it been written by an apostle? If not, did it come from the circle of the apostles? Did it contain the teaching of the apostles?'" (Stott, 37).

This may lead some to wonder about:

### **The Reliability of the Scripture Texts Generally**

We need to say something here about this, especially in our day. Some have chosen to ignore the Scriptures by pleading, "They were written so long ago; how can we possibly know how accurately they have come down to us in the copies that were made before the age of printing began?"

Ironically, in the providence of God, the further away we get in time, the more international evidence we accumulate and the more we know about the textual history of the biblical books. In our century we have a wealth of material evidence to assure our faith in the accuracy of the transmission of our Bible. Recently, busloads of people from the greater Vancouver area went to Seattle to see some of the Dead Sea Scrolls, discovered in 1948, scrolls which have subsequently revealed that the text of the Old Testament was passed on virtually unchanged for over a thousand years, so careful were Jewish copyists in transmitting it.

The New Testament has thousands of ancient copies and fragments

in collections around the world, which can be compared with one another for accuracy. The bottom line is that only one word in a thousand in the original is in any way uncertain and disputable, and in no single instance is any question of doctrine raised by this uncertainty, since every alternative reading in the manuscripts fits in with what the Bible teaches elsewhere, in places where no textual problem arises.

Entire books have been written on the evidences of the reliability of the biblical texts. As one scholar has noted: “The church has always believed, as the Westminster Confession says, that the Scriptures have been ‘by his singular care and providence kept pure in all ages’” (1:8-Wenham, 165). Detailed study bears this out.

Christ’s promises have proven true. He did send the Holy Spirit, the Apostles did create the Gospels from the remembered words of Christ, they were taught all that they needed for the development of the Church, and his teaching and commandments have gone throughout the entire world in the New Testament and in the life of the Church.

What can we say finally about:

### **Christ and the Bible**

From cover-to-cover, the Bible is *about* Jesus Christ and is claimed as his credential *by* Jesus Christ and is to be accepted *from* Him as our authority in all things for faith and living. In the words of St. Peter, his are “the words of eternal life” (John 6:68).

Christ stands at the centre of Scripture: his Spirit inspired the Old Testament, preparing for his Advent. In his human life he interpreted Scripture, provided salvation, and lived the Gospels. In his resurrected life he authorized the apostolic writings, and thus provided us with instruction about our discipleship, his second coming, and eternity.

Our Bible is the completed word of God in Christ Jesus, laying out the fullness of that faith “once for all delivered to the saints” (Jude 3). It is our discipleship manual, our total revelational package—past, present, and future—for every day of every week of every year. Recently Archbishop Venables of South America reflected this understanding by revealing something of the place of the Bible in his own family’s life. He noted that his wife had read her Bible from cover-to-cover, once through yearly, 32 times.

John Stott’s conclusion: “We believe the Scriptures because of Christ. He endorsed the Old Testament, and he made provision for

the writing of the New Testament by giving to the apostles his authority. *We therefore receive the Bible from the hand of Jesus Christ.* [italics mine] It is he who has invested it with his own authority. And since we are determined to submit to him, we are determined to submit to it. Our doctrine of Scripture is bound up with our loyalty to Jesus Christ. If he is our Teacher and our Lord, we have no liberty to disagree with him. Our view of Scripture must be his” (Stott 38).

As the ancient Israelites received the Ten Commandments from the hand of Moses, we have, in the fullness of times, received the entirety of the Bible from the hand of Christ. May he be able to say of us, again, the words from his High Priestly Prayer:

*“I have given them the words that you gave me, and they have received them...”*

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### **Notes for Recommended Reading:**

The first form of this essay was as a homily for Church of the Holy Cross in Abbotsford, BC. It more heavily quotes the authors above than is my usual writing habit because they so acutely and succinctly speak to the issues I am dealing with. I acknowledge my indebtedness to them and encourage the reader to study their books in their entirety.

I particularly encourage the reading of the new *English Standard Version* of the Bible, the editor of which was Dr. J.I. Packer. For some years a new translation has been needed which is both an intensely precise word-for-word rendering and a model of English prose. The new *ESV* is, for many of us, that translation. It is being adopted by many churches and created in parallel versions with foreign languages for use abroad. As some scholars are now calling for a return to the use of one standard English Bible for uniformity and as an aid in Scripture memorization, I can do no better than to commend this outstanding achievement.



## **Questions for Study and Discussion**

1. Why is the Bible so widely disregarded in our day? Do you see any validity in any of the reasons given for this neglect?
2. Why do some think that the original Hebrew and Greek of the Bible were corrupted beyond recovery in the course of manuscript transmission?
3. Why do some think that the biblical account of events past, present, and future, from the creation to the consummation, cannot be true?
4. What does it mean to call the Bible the Word of God?
5. What place should the Bible have in the life of each congregation?
6. What place should the Bible have in the life of each individual Christian?



Our Father, as we look forward to the coming of your Son, Jesus Christ, may we, as He did from His youth, embrace your living Word. We thank You that we live in a day and country with free and easy access to the Scriptures in their entirety. May we understand anew that they bear the fire of your will for us; may we read, study, and commit them to memory; may we follow them in obedience, hearing in them the very discipleship words of Jesus which echoed in the ears of the Apostles 2000 years ago. May this, your written Word, which we receive from the hand of Christ, transform us continuously until his second and final coming. We ask all this through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

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