



Bible: Good and Bad

On The Bible,
Karen Armstrong,
Allen and Unwin

In her epilogue to this book Karen Armstrong puts her stamp on the Bible in clear and forthright terms. She is concerned that in an age when people want certainty 'at the click of a mouse' the Bible is in danger of becoming dead or completely irrelevant. It also provokes fierce argument, even hatred, and is used as a sword rather than a ploughshare.

When we study the Bible, says Armstrong, we need to bring to it a spirit of charity and compassion, for it means different things to different people and is coloured by their particular circumstances at the time. The Bible has never encouraged its readers to follow a strict party line. The modern practice of quoting proof texts to give divine authority to this or that ruling or belief is out of step with the way the Bible has been interpreted over the years. From the very beginning, says Armstrong, the biblical authors contradicted each other but their conflicting insights were included in the final text. Indeed the Bible's inconsistency is a virtue rather than a vice, a point well made by the New Zealand author Kate Camp in a recent book. In discussing the Old Testament, Camp writes, "... it is this very inconsistency that gives the Old Testament its strength and durability ... Instead of finding strength in its unmovable, monumental certainty, it finds it in its fluidity and flexibility. It can absorb any shock, any change, any challenge: the text is earthquake-proofed by its own elasticity."⁽¹⁾

In technical terms the Bible has built into it a kind of self-correcting mechanism which helps us to avoid going down any one route (belief, doctrine, orthodoxy etc.) which its adherents claim is the "only way". Throughout her book Armstrong takes pains to show how down through the ages Jews and Christians "have tried to cultivate an intuitive approach to scripture." Today, she says, we are much more strident, talkative and opinionated and need to heed Augustine's call for charity when studying the scriptures.

Armstrong freely acknowledges that there are good things and bad things in the Bible. She deals with the topic of violence in the scriptures which raises problems for many people. Armstrong suggests that the time is ripe for Jews, Christians and Muslims to establish a counter-narrative, or 'canon within a canon'⁽²⁾, which will stress the more peaceful and benign aspects of their respective traditions. Those texts which are violent and problematic and which have been exploited by some of their followers would be clearly identified and the reasons for their inclusion in scripture explained.

In this book the Bible is presented as a rich and varied story of colour and design with no single message. The Jewish authors of the Bible revised the texts they had inherited and interpreted them freely to fit the circumstances of their times. It is crucial to note, says Armstrong, that reading the Bible literally is a modern development.



Karen Armstrong has written a scholarly but very readable book which is timely, balanced and wise. As she says, today the Bible and other scriptures have a bad name. They are charged with breeding violence, superstition and fanaticism and prevent people from thinking for themselves. Perhaps, like the original authors of the Bible, we need to be more free and playful in our approach to scripture, openly identifying what are the 'good and bad things' within its pages, as the idea of 'a canon within a canon' suggests. This would involve co-operation and understanding with the other monotheistic faiths to work out a common way of interpreting scripture and call for the exercise of tolerance, openness and charity in the process. It is worth a try.

Armstrong maintains that when people read the Bible with an open receptive ear they found it led them to an experience of transcendence. For Jews and Christians it is the Word of God. However, over the past 150 years or so there has been a biblical revolution which has greatly affected the mainline churches. It is freely acknowledged that they are under pressure if not in state of crisis. It is therefore vital that people be exposed to new thinking about the Bible as well as old, that they be helped to become biblically and theologically literate. This book would be a big step along the way.

Alan M Goss, Napier

(1) *Kates Klassics*, by Kate Camp. (Penguin Books)

(2) A term suggested by Michael Fishbane, Professor of Jewish Studies, Chicago.