

Is the Bible really as bad as critics make it out to be?

Earlier this year, *GQ* magazine [published an article listing 21 classic books you don't have to read](#), all the while suggesting other, more modern ones you should read instead. You might be surprised at the book which found its way to No. 12 on their list: The Bible. *GQ* says:

“The Holy Bible is rated very highly by all the people who supposedly live by it but who in actuality have not read it. Those who have read it know there are some good parts, but overall it is certainly not the finest thing that man has ever produced. It is repetitive, self-contradictory, sententious, foolish, and even at times ill-intentioned.”

The above paragraph says a lot about the way that our culture views our religion and our Scriptures. You might almost say that *GQ*'s commentary is a mirror for us on the way others see us, and I'd say that the reflection I see feels a little bit painful. Christians are people who *supposedly* live by the Bible but who have never actually read it.

I won't claim to be an expert on any denomination but my own, and here it would seem that the *GQ* editors' indictment of us has some merit. Catholics can be guilty of not taking the time to open up our Bibles to discover what's inside.

There are some outside the Church – whether they come from other Christian denominations, other religions, or non-believers – who recognize this and often challenge us accordingly. We might be asked if we know that the Bible says this or that. It might be a particular statement (usually from the Old Testament and taken out of context) which seems at best unreasonable or at the worst hateful and spiteful.

At times, it might be a claim which has no basis in Scripture whatsoever. Archbishop Fulton Sheen once said that: “There are not one hundred people in the United States who hate the Catholic Church, but there are millions who hate what they wrongly perceive the Catholic Church to be.” No matter the situation, we Catholics can find ourselves ill-prepared to face a discussion about our own beliefs and the words of our own book.

So we'll give points to the insights of the editors from *GQ* on this first statement. Many of us can be guilty of not reading the book for ourselves.

Their second insight is a fascinating one, though. Is the Bible really as bad as they make it out to be? I imagine that it is possible to read through Scripture and to find a book that is repetitive, contradicts itself, judges others, and might even be accused of being

foolish and ill-intentioned. But I'd say that someone who interprets it in this way is likely also guilty of not having read it or – at best – of having given it a very superficial reading.

The *GQ* editors comment that Scripture is repetitive. At first glance, it would seem that they are right. God is constantly trying to establish covenants with humanity while we struggle with our end of the bargain. So much like any healthy family relationship, the words "I'm sorry" and "I love you" are repeated over and over again.

This repetition has more to do with the fact that Scripture exists – the entire Catholic Christian religion exists – because we have a God who wants to be in relationship with us. But the beauty of this story is that God isn't trying to teach us everything in one shot.

He's accommodating our weakness and our stubbornness, and gently (throughout the Old Testament) building on prior lessons to set the stage for the coming of Jesus – and eventually for the implications of His passion, His death, and His resurrection. So yes, the Bible might be repetitive, but it's all about the relationship God is establishing and the lessons He is teaching.

Is the Bible self-contradictory? Again, a cursory look seems to imply that this is true. But if you understand what the Bible actually is – the word 'Bible' comes from a Latin term, *biblia*, which means 'books' or 'collection of books,' much like the French word for library (*bibliothèque*). The Bible is made up of 73 books written by many different authors (sometimes in the same book!) who wrote, in many cases, centuries apart from one another.

We call the process by which they wrote Biblical *inspiration*, meaning that God didn't dictate to them or impose some sort of divine knowledge they didn't previously know. Instead, He let them write with their own understanding of God, of themselves, and of the world around them. And, unsurprisingly, each writer's perspective is different. But these difficulties are meant to inspire us to dig deeper and to discover what it is that God is trying to say to us.

Is the Bible sententious (judgmental) and foolish? I'm going to have to say yes to both of these – but not in the way that they mean. God's love for us is foolish in the way that all love can be foolish: it inspires you to do things that don't make sense at first glance. That's just the way that love is.

And to say that the Bible is judgmental is not about God acting like some sort of warped Santa Claus, seeking out the moments we are naughty. Rather it's about God's design for our lives and our ability (or not) to live up to that design. The word we use to describe our shortcomings, sin, comes from an old Greek word which means 'to miss the mark.'

This leads to the final accusation: that the Bible is ill-intentioned. This, to me, is the clearest evidence that the editors at *GQ* haven't given the Bible a

proper reading. God's plan in writing a story with and for us, from Genesis to Revelation, has but one intention: to bring us into right relationship with Him. It's why God made us. It's why He has reached out to us throughout history. It's why He came and died for us. And it's why He established a Church which, in turn, assembled the very book which relates this love story to us.