

## HOW THESE COMMENTS ORIGINATED

Most of these provocative comments originated in 1980 as weekly columns which appeared under the title “Between the Bindings” in the Waukegan, Illinois, *News-Sun*.

For fifteen months regular readers swallowed a dose of more than they ever wanted to know or even cared to ask about the Bible.

Stories and poems, bits of trivia and little-known incidents, selected chapters and even entire books—all were treated at one time or another.

And all sections of the biblical literature were sampled: the Jewish scriptures, the apocryphal books, and the Christian documents.

By and large readers’ response was favorable. I think I appreciated most a remark by a local bank teller. “It’s religious,” she said, “but it doesn’t cram it down your throat.”

On the other hand, we ducked a few brickbats too. There was a lady out in California who got her copy of the *News-Sun* by mail. She wrote an angry letter to the editor. “He is insulting the Bible,” she insisted. “He is an atheist and if this is what my hometown paper wants, then cut my subscription off.”

Phew! That wasn’t quite the reaction we were shooting for. We were aiming at the sizeable majority of people who have a Bible on their living room shelf but who never get around to dusting it off.

There’s the crux of the matter: Thousands of people own Bible and all but venerate them. But poll after poll shows they are biblically illiterate.

Here’s the one book which has had more influence on history and civilization than any other single volume. Yet even well-educated college graduates have never had a chance to read it in any depth.

That’s a shame. Because the biblical literature is some of the most fascinating stuff ever written. So if these columns provoked a few folks into thumbing around in their Bibles, then we were satisfied.

So what’s the trouble? The stuff is hard to read and dry as a temperance union meeting? That’s right, of course. Some passages can bore you to tears. However, other sections will blow your mind.

Here are two suggestions. Both can help

make reading the Bible not only tolerable but even engrossing. The first has to do with your frame of mind: When you read the Bible treat it as ancient literature.

Of course the scriptures have unsurpassed religious value. They’re a topnotch guide for faith and morals; just ask any rabbi, priest or minister.

They’re also a dandy collection of historical documents. You can glean all kind of insights about the ancient Near East if you’re a history buff.

But if you go at the Bible as a religionist or historian, the book can become tedious. However, if you’re content to treat it as literature, the biblical documents can become much more interesting. That takes some of the pressure off. You can just sit back and enjoy.

The second suggestion is to read longer hunks. Not just a verse or two. You can do that number in devotional books. There what you get is a choice sentence from the Bible (usually called a “text”) and then a page of commentary.

But you wouldn’t treat any other writing that way. You wouldn’t thumb through Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*, or *Time* magazine, or even the *National Inquirer* and settle for one or two sentences plucked out of the middle of a paragraph.

On the contrary, you read whole articles at a crack, quickly, without wasting time over difficult points.

Try the same thing with the Bible. Instead of reading verse by verse, bite off a whole chapter or book. Read it with all deliberate speed and enjoy what you can.

You hit a boring passage? Skip on down until things improve. Stumble on a difficult verse? Let it go until you’re in the mood to check it more thoroughly.

If these last few paragraphs sound too much like a sermon, pardon me. “Your column cannot be denominationally biased,” insisted the editor when this venture began, “and we don’t want anything preachy.”

So what readers got were provocative insights intended to goad them into reading more of the biblical literature. Because there’s a lot of fascinating stuff between the bindings.

— Mark Wegener

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