



Eugene H. Peterson

TRANSLATOR OF THE MESSAGE

the invitation

A SIMPLE GUIDE TO THE BIBLE

How do you probe into the heart of complex biblical texts, catching their nuance and fire, without killing the mystery? How do you approach Revelation's fantastical imagery or Esther's social textures without droning on in laborious prose? How do you welcome readers into the wild world of Scripture with an electric clarity that resists both triviality and abstraction? I don't know, but this is precisely what Eugene has done. When people have asked for a rich yet simple introduction to the Bible's books, I've pointed to Eugene. This beautiful volume makes that task all the easier.

WINN COLLIER, director of the Eugene Peterson Center for Christian Imagination at Western Theological Seminary and author of *A Burning in My Bones: The Authorized Biography of Eugene H. Peterson*

The Message tells us, "The Word became flesh and blood, and moved into the neighborhood" (John 1:14). Here, Peterson serves once again as a trustworthy guide, introducing readers to the sections and books we encounter in the Bible. His pastoral insights help us better understand the arc of God's story and how much our Father truly loves us, so much so that "he gave his Son, his one and only Son" (John 3:16).

TRACI RHOADES, author of *Not All Who Wander (Spiritually) Are Lost*

Anyone who takes the Bible seriously should own at least one introduction to it. This collection of Peterson's pithy introductions to each section and individual book of the Bible deserves a place on your shelves: Keep it within arm's reach to consult any time you open the pages of the Book.

SEAN GLADDING, author of *The Story of God, the Story of Us* and *A View from the Margins: Stories for Holy Week*

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with Tyndale House Publishers



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The Invitation: A Simple Guide to the Bible

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How to Get the Most out of This Book

A Note from the Editors

IN 1993, the world of Bible publishing was revolutionized with the publication of *The Message: The New Testament in Contemporary Language*, followed in 2002 by the completion of the entire *Message Bible*. Here was a Bible that parted from any number of conventions in order to return the Bible reading experience to its oldest, purest form: the Word of God in the language of the people.

Not just anyone could be trusted with such an undertaking, but Eugene H. Peterson was up to the task. A scholar of biblical languages, a lifelong pastor, and a demonstrated master of wordcraft, he had earned the trust of people who cherished the Bible, and when his “Bible in Contemporary Language” was released, it was welcomed with critical acclaim and popular praise.

In the decades since, *The Message* has weathered the storms of a volatile publishing industry, the critiques of Bible purists, the vicissitudes of a fickle public. Its relevance

remains obvious; its resonance has only increased. In its original language, the Bible was world-weary, savvy, prophetic, and compassionate; now well into the twenty-first century, the world is itself more weary, more savvy, more desperate for compassion and prophetic challenge.

Often overlooked in people's engagement with *The Message* are the introductions Eugene wrote to each book of the Bible. Many very good Bibles take a minimalist, utilitarian approach to these introductions—just the facts, and often the facts presented in granular detail. But Eugene had a different vision.

In the pages that follow, you'll find introductions to Bible books that demonstrate a sense of urgency for the People of God to be rooted and established in the Word of God. These book-by-book reflections reveal the heart of the Word—a God seeking a people in a world born of love but struggling to survive, a world that “can hardly wait for what's coming next” (Romans 8:19).

These introductions are not to be studied so much as soaked in. You may take up *The Invitation* whenever you find yourself taking up a new book of the Bible, using this book to inform your reading of that book. Or you may read multiple entries in one sitting to give you a greater appreciation for the themes that overarch the sacred Scriptures, the crossing connections between books of the Bible. Or you may just find yourself with a few spare moments and want

to refresh your understanding of the Bible, or even refresh your soul's connection to God.

Included in each of these entries is a "Verse to Remember." You may choose to commit these verses to memory as a way of letting the Scriptures follow you through your day, or you may simply enjoy the intersection of what Eugene called two language worlds: "the world of the Bible and the world of Today." However you engage these readings, we hope you find yourself simmering in them, immersed in the world they invite you into, met there with compassion and prophetic challenge. If the Bible is anything, it is some combination of profoundly simple and simply profound, cutting through walls like a double-edged sword, satisfying our souls like a river of life.

Introduction to the Bible

BECAUSE THE BIBLE IS SO FAMOUS AND REVERED, many assume that we need experts to explain and interpret it for us—and, of course, there are some things that need to be explained. But the first men and women who listened to these words now written in our Bibles were ordinary, everyday, working-class people. One of the greatest of the early translators of the Bible into English, William Tyndale, said that he was translating so that the “boy that driveth the plough” would be able to read the Scriptures.

One well-educated African man, who later became one of the most influential Bible teachers in our history (Augustine), was greatly offended when he first read the Bible. Instead of a book cultivated and polished in the literary style he admired so much, he found it full of homespun, earthy stories of plain, unimportant people. He read it in a Latin translation full of slang and jargon. He took one look at what he considered the “unspiritual” quality of so many of

its characters and the everydayness of Jesus, and he contemptuously abandoned it. It was years before he realized that God had not taken the form of a sophisticated intellectual to teach us about highbrow heavenly culture so we could appreciate the finer things of God. When he saw that God entered our lives as a Jewish servant in order to save us from our sins, he started reading the book gratefully and believingly.

Some are also surprised that Bible reading does not introduce us to a “nicer” world. This biblical world is decidedly not an ideal world, the kind we see advertised in travel posters. Suffering and injustice and ugliness are not purged from the world in which God works and loves and saves. Nothing is glossed over. God works patiently and deeply, but often in hidden ways, in the mess of our humanity and history. Ours is not a neat and tidy world in which we are assured that we can get everything under our control. This takes considerable getting used to—there is mystery everywhere. The Bible does not give us a predictable cause-effect world in which we can plan our careers and secure our futures. It is not a dream world in which everything works out according to our adolescent expectations—there is pain and poverty and abuse at which we cry out in indignation, “You can’t let this happen!” For most of us it takes years and years and years to exchange our dream world for this real world of grace and mercy, sacrifice and love, freedom and joy—the God-saved world.

Yet another surprise is that the Bible does not flatter us. It is not trying to sell us anything that promises to make life easier. It doesn’t offer secrets to what we often think of

THE INVITATION

as prosperity or pleasure or high adventure. The reality that comes into focus as we read the Bible has to do with what God is doing in a saving love that includes us and everything we do. This is quite different from what our sin-stunted and culture-cluttered minds imagine. But our Bible reading does not give us access to a mail-order catalog of idols from which we can pick and choose to satisfy our fantasies. The Bible begins with God speaking creation and us into being. It continues with God entering into personalized and complex relationships with us, helping and blessing us, teaching and training us, correcting and disciplining us, loving and saving us. This is not an escape from reality but a plunge into more reality—a sacrificial but altogether better life all the way.

Eugene H Peterson



THE BOOKS OF MOSES

AN ENORMOUS AUTHORITY AND DIGNITY have, through the centuries, developed around the first five books of the Bible, commonly known as the Books of Moses. Over the course of many centuries, they have prompted a truly astonishing amount of reading and writing, study and prayer, teaching and preaching.

God is the primary concern of these books. That accounts for the authority and the dignity. But it is not only God; we also get included. That accounts for the widespread and intense human interest. We want to know what's going on. We want to know how we fit into things. We don't want to miss out.

The Books of Moses are made up mostly of stories and signposts. The stories show us God working with and speaking

to men and women in a rich variety of circumstances. God is presented to us not in ideas and arguments but in events and actions that involve each of us personally. The signposts provide immediate and practical directions to guide us into behavior that is appropriate to our humanity and honoring to God.

The simplicity of the storytelling and signposting in these books makes what is written here as accessible to children as to adults. But the simplicity (as in so many simple things) is also profound, inviting us into a lifetime of growing participation in God's saving ways with us.

The image of human growth suggests a reason for the powerful pull of these stories and signposts on so many millions of men, women, and children to live as God's people. We can sketch the five books as five stages of growth in which God creates first a cosmos and then a people for his glory.

Genesis is Conception. After establishing the basic elements by which he will do his work of creation and salvation and judgment in the midst of human sin and rebellion (chapters 1–11), God conceives a people. He will reveal himself to them—and through them, over time, to everyone on earth—as a God of salvation. God begins small, with one man: Abraham. The embryonic People of God grow in the womb. Gradually details and then more details become evident as the embryo takes shape: Sarah, Isaac, Rebekah, Jacob and Esau, Rachel, Joseph and his brothers. The pregnancy develops. Life is obviously developing in that womb, but there is also much that is not clear and visible. The

background history is vague, the surrounding nations and customs veiled in a kind of mist. But the presence of life, God-conceived life, is kicking and robust.

Exodus is Birth and Infancy. The gestation of the People of God lasts a long time, but finally the birth pangs start. Egyptian slavery gives the first intimations of the contractions to come. When Moses arrives on the scene to preside over the birth itself, ten fierce plagues on Egypt accompany the contractions that bring the travail to completion: At the Red Sea the waters break, the People of God tumble out of the womb onto dry ground, and their life as a free People of God begins. Moses leads them crawling and toddling to Sinai. They are fed. God reveals himself to them at the mountain. They begin to get a sense of their Parent. They learn the language of freedom and salvation—a word here, a word there, the Ten Words (Commandments) as a beginning, their basic vocabulary. The signposts begin to go up: Do this; don't do that. But the largest part of their infant life is God, the living God. As they explore the deep and wide world of God, worship becomes their dominant and most important activity. An enormous amount of attention is given to training them in worship, building the structures for worship, mastering the procedures. They are learning how to give their full attention in obedience and adoration to God.

Leviticus is Schooling. As infancy develops into childhood, formal schooling takes place. There's a lot to know; they need some structure and arrangement to keep things straight: reading, writing, arithmetic. But for the People

of God the basic curriculum has to do with God and their relationship with him. Leviticus is an almost totally audio-visual book, giving a picture and ritual in the sacrifices and feasts for the pivotal ways in which God's people keep alert and observant to the ways their relationship with God goes awry (sin) and the ways they are restored to forgiveness and innocence (salvation). Everyday life consists of endless and concrete detail, much of it having to do with our behavior before God and with one another, and so, of course, Leviticus necessarily consists also of endless detail.

Numbers is Adolescence. The years of adolescence are critical to understanding who we are. We are advanced enough physically to be able, for the most part, to take care of ourselves. We are developed enough mentally, with some obvious limitations, to think for ourselves. We discover that we are not simply extensions of our parents and we are not just mirror images of our culture. But who are we? Numbers asks, *Who are we as the People of God?* The People of God in Numbers are new at these emerging independent operations of behaving and thinking and so inevitably make a lot of mistakes. Rebellion is one of the more conspicuous mistakes. They test out their unique identity by rejecting the continuities with parents and culture. It's the easiest and cheapest way to "be yourself," as we like to say. But it turns out that there isn't much to the "self" that is thus asserted. Maturity requires the integration, not the amputation, of what we have received through our conception and birth, our infancy and schooling. The People of God have an

extraordinarily long adolescence in the wilderness—about forty years of it.

Deuteronomy is Adulthood. The mature life is a complex operation. Growing up is a long process. And growing up in God takes the longest time. During their forty years spent in the wilderness, the People of God developed from their birth on the far shore of the Red Sea and were carried and led and nourished and protected under Moses to the place of God's revelation at Sinai—taught and trained, disciplined and blessed. Now they are ready to live as free and obedient men and women in the new land, the Promised Land. They are ready for adulthood, ready to be as grown up inwardly as they are outwardly. They are ready to live as a free people, formed by God, as a holy people, transformed by God. They still have a long way to go (as do we all), but all the conditions for maturity are there. The book of Deuteronomy gathers up that entire process of becoming the People of God and turns it into a sermon and a song and a blessing. The strongest and key word in Deuteronomy is *love*. Love is the most characteristic and comprehensive act of the human being. We are most ourselves when we love; we are most the People of God when we love. But love is not an abstract word defined out of a dictionary. In order to love maturely we have to live and absorb and enter into this world of salvation and freedom, find ourselves in the stories, become familiar with and follow the signposts, learn the life of worship, and realize our unique identity as the People of God who love.

The Books of Moses are foundational to the sixty-one books that follow in our Bibles. A foundation, though, is not a complete building but rather the anticipation of one. An elaborate moral infrastructure is provided here for what is yet to come. Each book that follows, in one way or another, picks up and develops some aspect of the messianic salvation involved in becoming the People of God, but it is always on this foundation. This foundation of stories and signposts has proven over and over to be solid and enduring.

GENESIS

God First and Last

FIRST, GOD. God is the subject of life. God is foundational for living. If we don't have a sense of the primacy of God, we will never get it right, get life right, get *our* lives right. Not God at the margins; not God as an option; not God on the weekends. God at center and circumference; God first and last; God, God, God.

Genesis gets us off on the right foot. "First this: God" (Genesis 1:1). Genesis pulls us into a sense of reality that is God-shaped and God-filled. It gives us a vocabulary for speaking accurately and comprehensively about our lives—where we come from and where we are going, what we think and what we do, the people we live with and how to get along with them, the troubles we find ourselves in and the blessings that keep arriving.

Genesis uses words to make a foundation that is solid and true. Everything we think and do and feel is material in

a building operation in which we are engaged all our lives long. There is immense significance in everything that we do. Our speech and our actions and our prayers are all, every detail of them, involved in this vast building operation comprehensively known as the kingdom of God. But we don't build the foundation. The foundation is given. The foundation is firmly in place.

Jesus concluded his most famous teaching by telling us that there are two ways to go about our lives—we can build on sand or we can build on rock. No matter how wonderfully we build, if we build on sand it will all fall to pieces like a house of cards. We build on what is already there, on the rock. Genesis is a verbal witness to that rock: God's creative acts, God's intervening and gracious judgments, God's call to a life of faith, God's making a covenant with us.

God spoke: "Let us make human beings in our image,
 make them
 reflecting our nature
 So they can be responsible for the fish in the sea,
 the birds in the air, the cattle,
 And, yes, Earth itself,
 and every animal that moves on the face of Earth."
 God created human beings;
 he created them godlike,
 Reflecting God's nature.
 He created them male and female.
 God blessed them:
 "Prosper! Reproduce! Fill Earth! Take charge!

Be responsible for fish in the sea and birds in the air,
for every living thing that moves on the face
of Earth.”

GENESIS 1:26-28

But Genesis presents none of this to us as an abstract, bloodless truth or principle. We are given a succession of stories with named people—people who loved and quarreled, believed and doubted, had children and married, experienced sin and grace. If we pay attention, we find that we ourselves are living variations on these very stories: Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel, Noah and his sons, Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah, Jacob and Rachel, Joseph and his brothers. The stories show clearly that we are never outsiders or spectators to anything in Heaven and Earth. God doesn't work impersonally from space; he works with us where we are, as he finds us. No matter what we do, whether good or bad, we continue to be part of everything that God is doing. Nobody can drop out; there's no place to drop out to. So we may as well get started and take our place in the story—at the beginning.

A Verse to Remember

God looked over everything he had made;
it was so good, so very good!

GENESIS 1:31

The Making of *The Message*

IF THERE IS ANYTHING DISTINCTIVE about *The Message*, perhaps it is because the text is shaped by the hand of a working pastor. For most of my adult life I have been given a primary responsibility for getting the message of the Bible into the lives of the men and women with whom I have worked. I did it from pulpit and lectern, in home Bible studies and at mountain retreats, through conversations in hospitals and nursing homes, over coffee in kitchens and while strolling on an ocean beach. *The Message* grew from the soil of forty years of pastoral work.

As I worked at this task, this Word of God, which forms and transforms human lives, did form and transform human lives. Planted in the soil of my congregation and community the seed words of the Bible germinated and grew and matured. When it came time to do the work that is now *The Message*, I often felt that I was walking through an orchard

at harvest time, plucking fully formed apples and peaches and plums from laden branches. There's hardly a page in the Bible I did not see lived in some way or other by the men and women, saints and sinners, to whom I was pastor—and then verified in my nation and culture.

I didn't start out as a pastor. I began my vocational life as a teacher and for several years taught the biblical languages of Hebrew and Greek in a theological seminary. I expected to live the rest of my life as a professor and scholar, teaching and writing and studying. But then my life took a sudden vocational turn to pastoring in a congregation.

I was now plunged into quite a different world. The first noticeable difference was that nobody seemed to care much about the Bible, which so recently people had been paying me to teach them. Many of the people I worked with now knew virtually nothing about it, had never read it, and weren't interested in learning. Many others had spent years reading it but for them it had gone flat through familiarity, reduced to clichés. Bored, they dropped it. And there weren't many people in between. Very few were interested in what I considered my primary work, getting the words of the Bible into their heads and hearts, getting the message lived. They found newspapers and magazines, videos and pulp fiction more to their taste.

Meanwhile I had taken on as my life's work the responsibility of getting these very people to listen, really listen, to the message in this book. I knew I had my work cut out for me.

I lived in two language worlds, the world of the Bible

and the world of Today. I had always assumed they were the same world. But these people didn't see it that way. So out of necessity I became a "translator" (although I wouldn't have called it that then), daily standing on the border between two worlds, getting the language of the Bible that God uses to create and save us, heal and bless us, judge and rule over us, into the language of Today that we use to gossip and tell stories, give directions and do business, sing songs and talk to our children.

And all the time those old biblical languages, those powerful and vivid Hebrew and Greek originals, kept working their way underground in my speech, giving energy and sharpness to words and phrases, expanding the imagination of the people with whom I was working to hear the language of the Bible in the language of Today and the language of Today in the language of the Bible.

I did that for thirty years in one congregation. And then one day (it was April 30, 1990) I got a letter from an editor asking me to work on a new version of the Bible along the lines of what I had been doing as a pastor. I agreed. The next ten years was harvest time. *The Message* is the result.

The Message is a reading Bible. It is not intended to replace the excellent study Bibles that are available. My intent here (as it was earlier in my congregation and community) is simply to get people reading it who don't know that the Bible is readable at all, at least by them, and to get people who long ago lost interest in the Bible to read it again. But I haven't tried to make it easy—there is much in the Bible that is hard to understand. So at some point along

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the way, soon or late, it will be important to get a standard study Bible to facilitate further study. Meanwhile, read in order to live, praying as you read, “God, let it be with me just as you say.”

Eugene H Peterson