

He wrote a letter as follows: 'Claudius Lysias, to His Excellency, Governor Felix, Greetings.' Acts 23.25-6.

How many times have you heard me say, 'Read the Bible. It's the Word of God'? But you must have asked yourselves, 'Is the Bible *really* the Word of God? Isn't it just a lot of history? And, come to think about it, what about all the gory bits? Are they the Word of God?'

Sometimes in our URC magazine I read letters to the editor which describe certain passages of the Bible as 'unworthy'. Such writers seem to have no sense of how arrogant that sounds. They obviously have a very high opinion of themselves and their moral superiority, that they can judge what is 'unworthy'. 'Unworthy' of what? 'Unworthy' of *themselves*?

But what about those Bible passages of death and violence, especially in, say, the OT book of *Judges*? Perhaps the vilest episode in the whole Bible is to be found in *Judges* 19 when a Levite stays in the Israelite town of Gibeah. What unfolds is a dreadful story of rape, perversion, unspeakable violence and sheer hard-heartedness. The 'sin of Gibeah' is a truly shocking story. But it's in the Bible. So is it the 'Word of God'? Is, for instance, the Psalmist's call to take the Edomites' babies and dash them against the rocks *really* the 'Word of God'?

Am I expecting too much, then, when I ask you to read the Bible as God's Word? Don't they say that the Bible is the most violent book in the world? Shouldn't we just take it as rather dubious history and pick out the useful moral bits? I'd like to give some help on this very tricky question.

Just because the vile story of the sin of Gibeah is in

the Bible, it does not follow that God *approves* of it. In fact the clue to understanding all the endless cruelty and selfishness in *Judges* is to be found at the very end of the book. P266, *Judges* 21.25... 'everyone did as he saw fit'. All this evil is what happens when people disregard God's law and do as they each see fit. It's not so different today. Get rid of the rule book. Forget the 10 Commandments. You do just what you think is right. We can't agree what's right and wrong.

Now let's come back to p1120, to *Acts* 23.23ff where Paul is under military protection, about to be transferred to Caesarea. Here in v25 we have the letter from the Roman commander Claudius Lysias to the Governor, Felix, vv25ff...

This ordinary secular letter from Claudius Lysias to Felix is preserved in the Bible. But is it the Word of God? The Bible even records the words of the Devil when he tempted Jesus in the wilderness for 40 days and nights. But are those words of the devil the Word of God? Are the words of those mocking Jesus on the Cross the Word of God? Of course, they're not. So how, then, is the Bible the Word of God?

What is fundamental is the notion that God *speaks* to us. 'In the beginning was the Word and the Word was God'. We cannot work God out ourselves. We are too sinful, weak, limited. God has to reveal himself to us. He has to speak to us. That's a wonderful thought. I would not expect the Queen to speak to me and to tell me her thoughts, and yet, miraculously, the *King* of kings, shares his thoughts with us puny beings. Incredible!

He spoke to Abraham. To Moses he revealed his Law, the 10 Commandments, the way he wants us to live. To prophets like

Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel he gave his Word. When the prophets spoke to the people they said: 'Thus saith the Lord'. All that's in the Bible. So far, so good.

But what about those terribly violent stories like the sin of Gibeah? What about this letter of Claudius Lysias, and the words of the devil - all the 'unworthy bits'? The Bible isn't just a book of laws and good advice. It is actually a very long story. Once upon a time there was a Garden of Eden, where God meant us all to live in Paradise. But Adam and Eve thought they could do without God, and we've been making a mess of the world ever since. But the Bible has a happy ending, when there's a revelation of a 'new heaven and a new earth'. Eden is restored, and we're back in Paradise. Eden at one end, and the new heaven and new earth at the other remind me of the town of Dover where my school was. On one cliff was my school and on the other side of the town on the other cliff was the boys' borstal. (We never knew which was which!) Between the two cliffs was the not every appetising port town of Dover down in the hollow. The Bible story is about humanity starting high up on one cliff in Paradise, then descending into the grim town below, until God comes in Christ to rescue us and bring us back to the cliff at the other side. Most of the Bible is taken up with all that yukky stuff way down in the hollow. Do you ever watch *Eastenders*? Most of the Bible is basically *Eastenders*, and *Eastenders* is life without God. No-one's ever nice in *Eastenders*. They're always lying, cheating, and selfish. That's what humanity chose when we decided to do without God. God said, 'OK, you don't want me. I'm not going to

force myself on you. Let's see how you get on without me'.

And yet through this *Eastenders* existence God was still working for us. He never gave up on us. He always wanted to save us from ourselves and our delusions. He was always there, calling Abraham, and making of him a nation called Israel who would shine as a light to the rest of the world. God was silently working among us, as he came in the little baby of Bethlehem. The world had to reject Jesus. We had to murder him. Why? Because starting with Adam and Eve, humanity rejects God. But still God did not give up on us. We were not going to have the last word. God raised Jesus from the dead, giving us all hope of a new, better life. The same power by which he raised Jesus from death and hatred would bring about the new heaven and the new earth; that same resurrection power will bring us back to Eden, to Paradise which God originally planned for us.

So, yes, there's a lot of yuk, in the Bible. That's what happens when people won't live God's way. It's called sin. But through our sinfulness and evil shines God's character of love, grace, mercy and justice. You cannot take isolated *bits* of the Bible, like the letter of Claudius Lysias, or the sin of Gibeah and say, 'How is *that* the Word of God?' It is this whole *story* of the Bible which is God speaking to us. Page 1 to the end taken *together* is God's story of redemption, and in it we learn God's purpose for us and his gracious, loving character. And everything God ever wanted to say to us is summed up in one word - JESUS. So get into the Bible, and have confidence in it as God speaking to you. He is speaking to you of love, mercy, grace, peace and hope, all in Jesus, his very Word made flesh.