

**THE
INSECT
AND THE
BUFFALO**

how the story of the Bible changes everything

**THE INSECT AND THE BUFFALO:
HOW THE STORY OF THE BIBLE CHANGES EVERYTHING**

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Preface

In a world that adds millions of new titles to its libraries each year, every book that is written should offer some explanation for its existence. This book is no different. There are many brilliant books available that help people read the Bible. There are also many books that help readers learn to live faithfully to the Bible. The Bible itself remains the world's best selling book. No other book can be found in as many languages, bookshelves and motel rooms. Yet, despite its widespread availability, many people still find it difficult to read and understand the Bible.

This book attempts to address this disconnect by offering a short, simple introduction to the Bible that can be read over coffee. We do not claim to offer a comprehensive commentary on the Bible, a new theology, or a complete set of tools to read the Scriptures more accurately. Instead, we hope to offer lenses on the Bible, ways to approach it humbly, to respect its author and His authority.

And, we hope to show that the Bible actively reshapes its readers. It invites them to rethink and re-imagine the world around them. It helps them to know the astonishing good news about Jesus, to know the culture that they are a part of, and to translate their faith so that it transforms the lives and world around them. That is, to know the Gospel, to know the culture and to translate.

Andrew & Roshan



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THE INSECT AND THE BUFFALO

“

For what you see and hear depends a good deal on where you are standing: it also depends on what sort of person you are.

C. S. LEWIS, *THE MAGICIAN'S NEPHEW*

”

The BaMbuti people live in the dense, forested valleys of the north-eastern Congo in Africa. Their history is marked by geographical and cultural isolation, and their way of life, like their language, is deeply shaped by their forest home.

In the 1950s, a British anthropologist studying their culture and lifestyle formed a friendship with a BaMbuti tribesman called Kenge, who began to accompany him on his expeditions. Like most BaMbuti, Kenge had never before left the confines of the forest.

It was on one of these journeys that the anthropologist invited Kenge to accompany him onto the plains. As they drove out of the forest into grassland, Kenge was speechless. His language gave him no words to describe a land where you could see for miles around with no trees.

Pointing to a herd of buffalo, far in the distance, Kenge asked what kind of insects they were. Perplexed, the anthropologist explained that these were buffalo, a common sight to the BaMbuti, but that they appeared smaller because of the distance. Kenge's reaction left no doubt that he thought this was nonsense, but when they drove

closer, he saw that the anthropologist was right. Having never seen an object at a distance, he had no expectation that distance makes things look smaller. *What witchcraft had made such small buffalo grow larger as they approached?*

Insects and buffalo. Anthropologists and tribesmen. So much of what we know depends on how we view the world.

The word ‘Bible’ means ‘the book’ or ‘the books’. *The Insect and the Buffalo* is therefore a book about ‘the book’. It is a book about how the Bible presents a picture of reality that is intended to shape the way we view the world.

Like the BaMbuti and the anthropologist, we each have a set of assumptions about reality. We think we know how things are. We look at the world through the lens of our assumptions and we interpret what we see according to those assumptions.

Is this a world where nothing exists but matter and energy? Is this a world where history repeats itself in endless cycles? Is this a world where everything is divine? Is human life primarily about love, sex, pleasure, owning things, expressing yourself, doing good to others, reaching your potential, or encountering god or gods? Is there any meaning in the world? Is the problem with the world greed, ignorance, sexual repression, social inequality, bigotry or sin?

Are we looking at insects or buffalo?

Kenge’s misunderstanding was an issue of worldview, a uniquely human problem that also affected the anthropologist and affects every human being of every culture. We humans are strange creatures. Unlike animals, we are not born with an innate understanding of what life is about – we don’t seem to instinctively

know what best to do with ourselves. Seagulls, elephants, salmon and fruitflies don't have this problem – their lives are controlled by instincts and established patterns of behaviour that leave little room for life-crises or self-doubt.

But we have a deep need for meaning. It is not enough to see the buffalo, we have to know what they are. We have to fit them into our worldview, so that we can make sense of the world we experience.

Everybody has a worldview, and that worldview is complex and constantly open to revision by the world around us. Imagine Kenge back among the BaMbuti that evening, sitting around the campfire, trying to explain how his understanding of the world had changed. A story about a journey into a land with no trees, where buffalo can shrink to the size of insects, is a story that is profoundly challenging to the worldview of a forest-dwelling people who have never seen buffalo at a distance – it invites them to see the world differently to how they had before. Kenge's retelling echoes something that has occurred in human communities since time immemorial – the telling of a story that paints a picture of how the world is.

In storytelling, we humans embed our worldview assumptions in a form that can be communicated in order to affirm or challenge our assumptions and the assumptions of our communities.

In fact, all worldviews are embedded in stories.

Not stories in the sense of fables or myths (although these can be important), but the stories that people believe to be true and that tell us something about who we are and how we should live.

Our very identities are caught up in these stories. Stories of family holidays, national tragedies, and many other narratives that shape

who we are as people and communities.

Successful politicians who want to win elections don't talk to us about statistics, they tell us stories about solo mums struggling to make ends meet. Teachers who want to motivate students tell them stories about how education can lead to the good life. These stories get in under our radar and sell us a picture of reality in ways that abstract numbers cannot. Likewise, we each have our personal stories that make us smile, laugh, cringe, cry, stand tall with pride, or hide with embarrassment. Stories from which we draw our identity and through which we find meaning in life.

It is from the beautifully complex way that this tapestry of stories comes together in cultures and in the lives of people that we get our worldviews. Smaller stories piecing together into large, overarching narratives.

In other words, to say that *everybody has a worldview*, is to say that *everybody lives out of a big story of the world*.

The Bible is this kind of story. It is an overarching, complex narrative, made up of smaller narratives, that claims to be the story of global human history. It is a collection of books, written over a period of some 1600 years by more than 40 different authors in three languages. It contains narrative, official (and unofficial) history, poetry, songs, prayers, genealogies, legal statutes, international treaties, census data, personal correspondence and much more. Yet, despite this great diversity, the Bible tells a single overarching story from the first Creation in Genesis to the Revelation of a second (renewed) Creation. It is the story of a creator God, the rebellion and death of humanity, and God's mission to redeem the entire human world.

This story, and the person who is at the centre of it, should define our worldviews.

Near the end of his *Gospel* in the Bible, Luke tells us a story about two people walking along the road towards a town called Emmaus.

They were walking away from Jerusalem. But they were also walking away from the death of a story that had framed their worldview. Jesus, the man from Nazareth, whom they had followed for perhaps as long as three years, had been executed by a coalition of Roman military and Jewish religious leaders, and with him had died a story of how the world was. According to this narrative, God would send a Messiah, who would bring to an end the spiritual and political Exile of the people of God (Israel), by overthrowing the Roman Empire in the same way that Moses had overthrown the Egyptians at the Exodus. He would establish a Kingdom under God, in the same way that David and Solomon had established the Temple in Jerusalem, finally fulfilling God's promises to Abraham.

It was a big story. And their hopes that Jesus might be this Messiah had unravelled on a cross.

Imagine then their surprise at being joined on the road by another man who put the same events into a different story. In this narrative, the Messiah had to die, because God was doing something far bigger than restoring the political independence and religious devotion of Israel. This second story was about God redeeming the whole of humanity by undoing Adam's rebellion in Eden and even death itself.

This retelling of the familiar events of the story of Israel, now fulfilled in the person of the resurrected Jesus, transformed their worldview. The same historical landmarks were there: Adam and

Eve in Eden, Abraham about to sacrifice Isaac, Moses and the Exodus, David and the Kingship, and the Exile to Babylon. But now they took on new meaning: they became part of a story about Jesus.

This book is a humble suggestion that like Kenge, our view of the world needs to change. The way for this change to occur is for the way that we read the Bible to change, because the story of the Bible is a story that changes everything.

