

Nick Van Langendonck

DOING GOOD WORKS

The bible for ordinary
people building
extraordinary companies

Unbossers

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the 1990s, the number of people in the UK who are employed in the public sector has increased from 10.5 million to 12.5 million, and the number of people in the public sector who are employed in health care has increased from 1.5 million to 2.5 million (Department of Health 2000).

There are a number of reasons for this increase in the number of people employed in the public sector. One reason is that the public sector has become a more important part of the economy. Another reason is that the public sector has become a more attractive place to work. A third reason is that the public sector has become a more important part of society.

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The thing that hath been, it is that which shall be; and that which is done is that which shall be done: and there is no new thing under the sun. Is there any thing whereof it may be said, See, this is new? it hath been already of old time, which was before us. There is no remembrance of former things; neither shall there be any remembrance of things that are to come with those that shall come after.

Ecclesiastes 1:9-11 (c. 250 BC)

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Foreword

Klaas Ariaans, Former Director Consumer Clients at ABM Amro

Klaas worked in finance for 30+ years and in 2017 decided to do things completely differently. No longer an organisation based on hierarchy, distance and control but on entrepreneurship, ownership, trust and autonomy for all. The result was a major radical transformation within a corporate and highly regulated environment. Within his consumer clients division of 3,500 people, he reduced the number of managers by 95 per cent in one day! Customer satisfaction rose while costs fell by almost 30 per cent.

What does it actually mean to do the right thing? Is it being honest, helping others, or taking responsibility? Great thinkers such as Aristotle, Thomas Aquinas and Jean-Paul Sartre have written about this. The Bible also features the theme frequently. While thinking about this, I was standing in front of a world-famous painting: The Last Supper. Not Da Vinci's famous primordial version, but the (also beautiful) version by Vázquez in Seville.

It is beautifully painted and captures the moment when Jesus reveals that one of his apostles will betray him. The faces of the disciples show disbelief, reinforced by their hand gestures. Judas is already sitting with the pieces of silver in his hand, the reward for his betrayal. As I looked at the painting, two thoughts wandered through my mind. The first: when man is inspired, he is capable of truly wonderful things. The second: the impact of this Supper scene was immense; it marked the beginning of a huge change in the Roman Empire.

After the Last Supper, Jesus delivered a clear directive to his followers: spread the word of God. Read: proclaim radical generosity as a common thread for a good life. Despite their doubts and flaws, as with Peter who would later that same evening deny knowing Jesus, these people brought about incredible change. They carried out their mission with heart and soul, often at the risk of their own lives.

This task was so clear that all efforts and actions were exactly in line with the goal. This brings me back to my first thought: human beings are capable of wonderful things. More importantly still: every human being has the capacity to mean something, not just in

great deeds, but in thousands of small actions. This ties in with the book you are reading now, full of inspiring examples that have particular tangents to Biblical stories, as Nick shows in the book.

I have personally experienced the power released when people are given the freedom to do ‘great’ things independently, in an environment where honesty, helpfulness, respect and responsibility are key. This mix, based on genuine trust and a clear vision, is in my view the key to success. A vision—one that people recognise, are inspired by and that calls for action—becomes even more powerful when people can contribute to realising that vision, not only in the beginning, but also throughout the process when creativity, empathy and inventiveness are crucial.

Wouldn’t it be great if we all chose to do the right thing, by experimenting, showing guts, being vulnerable and helping others? Over the past seven years as director of personal banking at ABM Amro, I have seen and experienced that everyone is capable of ‘great’ things, and that even the toughest challenges become achievable when thousands of people take small steps outside their comfort zone.

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Enjoy this impressive book and be inspired by its many examples. And remember, the Bible says: Examine everything and preserve the good. Starting today, let’s all do small ‘great’ things to make the world a little better.

Klaas Ariaans

the 1990s, the number of people in the UK who are employed in the public sector has increased from 10.5 million to 12.5 million (12% of the population).

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Prologue

In spring 2022, my innovation agency, which once had 15 employees and regularly appeared in the media due to its achievements, was on the brink of financial ruin. This was partly due to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, but also due to a succession of decisions I had made with my heart in previous years, like for example, discontinuing collaboration with customers, partners and employees because their values no longer aligned with mine, or because their practices no longer contributed to the company's mission. These decisions, although extremely painful and often very drastic, were necessary in my search for myself as a person and entrepreneur.

All this followed a year when it became clear that my wife and I would never have children. That realisation led us to share our love, each in our own way, with the world. I especially wanted to do this in an area where the need for a little love is great and where my talents could be most useful: the corporate world. With my back against the wall, I reflected on my first 10 years as an entrepreneur. I had successfully co-founded several companies, still in existence today. I had also worked extremely hard on start-ups that did not make it. I had been closely involved in the creation and growth of two successful private equity incubators, and I had advised numerous international and local companies in leadership, strategy and culture.

However, none of these projects fulfilled the deep-rooted vision I have carried with me since my first work experience as a gnawing feeling, always present in the background, but which I could never really put into words properly. Nevertheless, for 10 years I tried to follow that misunderstood heart of mine. This greatly enriched me as a person and positively influenced the lives of many professionals. Financially, however, it was a succession of investments without much tangible return. Following your heart, as the credo goes, is easier than you think. It is the consequences of those choices that are sometimes hard to bear. I believe that those who really try to be true to themselves don't necessarily get what they want, but rather what he or she really needs to grow. I would turn 40 that year. I was hanging in the ropes personally and profes-

sionally. By a stroke of luck, stripped of all my misguided ambitions, humbled by my many mistakes, and inspired by 10 years of research for this book, I get to articulate the vision in my heart with greater clarity.

In modern business, there is a persistent fable that tough competition leads to the best results. The survival-of-the-fittest theory is so deeply ingrained in us that we see colleagues as competitors, the overachieving and all-knowing boss as the most successful and even accept immorality when it serves our self-interest. This fuels mistrust in the workplace, saps motivation and literally makes people sick. We have almost everything our hearts desire, and yet there is so much strife, absenteeism, burnout, depression. This view is at odds with what we need today in our global and technology-driven economy. To ensure our prosperity and well-being in today's turbulent world, we need each other more than ever. How do we reconnect with each other in business? How do we put humanity at the centre, not necessarily to achieve the best results, but simply because it is the right thing to do? How do we maximise everyone's individual responsibility in the service of social cohesion for an ultimate common goal? Are doing the right thing in the workplace and financial success truly at odds, or can they complement each other?

Ever since my first disappointing work experience at a large energy company, I have dreamed of a harmonious corporate world built on the cornerstone values of our Western society: service, humility and forgiveness. I feel a deep longing for companies where people can do their jobs with dignity and where the workplace is filled with clarity, meaningfulness and joy, free from jealousy and greed. In short: a workplace where we can be human among other people and for other people. But in reality, our working relationships are constantly disrupted by conflict and injustice. Everywhere I encounter injustice, corruption and disloyalty. Why does this keep happening?

I went looking for answers and discovered it in a place where I did not expect it at all. To overcome my own discomfort, after a personal and professional low, I travelled through Europe, India and the Middle East. Extraordinary encounters led to many new insights, but to my own surprise I found the ultimate wisdom in the oldest book in the world, carelessly forgotten at the bottom

of an old book bag belonging to my wife. Great was my surprise when, as a convinced atheist, after years of theological and psychological analysis of the biblical texts, I concluded that in business we do have lessons to draw from the stories of Jesus and his Old Testament predecessors. These stories capture the fundamental dynamics of our culture. I also came to the conclusion that with the secularisation of our Western society, we have thrown out the baby with the bathwater and lost something particularly precious: namely, our foundations of a moral and duty-conscious community striving for a just, service-oriented society. Our society needs a revival of Christian values. For although we realise that we are still within a Christian culture, we have lost the meaning of the biblical story and how it can give our existence a deeper, yet often forgotten, significance. Without giving us the origin, we wander around aimlessly. It is urgent that we review our interpersonal relationships and behaviour in the workplace, as well as our relationship with our work. Sustainable success, including for generations to come, can only be derived from acting for the greater good, and caring for each other must become our only sustainable strategy. Otherwise, one person's success will always come at the expense of another. We already have that model. It has taken us far, but there is also room for improvement.

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For years, I thought my people-driven view of the business world was unique and innovative. That's how arrogant I was. I searched the corner of innovation, corporate culture, change and people management for the right words to capture it and the tools to make it happen: Agile, purpose, start with why, servant leadership, corporate values, wellbeing, colourful personality tests, Humanocracy, self-management, Sociocracy 3.0 and so on. We have no shortage of management books, models and bullshit lingo. Today, however, I realise that this vision is not exclusive to me. It has been driving people to strive for a better world for thousands of years. I am simply a carrier of their work, and I am bringing it in our time to where I think it is most needed right now, where we have lost our passion and connection with each other the most: our businesses. This dream may seem like a foolish utopia, but it remains ineradicable. By giving it up, I fear I would lose my faith in the goodness of man and risk sinking into cynicism and nihilism.

Prologue

So I invested my last savings and went all-in on 1 October 2022 for essentially more charity in business. Unbossers is a learning network to reinvigorate our core values in the corporate world. We believe that a committed, company-wide community, united by a deep-rooted belief in service, sacrifice, humility and forgiveness in the workplace, has the power to transform both people and entire companies. Our mission is to help business leaders, employees, managers and students experience such an inspiring work ethic so that they can incorporate this positive energy into their own work lives. How do I engage the insights of more people in the strategic process? As a non-CEO, how do I initiate big changes? What does fairness and openness mean in the context of a pay policy? What does humanity mean in the context of a restructuring? Et cetera. We oversee the gap between the ideal organisation, steeped in welfare and prosperity, and our current often flawed reality. We encourage each other to repair and transform human relationships in the workplace. In short: we are an incubator for what our companies could be.

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I had the help of, among others, my unlikely wife, Sarah, my ever-supportive parents, my mess of unregulated friends, and untold numbers of professional friends, such as Charlotte Verhaeghe (CFO GroupS), Stephan Janssens (Interim Manager) Kris Debisschop (Entrepreneur), Christophe De Wit (Investor), Paul Van Oyen (Director), Thijs Claes (Entrepreneur), Klaas Ariaans (Director), Jana Wuyts (Writer) and so many others who have enriched me during my life, each in their own way. A piece of each of them is in the DNA of this network, and of this book. Blood, sweat and two years of tears later, people from about 40 companies are involved, including HP, Nespresso, Port of Antwerp-Bruges, Equans, Projective Group, Buurtzorg Nederland, Daddy Kate, Komma Board, Technopolis, SD Worx and many others. What gives me so much hope is that there are ordinary people working in all these organisations who at least want to try to build extraordinarily human companies. They are involved in different ways in our highly diverse groups and activities that work together across corporate boundaries, united by an ambitious moral code, on concrete challenges to strengthen their businesses. In 2023, the concept was awarded the Zero Distance Award by the internationally renowned management platform Thinkers50. A wel-

come recognition, but the road to business recovery is still long and steep.

So dive into the myths of the Bible with me and find out why doing good for others can be our only sustainable business strategy to create more well-being and prosperity.

How on earth do you get to the Bible?

This is the question most often asked when I tell friends and Acquaintances, after years of secret research and writing, that my book on our businesses is completely inspired by the Bible. In all honesty, I still don't fully understand myself how that came about. All my life, I considered myself a convinced atheist with negative feelings about organised religion—a resistance that many readers may share with me due to the presence of rampant child abuse in the church, the Spanish Inquisition and other problems stemming from organised religion. My upbringing was very liberal and far from the Bible. You couldn't find anyone less Catholic than me.

Despite this, I do believe that there is more between heaven and earth. In my mind, for example, I have been speaking to deceased relatives since childhood, and intense personal experiences with death have greatly deepened my perspective on life. I am also curious and have explored just about every path of personal development and spirituality out there, including all kinds of coaching, constellations, channelling, and psychedelic experiences. I have found that many services touting themselves for personal and business development are of questionable quality and often overpriced by so-called 'conscious' people who like to use semi-psychotherapeutic jargon to hold mirrors up to others but find it difficult to look in the mirror themselves. Many of them also tend to act morally superior, believing they know it all because they themselves once overcame trauma or had a successful business, but if you can't go along with their insights, then that is your shortcoming because you are not ready. They dazed me into a stupor of dependency while eating into my bank account. I was also that person myself for a while, and I consider myself lucky to have come to my senses.

The only exceptions are those who are able to be a true mirror for others, reflecting transparently and without judgement. Often, these people do so even without being fully aware of their talent and impact. She will deny it herself in no uncertain terms, but my wife is such an incredible person. She is my greatest success in this life. An angel with the power of light wrapped in the body of a beautiful, introverted girl. We dreamed of starting a family someday, but in 2021, we made the decision to stop our fertility treatments. Despite the initial sadness, this experience also brought enormous peace and joy in life. We joke that the human evolution in us has reached its end point. We now intensely enjoy life together. We love to travel and do so a lot. All these experiences are woven into this book, which I wrote for almost a decade.

During our travels, my wife and I enjoy visiting churches, despite my inherent resistance to the institution. We find them special and meaningful spaces—one of the few places where it is still quiet and people are together with a certain reverence and respect. Even without a deep understanding of their psychological and historical significance, these locations have always encouraged us to engage in deep contemplation and philosophical conversations. Such was the case when, in 2019, we visited a beautiful little church in Arezzo, where scenes from our favourite film *La vita è bella* were shot. Suddenly, I asked my wife to say the Lord's Prayer for once. She used to attend a strict Catholic school and knows by heart the prayers she had to recite there daily. She immediately recited it:

*Our Father which art in heaven,
Hallowed be thy name.
Thy kingdom come.
Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread.
And forgive us our debts,
as we forgive our debtors.
And lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from evil*

Suddenly, an epiphany of sorts overwhelmed me. It dawned on me that these words had not just appeared out of nowhere. They had been spoken and written down long ago by people like you and me. It also suddenly hit me that billions of people throughout history have found guidance and a sense of liberation from these words. Surely words that survive the centuries cannot be trivial? What is behind them? Throughout the rest of our holiday, my interest grew. I thought deeply about it and dissected in modern language what the Lord's Prayer meant to me. Can I have your attention for a moment?

Our Father which art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name.

Humility: Source of all life, infinite cosmos all around. The universe is so wondrous, being human is far beyond what I can comprehend.

Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven.

Acceptance: Life evolves, and it does so with a pure, loving intention. I can control a fraction of that, but I mostly have to accept what happens.

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Give us this day our daily bread.

Trust, gratitude and generosity: Our human life is created from and dependent upon all life. So let us be grateful for what we receive and share it with others.

And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors.

Forgiveness: No one is perfect; we all make mistakes. So we must forgive ourselves when we hurt others, just as we do our best to forgive those who have hurt us.

And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil

Letting go and devotions: Help us not give in to selfish, dark temptations, and *unboss* us from distrust and self-interest so that we can care for others.

When I shared this version of the Lord's Prayer with my wife, she was dumbfounded. She had repeated the prayer for years without really thinking about its meaning. But now, for the first time, the words touched her too. The look of wonder on her face lit a fire

in me. All my life, I had dismissed the wisdom from our Western tradition as old-fashioned and even evil. For years, I had listened longingly to all kinds of new ideas and exotic philosophies only to find them conforming to our exchanging disposable culture for the latest form of philosophy of life that came my way. Now I felt quite ready to dig down to the moral roots of our society.

Since that experience, I return to the Lord's Prayer daily. It grants me a sense of inner peace. It invites me to pause, acknowledge life's challenges and ponder how to move forward meaningfully.

Source of wisdom for the modern business world

As of today, I've read the Bible from cover to cover and have completed in-depth research. I immersed myself in these myths and studied countless theological, historical and psychological interpretations. I sometimes doubted I would ever surface again, that's how fascinating I found it. I talked to priests, rabbis and academics, Jews, Christians, Muslims and Hindus, and travelled through the ancient Middle East and all the way to India.

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To my surprise, I discovered an epic story running through the Old and New Testaments about a simple tribe of shepherds seeking a path to a more just society amidst dominating civilisations. Their courage, sacrifice and life lessons proved timeless. These texts were written and rewritten by real people over thousands of years. They address all the essential questions of life. They deal with vision, change, sacrifice, failure and success.

I am only now realising that the Bible is the most important book in our Western culture and has been all-important for how Western people—including the generations that have banished religion from everyday life—view the world. Thus, I fell off my chair when I discovered that all literary storylines in books, films and series, from *Lord of the Rings* to *The Lion King* to *Star Wars*, have their origins in these ancient texts. The insight that all the media and culture I am such a big fan of is deeply rooted in the stories of the Bible was a gigantic eye-opener for me. It no longer seemed fair to condemn an entire history based on the actions of a few. Therefore, I chose to be open and embrace the possibility of a uni-

fyng, positive force in these ancient texts. Exploring more deeply various perspectives on this historical Bible story brought more and more nuance to my convictions.

I also discovered a long list of timeless insights that are super relevant to our businesses today. I am genuinely surprised to find that Biblical characters such as Abraham, Moses, Ruth, Hannah, Mary and Jesus continue to inspire me so much. Despite this, I had no intention of writing a book about them, but during my exploration, something special happened: I began to understand the stories better and better, uncovering patterns, styles and metaphors. My insights, rooted in my adventures with companies undergoing transformation, became practical. What once seemed like pure fiction emerged as psychological wisdom for professionals at all levels. I used to think that our organisations needed innovative leadership styles, working methods and structures to tackle the challenges of the 21st century. However, as I write this, I believe the essential knowledge for meaning, impact and success has been around for thousands of years. The context is changing, but our human nature is still the same. When I began speaking about my Bible adventures, I noticed something special: I grabbed the attention of friends and colleagues in a way that was new to me. They suggested that I should write a book about it, and this book is for them. In addition, through this book, I invite professionals at all levels—business leaders, managers and employees—to put aside their management books for a while and pay attention to this cultural analysis. Whether the stories in the Bible are true or not, whether you believe in God or not, does not matter to this book. It will challenge you to think about our behaviour and interactions in the workplace. It will also remind you that we all have our flaws, as well as extraordinary potential for growth.

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Message of general interest to the reader

Finally, let me stress this: I am not writing this book as a moral expert, but out of genuine ignorance. I am not a Bible scholar or management professor; this is not a traditional book. Nor am I a traditional entrepreneur, but rather a passionate idealist and artist who always follows his

heart. So the words in this book do not come from mere professional success, but mostly from my resilience and humility after many experiments and failures during my adventures in the corporate world. While I am neither the next Steve Jobs nor the smartest scientist, my uncharted path of always trying to do the right thing in the workplace has proved insanely instructive. I am a philosopher as well as a doer, driven by love and beauty, but I am also sometimes stubborn and persistent. People say I'm a 'naive dreamer', 'too good for this world' and 'hard to work with'. I often feel lonely within the corporate world. My approach to the Bible is therefore open-minded and thirsty for practical, historical and psychological wisdom, not religious. Writing this book has transformed me like no other personal development or management book, and for those who open up to explore these ancient stories with me, I honestly expect just the same.

Introduction

The history of mankind hangs together from profound upheavals. Today, we are experiencing another such crucial phase, especially in the business world, where the old industrial management thinking is giving way to network organisations and artificial intelligence. To ensure our prosperity in today's turbulent world, we need a business revolution rarely described in our management literature, which is steeped in survival-of-the-fittest.

Our biggest paradigm shift yet

Allow me to delve into the history books. After a bloody civil war, Emperor Constantine the Great triumphantly ascended the throne of Rome on 29 October 312. The Battle of the Milvian Bridge in 312 AD is remembered because, according to tradition, Constantine was on the eve of this battle when he had a vision in which he saw a shining cross. This sign from heaven had great consequences, as it led to Constantine's conversion to Christianity. This turning point of faith was followed by the Edict of Milan in 313 AD, in which Constantine introduced religious freedom for all religions, including Christianity. His conversion and decision for religious tolerance were also prompted by political motives. Promoting one god instead of multiple gods facilitated the strengthening of unity among Roman subjects. It strengthened social cohesion and brought stability to the political situation.

They could not have known it then, but this Constantine moment was a cultural upheaval of world-historical significance. It marked the transition from Roman culture to a Christian one. It paved the way for a previously marginal Jewish, apocalyptic sect with a crucified criminal as its role model to write the most influential story in our Western history. Some historians even argue that the Roman Empire never actually collapsed but rather changed and morphed into the Catholic Empire, which largely integrated Roman institutions and infrastructure into its operations.

The biggest paradigm shift ever

Fast forward to 2,000 years later. In 2022, Zhang Ruimin, former CEO of the highly successful Chinese mega-organisation Haier Group, made an extraordinary statement at a leadership forum. He said that our era is not characterised by rapid and successive changes, as many experts claim, but that we are entering an entirely new era. He stressed that in this age of the ‘internet of things’, each individual consumer will have unique needs, and that our traditional industrial organisations and the 20th century role model of the dominant, all-decisive boss were not designed to meet them. According to him, a tabula rasa will have to happen. Our bureaucratic structures and acrimonious management styles will have to evolve into what he calls ‘flexible network organisations’ and ‘the leader as architect’. Zhang thus advocates a shift in leadership from dominance to service. The story of his company illustrates perfectly what he means. The once classic, multinational Haier Group abolished all traditional management functions and transformed its control-driven business structure and corporate monoculture into 4,000 loosely connected micro-enterprises; the results were incredible.

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For those who want to see it today, this plea from a seasoned business leader, with over 30 years of experience at the top of the corporate world, is another ‘Constantine moment’ in the evolution of humanity. The dominant and unequal industrial power structures of the 19th and 20th centuries are once again giving way to a phase of increasing decentralisation and social justice. Such social movements are always accompanied by great challenges. We are at a critical juncture, and the stakes are high. Ambiguity and ignorance reign in boardrooms, management teams, offices and factories. Kevin Nolan, CEO of General Electric, sums it up as follows: *‘The business world is undergoing rapid change with AI making traditional structures obsolete and escalating competition for this technology. The biggest challenge is not the technology itself, but changing entrenched habits and training methods in our companies. Managers no longer need to lead knowledge work; their value will lie in creating an environment in which AI is seamlessly integrated. Moreover, the labour market will become dominated more than ever by employees, the providers of talents and skills. Traditional recruitment methods no longer suffice; creative approaches and attractive corporate cultures have become essential.*

Another fact is that this same working population reports being exhausted. We have already had to endure so many changes, while much greater challenges lie ahead. Finally, customers and investors judge companies not only on their products, services and profitability, but also on sustainability, social responsibility and good governance, which affects a company's reputation, finances and market acceptance.

The question is how to overcome these challenges sustainably and maintain our resilience. Believe it or not, but on all these challenges, I found valuable insights in humanity's oldest and most important book that focuses on doing good for others as a guiding philosophy of life.

A buffet through time and space

The Bible is an intriguing book with strange stories, laced with contradictions and unique characters marked by many flaws. Understanding these words from another era took some getting used to. Initially, I behaved like an unworldly tourist in a Chinese city who is displeased because he can't find a chip shop anywhere. In other words, I read the stories with a 21st-century view. That is not the right way to approach the Bible. I had to empathise with the authors' world. It took me more than a year to break away from my cultural frame of reference and adapt to their way of life.

The word 'Bible' comes from the Greek *biblia: books*. It is a compact collection of 66 books in different literary styles. They were written and rewritten by many different authors between 1200 BC and 100 AD. It baffles me that these texts have matured and refined over more than a millennium, as I live in a time when attention spans often do not extend beyond two tweets. So the Bible is truly a buffet through time and space. By the way, it is still a mystery how all these stories eventually came together. So the theory that a conniving group of grey men with malicious intentions is behind the composition of the Bible is not true.

The stories are about the lives of nomads and peasants who lived in what is now the Middle East. War, sex, deception, hope, despair, love and hate—it is all covered in detail. There was also

no dispute then that higher powers were at play; rather, it was about which gods were the right ones, often leading to conflict. The victorious side claimed rule over the region, and they imposed their gods on the defeated population. New gods emerged from these clashes, and the Biblical stories are products of these millennial cultural clashes. The Bible is also a particularly violent library, mostly written by the victims of that violence. All these abstract life topics are difficult to articulate, but the Israelites' unique scripture prophets were literary geniuses who conveyed profound truths with metaphors, analogies and ancient customs. Even meanings in numbers, such as 1 for unity, 2 for division or 12 for perfection, enveloped their messages. Some stories, such as 'The Great Flood', go back tens of thousands of years via oral tradition. Unravelling their meanings was a steep learning curve.

The Old and New Testaments

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The New Testament was written in Greek. It begins, of course, with four gospels (read: biographies) about a certain Jesus of Nazareth. Then comes the Book of Acts, which documents the growth of the early Jesus movement far beyond Israel. The New Testament ends with letters written by the first leaders of the Jesus movement and addressed to communities worldwide. They serve

as a historical record and guide for practising a specific interpretation of Jesus' teachings.

As already mentioned, understanding the whole Bible requires understanding the historical and cultural context of its authors and characters. I have learned to approach each letter with great caution and humility, realising that my interpretation is influenced by my own biases and limited cultural understanding.

It is also a rich treasure trove of history and literary styles, from poetry to prophecy and wisdom literature. This diversity makes it dynamic and open to multiple interpretations. Newcomers often start with the New Testament, but I say: don't do that. It's like starting at the second book of *Lord of the Rings*. By skipping the Old Testament, you miss the deeply rooted core of the Bible story.

My book clarifies this essence by covering 16 carefully selected Bible books chronologically. Each section offers a smooth summary of the relevant Bible book, followed by my analysis of relevant aspects for our businesses. It ends each time with an appropriate practical example and a short diary with some suggestions for action to do the right thing. By doing so, I hope to prompt the reader to reflect and motivate them to take the first step. So don't expect a simple roadmap. Occasionally, I will inspire you, and at other times, I may antagonise you. Some pieces will go in like sweet cake, while others will be more like vegetables—possibly not so tasty, but good for your health—because my aim is to evoke various emotions and to challenge the reader with sharp angles and contradictions.

Part 1

The Bible and businesses

In this first part, I unravel the overarching story of the Bible, which runs like a thread through the 66 books. Surprisingly, this storyline also finds its reflection in the contemporary challenges of our businesses. In essence, each one revolves around the human search for meaning, impact and purpose amid turbulence and chaos. Here, I offer a lens to better understand each individual book in the Bible, gain psychological insight into the character of God and pinpoint the need for a similar concept for our businesses.

Bible book in a nutshell: The epic narrative in the Old and New Testaments

The Bible story begins with a heroic character called God. Out of the chaos, darkness and silence of the universe, He creates a beautiful, peaceful and benign garden full of life and abundance. In this cosmic temple atop a mountain, He places two creatures with free will—Adam, Hebrew for ‘man’, and Eve, meaning ‘life’. He regards them as partners to whom He delegates the care of this magnificent creation. Their task: to use their talents to create order and allow the beauty of the garden to continue to flourish, just as He has shown them. This grandiose plan completely derails. For in the garden, on the way to the tree of life, which symbolises the power of creation, stands the tree of good and evil. God forbids Adam and Eve to eat from it. This is the only commandment they must obey to maintain the harmony of the garden, but since Adam and Eve have free will, this leaves them in a moral dilemma: they can cooperate with this God who created them and adhere to His definition of right and wrong, or they can ignore their Creator and the ideal of a harmonious life, deciding for themselves what is right and thus gaining control of paradise themselves. Despite God’s warnings, the pair succumb to a mysterious, snake-like creature who whispers to them that they would be much better off playing God themselves anyway.

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The Fall

As soon as Adam and Eve eat the apple and thus acquire a sense of right and wrong, they are immediately overcome by a sense of mistrust, suspicion and self-protection. They are cast out of the harmonious Garden and end up in our earthly reality. From that point on, there is one question that runs throughout the Bible: is man capable of creating a life on earth that approaches the harmonious existence in the Garden of Eden? The story of Adam, Eve and their descendants is then marked by toxic relationships, power-seeking and, ultimately, a civilisation called Babylon, which promotes pride, greed, and anger. When the inhabitants build a tower that is supposed to reach to the sky, an attempt by man to be

like the gods again, the creator God sees only one way out to temper this darkness: stop the construction of the tower by scattering this corrupted population all over the earth.

Cooperation between God and man ends in failure

However, this does not mean that this God no longer wants to work with man to restore the world; it's quite the contrary. A new plan is on the horizon. The focus now shifts to two shepherds, Abraham and Sarah, who emerge as the chosen ones. God makes a deal with them: *'the covenant'*. He chooses them to become the building blocks of a new nation, populated by king-priests who care for the world, and through whom all other nations will experience faith, hope and love. Abraham and Sarah are dumbfounded. Their advanced age has completely dashed their hopes of having children. How can this elderly couple now produce a new generation? Nevertheless, God makes a covenant with them. He transfers the calling of Adam and Eve to them. It is now up to Abraham and Sarah to help order and beauty flourish in the world. Once again, a choice between good and evil is presented. If they and their tribe take the right path, humanity will tread a path of goodness and justice. From here, the Bible story follows this family.

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Roughly speaking, their journey is one big failure, with only a few bright spots here and there. Despite the unconditional support of this God, Abraham and his family succumb to misguided desires and deviate from the righteous course. For generations, they violate the covenant made to be a blessing to the world. Even honoured leaders like King David and King Solomon, who made Israel great with deep faith in this God and exceptional wisdom, repeatedly fall into the same moral trap. Prophet after prophet warns the Israelites of captivity and destruction if they do not honour the covenant with the Source of all life, and their prophecy comes true. The Babylonian exile rises as a central and traumatic turning point in the annals of this nation. Fortunately, this is not the end. Prophets also depict the coming of a new leader, a messiah who will take up the divine calling of man for care of this world and the role of king-priest. He will redeem the Israelites from their sins against the covenant with God. He will transform hearts and

minds so that humanity does make right and righteous choices this time. The Old Testament, also known as the First Testament, ends here, with a story that remains open, begging for the sequel.

The gospel

The New Testament fits this perfectly. It brings us into the presence of a certain Jesus of Nazareth, a descendant of the great King David. This Jewish teacher is far from ordinary. He claims to embody the prophetic predictions described in the Old Testament. As the long-awaited messiah and true king-priest, he will finally fulfil God's ancient covenant with Abraham. Like Adam, Eve and their progeny, Jesus also faces the seductive forces of pride, fear, greed and anger that so gripped humanity. But unlike all before him, he does manage to resist, always choosing the wise and righteous path. Where Old Testament stories suggest a distance between the creator God and humanity, Jesus proclaims that the Source of all life is now leading the world to restoration through him. The wall of separation between God and man has been removed. God has come among men in Jesus. Jesus uses his life to teach God's vision of good and evil, and that vision can be summed up in two words: radical generosity. In doing so, he shakes up the traditional image of kings, priests and kingdoms. He reveals that true power lies in service, temperance and love, and thus not in wealth, status or possession. True kings cherish the poor and even their enemies. Thus, the creator of the universe takes human form so that He can show humanity how to make right choices, thus righting the original wrong of Adam and Eve and living together harmoniously here on earth. Jesus is the living example. He shows how human beings can fulfil their divine vocation: the royal priesthood caring for this world. Ultimately, he sacrifices himself on the cross, a sacrifice to forgive all the sins of the Israelites since Adam, including the Jewish leaders who condemned him to death, and enable a new beginning. It is the ultimate act of generosity. Jesus even gives his own life for the restoration of the world. He rises three days later, a symbol of rebirth from darkness and the reward for all those who can resist the earthly temptations of anger, envy and pride. With this, humanity faces a new tree of good and evil, and thus a new moral choice: the cross of Jesus invites everyone to introspection. Do we cling to our selfish actions? Or do we follow his trail and strive for the wise, courageous and righteous, even at the cost of our own lives?

The early Jesus movement

After the life of Jesus, a remarkable movement, amid the gigantic Roman Empire, germinates—one that urges people to love, share and forgive. This Jesus movement is expanding rapidly, and new communities are flourishing. However, the path of life that Jesus pointed out is not an easy one. The communities encounter resistance from various quarters within Judaism and, of course, from the Romans themselves. In addition, the temptation of evil also seeps into their ranks. At that, the apostles, the first leaders of the Jesus movement, come to the rescue. They write epistles to support, encourage and remind the communities of the path Jesus walked. These epistles form an integral part of the last segment of the New Testament. The Bible concludes with the Book of Revelation. This bizarre book casts a visionary glimpse of a future day. It proclaims that the promise God made to Abraham will be fulfilled once enough individuals embrace the example of Jesus and selflessly sacrifice themselves for others. All injustice will be righted, evil will be eliminated and humanity will care for the world with love, justice and radical generosity, united as king-priests just as in... the Garden of Eden.

Chapter 1

Navigating the chaos of life

The Bible is a timeless story about people building corrupt and violent cities and the hope that there is a better alternative. The storylines always follow a fixed pattern of creation from chaos to order, from problem to solution, from potential to reality. That pattern is reflected in our businesses.

The Bible was written by the underdogs

Each story has a core of characters, settings and events. It usually begins with an individual in a familiar setting, where unexpected events introduce challenges that lead to a final test. The Bible always revolves around underdog characters living oppressed lives in chaotic cities. However, an inner voice, referred to by them as God, calls them to transform the darkness in their world into light, and the greedy chaos into righteous order. As they seek to realise this calling, the characters face various tests, sometimes packaged as opportunities for greatness and sometimes as temptations with consequences. Consider the creation story in which Adam and Eve are placed as caretakers in the Garden of Eden, with access to wisdom and abundance, but also to the tree of good and evil as a test of their loyalty and faith in collective harmony. The rebellious serpent who intervenes turns this test into a trap of pride, greed and envy. Thus, in these stories, people and communities are tested to see if they can stay true to their higher ideals. Important resources are taken away from them, and they are placed in crisis situations. Biblical characters like Abraham initially fail but later succeed in crucial tests of faith by overcoming their self-interest. Finally, all Bible stories build up to an ultimate challenge in which the characters wrestle with their own insecurities and fears. It is always at the seemingly most hopeless point when they completely surrender to their fate, that they embrace their calling to help the world and undergo a remarkable transformation as a result.