

The Bible: Literal or Not?

As Christians, God communicates to us primarily through prayer and the Bible. This includes the Hebrew scripture, known to Christians as the Old Testament, and the New Testament writings that appeared following Jesus' death and resurrection. All Christians believe that God inspired the Bible. Debate rages over what is meant by "inspired". Many believe the texts should be interpreted literally and that they represent the inerrant word of God for all ages and situations. Other Christians, including myself, believe that much of the Bible is written with rich symbolism and metaphorical language. We believe that the Bible records the reality of God in the experiences of the ancient Hebrew and early Christian communities. We do not believe that all of the Bible is historically accurate and believe the messages contained within it should be interpreted within the context of the time in which they were written. This may or may not reflect God's will in today's world, which includes circumstances not in existence during biblical times. In this perspective, the Bible is not a divine product, but rather a human product that provides us a lens through which we can examine the divine.

Proving biblical inerrancy and factuality is a waste of time and effort. The fact of the matter is that it just cannot be done. Right from the start we see two different creation stories. In the first, land emerges from water. In the second, water emerges from land. In the first, vegetation and animals precede man. In the second, man precedes vegetation and the animals. In the first, male and female are created simultaneously. In the second, the female is created subsequent to the male. What's going on here? These disparate accounts cannot be reconciled into one. The reality is that there are two accounts because they derive from two different faith traditions. The first creation story emerged from the "priestly" tradition. This tradition was interested in outlining an orderly, structured account of creation. The second story emerged out of the "Yahwist" tradition, the experiences of Hebrew tribes located in Judah who worshiped a very personal God, Yahweh. Their creation story is less focused on order, and more focused on humankind's relationship and response to Yahweh. Neither of these traditions were particularly interested in the "how" of creation. They were more interested in the "why". This seems to be lost on those people today who spend so much time debating evolution versus creationism versus intelligent design.

We see similar disparities in the writings of the New Testament. Both Matthew and Luke have birth narratives, but they are very different. Mark and John have no birth narrative. Paul, in his letters to the early Christian churches, contradicts many of the events recorded by Luke in the Book of Acts. New Testament authors even appear to disagree on when Jesus acquired his divinity. Matthew and Luke have this happening through divine conception. Mark appears to have Jesus receiving divinity at his baptism. In the first chapter of Romans, Paul seems to imply that Jesus acquired his divine status through the Holy Spirit at his resurrection. John gives us an image of an eternally divine Jesus, a Jesus present from the beginning. Who is correct? Or does it really matter? The fact is that each of these authors saw the divine within Jesus. Each was able to acquire revelation from God through the words and actions of Jesus. Multiple authors, from varied traditions, will always disclose unique insights based upon their own experience and will transmit it in different ways depending upon the needs of their particular faith community, at that particular time.

We must not confuse factuality with truth. The rich and colorful stories emerging from the Hebrew scripture have mythological components intermixed with historical narrative that is unverifiable by today's scholarly standards. This does not, however, diminish the enduring truths revealed by the stories and the impact they had on the heart and soul of the Hebrew nation. It does not diminish the lessons that we, as people of faith, can learn about how to respond to God's disclosure of himself. All Christians should agree that within scripture we find divine revelation, God's enduring truth. It is this truth that we decipher. As an example, let us take the story of Jonah. Some believe that a man was actually swallowed by a whale and three days later spit onto land. Many an atheist would point to this as absurd and use this as an example that the Bible is just a collection of fanciful stories. However, it is just as appropriate to interpret this as an allegory, a story filled with symbolism that is meant to reveal truth about God's intent for humankind. This story reveals that God has a plan for each and every one of us and that we cannot live life the way it was intended by ignoring God's will and choosing our own path. It is a story of God's mercy and forgiveness extending to all of humanity, even the most evil. In debating the historical accuracy of this story or the feasibility of a whale swallowing a human, we lose the profound message God is giving us, a message that is just as relevant today as it was when this story was written.

Another destructive practice is ransacking the Bible in order to find verses that appear to proscribe behaviors considered amoral. We need to use a little common sense here. Does it really make sense that laws given to the Israelites 3000 (Leviticus/Deuteronomy) years ago would reflect God's will for us today? Similarly, the instructions and guidance Paul gave to fledgling churches developing in the midst of pagan Asia Minor and Macedonia (modern day Turkey and Greece) may or may not reflect God's will for us who now live in entirely different circumstances. Does it not make more sense to focus on God's will as reflected in the central themes taught by Jesus? Jesus made it clear that God reaches out to all of humankind with a spirit of compassion. Whenever one picks and chooses verses from the Bible with the intent of excluding and judging others, he has surely done so outside the intent of Jesus. Jesus, if nothing else, was inclusive, loving, forgiving, and compassionate. Any interpretation of scripture that results in actions contrary to this spirit clearly should be avoided.