

CHAPTER 2: THE BIBLE

“Thy word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path.”
(Psalm 119:105)

What is the Bible? What is its proper use? What is its authority for us, and why? What does it mean to approach it faithfully?

To begin with the few statements that everyone would agree with: the Bible is a collection of dozens of books, written by a number of different authors over a period of more than a thousand years. This collection of books went through a long and sometimes complex process of selection (and in many cases, editing) before arriving at its present form. It contains a variety of material, including some of the traditions, history, customs, laws, stories, teachings, psalms, and prophets of a small Near Eastern people called the Hebrews or Jews. It also includes some early writings of the followers of Jesus of Nazareth. These include accounts of his ministry and teaching, reflections about who he was, and reflections about the proper beliefs and practices for his followers.

This collection of writings also serves as the foundation of the Christian religion.

Source of Our Religious Truths

This is our starting point: the Bible as source for our religious truths. This is not to say it is the only source, but Christians have always recognized the authority of the Bible for our religious beliefs and practices, even though we may not always act accordingly. We look to the Bible for insights about the nature of God, the nature of humans, the nature of our relationship to God and the world and each other, and the kind of life that is appropriate to these. We look to it for basic attitudes and values. These are all the proper concerns of religion.

But if we look to the Bible for religious truths such as these, that doesn't mean that we also look to it for authoritative answers in the realm of the physical sciences or medicine or astronomy or geography.

We don't look to it for answers in home repairs, or modern technology, or economic theory, or the laws of the State of New York. And while it can sometimes be helpful to people studying history or archeology or sociology with respect to a certain period in a small region of the Near East, it is hardly the place we would look for a summation of the current knowledge in these areas.

We claim that the Bible is the source of our *religious* beliefs. We do not need to claim that is authoritative in every branch of human knowledge.

But we also call it the "Word of God". What does this mean? Doesn't this mean the Bible must be perfect? Mustn't it then be error-free and infallible on the topics it does address?

By saying that the Bible is the Word of God, do we mean that God wrote these words down with quill and ink? Of course not. By "Word of God" we mean truths about God and from God that were grasped and recorded by the Biblical authors.

But some people mean something very different than this when they talk about the "Word of God". There are in fact several ways of delineating just what constitutes the Word of God, and why. All have a place in the tradition of the Church, and all can point to a basis in Scripture itself. But not all are adequate for dealing with the broad diversity of the Bible, and not all fit with our common sense. One traditional view that is very popular today, and that we must deal with before proceeding, is Biblical literalism or inerrancy.

Biblical Literalism (Inerrancy)

Biblical literalism maintains that the whole Bible is the Word of God because it is divinely inspired. Every writer of every book in the Bible was divinely inspired and guided in what he wrote, so every statement on every subject in the entire Bible is literally true, without error.

There are four serious problems with Biblical literalism: (1) it denies the centrality of Christ; (2) it requires a concept of divine inspiration that denies the authors' humanity; (3) it requires that we believe that the Bible doesn't mean what it says; and (4) it stands in opposition to faith in God. Certainly the Biblical literalists do not intend all of these. But this is where their misdirected devotion and their misguided efforts for security lead them.

1. Biblical Literalism vs. the Centrality of Christ

Biblical literalism denies the centrality of Jesus the Christ. If we are Christians, then surely this means that we believe that the life and teachings of Jesus the Christ give us the truest understanding of God, and that this understanding is the benchmark against which we measure other interpretations. But if everything in the Bible is divinely inspired truth

then it is all equally true. Statements in the Old Testament about God or about how to treat our neighbors are all just as true and authoritative as those in the Gospels.

To pick just one example, we must then be willing to say that God actually told Joshua to kill all the men, women and children in the cities of Jericho and Ai (Joshua 6–8). Is this the same God preached by Jesus, who commanded us to love our enemies? Even if you believe that God spoke to Joshua, how could a Christian believe that God would order wholesale slaughter? Don't we have to say, at the very least, that Joshua mis-heard, that he mistook the cultural custom of "holy war" for divine command? But the Biblical literalist cannot do this, and has to insist that the words of Joshua and Elijah, Ecclesiastes and Job, are as true as anything Jesus said, and therefore presumably just as important. This negates the centrality of Christ and removes the possibility of his being our benchmark.

Many people address this problem with the idea of "progressive revelation". This is the belief that we have in the Bible a revelation of God—by God—that grows progressively more complete. Thus the earliest books reflect the least complete and least accurate revelation of God, with a progression to a much more complete revelation in the great prophets, and culminating in the final and complete revelation in Jesus Christ.

It does seem that there is in general an advancement in the understanding of God as the Bible progresses. But this is not uniform; I would be hard put to pick Proverbs or Ecclesiastes over Isaiah. And even if there is generally an improved understanding of God, to say that this is because of a progressive divine revelation rather than because of our own increased understanding through the years is tantamount to saying that our earlier ignorance is God's fault for not revealing more sooner. It hardly seems necessary to blame human ignorance on a divine coyness, or to picture God rationing out carefully increased doses of self-revelation.

In any case, "progressive revelation" would also mean that the earlier understandings of God were inaccurate to some degree. This leaves us needing criteria by which to decide what in the Old Testament is really God's Word. While I think this is proper and necessary, it is hardly an option for the Biblical literalist, for whom all parts of the Bible are equally true.

2. Biblical Literalism vs. the Humanity of the Authors

Biblical literalism requires an understanding of divine inspiration that denies the humanity of the authors and defies common sense.

The people who wrote the different books of the Bible were human beings. They had prejudices, they shared most of the views of their particular place and time, and they made mistakes. Yet we are asked to believe that when they wrote about the capture of Ai or the life of Jesus

they suddenly ceased to be affected by these prejudices and presuppositions. How is it that a person who is just as human as you or I should suddenly become error-free when writing a book which later on was to be included in the Bible? (Remember, these books were not recognized as Scripture until some later date.)

The only way that this could happen would be if some infallible power took over these writers, suppressed their humanity, and used them as writing instruments just as you and I would use a pen. I cannot see how this idea of using people can fit with the Christian view of God. Neither does it fit with our common sense.

Furthermore, part of the great attractiveness of the Bible is precisely in the human diversity it shows. One need merely approach it with an open mind to see that its authors were no mere robots, but human beings endowed with their own particular insights, virtues, customs, faith, and—as with all people—their own misconceptions and misunderstandings. The value and wisdom and charm of the Bible lies in no small part in seeing its people and its authors struggling with their faith just as you and I do. To claim that what these people wrote is perfect as it stands is to remove them from this shared human struggle.

It is possible, of course, to understand divine inspiration in such a way that it does not make robots of us. But such an understanding cannot serve as a basis for Biblical inerrancy.

3. Biblical Literalism vs. the Bible

Biblical literalism requires that we believe that the Bible doesn't mean what it says. Not only is this not a faithful approach, but it also means that Biblical literalism denies the very literal truth of the Bible which it purports to defend.

Let us look at an example of this: The first (of many) contradictions in the Bible is right there at the beginning, in the first two chapters of Genesis. Genesis 1 tells us that people were created by God *after* all the plants and all the other animals. Genesis 2 tells us that Adam was created *before* all the plants and animals. What are we to do with this?

Personally, I am not troubled by this in the least. The time and place of the origin of the human species is not a religious question. It is not a question for which I look to the Bible for answers. Rather, it is a question for science, to be answered by paleo-anthropologists, if and when they are able to come up with enough information.

What we do with this difference in the two creation accounts is, first, acknowledge it, and second, explain that they are both there because each was a part of one of the two or three sacred traditions put together by an editor to make up the book of Genesis. Each was sacred tradition; neither could be discarded. Furthermore, each makes very important—and different—*religious* points. These are the aspects of the stories

which are authoritative for us. Chapter 1 tells us about the goodness of creation (the world is neither to be avoided nor worshipped) and our relationship to God. Chapter 2 tells us about our need for each other, about our stewardship of the earth, and that the knowledge of good and evil is what separates us from other animals and makes us human.

So the contradiction as to the order of creation in Genesis 1 and 2 does not affect the religious points at all. But the Biblical literalist cannot admit to this contradiction. He or she must insist that both the statement that people were created *after* all the plants and animals, and the statement that people were created *before* them, are true. This, of course, is manifestly impossible.

The Biblical literalist is, however, quite willing to admit that there are apparent contradictions in the Bible. In many cases the contradiction is indeed only apparent, and a closer study of context and meaning will show this to be the case. But in many other cases the contradiction is not so easily resolved. Undaunted, the literalist takes on the challenge of showing that opposites can agree. This is done by resorting to the "higher understanding" argument, which goes as follows: "If you think that these two passages disagree, then you don't really understand them. In our feeble human understanding they may *appear* to be contradictory. But in the true understanding, a 'higher understanding' than ours, which our limited minds may never attain, there is no contradiction within the Scriptures."

I readily admit that my own understanding is not perfect. Nevertheless, my limited comprehension is enough to know that "after" is the opposite of "before". To say that "after the plants" is not the opposite of "before the plants" is to say that "before" and "after" do not mean "before" and "after.". To say that the creation account in which humans were created last does *not* contradict the account in which Adam is created before the plants and animals, is to say that the Bible doesn't mean what it says. This, of course, is to deny that it is literally true. Thus, to defend their view, the "literalists" actually have to *deny* the Bible's literal truth!

Confronted with undeniable contradictions if we take the words of the Bible in their normal understanding, many advocates of Biblical literalism choose to defend the Bible's inerrancy by abandoning its literal meaning in this way. This is an abstract sort of inerrancy that maintains that the Bible is true, not that it means what it says, and it makes unrestrained use of the "higher understanding" argument. In the case of apparent contradictions and errors, we are assured that the true interpretation of these passages, this higher understanding, will eliminate these.

There are several problems with this. The first, as we have just noted, is that this involves denying the literal meaning of these passages. If two apparently contradictory passages are both true in the higher under-

standing, this means that at least one of them doesn't mean what it says, which means it is true (in the higher understanding) precisely because it is false (in the literal sense).

The second problem is that in many cases we have to admit that our limited minds cannot discover the higher understanding that resolves the contradictions. This means that we are defending the truth of the Bible at the cost of its having any meaning at all. But if we don't know what it means, how can it matter whether it is true? Do you know what "xbvlg" means? Does it then make any sense to be concerned about its truth? And is this not where we are if "before" is not the opposite of "after"?

The third problem is that this "higher understanding" gives people free rein to reinterpret the Bible to mean whatever they want, so long as they can argue that this is the true and higher understanding. This is precisely to use the Bible to fit our own notions, to twist it to justify our own preconceived ideas instead of being open to the message it brings. And it is yet another way that this defense of the Bible's "truth" is possible only by sacrificing the integrity of its meaning.

A number of people who lean towards literalism/inerrancy recognize that these problems exist. After all, how can one *defend* the Bible by insisting it doesn't mean what it says? Some of these people avoid this by postulating that the original version of every book was divinely inspired and was indeed literally true and without error. Any errors or contradictions are due to mistakes by the editors or scribes who transmitted this material.

However, every verse in the Bible went through multiple scribes, and in some cases editors, before even our oldest existing copies were made. Therefore we are left to decide about each passage in its present form just as if divine inspiration had not been claimed in the first place. This leaves us to wonder why someone would claim divine inspiration for an original "untainted" version which they admit no longer exists.

4. Biblical Literalism vs. Faith in God

In the final analysis Biblical literalism stands in opposition to faith in God and worship of God, for it replaces these with idolatry of the Bible.

The real reason that so many people insist on the divinely-inspired infallibility of the Bible is a very understandable and very human one: they are trying to fulfill their need for security. If you have a perfect book in your hand or at your bedside, it certainly must relieve some of the anxiety in dealing with this imperfect and often confusing world of ours. Some people add to this the comfort of having all the answers right there in this book, which saves them the acute discomfort of having to think for themselves or make their own moral decisions. Surely it is more secure to have God perfectly in a book than to have to seek God in the gray areas and uncertainties of the world! But is this not our age-old

desire to possess God, to capture God in some kind of man-made cage (or statue, or book) to guarantee our security?

The Biblical literalist will claim that he or she trusts God more than I do. In fact the opposite is true, for they are willing to trust God only if these millions of words written over a period of centuries from two to three thousand years ago are all literally true, whereas my faith in God does not depend on this.

Their argument goes like this: "The Bible is God's Word. If God is trustworthy, then God's Word must be free of error. The Bible then constitutes the only sure and perfect guide in a world of uncertainty and imperfection. On the other hand, if God's Word is not trustworthy, not only then is there no sure guide in this world, but also then God is not trustworthy, and so not deserving of our faith."

But what they are *really* saying is: "I claim that the Bible is God's Word, and I mean by this that the Bible is literally true and without error. And if I'm wrong, then I can't trust God."

Of course, this makes no sense at all. If *we* make a particular claim about the Bible, and we are wrong, this casts doubt on *our* knowledge, or *our* trustworthiness in this field. Our being wrong in no way affects the trustworthiness of God. But all too often we insist on believing what we want to about God, and treat any threat to our own set of beliefs as a challenge to God.

In fact, we often need to have our own beliefs challenged precisely in order to free our understanding of God from preconceived notions, in order to open our minds and hearts to the real greatness of God. So a challenge to *our* beliefs may in fact be very much in support of God, not an attack on God. This is a possibility which we must keep in mind if we are not to become intolerant, self-righteous, and closed to the possibility of growth in our understanding.

All the same, we can surely sympathize with the yearning that motivates the literalist, the yearning for security and a sure guide. Who among us has not felt this deep need for something eternal and unchanging to cling to? Who has not longed for the perfect and undoubtable answer?

This yearning is not easily satisfied, and misses its true goal if it settles on anything less than God. To settle on anything else is to fail. To attribute perfection or eternal verity to anything in this finite universe, much less anything made by humans or possessed by humans, is the height of foolishness. Furthermore, to claim this kind of perfection or infallibility for anything is to worship it, to claim divinity for it. And to worship *anything* besides the one God is idolatry. No matter how great our felt need for this kind of security, God is too great to be possessed by us.

To claim that the Bible is perfect and infallible is to substitute it for God, to engage in idolatry, and to close ourselves off from real faith in

God. Our call is to seek God, using the Bible as a guide. Our call is not to seek the Bible or worship the Bible. We must seek God on the open seas of everyday life, with all its uncertainties and confusion and gray areas, confident that the greatness of God is present in all life's situations.

The Faithful Alternative

What is the alternative to Biblical literalism as a way of approaching the Bible? One alternative, of course, is to go to the opposite extreme and reject the whole book outright as unworthy of our attention. For those who prefer black and white choices, who prefer not having to think things through and make decisions, it is certainly easier to either unquestioningly accept or reject the whole Bible. But the whole area of reasonable approach for thoughtful, searching people lies in between these two extremes.

In fact, the most faithful approach to the Bible is also in keeping with our common sense. It is most faithful and most honest and most likely to result in proper understanding to accept the Bible for what it is, rather than to claim it to be what we want.

What then is the Bible? A common sense answer would be that it is a collection of books written by people who, like we, were people of their times, and who like we were capable of misunderstandings and mistakes as well as great insights. And they were, like we, struggling with the meaning of their faith and with their understanding of God in the midst of triumph and defeat, happiness and despair, stability and chaos. We find that our own faith is informed and inspired by their struggles and faithfulness. And since one of our aims in approaching the rich and diverse resources of this book is to understand it better, then we will want to know how these writings came about, and what the authors originally meant, and how they were affected by the beliefs and events of their times. To do this we will welcome all the tools that are available to us to help shed light on the Bible: studies of archeology, ancient history and customs, and other Near Eastern religions, as well as the various types of Biblical "criticism" that can inform us about the background, development, and meaning of the text itself.

This still leaves unanswered the question of Biblical authority. For Christians the answer to this depends upon the role and the authority that we ascribe to Jesus of Nazareth. In fact the primary question is not about the authority of the Bible but about the authority of Jesus the Christ.

So the task is to develop an interpretation of Jesus' centrality that is in keeping with our common sense. Before we do this we must first consider how God does and doesn't act, and what this means for miracles

and other forms of divine intervention. We will then examine the traditional formulations of Jesus' centrality which are rooted in a different common sense. Only then can we attempt a reconstruction appropriate both to our faith and to our reason that will give us a way to explain Jesus' centrality. In the light of all this we can then return to consider the authority of the Bible as canon, but because of the somewhat more technical nature of this discussion it will be found in Appendix A.

At this point we turn to the question of a God who goes "zap"—does God intervene in the world on specific occasions?