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IS THE BIBLE ALWAYS RIGHT?

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DOES the Bible really mean what it says? Do we really have to believe all those peculiar stories we hear or read in the Bible? At the present time, such questions seem as acute as ever. Have we not heard, after all, that many scholars have rejected or dismissed much of the Bible? The results of new Biblical research, it seems to me, can be hard on our faith.

We seem faced with a dilemma like this: If the Bible really means what it says, then I should believe it, all of it. But then how can I accept all of the Bible when much seems contradictory or improbable? And if the Bible does not mean what it says, is it just a collection of edifying stories? Or are we free just to accept what I want to accept? Or—and this is more probable—do I just ignore the Bible altogether?

To shed some light on these problems, I would like to point certain difficulties in the text of Bible: contradictions, improbabilities, and then problems in the readings of the major feasts of this month: Transfiguration (August 6) and the Assumption (August 15). Finally, some of the principles and statements of the Church might help us out of the apparent dilemma mentioned above.

Confused Picture

What can we make out of the following apparently contradictory Biblical texts? First, among most mystifying, the Ascension Jesus into heaven. Only Luke and Acts mention the Ascension specifically. They locate the event near Bethany, by Jerusalem. Mark 16:19 is less clear, and Matthew and John placed our Lord's final appearances not in Jerusalem, but miles north in Galilee, and they do not speak of the Ascension at all. Neither does Paul mention it, except for one text: 1 Timothy 3:16, and this is probably a liturgical hymn quoted by Paul. The writers have presented us with a confused picture of the Ascension. Where did it happen? Under what circumstances?

Next, we have no less than three accounts of Paul's conversion. Each of these differs in detail. Luke tells us of Paul's experience in Acts 9, and we hear it from Paul himself in Acts 22 and 26. In Acts 9, the men with Paul heard the heavenly voice, but saw no one. Acts 22 tells us, however, that Paul's fellow travelers did not hear the voice, but saw the brilliant light! The final passage tells us nothing about the men at all. Which account is correct? Why do they differ?

The account of the meeting of Saul and David in the Old Testament is clear enough—depending on which version of the account you read. In 1 Samuel 16, Samuel, last of the judges of Israel, is sent by the Lord to find and anoint David as successor to Saul. The episode here could easily stand by itself, except that the succession of David to the throne is told at least once more, and under different circumstances. Chapter 16 does not tell us how or even whether David actually took over from Saul, especially since David was still just a young shepherd. Further on in the chapter, the author relates how David entered the service of King Saul as a skillful harpist, and eventually became Saul's armor bearer. Note verse 21: "Saul loved him greatly."

The famous Goliath incident is in chapter 17. The account here supposes that David was still unknown to Saul. The boy comes to visit his brothers, soldiers in Saul's army, and succeeds in killing the giant Goliath. 17:56: "The king said, 'Find out whose son the lad is.'" Then, verse 58, he asks David the same question: "Whose son are you, young man?" It seems odd that Saul would not recognize his own beloved armor bearer and minstrel, just mentioned in the previous chapter.
Diverse Sources

Contrary to what we might expect, then, the texts of both Old and New Testament often are not consistent or uniform. Surprisingly enough, this is true even in the de-tails of the life of Christ.

Scholars commonly hold today that these contradictory accounts reflect the process of writing the text. In some way or other—at present not clearly understood—the authors of the individual books incorporated materials from different sources: documents, stories repeated by word of mouth, liturgical elements, and the like. They also did not necessarily -share our modern concern for smoothness and consistency. Neither did the various authors share one another's principles of choice in their materials. Therefore the same incident told under different circumstances has different details, which often appear as contradictory. After all, do we tell a story exactly the same way each and every time?

Contradictions, therefore, should cause us no concern. They form a normal part of any writing. They did not bother the writers of the Bible; should they bother us?

Some stories are contradictory; others are just improbable. In other words, accounts which, by all human standards, appear difficult to accept. For example, we have a talking donkey in Numbers 22:28 ff., and singing stars in job 38:7! But a more serious example is Jonah and the whale. A close look at this rather improbable story has convinced modern scholars that the author does not intend to give a blow-by-blow account of what happened to a particular prophet. What he really wants is to give his readers a long and humorous parable. We can accept the fact that our Lord spoke in parables: stories he devised to impart particular lessons. Could we not accept Old Testament parables as well? The Good Samaritan, as an individual, never existed except in the mind of Jesus. Yet this does not make the parable any less valuable a lesson in practical charity. Jonah appears to be a lesson for postexilic Jews: Don't be so closed-minded, narrow, and nationalistic. God loves foreigners, so should you.

We practically never hear of the Book of Esther, since it is rarely used in our liturgy. Yet it, too, poses its own problems. Is it a history or not? The consensus of modern Biblical scholars is that, far from being a reliable historical account, the Book of Esther is better understood as a popular tale. It gives reasons for the beginning of Judaism's "secular" festival, Purim, and teaches lessons on prayer and in God.

A more famous Old Testament woman is Lot's wife (Gn 19:26) turned into a pillar of salt. We can understand this verse as a caution against being interested unduly in other people's business. But the author of Genesis uses it, we believe, to explain some oddly shaped boulders or columns of rock still to be seen near the Dead Sea.

What is more important for this discussion, however, is the purpose of such explanatory stories. By comparison with dozens of other texts in the Old Testament, scholars have become convinced that stories which end in a similar fashion are told specifically to explain the origin of something. For example, the origins of names of places or persons, the origin of customs or proverbs, or of some unusual natural phenomenon. Rather than being just a tag at the end of the story, these explanatory verses are often the reason for the story, and not vice versa.

These improbable stories, it now appears, were told just as stories. The Bible asked no questions about the historical accuracy or reality of the story. It was just a story, much like we would tell a story. We know that George Washington did not cut down the cherry tree; that Santa Claus does not come down chimneys; and that the good fairy does not spirit away baby teeth. Still we hold on to these stories just for themselves, because they have their own purpose apart from whether they are true or not.

Vision Literature

A special problem in believing what the Bible has to say comes in the vision literature of the
Bible. There are many examples both in Biblical and contemporary nonbiblical literature, but the two major examples are the Books of Daniel and the Apocalypse. The Feast of the Transfiguration has a reading from both Daniel 7, and the Assumption, from Apocalypse 11 and 12. Both of these selections raise serious questions: What do they mean? What should they mean for us?

Without belaboring the problem, we affirm first the importance of all Scripture. For the rest, however, this method of imparting revelation by elaborate visions, or by stories told in the literary dress of visions is simply not our style. We prefer more straight-from-the-shoulder accounts. To interpret this vision literature, we should just look for the main point, and not concentrate on the individual details. To a degree, it is like political rhetoric: The central meaning is important; the words often do not mean very much, since they are used mostly for effect.

After all of this discussion, however, people still ask me: Would it not be easier to say that the Bible means exactly what it says? Why resort to complex and subtle explanations? This, of course, is really the nub of the problem. If we approach the Bible simply from what it says, we do so with one major presupposition that we do not often recognize. That is, we feel in the back of our minds that the Bible is to be accepted literally, meaning exactly what it says, since it is the Word of God, and God "cannot deceive or be deceived." The point we miss is that human authors also had a hand in the composition of the Bible. We have to find out what they intended to say - not what we think they should have said.

Pope Pius XII, in 1943, in an encyclical on Scripture studies, the Pontifical Biblical Commission in 1964, and Vatican Council II all commended this approach to the obvious problems present in the Bible. What is at stake in any reading of the sacred text, therefore, is what the authors intended by what they wrote.

If they intended to tell explanatory stories, that was their right. If they explained God's Word in terms of visions, what can we say against it, except that we might have done it differently? To read the Bible correctly, we have to attempt to understand it on its own terms, and not on our peculiarly modern insistence upon historical accuracy. If the authors and editors of the text decided not to smooth out the inconsistencies, that too was their right as inspired authors. Our desire to harmonize away the difficulties is evidently not quite true to the spirit of the authors.

Back, then, to the original question: Does the Bible really mean what it says? We can confidently say: Yes, it does. The Bible, after all, does not set out deliberately to speak nonsense. But what appears to be contradictory or improbable can, when understood on its own terms, be read with understanding and spiritual profit. God intends to speak to us, and has chosen to do so through his own written Word. Our job is to find out as clearly and unequivocally as possible just what he intends to say.