

The Bible: What Is It?

Rector's Reflection #2 on *God's Human Future*

The first chapter of Dr. Galston's text, *God's Human Future: The Struggle to Define Theology Today*, is entitled, "What is the Bible?" Dr. Galston was wise to begin with an examination of the assumptions popularly made about the Bible contrasting those assumptions with the realities of the text. I suspect that the ways we think about the Bible are foundational to the ways we think about almost all other religious topics, especially the meaning of Christianity.

What is the Bible? Good question. It seems that one can answer this question emotionally, i.e., "by faith," or "I believe (feel) the Bible is....," or "The Bible means....to me personally." Another approach is to try to answer it rationally based upon credible research and debate among the men and women who have been academically trained in relevant fields of study. If you answer the question emotionally or based upon traditional beliefs passed from one generation to the next, you will likely get the answer rehearsed in most churches and pulpits. If you answer the question with an effort to be free of any demand for a particular outcome, you will get a very different answer.

I continue to be amazed by the way Americans talk and think about the Bible. A good image for this is the way we Episcopalians read the Gospel passage each Sunday. We sing an inspiring song praising the glory of God as a fully robed priest or deacon is led down the center isle by a crucifer flanked by torch-bearers. The text is elevated as the minister proceeds down the isle visually declaring the awesome specialness of the book. The reading is preceded by the minister declaring, "The Holy Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ according to [Matthew, Mark, Luke or John]." And the people respond, "Glory to you, Lord Christ!" The "Holy Gospel" passage is then read followed by more pomp and circumstance as the text is returned to the Table of the Lord. In other words, we have been trained to think of the Bible as something worthy of our adoration or worship while our liturgies and ways of talking about the Bible reinforce that idea every week in every way possible. And adoration is a form of emotional attachment that can easily preclude objective assessment and critical evaluation.

I guess that is why most people talk about the Bible as something supernatural without thinking too carefully about what that may mean and imply. After all, how can you evaluate something or someone with disinterest and discipline if you have already declared it/him/her supernaturally divine? Catholics and the Orthodox parade with it ceremonially while evangelical preachers hold it open above their heads while asserting loudly that, "This is the Word of God!" There is no doubt that the Bible has held a unique kind of authority in Western culture for centuries. There is no doubt that it is our primary text for studying the

teachings of Jesus. There is no doubt that it contains many passages and stories reflecting courage, hope, compassion, wisdom and forgiveness. And, it is equally true that the "Holy" Bible contains many stories reflecting values destructive to the human community: prejudice, magical thinking, rigid condemnation of others who worship differently, patriarchy, slavery, violence, intolerance and genocide, to name a few.

And please note; if someone is willing to think that the Bible is in some way the words and instructions of a supernatural deity simply because that is the tradition they received from their family and church or because they get a warm feeling when they read some parts of it, then that person cannot complain or speak in a skeptical manner when someone else, for their own personal and cultural reasons, begins to talk about their special literature as divine or supernatural in origin. It seems to me that if someone is willing to live by the mantra "The Bible says it; I believe it; that settles it" while remaining intentionally ignorant concerning the enormous complexities involved in discerning the human origins of each of the biblical texts and how to interpret them, then they must accept the view that declares the same thing about the Qur'an or the perspective which argues the moon is made of green cheese. If facts do not matter, all bets are off! "Faith" must never be confused with magical thinking or a failure to think critically about all of the relevant facts and information.

My agenda is to make a small contribution toward helping all of us to begin to examine and think about the history, nature and content of the Bible in its actuality. What is the Bible when examined without the emotional demand to make it into something we want or think we need it to be? Can it remain meaningful and helpful to us if we demand more intellectual honesty in our relationship with it? The answers to these questions are very complex and far beyond what I can deal with in these short articles, but I hope to offer just enough content to pique your curiosity and encourage you to do further reading and research.

Dr. Galston in Chapter One. ***"It is important to know all that we commonly do not know about the Bible [...] The first commonly unknown thing about the Bible is that it is not a book, but rather a collection of books. The Word 'Bible' is derived from the French word for library. It is a book of books."***

Depending upon which version of the Bible you choose (Protestant, Roman Catholic, Syriac, Coptic, etc.), the Bible is a collection of about 70 books, a small library. This library was probably developed and written between approximately 1000 B.C.E. and 100 C.E. When did a biblical text first appear? Encyclopedia Britannica notes, "The earliest record of the reading of a 'Torah book' (Torah = the first five books of the Hebrew Bible) is provided by the narrative describing

the reformation instituted by King Josiah of Judah in 622 B.C.E. following the fortuitous discovery of a 'book of the Torah' during the renovation of the Temple. The reading of the book (probably *Deuteronomy*), followed by a national covenant ceremony, is generally interpreted as having constituted a formal act of canonization." Of course, the material that came to be expressed in *Deuteronomy* may have circulated orally for many, many years before it was written down. And, it may have been written many decades prior to the rule of Josiah. There is no way to precisely know all of the sources and their dates of the earliest oral and written Hebrew stories and traditions.

Also note that stories are not written to be scripture at the time they are written down. The narratives contained in our Bibles were likely circulated orally for many years, perhaps decades or centuries, before they were finally written down. Many years or decades after that, the texts of the various narratives were collected, edited and woven together. And then, much later after that, they officially came to be seen as "scripture" by the religious communities who found them in some way beneficial and edifying.

In addition to the Bible being a library of letters and books, each of these books are usually a blend of multiple, earlier texts by multiple, earlier authors. Take, for example, *The Book of Genesis*. For centuries everyone assumed that Moses had written the first five books of the Hebrew scriptures including *Genesis*. That assumption no longer holds. Professor Christine Hayes of Yale University wrote in one of her lectures on the Old Testament, "And in 1878 we have the classic statement of biblical source theory published by Julius Wellhausen. He wrote a work called *The History of Israel*, and he presented what is known as the Documentary Hypothesis. [...] it's the hypothesis that the historical or narrative sections of the Bible — Genesis and stretching on really through 2 Kings — is comprised of four identifiable source documents [labeled J., E., D. and P.] that have been woven together in some way. And he argued that these documents date to different periods and reflect very different interests and concerns. These four prior documents, he says, were woven together by somebody or some group of somebodies to form the narrative core of the Bible. Wellhausen argued that these sources therefore do not tell us about the times or situations they purport to describe, so much as they tell us about the beliefs and practices of Israelites in the period in which they were composed." (<http://oyc.yale.edu/transcript/947/rlst-145>)

One of the best books you can buy to learn about how modern scholars have tried to track down the origins and authors of the Hebrew scriptures and the uncertainties and complexities which remain today is *Who Wrote the Bible?* by the Harvard trained scholar, Richard Elliott Friedman, Ph.D. Writing in 1987, Dr. Friedman notes that Wellhausen's ideas concerning the various ancient sources woven together

within the biblical texts, after almost a century of examination and critique, remain the benchmark within the scholarly community. "His contribution does not so much constitute a beginning as a culmination in that history. Much of what Wellhausen had to say was taken from those who preceded him, but Wellhausen's contribution was to bring all these components together, along with considerable research and argumentation of his own, into a clear, organized synthesis. This model of the combination of the source documents came to be known as the Documentary Hypothesis. It has dominated the field ever since. To this day, if you want to disagree, you disagree with Wellhausen. If you want to pose a new model, you compare its merits with those of Wellhausen's model." (p.26)

What is true of the Hebrew scriptures is true of the Christian ones. Most versions of the New Testament contain twenty-seven books. It's important to note that Jesus of Nazareth wrote none of them. As far as we know, Jesus never wrote anything. He was executed around 30 C.E. The letters of Paul are thought to have been written between 45 and 65 C.E. and have almost nothing to say about the historical Jesus and his teachings. The four Gospels were likely written between 70 and 100 C.E. as theological narratives about Jesus.

Drawing from multiple sources is also the technique used by the writers of the Christian Gospels, who, like the authors of the Hebrew scriptures, are unknown. W.F. Albright and C.S. Mann state the following in *The Anchor Bible: Matthew*, "It is now accepted by a great many NT (New Testament) scholars that Mark provided Matthew and Luke with a common source, to which they added their own special traditions, along with the tradition which they found (according to this theory) in another body of tradition ('Q' quote from the German *Quelle*, 'source'). [...] Under the four-document hypothesis, it has generally been assumed that Luke and Matthew both had independent access to the material found in the 'Q' tradition and wrote independently of each other." According to B.H. Streeter, the "Four-Source Hypothesis" posits that there were at least four sources to the Gospel of Matthew and the Gospel of Luke: the Gospel of Mark, and three lost sources: Q, M Source, and L Source. (see Streeter, Burnett H., 2008 [1924]. *The Four Gospels, a Study of Origins treating of the Manuscript Tradition, Sources, Authorship, & Dates*. pp. 223–270.) Wikipedia: "According to this view the first gospel [Mark] is a combination of the traditions of Jerusalem, Antioch, and Rome, while the third gospel represents Caesarea, Antioch, and Rome. The fact that the Antiochene and Roman sources were reproduced by both Evangelists Matthew and Luke was due to the importance of those Churches. Streeter thought there is no evidence that the other sources are less authentic." Alas....things are never as simple as they seem....more to come in a few weeks. Let me know what you think. :)