

## The Bible: What is It? Part II

### Reflection #3 on *God's Human Future*

My purpose with this reflection is to continue to have an honest conversation about the origins and nature of the Bible with my congregation and with anyone else willing to engage the topic. I am attempting to examine the Bible without the demand that we find it to be perfect, all-wise, all-knowing and/or the thoughts and words of a supernatural deity. In other words, I am trying to think about the Bible in the way academics think about it. I am using David Galston's book, *God's Human Future: The Struggle to Define Theology Today* as my guide in this enterprise.

***Galston: "To ask what the Bible says about sex is like asking what a library says about sex. [...] When a preacher holds a Bible in hand and proclaims that the 'Bible says' something definitive about salvation or family or sex, the preacher only demonstrates ignorance." p. 9***

Recall that, in my last reflection, I discussed the fact that the Bible is more like a library of books than a single book. It is a collection of books and letters and each of these may contain more than one strand of tradition and/or may have had more than one author. Each of these multiple authors likely lived in a different time and context and wrote with a different agenda. Now think about this taking place over an 1100 year period involving about 70 different documents. The result is a collection of ancient texts of such variety and ancient backgrounds as to present challenges to accurate interpretation that may be unsurmountable.

It is not hard, therefore, to imagine that the Bible might say many different and even contradictory things in relation to the same topic. Dr. Galston notes, as one example, that the Psalmist (69:24) calls for the cursing of one's enemies while the Apostle Paul centuries later encourages his congregations to bless those who curse you (Romans 12:14). Here are a few other examples from the Freedom from Religion Foundation (<https://ffrf.org/legacy/books/lfi/f/?t=contra>): (1) Exodus 20:13: "Thou shalt not kill" vs. Exodus 32:27: "Thus says the Lord God of Israel, 'Put every man his sword by his side, . . . and slay every man his brother, . . . companion, . . . neighbor,'" (2) Proverbs 12:22: "Lying lips are an abomination to the Lord" vs. II Thessalonians 2:11: "And for this cause God shall send them strong delusion, that they should believe a lie," (3) Leviticus 25:45-46: "Moreover of the children of the strangers that sojourn among you, of them will you buy, . . . and they will be your possession . . . they will be your bondmen [slaves] forever," vs. Isaiah 58:6: "Undo the heavy burdens . . . let the oppressed go free, . . . break every yoke" as well as Matthew 23:10: "Neither be called Masters: for one is your Master, even Christ." (Please Remember: Pro-slavery bible verses were cited by many churches in the South during the Civil War, and were used by some theologians in the Dutch Reformed Church to

justify apartheid in South Africa); and (4) John 14:27 "Peace I leave with you, my peace I give unto you" vs. Matthew 10:34 "Think not that I am come to send peace on earth: I came not to send peace, but a sword. For I am come to set a man at variance against his father, and the daughter against her mother, and the daughter in law against her mother in law. And a man's foes shall be they of his own household." There are many more, but you get the point.

Traditional Christian apologists (people who formulate arguments to defend traditional Christian ideas from criticism) see their task as explaining away all such contradictions. They are entrapped by their starting supernaturalist assumption: "even though the texts of the Bible may have involved over one hundred different authors writing over a span of 1100 years without knowing one another, there can be no contradictions or mistakes in any of the texts because it is supernatural in nature and content. God is the ultimate author of the whole Bible and God would have directed each writer to write what God wanted. God would not contradict God and God does not make mistakes. Therefore, even if two passages seem to directly contradict one another, there actually is no contradiction. There must be an explanation that humans cannot discern." This defensive rationalization is one possibility, I suppose. It seems to be the one that has dominated most of Christianity for much if not all of its history.

Another possibility is much simpler and much closer to common sense. Dr. Galston explains, "These contradictory sayings exist in the same assortment because they come from different writers, different situations, and different times." In other words, when we read the Bible we are reading stories written by people about the struggles, conflicts, virtues and frailties of people; people just like us. We are reading ancient literature. When we read a Bible story about Jesus or one of the other ancient prophets teaching people to show compassion, love and forgiveness for one another, we are reading about the spiritual wisdom of the authors and their communities who produced that teaching. And equally true is the principle that when we read a story in which God is comfortable with human slavery or in which God is ordering the slaughter of a particular community or nation, we are reading about the attitudes held by particular authors and their communities. Bible stories use God-talk or theological language to authorize and validate the human attitudes and perspectives of the human communities that created those stories.

But if the Bible is human literature and if each biblical passage or story is an expression of the attitudes and ideas of the ancient community in which it was formed, does it have any value for the modern reader and the Church? If the Bible is not a supernatural document; if the Bible was not written by writers under the control of a deity; if the Bible is not "The Word of God" as most churches and pulpits claim, why read and study it? Because it can be

useful in helping us to examine our own attitudes, face our own internal contradictions and urge us to choose love and compassion over power and greed. All good literature helps its readers toward greater self-awareness and thoughtful reflection upon the challenges and contradictions we all encounter in life. Courageous reflection upon good literature helps us to make better decisions.

Dr. Galston talks about it this way, “After we recognize that the Bible is a collection of diverse writings, does it still have authority? The answer is twofold: yes it does, and no it does not. The Bible has authority [...] because it is symbolic of the virtues of a particular cultural experience. In Western history, that symbol is quite powerful due to the historic authority the Christian church held in the European experience. With the rise of modernity, of nation-states, and of citizen rights, the authority of the Bible as a document representing human knowledge and divine power has passed away along with the centrality of Christianity.”

Perhaps we should pause for a moment and think about the various meanings of “authority.” According to Webster’s Dictionary, the word “authority” comes from the Latin term *auctoritat* or *auctoritas* meaning opinion, decision, or power. There are two modern definitions that have relevance to our current discussion. The first is authority as the power to command and control thought, opinion, or behavior. Think of a police officer or your boss at work. Both have authority to issue directives, to control your behavior, to limit your choices and to punish you if you disobey. This first kind of authority is hierarchical or organizational in nature. The police officer is given his authority by the laws of the community or state; the boss through his place on the company’s organizational chart.

A second kind of authority has nothing to do with the power to control and punish. This kind of authority is earned; it is freely given by those who have experienced the relevant qualities in the person given authority. Examples include a physician being given respect and authority in areas of medical and health decision-making because that physician has been found to actually possess the knowledge and skills which enable her to promote health and healing in others. Another example would be a wisdom teacher or spiritual leader. Her students and followers imbue their leader with authority in spiritual matters because they have experienced first-hand the wisdom and loving-kindness of her teachings, life, manner of relating to others and insights. Her walk and her talk match up well and consistently.

Which type of authority best describes your understanding of the authority of the Bible? If you were raised in a “conservative” or “orthodox” religious culture, you were likely taught that the authority of the Bible is much like the first kind of authority, an authority of command and control. You would have been taught that the Bible cannot be questioned or challenged; that you must do or think or

believe whatever it commands or implies even if it seems irrational or inhumane. And if you dared to suggest that the ancient text in question is mistaken, morally indefensible or no longer relevant in the modern world, you probably would have been shamed, in one way or another, into silence.

If you were fortunate enough to have been raised in a more open, intellectually curious and pluralistic culture, your experience of the authority of the Bible would likely have been much closer to the second type of authority. The Bible may have earned authority from your direct experience of it. It came to have authority because its stories and teachings actually helped you to better understand yourself and the world. It provided material with which you could stand in agreement and by which you were encouraged. It also provided material that offended your sense of moral decency and righteousness; material with which you felt compelled to disagree, to reject and to condemn. The Bible came to have the authority of good literature as it helped you to see more clearly both the light and the darkness within yourself and the world.

Take, for example, all of the bluster and pulpit pounding we hear from clergy who assert that “the Word of God” clearly defines the term “family” and “family values.” Dr. Galston notes, “Modern Christians who extol ‘biblical family values’ have probably never read the Bible. The Bible tells lots of stories about families, but exemplary moral families are hard to find in its pages.” He goes on to talk about how the family stories contained in the Bible are largely dysfunctional families. They are families that have engaged in one or more of a large variety of questionable moral practices such as polygamy, incest, lying, drunkenness and betrayal. Dr. Galston: “When the gospel writer of Matthew recounts the genealogy of Jesus, the writer deliberately mentions women of questionable background.” These include Tamar (had children with her father-in-law: Gen. 38), Ruth (violates the marriage laws of Deuteronomy 23), Bathsheba (had an affair with King David - II Samuel) and finally Mary, the mother of Jesus (his father was not Joseph). Dr. Galston: “Matthew’s idea is to prod the reader into recognizing that women of apparent dishonor, like Tamar or Ruth, and their children are no barrier to the work of God. It is actually terrific theology, but it is not based on ‘family values.’”

The power of the Bible as literature has not passed away. “It still represents, and perhaps always will because of its history and in spite of its content, the honor of truth, commitment, and integrity. Yet, the Bible should not, since it never really did, have authority in the matter of normative human behavior.” In other words, we should read it, debate it, agree with it and challenge it using all of our wits and all of our humanity. Worshipping it or treating it like it is something supernatural is to disrespect it by making it into something it is not. That’s what I think. What do you think? My next reflection is coming soon.