

# Three Belief Systems for Studying the Bible

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### Three Belief Systems for Studying the Bible

While there may be many thousands of denominations or sects within the Christian religion itself, there are at least three main philosophies by which to view the Bible. Each is different in how the Bible is viewed, primarily on the issue of God, and secondarily on the involvement of God in human affairs. Two views, those of fundamentalism and liberal Christianity, include a belief that both God and Jesus were divine, and both would appreciate the following quote by Carl Jung, "... it is not that 'God' is a myth, but that myth is the revelation of a divine life in man. It is not we who invent myth, rather it speaks to us as a word of God" (Davis 19). The third, secular humanism, is a view that does not include believe in divinity, whether noncorporeal (God) or corporeal (Jesus).

Fundamentalism is the belief that the Bible is not only divine, it is the actual word of God. Fundamentalists believe in Biblical inerrancy—that what is written in the Bible is literally true. If something written in the Bible seems illogical, it doesn't matter to fundamentalists since they believe that God can do what God wants, and what God wants is written in the Bible. A fundamentalist would believe that "the testimony conveyed (through the Bible) is the testimony of God.... (and) ... the Holy Scriptures are to be accepted as an authoritative, infallible revelation of His will" (White 8).

Liberal belief is slightly different in that instead of the Bible itself being divine, it is considered divinely inspired. Liberals still believe in God, but view the Bible as a vehicle through which great religious learning and inspiration can come. The Bible helps the liberal Christians enrich their own faith in God. But they don't believe that the Bible is true in all regards. For example, while a fundamentalist would believe the Genesis teaching that everything was created in seven days, the liberal or non-fundamentalist Christian would be willing to say

that the “seven-day” time frame is just a metaphor, and is reflective of the prudence of having a day of rest during the work week.

When considering what it means to be a liberal Christian, Cobb wrote, “Theologically it cannot exist as a watered-down form of conservative Christianity” (10). He meant that liberal views, like an effective sermon, should stand on their own. He actually believed that the Bible *requires* us to be liberal so that we can open our minds to the true message of God. A fundamentalist view would be a close-minded view that might therefore keep us from learning God’s truth. If we have an open, liberal mind, we can see beauty and goodness through God’s inspiration. One possible problem with having an open mind as a liberal Christian is that they may be open to all ideas, but committed to none of them (Cobb 13).

Secular humanism is the view that the Bible is not inspired by anything other than humans themselves. If there is inspiration at all, the secular humanist believes it is from the mysterious workings of the mind’s own inner world. Secular humanists don’t necessarily recoil at the idea of beauty and goodness in the Bible. On the contrary, they recognize that there are countless valuable lessons in the Bible. They view the Bible as a creation *of man for mankind*, and in that regard, the Bible is a valuable tool indeed.

Secular humanists uphold reason and logic, and reject supernatural explanations for mysteries. They also reject spiritual guidance for decision making, preferring instead to use a utilitarian approach of “what makes sense” or “what is best for the whole.” They don’t believe that there are eternal truths that can come to us through divine inspiration; any such truths “revealed” to us were acquired by using the principles of logic and reason. Secular humanists would agree that “metaphors in religion have the function of guiding human feelings and behavior, aspirations and hopes (Ward 117). Therefore the “wrath of God,” for example, would

be seen as a metaphor by which to describe the self-destructiveness of iniquity.

### Old and New Testament Passages

Six sample Biblical verses, from The New Jerusalem Bible translation, are presented below, and each is viewed and/or expressed using the three broad perspectives of fundamentalism, liberal Christianity, and secular humanism.

#### Genesis 5: 3-5

“When Adam was a hundred and thirty years old he fathered a son, in his likeness, after his image, and he called him Seth. Adam lived for eight hundred years after the birth of Seth and he fathered sons and daughters. In all, Adam lived for nine hundred and thirty years; then he died.”

Fundamentalism. *The words written in this passage represent one of a number of different translations. But regardless of the translation, we believe they are the actual words of God. These words are literally true. Adam really did live 930 years. Just because science can't explain it, doesn't mean it isn't true. It is true, and we live our lives believing it is true. It just goes to show that with the grace of God, all things are possible, even extraordinary longevity..*

Liberal Believer. *We believe in the truth of Adam and in the list of his progeny. However, the longevity issue is problematic. A lifespan of perhaps 100 years might have been believable, but 930 years just isn't likely. Nevertheless, some details should be overlooked in the Bible and proper focus should be placed on the truths that are being shared. Some liberal believers on the fringe of liberal thought might take an extreme view and suggest that humans were co-populated by extraterrestrials or angels, and that could explain the longevity. But regardless of whether Adam lived 30 years or 930 years, he was a man of God and the first modern man that is recognized.*

Secular Humanism. *We may share the beliefs of the liberal Christians on the matter of*

*the issue of the longevity of Adam. But where they believe it to be unlikely, we believe it to be impossible. In fact, based on what science has revealed so far, early humans had a lifespan much shorter than what we have today. The longevity text might simply be a symbol to illustrate how venerated Adam was. The memory of Adam and of his teachings lasted many, many generations. We're not even sure if "Adam" was one man, or if it was the name of a clan that broke away from an existing population to start a new, higher-minded society. At most, Adam is a positive symbol of the heritage of the Judeo-Christian tradition.*

Genesis 7: 17-23

“The flood lasted forty days on earth. The waters swelled, lifting the ark until it floated off the ground. The waters rose, swelling higher above the ground, and the ark drifted away over the waters. The waters rose higher and higher above the ground until all the highest mountains under the whole of heaven were submerged. The waters reached their peak fifteen cubits above the submerged mountains. And all living things that stirred on earth perished; birds, cattle, wild animals, all the creatures swarming over the earth, and all human beings. Everything with the last breath of life in its nostrils, everything on dry land, died.”

Fundamentalism. *The passage above happened precisely as written. God is all powerful, so surely God could create a flood to punish the very humans whom he had created in his image and who had fallen from grace. Because he had remained reverent, Noah was selected to save mankind on the ark, along with the numerous other species he collected in male/female pairs.*

Liberal Believer. *The flood can be explained in different ways, and we believe it happened. However, it almost certainly did not cover the entire earth. It might have covered the region that these people lived in and were familiar with—that which they considered “their world.” It is doubtful that having only one saved breeding pair of each species would be considered a viable breeding population to repropagate the species. Regardless of the particulars of the flood, Noah kept his faith in God, even to the point of building the ark while being ridiculed by others. His faith in God is the main message of the Biblical flood story.*

Secular Humanism. *The flood is a wonderful story, but is just that—a story. Perhaps the collective conscious of the society felt guilt at how they had lived lives of self absorption for so long. They needed to create a myth such as the flood to explain how they could start anew with a clean conscious; water has historically been used as a symbol of cleansing. If there was a flood at all, it could be explained by natural causes. One theory based on science is that a meteor or comet struck the earth around 2800 B.C. off the island of Madagascar in the Indian Ocean, and left an 18-mile wide crater at the sea bed (Blakeslee). With the power of a 10-megaton bomb, it was estimated to have produced a tsunami at least 600 feet high. This impact could have sent a huge surge of water into the mouth of the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers, flooding the ancient land of Sumeria. There are numerous flood myths in the cultures of various people around the world. If anything is to be learned about the Noah flood story of the Bible, it was that Noah stood firm with what he believed in. His perseverance is noteworthy.*

Zephaniah 1:10-11

On that Day—declares Yahweh—uproar will be heard from the Fish Gate, wailing from the New Quarter and a great crash from the hills. Wail, you who live in the Hollow, for it is all over with the merchants, all the money-bags have been wiped out!

Fundamentalism. *God was angry with the merchants of Jerusalem for their repeated dishonesty and their focus on profits rather than on God. The words in this passage are those expressed by God for His displeasure. For those who live in the Hollow section of town, they will feel the effects of the merchants' punishment because their needs will not be able to be filled. When God gets mad, those directly responsible are punished, but there is also an unfortunate peripheral effect on those who depended on those merchants for fish, supplies, and other goods.*

Liberal Believer. *God in this passage is represented by Yahweh, the Old Testament God of the Bible. He was depicted as angry because of the self-centeredness of the merchants who*

*sought profit as their primary objective and worship of God as secondary. It is unknown if God actually directly punished the merchants of Jerusalem, but the passage illustrates that the people were not being reverent. Focusing on material things and profits should never be more important than duty to God.*

Secular Humanism. *God is a myth, and is too often portrayed as angry. Just like a parent punishes a misbehaving child, so does the God of the Bible punish those who “misbehave.” The image of an angry God is reflective of the guilt of those who knew they had done wrong by being selfish. Perhaps what the people of the time needed was both personal and fiscal discipline. It was of benefit to the religious leaders of the early Christian Church to have an angry God in the text of the Bible. It gave them more control over the people by being able to instruct them as to what to do, since they (the priesthood) had the answers (viz., they had control of “knowledge”).*

Hebrews 13: 20-21

I pray that the God of peace, who brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great Shepherd of the sheep, by the blood that sealed an eternal covenant, may prepare you to do his will in every kind of good action; effecting in us all whatever is acceptable to himself through Jesus Christ, to who be glory for ever and ever, Amen.

Fundamentalism. *God knows how to communicate through people with His Word, and He has given us this passage to direct us on how to live. God did raise Jesus from the dead, as he certainly can do with His infinite grace. The blood that Christ shed during his ordeal is the seal of God’s eternal covenant to mankind. The resurrection is a pivotal point in our belief system.*

Liberal Believer. *The supplication in this passage is one of the most sincere in the Bible. God raised Jesus from the dead, but we don’t know if it was his actual body or his astral body that was resurrected. There is evidence of the latter since his followers didn’t recognize him at first. Nevertheless, God works in mysterious ways. The way that the Son of God lived and behaved is the ideal that we should all strive for. God established a covenant with us “... which*

*will never change, nor will it ever be superseded by another covenant” (Teplý 321). Jesus encouraged all of us to recognize the inner presence of God, and his suffering is something he did for all of us, so that God’s eternal covenant could be manifested through Christ. To do God’s will is the greatest thing that can be done.*

Secular Humanism. *Whatever the highest ideal would be—that similar to what the New Testament’s loving God would espouse—should be what humans strive for. They should be able to strive for that on their own and without the need to encapsulate that belief in terms of God. Being loving and kind and generous to others is the way we should be anyway. The beauty in this passage from Hebrews is how it directs us to be loving to others just as the man Jesus was.*

## 2 John 4-6

It has given me great joy to find that the children of yours have been living the life of truth as we were commanded by the Father. And now I am asking you—dear lady, not as though I were writing you a new commandment, but only the one which we have had from the beginning—that we should love each other. To Love is to live according to his commandments: this is the commandment which you have heard since the beginning, to live the life of love.

Fundamentalism. *God wrote the words in this passage through John, and therefore John is his transcriber in this instance. We don’t necessarily know who the “lady” was, but it doesn’t really matter because the important point is that we should follow the commandments of the Heavenly Father. To allow God’s grace to be expressed through us is to live the life of love.*

Liberal Believer. *The “lady” mentioned in this passage likely referred to a church, as churches at the time were often regarded in that manner (i.e., as a “feminine” institution). The phrase “children of yours” refers to its congregation. The main point here is that love is the best way to respond to others. Just as God loved us, so should we love others.*

Secular Humanism. *The “God” of the Old Testament sure appeared angry much of the time. So how is it that “To Love” is a commandment we “have heard (from) the beginning?” If*



*there was a God, wouldn't he/she/it have been able to set a better example for humans on the topic of love than what is presented in the Old Testament? Forget the reference to God, because what is truly of high value in this passage is that "Love" is a pragmatic position to take in almost all of life's circumstances. If there was more loving attitudes and behavior, there would be far fewer wars and crimes.*

Luke 1: 31-35

Look! You are to conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you must name him Jesus. He will be great and will be called Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his ancestor David; he will rule over the house of Jacob for ever and his reign will have no end. Mary said to the angel, "But how can this come about, since I have no knowledge of man? The angel answered, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will cover you with its shadow. And so the child will be holy and will be called the Son of God.

Fundamentalism. *In The Living Bible, verse 34 of the first chapter of Luke reads, "Mary asked the angel, 'But how can I have a baby? I am a virgin.'" Regardless of the translation used, Mary identifies herself as a virgin when conversing with the angel Gabriel. This is what we have been taught by the Bible, and this is what we believe. God can do anything and everything, and chose this young woman, a virgin, to prove that whomever was born through her would be pure indeed. Everything happened just as it was written in this passage.*

Liberal Believer. *Mary may or may not have been a virgin. Many of us take it on faith that she was indeed a virgin, just like the Bible indicates. Perhaps she wasn't a virgin. In The Urantia Book it is written,*

*"(Jesus) was conceived and was born into the world just as all other babies before and since except that this particular baby was the incarnation of Michael of Nebadon, a divine Son of Paradise and the creator of all this local universe of things and beings. And this mystery of the incarnation of Deity within the human form of Jesus, otherwise of natural origin on the world, will forever remain unsolved. Even in eternity you will never know the technique and method of the incarnation of the Creator in the form and likeness of his creatures" (1317).*

*But even if Jesus was not born from a virgin, the important thing is that he did fulfill his mission as the Son of Man with the utmost of integrity through the grace of God. The Bible is an indispensable tool to guide us towards our own spiritual awakening in Christ Jesus. Not all passages should be taken literally. People of the times during when the Bible was written often wrote using metaphors and parables.*

Secular Humanism. *Mary was not a virgin. Human beings are propagated through the mixture of both male and female DNA. There is no need to have Mary be a virgin in the Christian tradition. That was a myth created by the early followers to show that something wonderful (viz., God incarnate through Christ) was born to help humanity. Jesus was wonderful, truly wonderful indeed. But he was a man in flesh and blood just like other men. What was different about Jesus was that he had the courage to stand up and teach messages of high morality, and he deserves great praise (but not worship) for that. Furthermore, the belief in the virgin birth has created an offshoot belief system that is almost a sub-religion in itself—worship of Mary, especially in the Catholic tradition. Many Roman Catholics have small statues of the virgin Mary in their homes. This is a form of idol worship, and wasn't idol worship forbidden in the Ten Commandments that the Christians so ardently believe in? Mothers in most societies are highly respected, especially since they give birth to babies and traditionally nurture and raise them. But to create the myth of a virgin birth detracts from the importance of Jesus's contributions as a great teacher who attempted to set a new high standard of morality for mankind.*

### Conclusion

The Bible can be viewed in many more than the three viewpoints presented above, if varying degrees of belief are considered when making distinctions. However, the broad

categories of fundamentalism, liberal Christianity, and secular human illustrate the three major belief systems along the spectrum ranging from strict fundamentalist to atheist. Despite the viewpoint used to study the Bible, there is much to learn. Each individual is encouraged to glean as much as possible from reading and studying the Bible. The availability of numerous translations or paraphrased editions makes it easy for anyone to find a version that is in line with his or her personal belief system.

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