

THREE VIEWS OF THE BIBLE AS HISTORY

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In its modern form, the Bible is composed of translations from the original Aramaic, Hebrew and Greek texts. Besides different translations, there are also numerous interpretive versions of the Bible (e.g., Revised Standard, Living Bible, and New International Version). Each version of the Bible can be examined from the tripartite model of fundamentalist, liberal Christian, and secular humanist. Academic study of the Bible can be helpful in understanding its various meanings and interpretations. Each point is valid within the context of its group of believers, and what is ultimately important is what the Bible *means* for each individual as it relates to both religion and history.

That the Bible is not an accurate historical account is only an issue for academic disciplines such as history and theology. It is not an issue for the realm of the practice of religion, nor should it be. Religion, in its applied form, is outside the domain of academia. For all but the fundamentalist, the Bible appears to have been written long after many of its events occurred. It was written by those looking backwards in time to explain and describe the events leading up to those of the New Testament and, as such, appears to be an historical account.

History seems to *want* to be told. "If professional historians refuse to tell us a story about the human past to illumine the present, we may be sure that others less fastidious, and less well qualified, will supply the lack" (Cobb 30). With the media resources we now have, documenting history is not as difficult as it used to be when written and word-of-mouth accounts were the only means. Anything that happened before history could be written relied only on word of mouth transmissions. One problem with the Bible as history is that much of what occurred did so before history could be written. So, is the Bible really an accurate accounting of historical events?

Fundamentalists believe so, and see the Bible as a creation *by God for man*. Liberal Christians tend to distance themselves from the Bible as being completely historically accurate, but still rely on it for the supreme concepts of spirituality, ethics, reverence, and communal worship it presents. Liberal Christians see the Bible as *inspired by God for man*. Secular humanists don't believe in God and, despite its lengthy heritage, see the Bible as a creation *by man for man*.

As is described in the preface of the New Jerusalem Bible, the Old Testament is divided into three main sections: (a) the Law (i.e., the Pentateuch), (b) The Prophets, and (c) the Writings (xi). Genesis and Exodus, the first two books of the Bible, seemingly provide us with an early history of the Jewish peoples of the Mesopotamian region of the Middle East. As a creation story, the first chapter of Genesis presents us with one that is quite different from those creation stories of other ancient cultures. Greek creation stories, for example, often portray God as coming out of a primordial state of chaos (Bowker 206). These stories have the common theme of essentially depicting a theogony—a birth of deity. But the Genesis story presents God as one who created all things (and therefore must be beyond the constraints of time and space), but yet is separate and different from all things.

Anyone can be an active student of the Bible, and studying it—whether a single verse or an entire section—can be very enriching. Fundamentalists let themselves be absorbed in the text. They allow their minds to feel the totality of devotion to the Bible as a work of God through the Bible's printed word. For them, this view is rich, for to allow the essence of faith to dominate consciousness is very spiritually fulfilling. They therefore not only believe in something greater than themselves, they actually experience the consciousness of such a belief system. "Faith sacrifices man to God" (Feuerbach 352). The strength of faith through their consciousness is such that their devotion to God is paramount, and they see everything through the filter of God-

belief and of the inerrancy of the Bible.

One who would want to step back just a little to question a passage, allowing critical thinking to engage the study, is no longer able to embrace faith as a fundamentalist would. However, stepping back for purposes of examination and study can be decidedly constructive. It can actually be *more* enriching to do so as passages are critically analyzed. This stance of the liberal Christian often makes religion much more powerful because the intent of the Bible is embraced. Their faith takes a different form—that of resilience, in that they may have struggled with or questioned historically-related issues, but have remained a member of the faithful after thoughtful consideration.

As humanity evolved we became more advanced not only in *what* we believe, but in how we came to believe it. There is value in structured methodology if it leads to truth. The scientific method has guided advances not only in the world of science, but has forced a higher standard in all academic disciplines. We now have the ability and the tools with which to delve deeply into a subject and analyze it critically. We no longer need to believe in a flat earth, although some still do so. We have proven, through science, that the earth is an oblate spheroid. Anyone still believing that the earth is flat is unquestionably foolish, at least with regards to that singular belief. But with the many stories of the Bible, it is not always easy to distinguish between what is fully accurate, what is partially representational, and what is solely metaphorical. Therefore, an open mind is useful when examining the Bible as an historical record.

An examination of the three types of views (i.e., fundamentalist, liberal, and humanist) as they pertain to a Bible verse may be helpful in illustrating how different views represent different ways of viewing the world. The first sentence of the Bible, from the Hebrew *Bereshith Bara Elohim Et Hashamim V'et Haaretz*, is typically translated as “In the beginning God created

heaven and earth.” In itself, this very first sentence sets the tone for the rest of the entire Bible. The fundamentalists believe it exactly as it was written, and to them it really doesn’t matter *when* the beginning was, nor does it matter what heaven really is. The words stand alone and are self-sufficient to convey whatever meaning God wants to convey.

Liberal Christians and secular humanists want more information, and could easily discuss and debate this first Biblical sentence for countless hours. Liberal Christians couple faith with critical thinking and believe fully in God. But they may question the meaning of heaven and ponder if it’s a real place, a state of mind, or something else. They also want to know more about “the beginning,” like asking if it refers to an absolute beginning, or if it is a metaphorical depiction of the beginning of recorded Semitic ancestry.

Secular humanists rely only on critical thinking and don’t believe that there is a God, and believe that God is only symbolic as it pertains to a need of humans to focus on and have reverence for something greater than themselves. For the secular humanist, strong evidence or proof is needed for something to be accepted as fact. There is value in this seemingly rigid position as it keeps us from believing every unsubstantiated claim that is put forth.

One specific benefit of critical analysis is that improvements can be made in terms of translations of the Bible. It’s not just the words that must be translated, but the proper meaning and context of those words. For example, some believe that *reshith* (from *bereshith*, the original Hebrew first word of the Bible) looks like a Hebrew genitive, and by showing possession could therefore mean “in the beginning *of*” (Bowker 204). *Reshith* is associated with the concept of wisdom, so the first sentence of the Bible could actually be written as, “by means of wisdom God created...” This usage is quite different from the way the Bible is usually translated. But its implication is of great importance in showing that it was not just God that created, but rather that

wisdom was associated with that creative effort. If God created everything, then he also created evil, and though it may be hard for some individuals to accept, the Bible does reflect acknowledgement of the creation of evil as well as everything else (Teply 20). But if God created everything with wisdom, then evil is subjugated to that wisdom.

Feuerbach wrote that the main difference between humans and other animals was that we have consciousness in the strictest sense—one with the added tool of language with which to communicate with others (3). Language, as expressed through the observations of the inner world, does not always accurately express the outer world. Therefore word choice is important in conveying meaning. Alphabets, words and meanings evolve over time, and continual scholarly study can benefit all but the most far right fundamentalists.

Besides words and meanings in translations, one other issue that might be questioned by secular humanists and those at the far left of the liberal Christian spectrum is the anthropomorphic depiction of God. The name “God” gives the connotation of some of some sort of being, or entity. For the liberal Christian, especially those at the far left, anthropomorphism is a distraction from the true nature of God. A liberal Christian might more likely agree with the more neutral view that “Faith separates man from man, puts in the place of the natural unity founded in Nature and Love a supernatural unity—the unity of Faith” (Feuerbach 345).

For the secular humanist, anthropomorphism may be the single greatest point of contention they have with the Christian religion. But disbelief (or not) on their part will not erase the concept of God in the mind of believers. That concept has been with humanity for countless ages. The entire “idea of deity coincides with the idea of humanity” (Feuerbach 155). Individually, each person has limitations and a sense of separateness. One lives here, another lives there; one is alive now, another will be born tomorrow. Each individual eventually dies, but

the collective of humanity continues forth. Therefore the collective idea of something greater than ourselves also flows forth with that humanity. Those concepts of the eternal thereby remain eternal regardless of what secular humanists believe.

Scholarly study is valuable not only for historical purposes, but also for religious purposes if it can provide a more accurate translation of original texts. Would fundamentalists be offended by the execution of a study to question accuracy? Perhaps some would. But they shouldn't concern themselves with issues under the purview of academics any more than academics should criticize their strength of faith. Fundamentalists still have the right to their beliefs, and those beliefs are held within the domain of religious practice.

Secular humanists, on the other hand, have their prevailing belief that God is man-made concept, but they don't necessarily reject the idea that there is much wisdom and knowledge to be gained from a concerted study of the Bible. Only those on the far left of the secular humanism portion of the spectrum (i.e., the cynics) would totally (and ignorantly) reject everything that the Bible has to offer.

The liberal Christian sits somewhere in the middle—between fundamentalism and secular humanism—and can see what appears to be close-mindedness in either direction. There is seemingly no *best* way, as each major viewpoint shapes opinions and is reflective of the very belief systems of those who possess them.

According to Cobb, what we focus on “shapes our vision of reality (and) determines to a great extent how we think, feel and act” (50). He described how it is difficult for those who attend church to find the right combination of the ultimate and the relative (52). He thought that believers could get more out of the lessons of the Bible if they could see how something was relative to their own lives in view of the ultimate (or divine) principles expressed.

Having a religious world view affects how people live and act. Starting with the first sentence of the Bible, all Christian believers have a world view on which to base their lives within the context of an ultimately broad and inclusive perspective. Fundamentalists allow the message of Genesis and the subsequent biblical passages to completely fill their world view. Liberal Christians accept much, including belief in God, but also gain much by questioning. Secular humanists don't believe in God, but believe that much can be learned about humanity through observing how so many people find strength and fulfillment through their religious beliefs. Each major viewpoint thus shapes the world view of the individual, albeit in different forms.

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