

## THE SHAPING OF GOD

### Bible Literalism in the Modern World

"Believing is easier than thinking. Hence so many more believers than thinkers." --Bruce Calvert

Thinking back to childhood, I can see that my ideas about God have changed. For others too, such changing ideas and the varying backgrounds of those who call themselves Christian seems likely to be a factor in the variety of beliefs encountered in this country today. At the very least, one of the consequences of living in a cosmopolitan centre such as Auckland is that you encounter a wide range of beliefs even amongst those who claim to share a common religious heritage such as Christianity. Even in a theological lecture at a non sectarian or secular university such as Auckland University, I venture to suggest the range of beliefs would be almost as diverse. I would not be surprised if among the Christians represented there, we might well find various shades of fundamentalism as well as a variety of those of a very liberal persuasion.

With my upbringing in modern mainstream Methodism and a professional career in science education I used to assume modern education and modern theological insights would sound the death knell of "every word inspired" so it was something of a surprise to encounter old-style fundamentalism (even amongst a few in the various staff rooms of my career ) when I was teaching whether it was in high school, teachers' college and briefly as a visiting teaching fellow, at university. Even among the congregations of the various churches where I was considered safe enough to have been invited to lead worship - first as a lay preacher and more recently as a full time lay minister I found among those there some, often very sincere folk with an extremely conservative attitude to the scriptures.

My PhD study on the creationist evolution debate highlighted for me that many shades of fundamentalism are alive and well in some educational quarters and in some places this extends to rejection of modern evolutionary biology, geology and astrophysics which are still seen by some as opposed to the truth of the bible. I have also encountered those who criticise scientific findings like the assertion that the Earth is much older than 6000 years, believing that such claims are at odds with God's divine word in the Bible.

There are also those who uncritically accept chosen verses to support strange belief systems including predictions about the end of the world. I have on my bookshelf at home a once popular American best seller with the now embarrassing title 88 Reasons Why the Rapture could be in 1988. The author Edgar Whisenant wrote an accompanying volume On Borrowed Time with a similar theme. The Rapture of the faithful was to occur on the Jewish New Year, Rosh Hoshana, in 1988, sometime between Sept. 11 and Sept. 13. The 88 "proofs" of this were based on a collection of dates and calculations from Biblical and historical factors.

Whisenant was totally convinced about his date, stating: : "[I]f there were a king in this country and I could gamble with my life, I would stake my life on Rosh Hashana 88."

He also wrote "Only if the Bible is in error am I wrong; and I say that to every preacher in

town." While many religious leaders in the US were highly sceptical of Whisenant's predictions, a number accepted his assertions uncritically. Paul and Jan Crouch, and their Trinity Broadcast Network (TBN) ministry were among those who used their ministry to publicise his predictions and even included advice to non Christian listeners as to how to cope with the unexpected disappearance of Christian family members and friends.

According to Whisenant, 300,000 copies of 88 Reasons were mailed free of charge to ministers across America, and reportedly 4.5 million copies were sold in bookstores and elsewhere. After his book was widely circulated, even in my hometown in New Zealand, I encountered a number who had read and believed his predictions

When nothing happened by the end of September 13, Whisenant revised his prediction, suggesting the rapture would come at 10:55 AM on September 15. When that failed, he revised it to October 3. When that date passed, Whisenant remained undaunted: "The evidence is all over the place that it is going to be in a few weeks anyway," he told Christianity Today.

After his "few weeks" had passed without discernable disruption to the world population or the firmament, Whisenant finally saw his "error". He claimed that he had made a slight miscalculation of one year because of a fluke in the Gregorian calendar. Jesus was actually going to return during Rosh Hashanah of 1989! Whisenant published his discovery in The Final Shout--Rapture Report 1989 but alas his public were now beginning to lose faith. However there were others prepared to take up a similar cause. A segment of the Jehovah's Witnesses claimed evidence for a 1994 date. I also understand that that the respected fundamentalist Pat Robertson subsequently recalculated the figure and decided the true believers would be raptured up to heaven in 2007. The fact that I am still here would not surprise some of my critics.

While fundamentalism has a variety of shades of meaning, many of which can be held with perfect integrity, this booklet is entirely focussed on one particular but surprisingly widespread attitude to the Bible, centred on the apparently secure belief that the Bible from beginning to end is the inerrant word of God. When I use the term fundamentalist, I am deliberately choosing this popularist and non technical definition to refer to those who hold that view of scripture. The examination of this proposition is my topic since I believe the educated lay person as well as the theological student, church member or future Christian Church worker should at least be informed about what biblical scholarship has to say about this form of Biblical interpretation before entering discussions on the topic. I also acknowledge the discussion about the shades of meaning of fundamentalism is itself a separate major study and is not discussed here but it is worth noting in passing that there is no single agreed position in fundamentalism, some assuming the extreme position that every word in one version of the Bible ( the true version) is the inspired eternal word of God while others are fundamentalist only in terms of morals and faith and allow the advances in science to be seen as ways of better describing creation.

I should also note and even stress in passing that this brief informal article is NOT expected to dissuade the believer in the inerrancy of scripture from his or her position. For what it is worth I have observed that those who adopt such positions are comfortable with, and indeed almost dependent on the group labels and self proclaimed identity that go with such

positions. For example a Jehovah's Witness would be well aware that the package of beliefs that go with identifying oneself as a Jehovah's Witness include a belief in inerrancy of the Bible (from the approved translation of course) not to mention a consequent rejection of Darwinian type evolution and in particular the evolution of humankind. Since giving way on such issues is the equivalent of a rejection of their stated and often hard won faith position, it is a tall ask to require such a cataclysmic shift. A more reasonable proposition is that the following arguments might help the fundamentalist begin to understand why this particular author is comfortable with what might be understood by the fundamentalist as liberal heresy!

Since many who debate the issues will only have passing acquaintance with the justification of the claim of inerrancy I will share some issues I believe are important in assessing this claim. In this I would stress that although I have read much on the subject and in the distant past even given the occasional lecture on the topic in University continuing education courses, I make no personal claim to Biblical scholarship and what follows is a summary of the scholarship of other authorities. I cheerfully leave it to the reader to decide if these are fair points. In this I would stress that for me the questioning of inerrancy does not equate to a rejection of the Bible itself - but rather affirms a shift to a position of holding great respect for the Bible for the way in which it uses a unique collection of history, poetry, folklore, literature and inspirational writing to document a slow, at times uncertain, but eventual development of understanding about the nature of God as Love and to the evolution of the desirable relationships we should be developing with our neighbours.

The Bible also deserves recognition as the central inspiration for many of the key individuals who have helped develop the education system, the welfare system, the hospital system, the legal system and a surprising number of significant scientists who claim to have been strongly influenced by various forms of Bible based belief.

Casual reading of the Bible may overlook the evidence for an evolution of what the word "God" is thought to stand for. It may help the reader to recall that just as the anthropologists and historians have shown on many occasions that primitive societies naturally move from animism (whereby spirits are thought to inhabit living things) to polytheism, to the acceptance of Gods associated with states, to a single personal God associated with one's own tribe, to the notion of a universal God, such an evolution of "God" is clearly if unevenly perceived in the books of the Bible. Our single word "God" used as translation for distinctly different Old Testament ideas of God like Elohim and Jehovah sometimes masks the fact that we can be talking about the word God carelessly as if it only has only ever had one meaning fixed forever. This can cause great confusion when for example an atheist is arguing with a Christian, when the atheist assumes the Christian is defending a primitive Old Testament notion of God and the Christian may well believe that by God he or she is referring to the essence of the idea that God is Love. An occasional criticism of the atheist author Richard Dawkins has been that he is extraordinarily protective of his description of the God he does not believe in. If for instance the modern Christian were to be debating a rationalist about the justification for some variant of the modern rationalist advertising slogan.."There probably is no God, now relax and have a good day" - even the rationalist might pause to wonder at the

wisdom of in effect saying: "there probably is no Love. now relax and have a good day".

There is also an underlying challenge that all who claim to respect the Bible must eventually face as part of any Christian pilgrimage. Clearly the Bible represents a number of points of view. Thus for example, when we are wronged, we might alternately encounter the text which refers to an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth.. or conversely the text which suggests we should forgive seventy times seven. Hence if we respect the scriptures and wish to have them as a guide, we must still decide which bits are the parts that should act as the personal beacon and direction for our lives. And there is a corollary. Since we may all find ourselves facing different life circumstances, we should not assume that there is only one viewpoint on choosing the appropriate emphasis. An aid worker placed in a foreign setting surrounded by different cultures and creeds is likely to need entirely different spiritual sustenance to that of the elderly person with failing health and surrounded by an ever diminishing number of personal contacts.

History teaches that the choice of emphasis is one that merits careful thought.

and provides many examples of what can go wrong. Placing the importance of a particular version of Bible centred belief ahead of principles like love of neighbour has provided religious excuse for pogroms against those with so-called false beliefs. Crusades, warlike "Jihads" and numerous acts of discrimination and persecution against "the other" have been documented in copious detail through the centuries. Heightened levels of dedication to a cause, or adherence to particular patterns of religious behaviour might well strengthen bonds within a group sharing a faith viewpoint but the record shows all too clearly that this alone is not enough.

The religiously motivated aid worker is not necessarily more dedicated to his or her cause than the suicide bomber, any more than society can be assured that those with a religious seal of approval in the form of ordination are somehow inured from taking part in abusive behaviour, or perhaps more commonly, a tendency to indulge in hard hearted judgment against those following different faiths or different lifestyles.

I remember vividly one encounter I had many years ago, with a fluent quoter of the Bible, a man who said he had learnt his Bible with the group called the Navigators. This man had taken umbrage at one of the Reverend Selwyn Dawson's sermons at Durham Street Methodist church in Christchurch because Selwyn apparently had contradicted a verse in the Old Testament in what he had been saying. When I tried to explain why I agreed with the Rev Dawson, this self proclaimed scholar became so angry that he whacked me on the head with the very large, leather-bound King James Bible he was carrying. The ability to memorise key texts does not, it seems, automatically make the memoriser a more congenial neighbour.

The principles we select to interpret scripture (which academics might want to call hermeneutics) are by no means universally agreed, but honesty requires that I admit the principles which motivate my personal approach to be as follows.

1.. I make an assumption that studying how the Bible came to be written, collected together and passed on might suggest how we might make sense of the apparent contradictions and help us evaluate the changing teachings of the Bible.

2.. I assume that no one part of the Bible represents all truth or complete truth - but rather like other fields of knowledge, reflects an emerging understanding which hopefully might help the thoughtful reader make sense of how religion might better be applied to understanding of the human condition and the assistance for uncovering useful social principles.

3.. There is an assumption that a human setting has influenced the recording of the scriptures, and evidence will be put forward to show that those doing the writing were limited by local and current understandings of the day.

4.. There is also an assumption that there is nothing to fear from being as honest as possible in admitting difficulties when they arise.

5.. I further admit to a principle that I personally follow but which may well be challenged by those better educated in such matters than myself: namely that there is useful purpose in looking in scripture for ideas that need further work before they can be applied to the changing modern world. In other words, finding within the pages of the Bible a potential but incomplete set of pointers for modern living.

So to work. The first point is that although the Bible is usually talked about as if it is a single book, sometimes referred to as the Good Book, the word Bible is derived from Ta Biblia, originally a Greek word for Papyrus derived from Phoenicia's sea port Byblos. This Ta Biblia then came to mean books and from there - the library or collection of books. What we now call the Bible had its origins in a changing collection of clay tablets, scrolls and parchments, a good number of which apparently emerged from many years of oral tradition before they were consigned to the written record. The decision about which "books" should be included was only arrived at after much debate by early church authorities and leaders over a period of many years. These key decisions at the various Church councils were sometimes acrimonious, even influenced by prevailing politics, and those defeated in the testy debates when their favourite works of theology were excluded were sometimes dismissed as heretics or simply stormed off with their own separate version of the final documents. In the centuries it took to sheet down the final forms of today's bibles there is also strong evidence that some writers were continuing to modify and add to the texts. The last part of the Gospel of Mark is a good case in point since the last few verses of Mark as we now find them were not present in the early versions and certainly not the work of the original author.

Now days if you look at the bibles of the Roman Catholic Church, the Anglican Church, those used in the various Protestant Churches, the Greek Orthodox Church and Russian Orthodox Church you will see not only changes in emphasis but parts of, or even whole books omitted or included. Many bibles found in Protestant churches for example totally leave out the books of Baruch and the books of the Apocrypha.

Perhaps we might also acknowledge the subtle censorship which occurs with the Sunday

lectionary readings where some readings stop when the going gets rough.

One mainstream traditional statement of views on the Bible is found in the so called Thirty-Nine Articles which are the historic defining statements of Anglican doctrine. Article VI of the Thirty Nine Articles, which despite its air of tradition and authority makes the suspect claim: "In the name of the Holy Scripture we do understand those canonical Books of the Old and New Testament, of whose authority was never any doubt in the Church..." (italics added) The articles were established by a Convocation of the Church in 1563, under the direction of Archbishop Matthew Parker , using as a basis the Forty-Two Articles written under the direction of Thomas Cramner and passed at the time of Edward VI in 1553. Adherence to them was made a legal requirement by the English parliament in 1571. They are recorded in the Book of Common Prayer and other Anglican prayer books. While the articles no doubt reflect the faith position of countless followers of a number of major branches of the Christian church, historically in the case of Article VI it is plainly untrue that there was never any doubt. Not only was there much doubt and dispute from time to time, whole branches of the Church remain divided about the canon or authoritative list of which books were to be included and which rejected. For example some Churches in Eastern Syria in deciding their New Testament leave out 2 Peter, 2 and 3 John, Jude and Revelation, while the Ethiopian Canon has 38 New Testament books instead of the more common 27.

Historically we should remember that although there was much agreement about the less problematic New Testament books, some of the briefer Epistles (e.g. 2 and 3 John, 2 Peter, James, Jude) along with the Revelation were much longer in being accepted in some parts than in others; while elsewhere books which we do not now include in the New Testament were received as canonical in the first of the Church lists.

It is misleading to think of the process as a seamless acceptance under divine revelation. In the early times of New Testament formation, while the theologian Marcion was going one way with his assertion that only 11 of the commonly used books should be accepted, another theologian Montanus, seeing the task in terms of the stocking of the "Library" meaning of the word Bible, was arguing that since revelation of Christian understanding was continuing to grow, there should be no end to the production and recognition of suitable scriptures. Shortly after the year 200, the theologian Origen, recognising that selected Christian writings were by then widely shared and read in the various Christian communities, conducted what in effect was a rough poll to see which writings were sufficiently popular to constitute a sensible collection. His collection was presented in three parts, first the accepted writings, then the questionable books with limited support and finally those widely considered unreliable. His list of consensus approved had the four gospels we now accept, the thirteen letters of Paul , Acts, 1 Peter, 1 John and Revelation. The books on his questionable list included Hebrews, James, 2 Peter and 2 and 3 John. Rejected by consensus were books like the Gospel of Thomas, the Gospel of Matthias and Gospel of Egyptians. What we cannot know is how much his personal preferences influenced his decisions. Nor was his the only collection. In the Codex Alexandrinus we find the writings known as the First and Second Epistles of Clement alongside the more recognised biblical writings. Another early standard collection, the fourth century Codex Sinaiticus included the 'Epistle of Barnabas' and the Shepherd of Hermas, a Roman work of about AD 110 or earlier.

One of the more interesting relatively recent finds discovered in Egypt in 1945 was a collection of early Christian documents on ancient scrolls, fragments and codex collections which we now call the Nag Hammadi texts. Among the gospels in the collection were a

number such as the Gospel of Thomas. What scholars such as Elaine Pagels now tell us is that there were a surprising number of different texts circulating in the early Christian period. Historically the scholars now accept that far from being the founding documents of a simple, unified theological community, the sacred writings were the source of much debate as Christians tried to agree amongst a complex interplay of competing scrolls and competing interpretations. That ancient Egyptian collection at Nag Hammadi held fifty-seven different scrolls - attributed not only to Thomas, but a number of others, including Phillip, John, and Mary Magdalene. It also included a message from Athanasius, the Archbishop of Alexandria, which authorized a list of 27 texts and ordered the destruction of all the others.

Yes, many Christians are still taught there were just four gospel writers - Mathew, Mark, Luke and John. But few modern Christians seem aware that this is a consequence of much debate about the status of competing writings, and which were only eventually resolved by proclaiming four as the legitimate number. And why? It was because four pillars supported the heavens and four winds blew across the earth. Thus for example we find Irenaeus, bishop of Lyons in Gaul about AD 180 writing:

For as there are four quarters of the world in which we live, and four universal winds, and as the Church is dispersed over all the earth, and the gospel is the pillar and base of the Church and the breath of life, so it is natural that it should have four pillars, breathing immortality from every quarter and kindling the life of men anew. Whence it is manifest that the Word, the architect of all things, who sits upon the cherubim and holds all things together, having been manifested to men, has given us the gospel in fourfold form, but held together by one Spirit.

These days we might be sceptical about that rationale, and might wonder about the twenty three other candidates in the Nag Hammadi collection for what subsequently became the books of the New Testament that did not make the cut! For example from the traditions surrounding Thomas and the historical tradition that he went on as an inspirational missionary to found a Christian Church in South India, his gospel (if he in fact were the author) might be considered to have a real potential claim. A further point of interest is that a number of modern scholars claim that his gospel was early - perhaps even earlier than that of Mark, and it contains interesting sayings and parables of Jesus not found in the other gospels. Yet the fact that Thomas himself is only talked about in the gospel of John and then only negatively would lead us to believe that Thomas had no real merit in the eyes of those whose gospels did make the final cut. Remember Thomas was the doubter, the one who needed to be convinced by touching the wounds of Jesus after the resurrection and the one who didn't accept that other disciples had seen Jesus. He was missing at Pentecost and hence missed out on the gifts of the Spirit. According to Pagels it seems probable that the bad press he had attracted may be related to an aspect of one of his heretical views, namely his interpretation that Jesus had the essence of a divine light which was at the centre of his creativity. The reason why this was unacceptable to some in the early Church and at odds with the other gospel writers was because he also taught that we too had some of this light which we should recognise and foster. Thomas stressed the humanity of Jesus. This was clearly different from John who focussed on the uniqueness of Jesus as the only Son of God.

Such disputes continued for many years and thus we find that Luther who tossed out the book of Baruch for his preferred Bible also tried (unsuccessfully) to chop out the letter of James calling his letter "the gospel of Straw".

It is as well to remember that the earliest relatively complete scripts we now have of the New Testament writings are actually recorded years after they were composed and are transcribed in what scholars call miniscule writing. In other words unlike the earlier fragments which were written in Greek capital letters with virtually no spacing between words or punctuation, miniscule script, first appearing several hundred years after the earliest versions of the same books, in its more modern form has a mixture of capital and small letters and many of the more familiar spacings and layout. In other words many copies and versions in the more primitive form of written Greek almost certainly predated the basis for our more familiar texts.

Although it is relatively easy to skim read the books of the bible secure in the knowledge you are reading the inspired word of God and hold to the assumption that therefore every word is entirely reliable, comparing passages about identical events and assessing what was written then against what we now believe to be true should cause us to pause to wonder. The two accounts of creation in Genesis 1:11-27 God creates plants, then animals and then men and women together. Only then does he get to work on the heavens. In Genesis 2 7-22 the order is Man, then plants, then animals and finally a woman out of Adam's rib. There are no problems if we see the stories as the mythology of creation stories of people in a relatively common area. If however we are going to insist on scientific accuracy the problems are just beginning. It goes without saying that this day by day order is substantial different from the fossil record. Similarly in the story of Noah, the version in Genesis 7: 2-3 Noah takes aboard seven pairs of each kind of clean animal and bird but only one pair of each unclean animal. In Genesis 6:19 -20 and 7: 8-9 we find him taking aboard only one pair of each kind of animal.

In the Old Testament there are a number of stories which are strikingly similar to the stories of other peoples in the area. Thus we have Moses being found in the bulrushes by the Pharaoh's daughter which only becomes problematic when we remember that Sargon was also found in the bulrushes - noting this was recorded before the Moses story by several hundred years. The story of Moses and the bulrushes also has its prototype in ancient Mesopotamian literature. Preserved in Babylonian tablets the ancestry of Sargon, king of Akkad (2340 to 2284B.C.) is quoted thus:

"Sargon, the mighty king, king of Akkade, am I. My mother was an en-priestess(?), my father I never knew. ....She conceived me, my en-priestess mother, in concealment she gave me birth. Set me in a wicker basket.... She cast me down into the river ... The river bore me... Aqqi the water drawer did raise me as his adopted son."

A coincidence, or is this tale of Moses a borrowed story to show that Israel's leaders are every bit as good as those venerated by other tribes? Then we have a flood which covered the whole world despite modern geologists assuring us that there is no geological evidence for such a flood or even sufficient water for such an event and what is more a flood story that had



close parallels to the Babylonian saga of Gilgamesh. While horizon to horizon floods have not been uncommon in some localities surely it makes more sense to see the Noah story in allegorical form than to insist on a story which hardly makes sense given what we now know about the size of the Earth and the millions upon millions of species that could not have been physically stored on such a small ark if the story were literally true.

If despite these qualifications we insist on the veracity and authority of every word, we appear to have a new set of problems. If the quaint laws of Leviticus have to be elevated to legitimate inspired words for all time then we are required to stone people for such crimes as having their temples shaved (Leviticus 19:27). I had to apologise to one such literalist who berated me for not being a bible literalist after my Sunday sermon. I told him, (perhaps a little unfairly), assuming he was correct, my diary was pretty full and I simply didn't have time to have him stoned until at least Tuesday week for wearing mixed fibres (a woollen / synthetic fibre suit and cotton socks) cf. Leviticus 19:19 or for his disobedient haircut (Leviticus op. cit). When I said "a full diary" the truth was not in me but if I had indeed recorded all those who needed punishment come to think of it there was also the matter of my airline steward next door neighbour who insists on working on the Sabbath. The neighbour the other side is just as bad. He had the temerity to have bacon and eggs for breakfast the other morning in clear contravention of Leviticus 11:7.

Those anxious to show why homosexuality is totally unacceptable, particularly for Church leaders, often quote two particular verses that seem to be aimed at gay people. These two verses, both of which appear in the book of Leviticus, are . . .

"You shall not lie with a male as with a woman. It is an abomination." (Leviticus 18:22)

and . . .

"If a man lie with a male as he lies with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination. They shall surely be put to death. Their blood shall be upon them." (Leviticus 20:13)

Unfortunately for those vehemently opposed to the practice of homosexuality on Biblical grounds, it is not just homosexuality which is condemned as an abomination. It is also people with slanted eyes, which might be something of a personal embarrassment should I adopt Biblical literalism since my son-in-law is Chinese. and, come to think of it, eating with Egyptians is another claimed abomination. I hope this does not require we all check the nationality of those who share restaurants with us. Do you know... and I had better mention this quietly.. I have even met some Bible literalists who eat shellfish.

It is actually quite awkward to live by such edicts these days. Can you imagine trying to get a permit to burn a witch with current legislation. Just a few words before the diatribe against homosexuals comes the diatribe explaining what must be done to those toe rags of children who are disrespectful to their parents: "For everyone who curses his father and mother shall surely be put to death." (Leviticus 20:9). Even the Sensible Sentencing Trust might balk at the suggestion that we killed every child who was disrespectful to his or her parents. If the passage relating to executing disrespectful children is claimed to be outdated in that it formed part of a previous holiness code, then out too must go the outdated comments on homosexuality. You can't have it both ways. .

I do however confess the attraction of one of the edicts when we read the following words which some have claimed to be inspired and true for all times:

"Your male and female slaves are to come from the nations around you; from them you may buy slaves. You may also buy some of the temporary residents living among you and members of their clans born in your country, and they will become your property" (Leviticus 25:44-45)

This directive raises some interesting philosophical points. For example, for me as a New Zealander, there is the question of whether or not Australians should be included in this list of potential unpaid help or whether it only applies to tilers from Thailand.

It is not just the glimpses in the older parts of the Bible of a God who starts out small time and can be carried around in a litter, but there is also the more worrying question as to whether we can worship, or even want to worship, a God who is petty and vindictive and one who for example insists that Joshua slaughters all the men, women, children and even animals after bringing down the walls of Jericho with the blast of a trumpet. Unless we accept a gradual awakening of understanding by the authors of the Bible through the ages, we would be puzzled how this tribal, and at times mean God, somehow metamorphoses into a God of Love. Look at the following:

"I will not pity, nor spare, nor have mercy, but destroy." (Jer. 13:14) "Now go and smite Amalek, and utterly destroy all that they have, and spare them not, but slay both man and woman, infant and suckling."

In Psalm 137:7-9 we find the suggestion that God thinks that it is appropriate that the children of the Edomites have their heads dashed against rocks for what the Edomites did to the Jews. This raises the question of whether or not this same God is really the God of the Edomites as well as the Jews or if tribalism is somehow getting in the way of the understanding. And as for Psalm 109! when you have looked carefully at what it says at the very least you can at least understand why Psalm 109 is rarely read now days in Churches where the love of God is a focus.

Certainly a different mindset is demonstrated in the contrast: "The Lord is very pitiful and of tender mercy." (James 5:11)

"For his mercy endures forever." (1 Chron. 16:34)

"The Lord is good to all, and his tender mercies are over all his works." (Ps. 145:9)

"God is love." (1 John 4:16)

There is the question as to if Moses, claimed by many literalists to be the sole author of the first five books of the Bible, including the account of his death, might really have been so inspired when his recorded actions show him to have great disregard for the laws he is supposed to have recorded. While Moses is credited with finding the ten commandments of which three, in part mutually exclusive, versions exist in the Bible (Exodus 20, Exodus 34 and Deuteronomy 5), not only are there strong similarities with parts of the Code of Hammurabi there is no indication that Moses himself lived by these commandments. "So

they warred against Midian as the Lord commanded Moses and they slew every male". (Num 31:7) Thou shalt not kill? Wasn't that commandment from the Lord? In fact Moses was angry that they had let the women and children off even although the Israelites had stolen the cattle, flocks and goods (Num. 31:7) he ordered that the male children be killed. He made an exception of the virgin women whom he directed his men to keep ("for yourselves"). Presumably here was a case for overlooking 'Thou shalt not commit adultery'. When he told the Pharaoh that the Israelites were just going into the Wilderness and would be back in a few days, the truth was not in him. Thou shalt not bear false witness? When the Israelites fashioned their golden calf they did so with gold stolen from the Egyptians. Thou shalt not steal?

The contradictions in the Bible extend beyond hypocritical actions of God's chosen leaders to contradictions in fact. Let us take a few of the better known problems.

David numbers the people and buys the land for the temple in two different records. The two accounts differ in more than merely the numbers and price and the readers are invited to compare the two passages for themselves. But since David is directed to do the census in one passage by God and the other by Satan we can hardly claim this is a minor problem.

II Samuel 24: "And again the anger of the LORD was kindled against Israel, and he moved David against them to say, Go, number Israel and Judah."

I Chronicles 21: "And Satan stood up against Israel, and provoked David to number Israel."

The numbers of the different groups counted and the amounts he pays for the land differs markedly in the two accounts and the reader is invited to turn to the two passages and compare them carefully.

Christian fundamentalists often insist that the Bible is infallible in its various prophecies. However, in the book of Ezekiel, specifically Ezekiel 26:1-14, we find a prophecy (the conquering of the city of Tyre) that, according to Ezekiel 29:18-20, seems to have turned out a little differently to the way the prophet had predicted. Yes, Nebuchadnezzar did in fact conquer the city of Tyre as prophesied, but the spoils of the battle apparently were not as extravagant as Ezekiel predicted they would be, and the city has been rebuilt (modern day Sur, Lebanon) contrary to prophetic claims it would never stand again.

Another discrepancy found in the actual recorded words of the Bible is found in Mark 2:26 when Jesus asks the Pharisees if they remembered how David "went into the house of God when Abiathar was high priest and ate the bread of offering." According to 1 Samuel 21, however, the high priest was Abiathar's father, Ahimelech. Surely the only fair interpretation of these differences in detail between these two books of the Bible is that there seems to be some error in recall.

Even in matters like the two accounts of Jesus' birth and death there are contradictions. Whereas Matthew has the details of the birth revealed to Joseph in a dream, Luke has an Annunciation made to Mary by an angel.

In two places in the New Testament the genealogy of Jesus son of Mary is mentioned.

Matthew 1:6-16 and Luke 3:23-31. Each gives the ancestors of Joseph the CLAIMED husband of Mary and Step father of Jesus. The first one starts from Abraham (verse 2) all the way down to Jesus. The second from Jesus all the way back to Adam. The only common name to these two lists between David and Jesus is JOSEPH, How can the two lists be simultaneously true? And in any case how can Jesus have a genealogy traced through the male line when a good proportion of Muslims and most conservative Christians believe that Jesus had/has no human father.

According to Luke on the eighth day of Jesus' life he was circumcised, on the fortieth day of his life he was presented to the temple in Jerusalem (both in accordance with the law) and having accomplished these Jewish family requirements they went back to their own city of Nazareth in Galilee. (Luke 2.39). Unfortunately despite the assurances of some of the televangelists and the other proponents of biblical inerrancy - at the time of these events, according to Matthew, Mary and Joseph had fled for their lives into Egypt to avoid the vengeful Herod's slaughter of the innocents and that is where they remained until Herod had died and where they remained before returning to their family home in Bethlehem (not Nazareth) only transferring to Nazareth when they felt it was too dangerous to remain in Bethlehem. Certainly at the very least Luke and Matthew cannot both be absolutely correct in their accounts and therefore literal inerrancy cannot apply to every verse of the Bible. There is of course an alternative way of reading the Christmas story based on the not unreasonable view that the story is intended as a powerful metaphor to signify the coming of Jesus as a very significant event for the history of the world. which is certainly borne out by subsequent history.

When some stories apparently about the same event are repeated in the different gospels the essence of the story may well change while the setting and details flatly contradict. For example there is a well known story about a woman who despite protests from one (or more) of the disciples uses incredibly expensive perfume to anoint Jesus' feet (or head?). In John, it is a good woman who does the anointing. Luke, thinks it was a sinful woman. The woman anoints Jesus' head according to Mark, yet in Luke and John, whoever that woman was, she anoints his feet.

Just for the record, later generations for some reason unsupported directly by any of the biblical texts, commentators probably wrongly assumed the woman was Mary Magdalene. And the differences go on.

In John, Judas objects to the anointing and the waste of the expensive perfume that might have been sold and the proceeds better used.

In Matthew, it was not just Judas but the disciples who object.

In Mark, it was even vaguer and some of those present who object.

In Luke, it was Simon, the pharisee who objects.

All this took place in the house of Simon, the leper according to Matthew and Mark but for Luke, it occurred in the house of Simon, the pharisee and in John, the home of Lazarus.

The Mark gospel - while probably earlier in date than the others in the New Testament suggests Mark was geographically removed from the events he recorded. For example his knowledge of Palestinian geography is quite hazy in that in the seventh chapter he has Jesus travelling through Sidon on his way to Tyre and the Sea of Galilee. Not only is Sidon in the opposite direction, in the first century there was no road from Sidon to the sea of Galilee. In another awkward blunder in his fifth chapter, the sea of Galilee's eastern border is the country of the Gerasenes. Gerasa - now called Jerash is a good thirty miles to the South East which apart from anything else is a rather long hike for the pigs who were supposed to have run

from Gerasa down the slope into the water.

The gospels as we know them today show signs of best guess and at times clumsy translation. In Chapter 11 of Luke (Luke 11: 39-41) for instance there occurs the following: "Oh, you Pharisees! You clean the outside of the cup and plate, while inside yourselves you are filled with extortion and wickedness.. Instead give alms from what you have and then indeed everything will be clean for you."

The phrase "give alms" which I have been assured (but not checked out for myself) occurs in all the Greek text versions of Luke and seems curiously out of place until we recall that the Aramaic "give alms" zakkau is remarkably similar to dakkau "to cleanse". That the original should have contained to cleanse then makes more sense when we look at the equivalent Matthew passage Matthew 23:26 which reads: "Blind Pharisee! Clean the inside of the cup first so that the outside may become clean as well."

Nor are things any better for the accounts of Jesus' death and resurrection.

Justice Haim Cohn, a prominent contemporary Jewish scholar draws our attention to some obvious problems in accepting the veracity of the account of Jesus' evening trial in the house of the High Priest. First according to Jewish law and custom, the Sanhedrin were not allowed to exercise jurisdiction in the High Priest's house or for that matter anywhere outside the Courthouse and Temple precinct. No session of the criminal court was permissible after nightfall. Passover or Pesach would not have provided the setting since no criminal trial was permissible on a feast day or the eve of a feast day. In view of the formalistic and rigorous attitude to the law for which the Pharisees were well known a conviction must be proceeded by two truthful and reliable witnesses and in fact the charge of blasphemy was inapplicable since it was closely defined as pronouncing the ineffable name of God, the tetragrammaton which under Jewish law might only be pronounced once a year on the Day of Atonement - and then only by the High Priest in the Kodesh Kodashim, the innermost sanctuary of the Temple.

Jesus' last words were?

Matt.27:46,50: "And about the ninth hour Jesus cried with a loud voice, saying, "Eli, eli, lama sabachthani?" that is to say, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" ...Jesus, when he cried again with a loud voice, yielded up the ghost."

Luke23:46: "And when Jesus had cried with a loud voice, he said, "Father, unto thy hands I commend my spirit:" and having said thus, he gave up the ghost."

John19:30: "When Jesus therefore had received the vinegar, he said, "It is finished:" and he bowed his head, and gave up the ghost."

And for that matter who did his followers actually see at the sepulchre?

Mark 16:5 And entering into the sepulchre, they saw a young man sitting on the right side, clothed in a long white garment; and they were affrighted.

Luke 24:4 And it came to pass, as they were much perplexed thereabout, behold, two men stood by them in shining garments:

John 20:12 And seeth two angels in white sitting, the one at the head, and the other at the feet, where the body of Jesus had lain.

NOTES ON THE EVENTS OF THE RESURRECTION

According to Matthew, Mark, and Luke, Mary Magdalene was among the group of women who were told by angels at the empty tomb that Jesus had risen "even as he said," and Luke went as far as to say that when the women heard this, "they remembered his words" (24:9). Such statements as these can be put together with Matthew's claim that the women encountered Jesus, even held him, and worshipped him as they were running from the tomb to tell the disciples what they had seen, 28:9)) This presumably indicates the women left the tomb convinced that Jesus has risen from the dead. Despite the unambiguous nature of these statements, John's account of the resurrection had Mary saying, after she had found the disciples, "They have taken away the Lord out of the tomb, and we know not where they have laid him" (20:1).

Matthew records Jesus saying: "For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the whale, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the Earth." (Matthew 12: 40) The creed accepts this unquestioningly with the phrase 'on the third day' but hold on... This does not tie with the details in Matthew. Surely he was buried after his death which occurred on the 9th hour (about 3pm on Friday). (Matt 27:45-46.) He had escaped the tomb before dawn on the first day of the week (Matt 28:1). By any reckoning this is closer to one day and two nights (36 hours) and not 72 hours or the predicted 3 days and three nights).

Judas died how?

"And he cast down the pieces of silver into the temple and departed, and went out and hanged himself." (Matt. 27:5)

or was it..

"And falling headlong, he burst asunder in the midst, and all of his bowels gushed out." (Acts 1:18)

Did those with Saul/Paul at his conversion hear a voice?

ACTS 9:7 And the men which journeyed with him stood speechless, hearing a voice, but seeing no man.

ACT 22:9 And they that were with me saw indeed the light, and were afraid; but they heard not the voice of him that spake to me

## SCIENCE IN THE BIBLE

Then there are the problems which surface when we use what science has discovered to test the biblical accounts. Just to take a few examples. Leviticus 11:6 refers to hares with the explanation ..because they chew the cud. Sorry they don't. Hares are not ruminants related to cattle. Technically just for the record they are lagomorphs which most certainly do not chew the cud. Leviticus 11: 13 - 19 refers to bats as fowl, whereas God, if he /she were dictating this verse, should have known about bats being mammals. Is there literal truth intended when in the psalms we read of the four corners of the Earth and the pillars on which the world (and the heavens) are supported. When we read in two places both Job and Jesus were separately taken to high places from whence they could see the whole world surely we now know that the other side of the world would not be visible unless the world were flat. When we read of Jesus stating that no-one knows from whence the winds come and whence they go that was probably true for his day but in this day of satellite assisted meteorology we might question if these are omniscient eternal truths.

Certainly Jesus stating the mustard seed is the smallest of all seeds is scientifically incorrect when many seeds are smaller eg the seeds of many orchids are smaller and in any case the mustard plant is not a shrub - nor does it grow into a tree. It is technically a herb and stays that way despite the assertion in Matthew 13: 31 - 32. This is of course only a problem if we insist along with many fundamentalists that Jesus as the Son of God is omniscient. Similarly a world in which God's punishment can come in the form of disease caused by evil spirits may well have been the only way of understanding disease in a prescientific age but there seems rather better understanding today in the form of microbiology with its insights about viruses, bacteria and genetics. If the plague were to break out today we are less likely to attribute this to God's interference and would be rightly considered quaint if for protection we were to chalk crosses on the door as they did in the Middle Ages. Surely as modern educated people we would instead protect ourselves by killing the rats and the fleas on them which are now known to spread the disease.

If the stars were conveniently small and close as was the picture for the contemporary Jews of the first century AD a wandering star stopping on top of the place of Jesus birth may well have seemed plausible - but when stars, at light year distances, appear to be directly over different places many miles distant we might wonder if prescientific understandings might need re-evaluation.

To return to the point I made at the outset. It is true there are so many examples of errors and oddities in the Bible there is reason to move away from a stand that every word is somehow inerrant. However the total collection contains so much of value in the way it records a growing understanding of desirable values that it deserves our admiration.

To take a parallel from the history of science, the Greek philosophers with their quaint ideas about elements and atoms, Dalton with his now hopeless theory of the atom and Newton with his blatant disregard for relativistic motion all still deserve our respect and admiration for their contributions to the foundations of modern science. No modern scientist would be considered literate without knowing something of the history of science. Similarly we can hardly learn the path trodden by our forebears without knowing the flawed but fascinating accounts of the struggles of the early Jewish leaders and first Christians and for that matter, the sheer humanity of the great leaders of the past.

There is a case to be made for seeing scripture in the same way as scientists view the progression of science. Namely the insights themselves may not have permanence, but they set up new ways in which we can learn more. The new theory is then justified to the extent that it helps us discover more about reality. For religion this is very close to the notion of progressive revelation. We hear an echo of this in Jesus saying. "You were taught.. but I tell you...." Just as there is danger in pretending scripture is to be presented as simplified and

careful analysis is to be ignored, this is hardly different to a version of science which insists that all the complete answers are known. It would have been sad if those who insisted Descartes had written the last word in science were allowed to continue blocking the further insights of successive scientists. The alternative thinking that science has all the answers and traditional religion is gradually losing its relevance is not the cut and dried truism some would have us believe. As long as living in community, caring for the neighbour with a different background and faith, and placing forgiveness ahead of retribution are missing in the world we inhabit there is a clear area for a place for scriptural insight.

The relatively recent explosion in knowledge has taken those who live in modern civilisations far past the Bible as a sufficient descriptor of their place in the universe. Further, the inevitable knowledge of other cultures makes the insistence that today's readers of the Bible should follow the rules and customs of antiquated Jewish culture appropriate for another place, another setting and another age seem increasingly irrelevant. Geographically separated and culturally isolated conduct and farming methods of 4000 years have historical interest but surely not as a pattern for those of us living in different times with different backgrounds and resources.

In their time, the early religious leaders made a best guess and came up with the poetically compelling description of how the Earth and the Cosmos gained its shape with the seven days of creation.. And without telescopes, is it surprising they could only think of the tiny stars as an afterthought on the part of the Creator (Genesis 1:16: "He made the stars also"? To the modern thinker, aware of the tiny Earth in a tiny corner of gigantic and mind-numbingly huge universe of billions of stars and millions of galaxies, this Genesis description seems trite in the extreme.

While the conservatives may be uneasy with a critical approach to the Bible it is quite clear traditional faith has still some room for development. The new problems of bioethics, population control, world economics, euthanasia, genetic engineering, aging populations, weapons research etc show the problems are constantly changing and it will be important to identify which of the Biblical principles that can act as a base for further thinking, then explore what must then happen to those principles in a changing world.

Yes there may be contradictions, and there are clearly many who would use this as an excuse to dismiss the Bible out of hand. It is only a purely personal view but in the opinion of this writer the incomparable stories and teachings of Jesus about such essentials as loving one's neighbour, even if like the Samaritan the neighbours have inconvenient beliefs, still stand as unrealised ideals for today. Surely too, the rest of the Bible also has a place in highlighting essential parts of our history and little can be understood of Christianity without placing the Bible at the centre of our study. If we did not see the Bible as a piecemeal account of an evolving knowledge and understanding we would presumably see it as a closed, complete and by implication, a document which becomes increasingly irrelevant in a modern world with



almost nothing to say about new moral dilemmas in fields like global economics, bioethics, climate change, weaponry development and the collision of cultures. It is only a personal view but I prefer a Bible which points stepping stones to the future.

## QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND STUDY

- 1.. Thinking back over your life and beliefs to date, can you notice changes in any of your beliefs about religion. and in particular your beliefs about God. Suggest what your response might mean.
- 2.. To what extent do you feel that the Bible was influenced by the local experiences of the various backgrounds and experiences of the writers?
- 3.. Do you agree with author of this booklet that parts of the Bible are no longer relevant to our contemporary situation? Examples?
- 4.. Compare 1 Samuel, chapter 24 and 2 Chronicles chapter 21 for the two accounts of David's numbering of the people. List the similarities then list the differences of the two accounts and come to your own conclusions about why the two accounts appear to be about the same event yet entirely different in detail.
- 5.. After reading this booklet, what implications might it have for today's church and attitudes of Christians to the Bible?

(The writer Dr Bill Peddie, a retired science educator, is currently a Methodist lay minister stationed in the Auckland Central Methodist Parish, with responsibilities for the Epsom and Mt Eden Methodist churches).