

Latter-day Biblical Literalism

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Introduction

The eighth Article of Faith of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints reads (in its current form) “We believe the Bible to be the word of God as far as it is translated correctly; we also believe the Book of Mormon to be the word of God.” Some in the LDS Church today interpret this to mean that the entire King James Bible, possibly excluding a few mistranslated verses, is the literal, inerrant word of God.

Yet the LDS movement was founded on a rejection of biblical inerrancy. Joseph Smith taught that the Bible is not complete, and that “Ignorant translators, careless transcribers, or designing and corrupt priests have committed many errors.” [HC, vol. 6, pg. 57; TPJS, pg. 327]. In his account of the first vision, he recalled that “teachers of religion of the different sects understood the same passages of scripture so differently as to destroy all confidence in settling the question by an appeal to the Bible.” [JSH 1:12]. It was for such reasons that Joseph Smith embarked on his own revision, the Inspired Version of the Bible, which he never completed.

Brigham Young taught:

As for the Bible account of the creation we may say that the Lord gave it to Moses, or rather Moses obtained the history and traditions of the fathers, and from these picked out what he considered necessary, and that account has been handed down from age to age, and we have got it, no matter whether it is correct or not, and whether the Lord found the earth empty and void, whether he made it out of nothing or out of the rude elements; or whether he made it in six days or in as many millions of years, is and will remain a matter of speculation in the minds of men unless he give revelation on the subject. [Young].

Even Joseph Fielding Smith acknowledged that limits must be placed on literal readings:

Even the most devout and sincere believers in the Bible realize that it is, like most any other book, filled with metaphor, simile, allegory, and parable, which no intelligent person could be compelled to accept in a literal sense. ... The Lord has not taken from those who believe in his word the power of reason. He expects every man who takes his “yoke” upon him to have common sense enough to accept a figure of speech in its proper setting, and to understand that the holy scriptures are replete with allegorical stories, faith-building parables, and artistic speech. ... Where is there a writing intended to be taken in all its parts literally? Such a writing would be insipid and hence lack natural appeal. To expect a believer in the Bible to strike an attitude of this kind and believe all that is written to be a literal rendition is a stupid thought. No person with the natural use of his faculties looks upon the Bible in such a light. [Smith].

With regards to the eighth Article of Faith, it is interesting to note that a version published in the 19th century differs from the version cited above: “We believe in the Word of God recorded in the Bible; we also believe the Word of God recorded in the Book of Mormon, and in all other good books.” [Wood] Note that this more open-ended wording clearly avoids the inference that the entire Bible is the literal or infallible word of God.

In spite of this tradition, some LDS writers today insist on a highly literal approach to the Bible. For example, one prominent LDS scholar recently wrote, “We take the Scriptures to be literally true, we hold symbolic, figurative or allegorical interpretation to a minimum, accepting the miraculous events as historical and the moral and ethical teaching as binding and valid.” He added, “There isn’t a single verse of the Bible that I do not personally accept and believe.” [Bloomberg, pg. 55, 59].

Such views echo what is widely taught in the evangelical Protestant world. As Rev. Jerry Falwell once declared, “The Bible is the inerrant ... word of the living God. It is absolutely infallible, without error in all matters pertaining to faith and practice, as well as in areas such as geography, science, history, ...” [Falwell, pg. 26]. In a similar vein, the Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy, formulated by a group of evangelical scholars, declares, “Holy Scripture, being God’s own Word, written by men prepared and superintended by His Spirit, is of infallible divine authority in all matters upon which it touches. ... Being wholly and verbally God-given, Scripture is without error or fault in all its teaching.” [Chicago].

These writers are certainly entitled to their beliefs, but I personally cannot see how such claims can be defended in light of modern scholarship, or even from a careful reading of the text itself. A more flexible approach is required, one that recognizes the human as well as the divine in scripture. To that end, I present the following examples, certainly not out of disrespect for the Bible, but only to underscore the hopelessness of a literal or inerrant approach. Most of these examples are fairly well known, although some are my own observations. Biblical citations below are taken from the King James translation (although it makes little difference which translation one uses). Material in brackets [...] denotes text inferred by the King James translators, as included in the King James version, while words delimited by <...> are clarifications, clearly justified either from the context or from original manuscripts.

The Old Testament

There are numerous discrepancies in the first few books of the Old Testament. For instance, in Gen. 7:2 we read that Noah was commanded to take seven each of every “clean” beast, males and females, and two of beasts that are not “clean.” But in 7:9 we read that only two of each kind were taken. In 8:7 we read that Noah sent forth a raven; in the next verse we read that he sent a dove. In 7:17 we read that the flood was 40 days upon the earth. However, in 7:24 we read that the waters prevailed on the earth 150 days, and then decreased until the tenth month, which would be roughly 300 days. A still different figure is found in 8:14, which with 7:11 gives 57 days [Friedman, pg. 59].

A second example is in the account of Joseph being sold into Egypt. In Gen. 37:28, we read that Midianite merchants drew Joseph out of the pit and sold him to Ishmaelites for twenty pieces of silver. In Gen. 39:1, the Ishmaelites then took Joseph to Egypt and sold him to Potiphar. But in Gen. 37:36 we read that it was the Midianites who sold Joseph to Potiphar.

Exo. 12:37 says that “about six hundred thousand” Hebrew men (i.e, two to three million total persons) left Egypt in the exodus. Exo. 38:26 and Num. 1:46 are more specific, giving the figure

603,550 men 20 years or older. Needless to say, is hard to see how such a host could have survived in the Sinai desert for 40 years and escaped modern-day archaeological detection. However, even from the Old Testament text it is clear that the actual number was much smaller: (1) Exo. 1:5 says that Jacob's extended family numbered just 70 persons when they entered Egypt, so 430 years later they would have numbered only a few thousand; (2) Exo. 1:15-17 says that there were only two midwives for the Hebrews when Moses was born, which implies that the Hebrew society at the time had no more than about a few thousand women; (3) in Exo. 18:21, Jethro recommended that Moses organize the host of Israel into thousands, hundreds, fifties and tens (not tens of thousands or hundreds of thousands); (4) a census of firstborn males in Num. 3:40-43 counted 22,273; (5) in Num. 20:17-19 and 21:22, Moses promised the king of Edom that the Israelites and their cattle would pass through his territory strictly on the narrow king's road; if the Israelites numbered in the millions, such a procession would have been hundreds of miles long and taken many months; (6) the ancient city of Jericho was only about two blocks in size, and could have housed at most 3,000 people; if the Israelites numbered in the millions, a miracle of walls falling down would hardly have been needed to overcome this small settlement [Martin].

Similar difficulties arise in analysis of the ages of the patriarchs given in Gen. 5 and Gen. 11. Even setting aside the question of whether such extreme longevities are biologically possible, it is clear that there are anomalies in these figures:

Name	Age at first son	Years after first son	Age at death
Adam	130	800	930
Seth	105	807	912
Enos	90	815	905
Cainan	70	840	910
Mahaleel	65	830	895
Jared	162	800	962
Enoch	65	300	365
Methusaleh	187	782	969
Lamech	182	595	777
Noah	500	450	950
Shem	100	500	600
Arphaxad	35	403	438
Salah	30	403	433
Eber	34	430	464
Peleg	30	209	239
Reu	32	207	239
Serug	30	200	230
Nahor	29	119	148
Terah	70	135	205

Note that among the 19 figures in the middle column ("Years after first son"), in all but six instances the last two digits are 20 or less. The odds of this happening are one in 45,000. Note also that five of these 19 figures end in 00. These odds are roughly one in one million.

With regard to the very long lifetimes, some scholars think that these figures may have adjusted upward by Jewish scholars living in Alexandria during the first few centuries BC. Being aware that Egyptian history went back several millennia, perhaps they felt that the biblical record should reflect a similarly ancient history. Note that by adding the ages at first son through Lamech, plus 600 (since the flood occurred when Noah was 600), one finds that the flood occurred 1656 years after Eden. This corresponds to 86,400 weeks, which is a magic number in Egyptian cosmology, and which is memorialized even today in our reckoning of time: 24 hours x 60 minutes x 60 seconds = 86,400 seconds per day [Campbell, pg. 35-36]. These longevity figures also conflict with Gen. 6:3, where the Lord declares that mankind's days shall be "an hundred and twenty years."

The New Testament

The four Gospels, while generally in agreement on the Savior's ministry, contain numerous discrepancies, although as before such discrepancies pose no substantive difficulties, except to those who insist that the Bible is the inerrant word of God. One well-known example is the differing versions of Jesus' genealogy given in Matt. 1:1-17 and Luke 3:23-38. These passages disagree beginning with who was Joseph's father (Jacob versus Heli), the number of generations between David and Jesus (27 versus 40), and even in the genealogy between Moses and David [Spong, pg. 213].

There are significant differences in the two accounts of Jesus' nativity. In Matthew's account (Matt. 1:18-25, 2:1-23), Jesus and his parents were living in a house at Bethlehem at the time of his birth, and were visited by the wise men when he was one year old or so (since Herod ordered all children under two killed). They then fled to Egypt, but later settled in Nazareth. In Luke's account (Luke 2:1-52), Joseph and Mary were living in Nazareth, went to Bethlehem and then returned to Nazareth after a stop at the temple in Jerusalem. Thereafter they lived only in Nazareth – Luke specifically mentions that they returned to Jerusalem from Nazareth each year at Passover. Also, whereas Matthew's account records Jesus' birth during the time of Herod the Great, who died in 4 BC, Luke describes Jesus' birth in the days of Cyrenius, governor of Syria, who did not reign until 7 AD (an 11-year discrepancy). Along this line, there is no historical record of a decree from Augustus "that all the world must be taxed," requiring everyone to return to his/her birth city [Fox, pg. 27-38].

The four gospels do not even agree on who served as Jesus' original twelve apostles. Matt. 10:2-4 and Mark 3:16-18 list Simon (Peter), Andrew, James (son of Zebedee), John, Philip, Bartholomew, Thomas, Matthew, James (son of Alphaeus), Lebbaeus (surnamed Thaddeus), Simon (the Canaanite) and Judas (Iscariot). However, in Luke 6:14-16 and in Acts 1:13, Judas the brother of James is listed in the place of Lebbaeus, and Simon Zelotes is listed in the place of Simon the Canaanite.

The four accounts of Jesus cleansing the temple at Jerusalem (Matt. 21:12-13; Mark 11:15-17; Luke 19:45-46; John 2:14-16) are in remarkable agreement as to what transpired, even employing the same phraseology. But while Matthew's, Mark's and Luke's accounts place the event near the end of Jesus' ministry, John's account places it at the beginning. Some writers have advanced the dubious theory that there were two separate cleansings, but this does not

explain why the two events are described using such similar wording. Another difference between John and the other three gospels is in the timing of the Last Supper. In John 19:14, the Last Supper, arrest and trial all occurred on the day before Passover. But in Mark 14:12, Matt. 26:17 and Luke 22:1, the Last Supper was the Passover feast [Ehrman, pg. 10].

There are also differences among the four accounts of Jesus' death and resurrection. In Matthew and Mark, Jesus appears first to Mary Magdalene (Matt 28:9; Mark 16:9), whereas in Luke, he first appears to Peter (Luke 24:34). In Matthew, Jesus meets the apostles in Galilee (Matt 26:32, 28:10, 16), but in Luke and John, Jesus first appears before them while they were gathered in Jerusalem (Luke 24:33-36; John 20:19).

The two accounts of Paul's vision present similar difficulties:

Acts 9:3-7. And as he journeyed, he came near Damascus: and suddenly there shined round about him a light from heaven: And he fell to the earth, and heard a voice saying unto him, Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me? ... And the men which journeyed with him stood speechless, hearing a voice, but seeing no man.

Acts 22:6-9. And it came to pass, that, as I made my journey, and was come nigh unto Damascus about noon, suddenly there shone from heaven a great light round about me. And I fell unto the ground, and heard a voice saying unto me, Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me? ... 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.

Note that in the first account, the men with Paul heard a voice but saw nothing. In the second, they saw the light, but heard nothing. Joseph Smith evidently was aware of this discrepancy, because he changed Acts 9:7 to conform to Acts 22:9 in his revision.

Along this line, Acts 9:10-26 indicates that Paul went to Jerusalem and met the apostles shortly after his conversion. But in Gal. 1:16-18, Paul states that he went first into Arabia and then returned to Damascus; he did not visit Jerusalem for three years, and then saw only Peter and James there. He did visit Jerusalem again, this time taking Barnabas and Titus with him and visiting with the apostles, but that was 14 years later (Gal. 2:1).

The Nature of God

Christian denominations cite various biblical passages to support their particular concept of God. In Exo. 24:9-10, we read that Moses and seventy of the elders of Israel saw the God of Israel standing on sapphire stonework. In Acts 7:55, Stephen declared that he saw the glory of God, with Jesus standing on the right hand of God. Yet in Exo. 33:20, God tells Moses that "no man shall see me, and live." Along this line, John 1:18 says "No man hath seen God at any time," and Col. 1:15 mentions the "invisible God."

Given such differences, it is no wonder that Joseph Smith was confused in trying to sort out competing doctrines based on the Bible. Indeed, he changed Exo. 33:20 and John 1:18 in his revision. Along this line, it is also worth pointing out that the traditional doctrine of the Trinity, as taught by Catholic and Protestant denominations, is stated explicitly in only one verse:

1 John 5:7-8. For there are three that bear record in heaven, the father, The Word, and the Holy Ghost: and these three are one, and there are three that bear witness in earth, the spirit, the water, and the blood: and these three agree in one.

But this passage (known as the “Johannine Comma”) does not appear in the early Greek manuscripts – it can be traced back only to the eighth century [Ehrman, pg. 81]. It has been omitted in several recent translations.

Biblical Literature

Even viewed from an entirely secular point of view, the Bible contains great literature. The Book of Psalms contains some of the most beautiful and exalting poetry anywhere. The Book of Proverbs includes excellent written snippets of counsel for moral behavior, many of which are as relevant in our times as they were in ancient times. The Book of Ecclesiastes, after a strikingly sophisticated exploration of the angst of disillusionment, ends with the concise (and very wise) admonition, “Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: Fear God, and keep his commandments: for this is the whole duty of man.”

In the Book of Job, thought by many to be among the greatest works of all world literature, Job and his colleagues engage in a lengthy, thought-provoking and eloquently worded discussion on the nature of God and the meaning of human suffering. But must Job be read as literal historical fact? Did someone truly record, word-for-word, all of the intricate scholarly dialogue between Job and his friends? Even worse, did God truly engage in an idle wager with Satan, deliberately subjecting the saintly Job to a series of terrible calamities (Job 1:8-12)? Most biblical scholars have long concluded otherwise [Borg, pg. 179-179]. Surely the Book of Job is much more valuable as spiritual literature (world-class drama, in fact) than as a history textbook.

Science

It should be abundantly clear that the Bible was never intended to be a rigorous scientific treatise in our modern sense, and it is completely unrealistic to expect that the original authors of the Bible could have anticipated every development of modern science. Talmage, for instance, wrote, “The opening chapters of Genesis, and scriptures related thereto, were never intended as a text-book of geology, archaeology, earth-science or man-science.” Nonetheless, many today insist on a literal reading of the Genesis, holding that the earth (or even the entire universe) was created a few thousand years ago over a 6-day (or 6,000 years) period, that there was no life or death on earth prior to this, and that species are unchanged since creation [Gallup].

Needless to say, these notions are at odds with modern scientific research, which in many cases has been conducted by devout Christian believers, including Latter-day Saints [Bailey2002; Bailey2008]. In my personal view, a highly literal interpretation of the creation scriptures, in the face of this evidence, borders on the blasphemous notion that God has deliberately planted evidence throughout the earth (and even in the universe around us) to mislead us [Bailey2008].

Some LDS church authorities, mostly in the 19th and early 20th century, have taught literal readings of Genesis, but by no means have LDS leaders been unanimous in this regard. Brigham

Young (see quote above), James E. Talmage, John A. Widtsoe, B. H. Roberts and David O. McKay, among others, all argued for a creation over eons of time in keeping with modern science. For instance, Elder B. H. Roberts declared,

On the other hand, to limit and insist upon the whole of life and death to this side of Adam's advent to the earth, some six or eight thousand years ago, as proposed by some, is to fly in the face of the facts so indisputably brought to light by the researcher of science in modern times ... To pay attention to and give reasonable credence to their research and findings is to link the church of God with the highest increase of human thought and effort. On that side lies development, on the other lies contraction. It is on the former side that research work is going on and will continue to go on, future investigation and discoveries will continue on that side, nothing will retard them, and nothing will develop on the other side. One leads to narrow sectarianism, the other keeps the open spirit of a world movement with which our New Dispensation began. As between them which is to be our choice? [Roberts].

It is useful in this context to ask why the creation scriptures should be read so literally, when no reasonable person insists that the following passages should be taken literally:

1 Sam. 2:8. ... for the pillars of the earth [are] the LORD'S, and he hath set the world upon them.

Psa. 93:1. ... the world also is stablished, that it cannot be moved.

Psa. 104:5. [Who] laid the foundations of the earth, [that] it should not be removed for ever.

Eccl. 1:5. The sun also ariseth, and the sun goeth down, and hasteth to his place where he arose.

These passages, among many others that could be listed, affirm the geocentric cosmology of antiquity: the earth is flat, has four corners, is set on a foundation of pillars, and is immovable, with the sun and other heavenly bodies moving on transparent spheres above the earth. Such passages were the foundation of the persecution of Galileo and others over Copernican astronomy during the 16th and 17th centuries [Durant, vol. 7 (1961), pg. 600-612].

Readers who have studied mathematics may be amused by these two verses:

1 Kin. 7:23. And he made a molten sea, ten cubits from the one brim to the other: [it was] round all about, and his height [was] five cubits: and a line of thirty cubits did compass it round about.

2 Chr. 4:2. Also he made a molten sea of ten cubits from brim to brim, round in compass, and five cubits the height thereof; and a line of thirty cubits did compass it round about.

These verses describe the baptismal font in the court of King Solomon's temple as being "round in compass," 10 cubits from "brim to brim," and 30 cubits in circumference. In other words, the mathematical constant pi (the ratio between the circumference of a circle and its diameter) is exactly 3.00, not 3.14159... as students now learn in school. Even today, some writers are unwilling to accept the simple and obvious conclusion that these measurements were only rough approximations, and that the Bible is mistaken on this very minor point. For example, one evangelical scholar argues (without any scriptural justification) that the measurements of the

diameter and circumference were taken at different positions in the vertical profile of the pool [Major].

Violence and War

The Old Testament was written long before our modern anti-violence ethic (and even before Jesus' teachings in the New Testament), and thus it is not too surprising that a fair amount of war and violence are recorded there. Some well-known examples include the account of Simeon and Levi, two of the sons of Jacob, "boldly" slaying all the males of Shechem and spoiling the city (Gen. 34:20-28), and the account in Num. 31:7-18 of the Israelites, under Moses' command, killing all the Midianites except for young virgin females, which they took for wives.

Even if one acknowledges that such events actually occurred, must we insist that God condoned, much less directed, such actions? Was the Moses described in the Numbers passage the same person who declared from Mount Sinai, "Thou shalt not kill" and "Thou shalt not commit adultery"? The consensus of biblical scholars and archaeologists is that the early military accounts of the Old Testament were recorded many years after the fact (note the numerous instances of the phrase "unto this day" in Genesis through Judges) and had grown more heroic with the passage of time. Such considerations suggest that we should be very cautious in presuming historical accuracy, much less divine sanction, for these accounts.

Here is one other Old Testament passage where a strictly literal, historical reading turns the notion of a loving and forgiving God on its head:

2 Kin. 2:23-24. And he <the prophet Elisha> went up from thence unto Beth-el: and as he was going up by the way, there came forth little children out of the city, and mocked him, and said unto him, Go up, thou bald head; go up, thou bald head. And he turned back, and looked on them, and cursed them in the name of the LORD. And there came forth two she bears out of the wood, and tare <tore> forty and two children of them.

This describes how 42 "little children" (which according to LDS doctrine are not accountable for sin) were savagely attacked by bears for teasing the prophet Elisha about his baldness. Must we accept this account at face value?

The Law of Moses

The writers of the Old Testament established a surprisingly sophisticated written law, setting forth principles for an orderly, moral and God-fearing society [Conkling]. Indeed, much of the Law of Moses, including the Ten Commandments, remains entirely relevant today. But even allowing that the ancient Israelites required a strict law, some points of the Law were very punitive. For instance, Exo. 21:15-17 instructs that if a young person smites or curses his father or mother, he or she "shall surely be put to death." Death by stoning is also prescribed for a "stubborn or rebellious son" (Deu. 21:18-21) and for a young woman found not to be a virgin on her wedding night (Deu. 22:20-21). Prohibitions also apply to eating shellfish (Lev. 11:10), sowing fields with "diverse seed" (as is done in virtually every vegetable garden today) and even wearing a garment of mixed fabric (Lev. 19:19). The New Testament does not set these prohibitions aside.

Along this line, illegitimate children, as well as those with Ammonite or Moabite parentage, were banned from fellowship for ten generations by the following stern passage in Deuteronomy:

Deut. 23:2-3. A bastard shall not enter into the congregation of the LORD; even to his tenth generation shall he not enter into the congregation of the LORD. An Ammonite or Moabite shall not enter into the congregation of the LORD; even to their tenth generation shall they not enter into the congregation of the LORD for ever:

Many biblical scholars now believe that Deuteronomy was not literally written by Moses (1200 BC or earlier), but instead was compiled much later, possibly in the days of King Josiah, about 620 BC [Friedman, pg. 101-116]. One item of evidence here is to note that the Israelites living in the tenth century BC were completely unaware of the restriction given in Deu. 23:2-3, since the prophet Samuel anointed David, whose grandmother was Moabite (Ruth 4:13-17), to be Israel's second king. These provisions of the Law of Moses were rejected by the prophet Ezekiel, who taught that children are not to be held responsible for the sins of parents or ancestors (Eze. 18).

Women

In the Old Testament, Miriam, Deborah, Huldah and Noadiah, were prophetesses. In the New Testament, Mary and Mary Magdalene were central in Jesus' life and ministry. The Apostle Paul acknowledged notable contributions of several women in the early church, including Phoebe, Priscilla, Mary, Julia and Junia (Rom. 16:1-16). Paul also declared, "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus." (Gal. 3:28).

But in other passages, we read of sexist roles and attitudes that no reasonable person would endorse today. For example, in Num. 5:12-28, we read that if a "spirit of jealousy" came upon a man, or if he for any reason suspected that his wife may have been unfaithful, he was entitled to require that his wife undergo an ordeal by poison, administered by the local priest. If his wife died in the process, then she was presumed guilty of adultery, but if she recovered then she was judged innocent. There was no similar provision for a woman who suspected her husband of being unfaithful [Spong, pg. 18].

The New Testament does not fare much better in this regard:

1 Tim. 2:11-14. Let the woman learn in silence with all subjection. But I suffer not a woman to teach, nor to usurp authority over the man, but to be in silence. For Adam was first formed, then Eve. And Adam was not deceived, but the woman being deceived was in the transgression.

1 Cor. 14:34-35. Let your women keep silence in the churches: for it is not permitted unto them to speak; but [they are commanded] to be under obedience, as also saith the law. And if they will learn any thing, let them ask their husbands at home: for it is a shame for women to speak in the church.

If these two verses are taken to be the literal word of God, then the LDS Church (and almost every other Christian denomination) is acting in error by permitting women to pray, speak or teach in church meetings.

With regards to the first passage, the consensus of biblical scholars is that 1 Timothy was not actually written by Paul. With regards to second passage, scholars suspect that it was a later addition, since it does not appear at this location in the earliest manuscripts. Both passages sharply conflict with what Paul wrote just three chapters earlier (1 Cor. 11:5), where women are permitted to pray, teach and even prophesy in church meetings. They also conflict with the passages mentioned above in Rom. 16:1-16 and Gal. 3:28 [Ehrman, pg. 178-186].

Slavery

However, both the Old Testament and New Testament condone rather harsh treatment of slaves. For example, in Exo. 21:20-21, we read that so long as a slave survives “a day or two” after being beaten by his or her master, then the master is not to be punished:

Exo. 21:20-21. And if a man smite his servant <slave> or his maid <slave>, with a rod, and he die under his hand; he shall be surely punished. Notwithstanding, if he <the slave> continue <survives> a day or two, he <the master> shall not be punished: for he <the slave> [is] his <master's> money.

The New Testament also condones slavery and teaches slaves to be subservient:

Eph. 6:5. Servants <slaves>, be obedient to them that are [your] masters according to the flesh, with fear and trembling, in singleness of your heart, as unto Christ;

1 Pet. 2:18. Servants <slaves>, [be] subject to [your] masters with all fear; not only to the good and gentle, but also to the froward.

Such passages were cited by some even into the 20th century as justification for the continuance of slavery and racial discrimination.

Predestination

The following passages has been cited by those who question the notion of free agency:

Rom. 8:29-30. For whom he did foreknow, he also did predestinate [to be] conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brethren. Moreover whom he did predestinate, them he also called: and whom he called, them he also justified: and whom he justified, them he also glorified.

Eph. 1:5. Having predestinated us unto the adoption of children by Jesus Christ to himself, according to the good pleasure of his will, To the praise of the glory of his grace, wherein he hath made us accepted in the beloved.

Eph. 1:11. In whom also we have obtained an inheritance, being predestinated according to the purpose of him who worketh all things after the counsel of his own will:

Historians Will and Ariel Durant noted that Luther and especially Calvin took these biblical passages to “ruinously logical conclusions” in their stern doctrine of predestination, resulting in “the most blasphemous conception of God in all the long and honored history of nonsense.” [Durant, vol. 6 (1957), pg. 465, 490]. Some LDS authorities have suggested that “predestinate” in these verses should be read “foreordain” (a reading that I prefer), but this interpretation is a clear departure from the text as it appears in virtually all translations, including the King James.

Treatment of Jewish People

Many biblical scholars now believe that following the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD, the early Christians adopted antagonistic attitudes towards the Jews, which are reflected in some New Testament passages, including:

Matt. 27:22-25. Pilate saith unto them, What shall I do then with Jesus which is called Christ? They all say unto him, Let him be crucified. ... Then answered all the people, and said, His blood be on us, and on our children.

Luke 23:18-24. And they cried out all at once, saying, Away with this man, and release unto us Barabbas: ... But they cried, saying, Crucify him, crucify him.

John 8:44. Ye <Jews> are of [your] father the devil, and the lusts of your father ye will do. He was a murderer from the beginning, and abode not in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he speaketh a lie, he speaketh of his own: for he is a liar, and the father of it.

With regards to Matt. 27:22-25 and Luke 23:18-24, where “all” of the people demand Jesus’ death, it is important to note how this conflicts with Matt. 21:7-11, which tells of Jesus’ triumphal arrival in Jerusalem just a few days earlier. At that time, a “very great multitude” of the Jewish people of Jerusalem greeted Jesus as he arrived, with many shouting “Hosanna in the highest.” Further, we learn in Matt. 26:56 and Mark 14:50 that when Jesus was arrested, his disciples all “forsook him, and fled.” In other words, none of Jesus’ immediate disciples and apostles, who would have been immediately recognized and possibly put to death, were present during Jesus’ trials, so that the accounts we have of these events are at best second-hand. From these and other considerations, scriptural and historical, the consensus of modern biblical scholars is that at most only a few Jewish leaders were involved in Christ’s trial and crucifixion, certainly not the main body of the Jews in Jerusalem [Shorto, pg. 167-196].

In any event, passages such as “His blood be on us, and on our children” (Matt. 27:25) fly in the face of fundamental principles of justice, and conflict with other biblical teachings (e.g., Eze. 18), which ban punishment of children for the sins of parents or ancestors. Unfortunately, these passages have been cited for centuries by Christians as justification for cruel treatment of Jews. This persecution reached a tragic climax in the 20th century with the Nazi holocaust.

Conclusion

The Bible is the foundation of all Christian faiths, and a large portion of the Bible is common to Christian, Jewish and Islam faiths. Hundreds of millions draw comfort and spiritual enlightenment from its pages. The Bible established the progressive notion that the world has

advanced from ignorance and barbarism to enlightenment and civilization, and that an even brighter future awaits us [Nisbet, pg. 4-5; Bailey2000]. The Bible was the first major religious work to establish a written law, one that however faulty some of its details may appear to us today, was ahead of its time in setting the framework for an orderly, moral society; indeed, it is the basis of civil law in many western countries [Conkling]. The Bible's literature, such as the Book of Job, has no peer. Jesus' teachings have inspired millions of downhearted, weary and sin-laden to cast off their burdens and start anew.

But the claim that the Bible text is the inerrant word of God, or anything close to this position, is indefensible. Scientific realism, spiritual sensitivity, knowledge of the cultural and historical environment, and, above all, recognition of the fundamentally human element in scripture, are essential to obtain valid insights.

None of this means that one must reject a belief that the Bible is inspired. None of this means that one must abandon fundamental doctrines of God or salvation. But it does mean that modern readers must avoid the extremes of biblical literalism that permeate the modern evangelical world today, and which sadly are heard even among some Latter-day Saints. As Paul declared, "... the letter killeth, but the spirit giveth life" (2 Cor. 3:6).

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