



Deconstructing Biblical Literalism



As a progressive theologian, I have a quarrel with blind faith—not the faith of mystics or contemplatives, but the faith of biblical literalists, especially evangelicals. Don't you? I know I'm talking to the choir, yet our collective effort is needed to offset Christian Imperialism. So here are some highlights from how modern scholarship refutes biblical literalism; just pass it on.

The Bible is not the word of God; it's the word of man about God. Moses didn't write the *Five Books of Moses*; David didn't write the *Psalms of David*; Solomon didn't write the *Song of Solomon*, and Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John didn't write the gospels according to Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John.

The Bible is also not a book; it's a library. There's over 70 books in this library: books of law, fiction, poetry, history, narratives, legends, and letters. They were written in Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek over a period of more than a thousand years, following a period of oral transmission.

As such, the Bible presents the usual problems of language—transliteration, translation, transcription, authentication, attribution, and interpretation. Modern biblical scholars have largely resolved these problems. Yet, an enormous gap exists between what biblical scholars know and what Christians believe. One scholar said:

*"We need to have the courage to say that certain positions are nonsense."*¹

An intellectual's most generous concession—that the original scriptures *might* have been *inspired* by God—is irrelevant because we don't have the originals. We don't even have copies of the originals—or copies of the copies! We have copies from centuries later, and they all differ in several thousand places.

The politics of religion are also important for understanding how the Bible took shape. Selective revision and dissemination of knowledge among classes of people for control of collective meaning is a show of political power. So, if the Bible is the word of man about God, who are these men? What are their motives? How do biblical scholars know WHO wrote WHAT, WHEN, and WHY?

In deconstructing biblical texts, scholars take the forensic evidence of linguistics and philology and the excavation findings of archeology and anthropology and then apply these to a historical-literary analysis of text, form, and source in order to determine the author and context of a passage, which then suggests meaning. Without such a method, one can't say what scripture means.

Authentication & Attribution

Indeed, Hebrew Scripture, which Christians call the Old Testament, shows a variety of editorial and stylistic revisions over a long process of development. The most broadly accepted theory among biblical scholars for who wrote the Hebrew Scripture is the "documentary source hypothesis."² This textual analysis identifies four separate strands of narrative material, each with its own agenda, which were altered when eventually merged with another strand.

Aristocratic priests in late 6th century BCE were the final editors. As such, they took advantage of the opportunity to revise centuries of accumulated texts to support a growing theocracy of the Hebrew nation. Thus, scripture became an ideological tool of priests to control the "master story." Hebrew law was not binding unless of Mosaic origin,³ so priests often backdated texts to claim Moses' authorship or that of a sacred ancestor or folk hero with some credibility. We now know that stories about Moses' birth are modeled on Egyptian tales from a millennium earlier. The three different versions of Ten Commandments (Exodus 20, 34; Deuteronomy 5) result from similar cultural accretions. Hebrew priests advanced these moral strictures after the Hebrews' captivity in Babylon (597-538 BCE) where they were influenced by exposure to the *Code of Hammurabi* (1780 BCE).

Two different versions of the creation story (Genesis 1 and 2) result from sequencing two different narrative strands. The older or earlier creation myth from 9th century BCE is Genesis 2 where God creates Adam first, then the animals, then woman from a rib of Adam. That version differs from Genesis 1 where God creates the

¹ Catholic New Testament scholar Raymond E. Brown, S.S.

² Also called the Graf-Wellhausen Hypothesis for German biblical scholars Karl Heinrich Graf (1815-1869) and Julius Wellhausen (1844-1918).

³ Robert H. Pfeiffer, *The Books of the Old Testament* (New York: Harper & Row, 1965), page 70.

animals first, then man and woman together at the same time: “...male and female he created them” (Gen 1:27b). The priestly editors inserted this new story about the six days of creation culminating in a seventh day of rest in order to endow the Sabbath observance with a cosmic primeval origin. How Genesis 1 and 2 have been accepted for centuries as a tale of sequence, despite so many contradictory elements, can only be explained by faith being as blind as love.

Multiple narrative sources are also interwoven in Exodus 14, giving conflicting accounts of how Moses rolled back the sea. In one verse (14:16), Moses “*lifted up his rod and stretched forth his hand over the sea and divided it.*” Cecil B. deMille preferred that one. A different verse (14:21) from an older literary tradition comes a few sentences later with Moses “*stretching forth his hand over the sea and the Lord causing the sea to go back by a strong east wind all that night, which made the sea dry land.*” The Israelites crossed the marshland of reeds and, by morning, the waters returned—shallow but still muddy enough to clog chariot wheels. Even in modern times, people have witnessed the same effect of the wind on these shallow waters. But the image of Charlton Heston parting the waters endures.

Translation & Transcription

Although most books of the Old Testament were in Hebrew, the Hebrew language lost dominance after the fall of Jerusalem in early 6th century BCE when the Israelites were taken captive to Babylon. Their Babylonian exile lasted two generations. By then, only rabbis knew Hebrew; common Jews used Aramaic. When Hebrew Scripture was read—even in Palestinian synagogues—Aramaic translations had to be given.

By mid-3rd century BCE, Hellenized Jews outside Palestine knew neither Hebrew nor Aramaic. Hebrew Scripture had to be translated into Greek (a version called the *Septuagint*). The potential for error in translating Hebrew to Greek is enormous, because Hebrew is a mytho-poetic language: words paint pictures through metaphor. “Daughter of the cloth” meant seamstress; “Lip of Canaan” meant Hebrew language; “My horn” meant personal power.

Hellenized Jews revered most any Hebrew text as sacred; thus, the Greek *Septuagint* contained more books than were accepted into later translations. By 1st century CE, rival rabbinic schools were disputing which books were actually sacred. So a council of rabbis⁴ met to set the sacred canon; ironically, humans decided what was “divinely inspired.”

The rabbis rejected many of the books in the *Septuagint*. These are called the *Apocrypha* (for “hidden”). In late 4th century CE, when the Bible was translated from Greek to Latin, the *Apocrypha* was omitted. The preface to the Latin version (called the *Vulgate*) explained the need for a new translation because so many Greek translations differed. Of course, when the Bible was taken to those who didn’t read Greek or Latin, translations into other languages increased such differences.

When the first English translation from the Latin *Vulgate* was commissioned in late 14th century, the *Apocrypha* was still omitted. However, when the first English translation from the Greek *Septuagint* was commissioned in early 16th century, the *Apocrypha* was included. However, after the Reformation, Protestants ejected the *Apocrypha* from their Bibles; but after the Counter Reformation, Catholics restored the *Apocrypha* to their Bibles. That’s why Catholic and Protestant Bibles had always differed.

During all this squabbling, no original Hebrew Scriptures still existed against which to check errors of translation. The *Masoretic* text from the Middle Ages was the oldest Hebrew Old Testament. So the Greek *Septuagint* had seniority, despite that its *Apocryphal* books were still disputed after almost two thousand years.

That dispute was resolved upon discovery in 1947 of hundreds of Hebrew scrolls in clay jars hidden in caves around the Dead Sea. These scrolls included the complete texts of Isaiah, Job, and the Psalms, plus some parts of all the rest of Hebrew Scriptures (except Esther). Yet these scrolls were not the original Hebrew texts; they were copies of copies of copies by 1st century scribes.⁵ These Dead Sea Scrolls were significant for two reasons:

- First, the Hebrew of the scrolls differed from the *Masoretic* text; the debate over which was more authentic resolved in favor of the Dead Sea Scrolls, which were closer to the Greek *Septuagint*.

⁴ The Council of Jamnia in 90 CE.

⁵ Essenes, a community of ascetic Jews who probably supported themselves in the desert through transcription..

- Second, among the 202 distinct texts among the 555 scrolls found, no two copies were identical; scholars explain this as “insufficient control” over “scribal freedom.”

Before we disparage the poor scribes, let us take a moment to sympathize with their task. Hebrew and Greek have different alphabets. So, the first task was transliterating the letters by matching those of one alphabet with their compliments in the other—but only consonants! Hebrew and Greek had no vowels.⁶ Also, both Hebrew and Greek were written in full capital letters with no spaces between words and no spaces between sentences and no punctuation.⁷ Now read that by candlelight!

Making the task even more difficult was the protocol of reverence in never writing the name of God in full—whether Yahweh, Adonai, Jehovah, or Elohim in the Old Testament or Christ, Lord, Jesus, or the Holy Spirit in the New Testament. Instead, the first and last letter were used with a line above, which invariably was often misread.

The arduous task of translating and transcribing was done by hand in monastic schools or universities, usually under the impetus of some reform movement. Consequently, scribes were often inclined to change the text with editions, deletions, and variants of what they felt were “corrections.” Readers sometimes wrote “commentary” in the margins, which scribes often worked into the text as further “explanation.”

The scribes' difficulty is illustrated in another Moses passage from Exodus. Take Moses leading the Israelites out of Egypt to escape Pharaoh. One verse reads: “*God did not lead them by way of the land of the Philistines*” (Exodus 13:17). This route would have been the coastal highway, which was well-fortified by Egyptian soldiers. The next verse reads: “*God led the people by the roundabout way of the wilderness toward the Red Sea*” (Exodus 13:18). But the Red Sea is not between the city of Ramses and Canaan; it's much farther south. The Israelites' probable route was through the marshy wilderness that today borders the Suez Canal.

An Egyptian document from those times refers to a body of water near Ramses known as the “Papyrus Marsh”—“*Yâm sâph*.” The Hebrew in the Exodus account among the Dead Sea Scrolls used the word “*sâph*” for “reed,” but the Greek *Septuagint* translated that as “red.” Remember, no vowels! As most Old Testaments were translated from the Greek *Septuagint* or the Latin *Vulgate*—and not from the original Hebrew—we have inherited a dramatic error of cinematic proportions. Only recently have some Bibles taken advantage of the Dead Sea Scrolls and translated Moses' crossing of the “Sea of Reeds.”⁸

Replicating the Problems

The New Testament has much the same problems of language as the Old Testament, but now they emerge only from Greek, not Hebrew. Yet, note the similarities:

- No original New Testament texts in Greek exist; only copies of copies, and they differ;
- Greek texts had to be transliterated to Latin and other languages with alphabets other than Greek;
- Gospels and epistles were attributed to an apostle as a revered and credible source;
- Multiple and conflicting sources were interwoven along with myths and legends;
- Editorial revisions were made over time for political motives;
- Scribal freedom in copying manuscripts introduced numerous errors; and
- Some popular gospels and epistles were excluded from the sacred canon.

Evidence from 30,000 variations of the New Testament attests to the fact that manuscripts were substantially altered throughout the first few centuries of their circulation.

Everything we know about Jesus is secondhand anyway. He wrote nothing, and no documents survived from the contemporary life of Jesus. The gospel writers were not companions of Jesus or eyewitnesses or heard his words spoken. For 20 to 30 years after Jesus' crucifixion, stories circulated orally about what he said or did. By the end of 1st century, these stories started being written down.

- Paul's epistles are older (50-60 CE) than the gospels, but Paul only wrote half of these.⁹

⁶ Not until the 6th century CE in the Masoretic text were vowel markings indicated—and then only “pointing” under the consonants, like Brail.

⁷ Biblical texts were not divided into chapter and verse until 16th century.

⁸ In the text of the Catholic New Jerusalem Bible, and in a footnote in the New Revised Standard Version.

⁹ Authentic: I Thessalonians, Galatians, I Corinthians, II Corinthians, Romans, Philippians, and Philemon.

Inauthentic: II Thessalonians, Colossians, Ephesians, I Timothy, II Timothy, Titus, Hebrews.

- Mark's gospel is the oldest (70 CE); Matthew's and Luke's are the next oldest (80-90 CE);
- Matthew and Luke borrowed heavily from Mark and another unknown source or two;¹⁰
- John's gospel is from another generational mindset (100 CE) and is completely different.

The gospels have only two stories in common: Jesus' ministry in Galilee, and his passion and death. Everything else differs or contradicts. That's a good argument against biblical literalism. If one accepts the first or oldest gospel, Mark, as the inerrant word of God, then Matthew, Luke, and John are heresy.

- Luke (1:26-35) had Gabriel announce the imminent birth of Jesus to Mary; whereas, Matthew (1:20) had an unnamed angel announce it to Joseph.
- Only Luke (2:46) had twelve-year-old Jesus found in the temple.
- Mark (14:12-15:25) wrote that Jesus was crucified the day after the Passover meal; whereas, John (19:14) wrote that Jesus was crucified the day before.
- Luke (24:51) wrote that Jesus ascended into heaven a few days after his resurrection; whereas, the Acts of the Apostles (1:1-11) reported that Jesus ascended 40 days later.

Here's a better argument against biblical literalism. Mark, the first and oldest gospel, can't be inerrant because it was written in Greek! Jesus and his apostles spoke Aramaic!! So the earliest gospel word of God is already subject to the errors of translation. AND, if anything were important enough to be passed on literally, wouldn't it be the last words of Jesus on the cross? But...:

- Matthew (27:46) and Mark (15:34) had Jesus say "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me";
- Luke (23:46) had Jesus say "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit"; and
- John (19:30) had Jesus say "It is finished."

How did Mel Gibson decide?

Here's a fun test to debunk biblical literalism. Ask someone to name those present at the birth of Jesus. Most Christians would name the shepherds, three wise men, the angels, and the animals, but you can't find that scene in any of the gospels—particularly not three wise men (they were never numbered). We've all seen too many Christmas pageants! Clearly, cultural myths have eclipsed primary sources.

A Developing Divinity

The key question to ask about the *New Testament* is whether it's about Jesus or about Christ. If about Jesus, a man's name; the gospels are *historical*. If about Christ, the title "anointed one," the gospels are *theology*. Indeed, it's the later. Gospel writers were biased about Jesus by faith in him as Christ.

After the death of Jesus, the New Testament writers chronologically reflect a developing Christology of Jesus. Within the 50-year span from the oldest New Testament text (Paul's First Thessalonians) to the latest (the gospel of John), we can see this evolving belief.

- Paul wrote (Romans 1:3-4) that God had designated Jesus as the Son of God at his resurrection.
- Mark wrote (1:11) that Jesus was proclaimed Son of God by a voice from heaven at his baptism.
- Matthew (1:20) and Luke (1:35) wrote that Jesus was proclaimed Son of God at his conception.
- John (1:1-14) wrote that Jesus, as the Word, was God and was with God from the beginning of creation.

Each belief reflects a human author's subjectivity under a proselytizing motive. Thus, a Christology of Jesus as the Son of God evolved by sourcing its inception backward in time for increasing authenticity—from resurrection, to baptism, to conception, to creation. Truly, Jesus becomes the divine Son by the power of the human pen.

Furthermore, this development of doctrine is Jewish. The *New Testament* is Jewish! First generation Christians were Jewish; second and third generation Christians were Gentile. Thus, the gospels were written in the *midrash* style of ancient Jewish storytelling, which referenced Hebrew Scripture for its deeper meaning on current events, i.e., fulfillment of prophecy. The *midrash* style is not concerned with historic accuracy but with theological intent. Jewish Christians scoured Hebrew Scripture to find "foreshadowings" of Jesus' life in order to convince orthodox Jews, who had certain expectations about the Messiah within the scriptural authority of the *Torah*.

¹⁰ The "Q Source" of sayings of Jesus (perhaps the Gnostic Gospel of Thomas), and "UrMarkus," an earlier version of Mark.

This motive style is particularly apparent in the infancy narratives—found only in Matthew and Luke—because as a flashback without eyewitnesses, the childhood of Jesus is more vulnerable to fictionalizing, which is why Matthew and Luke are in such disagreement over details. Indeed, Matthew cites the prophets three times in rapid succession.

- After the angel announces that Mary has conceived of the Holy Spirit, his words explain (1:22): "*All this took place to fulfill what the Lord has spoken by the prophet...*," then he cites Isaiah 7:14.
- When Herod asks his high priests where the child was to be born, they assure him (2:5): "*In Bethlehem of Judea, for so it is written by the prophet...*," then he cites Micah 5:2.
- Where Joseph takes Mary and Jesus to Egypt to escape Herod, his words reinforce (2:15b): "*This was to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet...*", and then he cites Jeremiah.

This proselytizing for Jesus through the Hebrew prophets created hostility between Christian Jews and Orthodox Jews. Christian Jews were saying that God had created a new Israel based on the 12 apostles to replace the old Israel based on the 12 sons of Jacobs who led the 12 tribes of Israel. Because orthodox Jews didn't accept Jesus as Messiah, Christian Jews took the good news to the Gentiles. But the Gentiles misinterpreted the Jewish *midrash* style of presentation, reading it instead as literal history. Cut from the mytho-poetic prophetic context, the gospels were interpreted as biography. One should know better. Throughout the cultures of the world, gods are always born of virgins and also rise from the dead. How better to prove divinity?

Renowned theologians and biblical scholars agree that the New Testament texts offer no careful historian enough material for a biography. Whoever actually wrote the infancy narratives of Jesus had the Books of Isaiah and Micah in front of them. Whoever actually wrote the passion and death of Jesus had Isaiah and Psalm 22 in front of them. Proof that God is neither known nor understood—but well used.