

Frontier #1: Restoring God's Glory

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Our proper respect and awe of the Bible may on occasion incline us to expect it to do all kinds of miraculous things. For example, it is not likely that it will infallibly perform some special therapy if placed under a pillow at night. Or, can we properly assume that it contains a secret code waiting for us to decipher? Or, if in a jam, should we open it anywhere and stick our finger down on the nearest verse? Is the Bible supposed to be used in such ways? Is it possible to be unfair to the Bible?

The history of Christianity is full of earnest and ingenious expectations of the Bible which misjudge its very nature. If the Bible is more important than any other book then we must treat it with greater caution and thoroughness but not assume that the first thing that comes into our head is certainly its real meaning.

The Bible is not like the *Quran* and the *Book of Mormon*, which supposedly came directly from heaven. The Bible itself states - in the King James - that "Holy men of God spake as they were moved by the Holy Spirit (2 Pet 1:21)." Usually what they wrote was understandable to them as well as to their hearers. Usually it made sense within the worldview of the hearer.

For example, when Isa. 49:6 tells the Israelites that their interest in returning to their land is not as important in God's eyes as for His salvation to go to (quote) "the ends of the earth," (unquote) God is not referring to the ends of the *planet* but to the ends of the flat earthen plain constituting the Fertile Crescent which terminates at the foothills of the mountains of Iran and

Turkey. Why would Biblical writers be talking about a planet of whose very existence they had no knowledge? The immediate point was that the exiled community was *already in captivity*, in today's Iraq, at what was commonly referred to as "the ends of the earth." If this is what it means, the verse suddenly means that God wanted them to witness to their captors! He was not talking about them going elsewhere (to the furthest point on the planet, but to witness right where they were - in the most difficult circumstances of all!

A much more serious possibility of misunderstanding the Bible has to do with the assumption (which is easily made) that there is no progression of insight as the chosen nation's history unfolds - the idea that what God was able to tell His chosen people and what they were able to hear was exactly the same at the beginning of the Bible as at the end.

The Bible does tell us exactly what happened. But, it is not always perfectly clear that what it is saying is merely *descriptive* of what actually happened or is *prescriptive* of what should happen in general. I was reading 2 Chron. 15 a couple of days ago. Right in the midst of great revival and worship it says that "All who would not seek the LORD, the God of Israel, were to be put to death, whether small or great, man or woman." Sounds like the Taliban policy in Afghanistan, doesn't it?

However, just because the Bible accurately *describes* this situation, we cannot easily assume that it is *prescribing* or *promoting* this as a general practice. Jesus said let the wheat and the tares

both grow together.

In other words the Bible is the story of a chosen nation called out from within a drastically fallen humanity. The Bible is unique among all the world's national histories in the sense that it does not glorify the nation it describes. It is often a highly self-critical story. No other nation has written such a thing. What we see is a mixture of gradual and spectacular human redemption, a nation being led along as fast as its growth and maturity would allow.

Some scholars for many years were convinced that the evidence of changes over time could best be described as a sequence of different "dispensations" each of which clearly involves new understandings.

For example, we see animal sacrifices employed as signs and symbols. Later they are understood more clearly as a practice, as a means that no longer is crucial. Rarely is Satan mentioned early in the story. Later in the New Testament *Satan* or the *Devil* as a person is referred to 63 times.

A second questionable assumption often made about the Bible is the idea that prior to Pentecost in the New Testament the Chosen Nation is the sole sphere in the whole world in which God is at work. No one else knows anything about the one true God.

There is of course only one "Chosen Nation." However, the Bible itself clearly and repeatedly makes clear that God is constantly at work in every nation even though He chose one nation through which to work in a special way. This explains why there are so many parallels in the Bible to other traditions. The Ten Commandments are

not altogether unique. Circumcision is not unique. Animal sacrifice is not unique. Prayer is not unique. Worship of some sort is not unique.

Romans 1 tells how much people can learn of God in creation. I quote, "For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities - His eternal power and divine nature - have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made." In Genesis 21 Abraham is corrected in a matter of startling sin by, no less, Abimelech, a man in another tradition outside the Covenant. Matthew's lineage leaves out dozens of intermediate generations so as to end up with a teachable 14 between Abraham and David, 14 between David and the Exile and 14 between the Exile and the birth of Jesus. What could easily have been omitted (but was deliberately not left out) are the Gentiles in that lineage.

Thus far we have seen both the "progress of doctrine" in the Bible, and its borrowings from other traditions where God was also at work. The immediate reason to go into this much detail is due to widespread underestimation of the significance of the sudden prominence in the New Testament of Satan as a person.

It's widely understood that when God allowed the Babylonians to carry off the Southern Kingdom, the Jewish scholars now in Babylon found themselves in the midst of a Zoroastrian sea. I know the word *Zoroastrian* sounds strange and maybe kooky. Zoroastrians had some ideas we don't accept, but they at least understood that there was an enemy to God. They exaggerated his status as an equal evil god. But the impact on the Jewish community is

very clear. We see remnants of that perspective in one of the strong but heretical sects in the early centuries. I refer to the Manichaeian stream, which accepted the two equal gods of the Zoroastrian without objection. The most influential theologian of all time, Augustine, first became a believer within Manichaeism, and continued in it for a number of years. When he finally left them, he felt he had to oppose the idea of an equal evil god so strongly that he essentially went over to Neoplatonism which only has one god, a god who does mysterious things. Still today, for many, that's the way evil is explained - the mysterious work of God which we simply don't understand.

By contrast, the New Testament clearly reflects, as mentioned, a view in which Satan, or the Devil, is referred to sixty-three times. He is not an equal god but nevertheless a Dark Power who is alive and well even after the turning point in his defeat at the cross. 1 Peter 5:8 describes him as stalking about like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour. In much of Western Christianity then, Satan is either trivialized, downplayed, or ignored altogether.

John Eldredge, in his little book, *The Epic*, says

I am staggered by the level of naivete that most people live with regarding evil. They don't take it seriously. They don't live as though the Story had a Villain ... Life is very confusing if you do not take into account that there is a Villain.

Toward the very end of the New Testament, the role of the Devil is taken especially seriously in such statements as 1 John 3:8, "The Son of God appeared for this purpose, that He might destroy the works of the Devil."

This new ingredient in the New Testament made for one of the unexpected experiences of C.S. Lewis. Let him tell it in his own words:

One of the things that surprised me when I first read the New Testament seriously, was that it talks so much about a Dark Power in the universe - a mighty evil spirit who was held to be the power behind death, disease, and sin ... Christianity thinks this Dark Power was created by God, and was good when he was created, and went wrong. Christianity agrees ... this is a universe at war. (*Mere Christianity*)

In order to restore the glory of God, it seems obvious that we must stop assuming that He is the one behind all evil. This is a key point. The main problem in restoring God's glory is the very fact that secular people have been given the impression by earnest Christians that there is no Satan and that God is the author of all things that happen even the cruelest disease and suffering.

Unfortunately, while the Intelligent Design people insist properly that there is incontrovertible evidence of intelligence in nature, they don't speak of *evil intelligence*. This allows people to say, as a Harvard professor was quoted to say quite logically in TIME Magazine, that "If the God of the intelligent Design people exists, He must be a divine sadist who creates parasites that blind millions of people."

It seems clear that we must reinstate Satan and to do that, we have to go back to the Bible and try to understand it in the light of all that we now know about the world and the universe.

One scenario might be that Satan fell long before Genesis 1:1 and during millions of years distorted God's good creation, twisting the DNA of all animal life into violence. This would be the reason for astounding rampant cruelty and suffering abounding, virtually

every form of life, human or animal dying a premature death of violence through major physical aggression like African dogs tearing a wildebeast to pieces, or pathogens attacking the central nervous system.

Indeed, a fairly simple picture emerges once we recognize the possibility that the Genesis writers, upon which Moses drew, were speaking of contemporary events.

It goes like this: Act 1 in the drama is the creation of a universe including the earth and including many long years of angelic industry following God's guidance in developing life as we see it in its earliest evidences of non-carnivorous life. But into the midst of this, Act 2 begins with Satan's fall, which included perhaps thousands of intelligent angels in rebellion against a good creation and into the intentional and deliberate distortion of the DNA of all animals in general. We now suddenly, toward the very end of the story of life, see emerging incredibly violent and vicious forms of animal life. Should the general picture the paleontologists paint be right the time of the Fall of Satan would most likely have occurred, it seems to me, at the first occurrence of predatory life, which is considered to be the time of the so-called Cambrian Explosion, about 535 million years ago, toward the very end of the story of life.

Then Act 3 begins with Genesis 1:1, which in this scenario, is a new beginning which is local in an earth already populated by terribly depraved human beings who for about five thousand years have been viciously killing each other off as well as destroying many other forms of life. In contrast, Act 3, as depicted by Genesis, introduces ani-

mals which don't kill each other or eat each other. Even the human beings of chapter one are not carnivorous.

Act 4 begins, then, with Adam's fall and the gradual reversion of noncarnivorous humans and animals by interbreeding with the world outside of Eden, and thus the reversion to the violent situation in Act 2.

A second new beginning occurs, also regional, following the flood. A third new beginning occurs with God's formation of a redeemed nation through the pioneer leadership of a rare man of faith named Abraham. There were other new beginnings, the new beginning of the Exodus, the new beginning of the Davidic Kingship, the new beginning of the return from exile, the new beginning of Pentecost, the new beginning of Constantine, the new beginning of Islam and the new beginning of the Protestant Reformation.

Act 4, as you can easily see, is a period of wartime even though most Evangelicals think of it as a period of mere redemption of human beings. In fact, the redemption of human beings is very important, but it is also the basis of the war effort against the works of Satan. Tragically, his works are all too often today assumed to be, as mentioned earlier, the work of God Himself, thus emptying our evangelism of much of its meaning.

It cannot be too strongly stated that winning people away from sin and into the fellowship of God is not the end, but the beginning of a life of all-out obedience, sacrificially and dangerously in a war against evil.

Several topics can be seen intertwined in this unfinished epic. It

explains the origins of evil as a two-stage affair.

1) The Fall of Satan: the distortion of all nature, including human beings, followed by the brief new beginning of Genesis, and,

2) The Fall of Adam: the distortion of the new human beings created in God's image, followed by the very gradual redemption of those human beings to fight for knowledge of nature, knowledge of evil, and ways to fight it.

However, our church life today is by no means in the mood for war. Outside the churches, the computer games, fictional novels, the blockbuster movies, all have villains and intelligent opposition to good. Inside the walls of the churches we only speak about people gaining a hope for heaven and staying out of trouble, doing a few good things to justify their new life in Christ. Only missionaries are expected to live intentionally, dangerously, and sacrificially.

One of the chief characteristics of a people who do not sense the war or understand what they might do is the existence of mainly heavenly-focused perspective. In my youth I sang,

This world is not my home, I'm just a-passing through

My treasures are laid up somewhere beyond the blue

The angels beckon me from heaven's open door

And I can't feel at home in this world anymore.

My Savior pardoned me from guilt and shame I know

I'll trust His saving grace, while traveling here below.

I know He'll welcome me from heaven's open door

And I can't feel at home in this world anymore.

I have a precious mother up in glory land

I don't expect to stop until I clasp her hand

For me she's waiting now at heaven's open door

And I can't feel at home in this world anymore
The saints in glory land are shouting victory
I want to join their band and live eternally
I hear the sweetest praise from heaven's open door

And I can't feel at home in this world anymore

This thinking in itself is not evil nor disobedient, nor God denying. It simply reflects what remains when we do not know what we are being left in this world to do.

In the Second World War, not all civilians were inducted into the armed forces, and yet all citizens were clearly harnessed into the war effort, as we have commented earlier. Remember, there was no time for trivialities, or even the production of nylon stockings. Parachute cords were more important than nylon stockings. Tanks and bombers were more important than the production of new automobiles for civilians.

It is not merely the absence of energies applied to the destruction of evil ranging from political and industrial corruption, to the evils of deadly viruses, it is the presence of much of this being blamed on God, for that tears down terribly any real credibility to the Gospel of Jesus Christ. In our next lesson, we will try to sum all this up, see where we stand, and try to figure out what needs to happen next.