

# SCIENCE READING THE BIBLE

SERIES—CAN OLD LOVERS BE RECONCILED? : FAITH AND SCIENCE

*A sermon by David J. Anderson, Church of St John the Evangelist, Sunday, November 8, 2009.*

*Note: while this full (long) text was prepared, only portions of this sermon were delivered in the worship services. For example, the portion of the history of biblical interpretation was omitted at all services.*

I often find it embarrassing to get up to preach a sermon after today's Gospel passage is read. Jesus says certain things about people who like to wear long robes and say long prayers and most usually when I get up to preach, I'm wearing long robes and about to say long prayers. It's embarrassing. More about the Gospel passage later.

A few weeks ago, when John Bowen introduced this series on Faith and Science, he pointed out quite correctly that the modern scientific enterprise took root in the soil of the Protestant Reformation. It was a time of social, political and religious turmoil, a time of great change.

With the invention of the printing press and with the Protestant interest in publishing the Bible and putting it into the hands of ordinary people, there was to be a radical shift in the way that the Bible itself was read and understood. And while the Bible helped people to see that God's creation was a wonderful mystery that could be explored and understood because God's natural laws made this possible, the interest in looking at things this new, "scientific", way was eventually turned back upon the Bible itself. If you can look at the world in a scientific way, why not the Bible and its claims?

## A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE INTERPRETATION OF THE BIBLE

### THE APOSTOLIC PERIOD

We should probably begin by remembering that throughout its history the Bible has not always been read in the same way. People often assume that throughout most of its history the Bible has been read for its most literal meanings. Perhaps it will surprise you to learn that throughout its history the Bible has been read very different ways. For example, if we go back to the time of the apostles (the earliest leaders of the church, who knew and followed Jesus themselves and had a hand in writing the New Testament texts), we know from reading the New Testament that they seem to have read the Old Testament primarily from the perspective of the fulfilment of prophecy. When we read the work of Matthew, for example, it seems to be one of the main themes of his writing to show how Jesus fulfils Old Testament prophesy regarding the promised Messiah. Jesus himself seems to have read the Old Testament this way.

## THE PATRISTIC PERIOD

In the period following the early church, two main approaches evolved out of two great centres of teaching. The Alexandrian school followed an allegorical approach, insisting that passages always had a secondary, often hidden, meaning. The apostle Paul himself gives an allegorical reading of the Old Testament in his Letter to the Galatians when he teaches on the Genesis stories of Sarah and Hagar. Paul says that the two women represent two covenants: the covenant of the law at Sinai and the new covenant in Jesus. None of this is of course readily apparent in a surface reading of the Genesis text. In the Alexandrian School this method was taken to a kind of extreme, where allegory was seen everywhere in the Bible. Any literal or historical sense of the biblical texts was obscured.

In opposition to the Alexandrian School, a new and competing school of interpretation developed in Antioch. The Antiochene School stayed to the more literal and historical sense of the texts.

## THE MEDIEVAL PERIOD

The medieval period saw an explosion of allegorical readings of the biblical texts and the Alexandrian School became the dominant one. Medieval biblical interpreters looked for four levels of meaning in each text: (1) the literal; (2) the spiritual; (3) the moral; and, (4) the eschatological (to do with the final consummation of all things). Very little interest was given to the literal meaning, however. There were some exceptions to this trend, especially in the later medieval period, where people such as Thomas Aquinas and some Jewish scholars maintained that the literal sense of the texts were still important. These exceptions later became an important influence upon Martin Luther and other Reformers as one of the main concerns of the Reformation was to rethink and recapture how the Bible ought to be read.

## THE REFORMATION

Luther and the other Reformers called for a return to a more literal understanding of the Bible. The Reformer's cry was "sola scriptura," that is, "the Bible alone." By this they meant that the Bible itself should be the main reference for the interpretation of the Bible. For the Reformers it was important to free readers of the Bible from the church's dogma, which in light of many centuries of fanciful reading, might not always be helpful.

## MODERNITY

With the Enlightenment came the notion that the Bible could be read and studied like any other book. The argument was made that since God gave us rational minds, the Bible should be grasped like any other communication. The Bible became subject to historical investigation. There was a new emphasis placed upon studying the Bible in its original languages and in studying early manuscripts. The Bible began to be viewed as any other ancient human book that could be studied with human tools.

## THE BIBLE AND THE “SCIENTIFIC METHOD”

The tools of the scientific method were finding application in all sorts of fields of study, including the literary. The basic process of the scientific method involved:

- Observation and collection of data;
- The development of a hypothesis to explain and integrate the data; and,
- Testing of the hypothesis through experiment and further observation.

With the new study of the Bible, scholars recognized certain patterns and other data in the Bible and devised hypotheses to explain them. So here we see a kind of scientific approach (the method of observation, hypothesis and testing) being turned upon the Bible itself for the first time. So I want to talk about some examples of how a kind of “scientific” reading of the Bible has worked and some of the results of that kind of reading of the Bible.

### EXAMPLES OF SCIENCE READING THE BIBLE

#### THE “PROBLEM” OF MIRACLES

One of the first obstacles the modern (*modern*, meaning post-Enlightenment, not necessarily contemporary) scientific mind has to work with is the problem of miracles. When you read the Bible in both the Old and New Testament we read about miracles or “signs”. It is the case that for the most part what we talk about a miracle it poses a problem from this scientific point-of-view. A miracle is generally not something that we can repeat in a laboratory and so it is difficult to explain. And so the modern-scientific reader found that they had to develop some hypotheses to explain the patterns of miracles that they encountered in the Bible.

One hypothesis put forward is simply to say that these things never happened and never happen. Since miracles defy the natural laws we see all around us and since evidence tells us that these natural laws never change, the conclusion, or the hypothesis, is to say that the accounts of miracles are not literal histories. They did not happen and never happen.

That is not to say that Biblical scholars with this point of view have not attempted to explain the miracles of the Bible. You can read countless books that will explain how a strong wind blowing in a certain direction could create a “dry” place in the Red Sea through which the Israelites could have escaped Egypt. William Barclay, a very popular New Testament commentary writer from the early twentieth century, while offering quite orthodox commentary on most passages, had a particular penchant for explaining the miracles of Jesus, some would say, “explaining them away.” Take, for example, Jesus feeding of the five thousand in described in John’s Gospel. A very popular reading of that miracle story, one that I’ve heard many people here at St John’s, notices that Andrew finds a boy who is willing to share his lunch of two fish and five barley loaves. Jesus takes that meager lunch and shares it. And the explanation is that everyone miraculously begins to share what they had, rather than hoarding it to themselves, and the result is that not only is everyone fed, but there is plenty left over. I know that this

reading of the Feeding of the Five Thousand is attractive to many people. To the *modern* reader, it is a plausible explanation, and there is not much in the text that would actually rule out such a reading. But not every miracle can be so tidily explained and the lingering question is, whether an insistence upon every biblical account of a miracle being accountable to a scientific explanation allows room for the God the scriptures are seeking to reveal to us. In fact, what we might want to say to the this modernist/scientific reading of the Bible, that says that miracles must be explained (explained by saying they never happened, or explained by saying they weren't really miraculous): is that the most faithful explanation is that there really is no explanation other than the fact that God is God and Jesus is God's Son.

### THE SYNOPTIC PROBLEM

Let me talk about another example of "science reading the Bible" that I believe has proven more fruitful. The scientific method always begins with observation. When we read the Gospels, the biographies of Jesus, we notice that the first three, Matthew, Mark and Luke bear striking similarities, while the fourth, John is a little different than the others. Matthew, Mark and Luke have come to be known as the "Synoptic" Gospels (synoptic, meaning: seen together), because of these similarities. When we take observation to another level and actually put the various stories from the synoptic Gospels side by side, we see that in many cases not only are they similar, they share exact, wording. Yet, we also notice that the Gospels are not identical, they have differences. And sometimes two of the Gospels agree identically and differ from the other and at other times another two will agree and differ from the other.

These observations call for a hypothesis. And so critics have come up with a hypothesis about written sources for the Gospels. If the Gospel writers shared written sources the patterns of similarities could be explained. And so current thinking in the main runs along lines that say that Mark is one of the written sources for Matthew and Luke, and that Matthew and Luke seem to have shared some other written source that we don't actually have copies of. The scholars have nicknamed this hypothetical source as "Q" and all of this is called the "Two Source Theory". Sometimes in books you will read about the mysterious Q Gospel and perhaps you've wondered what that is. "That's not in my Bible." Actually it is in your Bible: it's the bits of Matthew and Luke that are the same, but don't appear in Mark. But Q itself is still just a part of hypothesis really.

So scholars made an observation and developed a hypothesis that seems to work with most of the evidence. So what? Well, actually, this theory has really helped to advance our understanding of the New Testament and the particularly given us information about the Gospel writers, their particular emphases and interests and also about their audiences, the people that they were originally writing to.

### THE JESUS SEMINAR

Another more current, and perhaps controversial, example of "science reading the Bible" in a sense builds on the hypothesis I've just spoken of. If the Gospel writers used various sources and edited them together, making changes, adding detail in some cases,

leaving it out in others, we might assume that they did so for a purpose. If that is true, scholars have wondered whether it is possible to strip away the various intentions of the Gospel writers and their own emphases and perhaps biases, in order to get right back to nothing but the actual historical Jesus and his sayings and his sayings alone.

Various scholars have attempted this type of work, and among the most famous of these have been those scholars of the so-called “Jesus Seminar”, people like John Dominic Crossan, and those who have responded to them, people like N.T. Wright. Both of these are very well respected and serious scholars. Wright and Crossan have debated many times in public forums. I remember reading Wright praising Crossan’s scholarship and contribution saying, “With foes like this, who needs friends?” We’ve talked about how sometimes these topics of science and faith end up in places like *TIME* magazine, well this debate about the “historical Jesus” is one that often appears in the magazines at Easter time.

Crossan writes this about his own work, “What if you wanted to move behind the screen of credal interpretation and, without in any way denying or negating the validity of faith, give an accurate but impartial account of the historical Jesus as distinct from the confessional Christ? That is what the academic or scholarly study of the historical Jesus is about, at least when it is not a disguise for doing theology and calling it history, doing autobiography and calling it biography, doing Christian apologetics and calling it academic scholarship.”

So a scholar like Crossan uses three basic tools that he claims to employ with scientific objectivity. First, he uses the science of cross-cultural anthropology: what is true across similar cultures. For example, what do we know about people’s customs regarding meals and eating together? Meals figure prominently in the stories of Jesus. Second, they use Greco-Roman and especially Jewish history. And finally, they use textual studies to in order to try to determine the earliest attestations to the sayings and doings of the historical Jesus. Crossan’s idea is that these three taken together offer coordinates as well as a corrective for triangulating, if you will, in upon the historical Jesus.

I could talk with interest for hours about the results of this type of inquiry, but suffice it to say that the result is that the Jesus Seminar finds only a small remnant of the historical Jesus reflected in the Jesus of the Gospels.

The cover of Crossan’s book, *The Historical Jesus*, makes a startling claim to be “The first comprehensive determination of who Jesus was, what he did, what he said.” It seems to be a great ambition, but Crossan’s tools seem to lead him to a description of a hippie Jesus preaching to a yuppie world, precisely the sort of Jesus we might expect Crossan to find. We have to wonder about the scientific objectivity with which these tools have been employed.

Whether, in the end we buy the theory, may not be the point. Perhaps the most helpful thing about science reading the Bible is the inquiry itself. Crossan, for example, teaches

us a great deal about the world in which Jesus lived and all of that in turns help to illuminate the biblical texts.

## THE FUTURE OF SCIENCE AND THE BIBLE

If you were here last week with David Chettle, the scientist from McMaster University, that told us something of his own journey with faith and science, you will have heard him say that he and his colleagues are realising again that science, even so-called “pure science” is not pure as once thought. Science is a human endeavour and we bring who we are to our scientific study.

In these postmodern times we are increasingly aware of the importance and influence of perspective. The cry of the reformation period, “*sola scriptura*”, *the bible and the bible alone* seems somewhat naive. We know that we will always be bringing something with us to the Bible. For me, that is always a very important corrective as I bring whatever tools with me to reading the Bible.

In today’s Gospel, Jesus employs a type of observation and hypothesis. He sits down opposite the treasury and watches people putting money into the treasury. He sees people give from their abundance and he sees a widow give all that she had to live on, out of her poverty. From this observation Jesus seems to develop a hypothesis and draws a conclusion about what real faith looks like: it’s not just a show, but it is a total commitment. The life of this widow, in a manner of speaking, is the evidence Jesus is looking for, for the great hypothesis of faith. If we look at the life of the widow we see the truth of the great hypothesis of the Bible being lived out.

When we come to the Bible, we need to remember who we are. We need to remember that this is our book and this is our story. The Bible is not just some book like any other book; it is ours. We find our identity in this book: the parts we like and the part that embarrass us. We understand the Bible properly only when we stand together in this community; we require the interpretive clues that we find in the life we find together, in the same way that Jesus found the life of faith being lived out by the widow in the temple.

What is more, the people who live out there in our world also need us to be the people of this book, the Bible, so that they too can see the truth. In a sense, we are the scientific proof of the great hypothesis of the Bible. We are called to be the living sign of God’s loving and redeeming action in our world. May God help us to provide such evidence of our loving God. Amen.