

Biblical Misunderstandings and Difficulties

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Holy Book

For millions of people of faith, the Bible is a holy book. Written over about ten centuries (fifteen if one includes the oral traditions), the Bible is unlike any other book, if we even can call it ‘a book’. To be more precise, the Bible is a collection of many books, a library of books containing different literary styles and forms. This fact may lay at the root of many difficulties that people have with the Bible; readers sometimes open the Bible and look for easy advice or practical moral guidelines, but instead find different stories and tales, some of which are very difficult to understand. Moreover, some of these stories evoke even moral difficulties.

The atheists and sceptics sometimes speak in triumph: “*Bible – Holy book? Come on!*” And yet, the people of faith claim that the Bible is the holy book that contains the word that God addressed to the people of all ages and all times.

So, how do we understand the holiness of the Bible? The explanation is thus in order. In the phrases “the Holy Scriptures” or “Holy Bible”, the adjective ‘*holy*’ (*kadosh* in Hebrew) does not describe moral perfection. Only God is holy – which means that he is separate, totally other, and transcendent. Everything that belongs to God is therefore holy. In this sense, the Bible, containing the word of the Holy God, is holy itself. Therefore the Bible is holy *not* because it speaks of holy people or holy things only (in many places it speaks of very un-holy people and very un-holy things!), but because in the eyes of believers it is the word of God, and speaks of the things of God who reaches to humanity in order to offer it salvation. Moreover, for believers the Bible not only speaks of God but is also a place when they can meet God and – if only they open their hearts – experience God’s love and mercy.

Two Authors

There is also a second misunderstanding that we need to address. Many people today imagine that because the Bible is the word of God it was in its entirety dictated by God to human authors, who simply wrote the words that God spoke to them. In the old art, we can sometimes find this depiction of the Biblical inspiration; we see a human author writing the book depicted with a dove sitting on his shoulder (symbolizing the Holy Spirit) and dictating to him word by word the biblical text.

According to the teaching of the Catholic Church, the Bible has two authors: God and human beings. The latter are not just passive instruments in the hands of God. Vatican II Constitution on Divine Revelation no. 11 says that “*to compose the sacred books, God chose certain men who, all the while he employed them in this task, made full use of their powers and faculties so that, though he acted in them and by them, it was as true authors they consigned to writing whatever he wanted written and no more.*”

Then, the document quotes St. Augustine who said that God talks to his humans in human words, so that they are able to understand. So, in order for us to understand any Biblical text we have to grasp what the human authors wanted to say. We do not read in the same way a poem, novel or the codex of the law or parable. If we did, it would create many misunderstandings and, more often than not, we would miss the real, true meaning of the text.

Literary Forms

There have also been many misunderstandings in regard to literary forms of the Bible. We often do not have trouble distinguishing between literary forms in the secular literature. We will not learn how to cook using the book on geometry, and we will not learn how to do geometry from a cook book. We will not read a poem in the same way we read a novel. We have to approach the Bible with this in mind.

Many times in the Bible text the meaning of the literary form is very clear. For example, in the book of Judges we have a story of trees that went to anoint the king over themselves (Judges 9:8-15). Nobody claims that through that story Bible teaches that trees sometimes talk and elect kings. Instead, it is a symbolic tale, a parable, which meaning is totally different. So in this case it is easy to determine the literary genre. It is not always that easy though.

For instance, many scholars have used a lot of ink to write about the fish that swallowed the prophet Jonah, trying to answer the question what kind of fish that was, how big the fish was, etc. In doing so, they missed the point of the story that really wanted to teach that God is everywhere and from him no one can escape.

So, if we are to understand any text of the Bible, the determination of its literary genre is very important and would save us many headaches and misunderstandings.

Last observation: When reading the Bible we sometimes discover that things that interest us most were not at all important for the Biblical author. For instance we often focus on accuracy and exactness in many details that were really of secondary nature for the Biblical author. For example, in the story of the flood (Genesis 6:5-9:17), the author is not concerned about the accurate number of animals that entered the ark. According to Genesis 6:19-20, Noah led to the ark one pair of each kind of animal; but according to Genesis 7:2-3, of every clean animal he was to have seven pairs, and of every unclean animal only one pair. Which is true? If we asked that question to the last redactor of the book of Genesis who compiled these stories, he would have said that it is not really important. There were in reality two separate accounts of the flood (like there were two separate accounts of the creation of men), and the redactor wanted to preserve them both, even with their differences.