

UNDERSTANDING THE BIBLE HISTORICALLY

The Bible is made up of 66 “books,” that is, individual compositions that have been brought together into one collection. Thirty-nine of these are recognized by Jews as holy scripture, and an additional 27 are accepted by Christians. They are understood as a divine gift to humanity for guidance in living and for support of faith in God.

This said, among both Jews and Christians **there remains much diversity in understanding what the “inspiration” of scripture means** and in what way its authority is definitive for practical life. While we would not propose to answer every question that is raised regarding this much-debated subject, we believe that in evaluating the Bible’s relevance to 21st century culture and politics, a historical perspective is essential.

The books of the Bible were composed over a period of some 1,000 years, from approximately the 10th century before our era to the 2nd century after Christ. Its earlier books contain memories and traditions passed down orally from many centuries earlier. It was written in three ancient languages, Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek, languages which in their biblical forms are no longer spoken, but which in modern forms are still living languages. It is essential to recognize that *the books were written in the first instance for the people of ancient Israel and for early Christians living in the Roman Empire.* This means that the biblical authors spoke to the people of their times not only in their languages, but also in terms of their cultures and their understandings of morals, of their past and their visions of the future, and of their gradually deepening perceptions of God. The stories, laws, admonitions and songs of which much of the Bible consists reflect the dilemmas, failures and triumphs of men and women within these contexts, and constantly point their readers to higher levels of perception and action as they are confronted by the divine Spirit.

How then is the Bible “authoritative” for us today? Since the Bible was written originally for readers living in a pre-scientific, and to a large degree a pre-Christian world, today we must play fair with its authors. We cannot expect them always to speak as a 21st century writer would do. As the ancient Israelites and later the early Christians developed over time in their perceptions of God’s ways and God’s expectations of them, which developments are mirrored in the Bible, so we today must take into account advancements in the physical and human sciences and in theological insight that have been achieved in the nearly 2000 years since the last book of the Bible was written. In recognizing the Bible as authoritative for our lives, we must read it through the lenses of what the sciences offer us. We should not worship the Bible; we should worship the God who, we believe, gave it to us.

This means:

We should always continue the search for a fuller understanding of the Bible.

Example: Over the last two hundred years, scholars and researchers have made great strides in understanding better the world in which the Bible was written. Archaeology especially has revealed many insights into the Bible. For instance, the story of how both Abraham’s wife Sarah

and the wives of Jacob gave their husbands servant girls with whom to have children may seem troubling. We now know from laws and marriage contracts of that period that this was a recognized and legal custom when a wife was unable to bear a child. These women were simply doing what they were taught was the right thing to do.

In searching for the truth of the Bible, we should focus on the spirit behind its words, on the God who is revealed there, rather than on literal events.

Example: This principle is particularly helpful and important in understanding stories of miracles; take for instance, the stories of Lot's wife being turned to a pillar of salt (Gen 19:26), the parting of the Red Sea (Ex 14:21-31), Elijah taken up to heaven in a whirlwind (2 Kings 2:11), the three men saved in a fiery furnace (Dan 3:19-30), Jonah swallowed by a large fish (Jonah 2:1-10). The point is, if we choose to take these stories literally, we are free to do so; but if in good conscience we feel that we cannot believe that they literally happened, that is legitimate also, because each one offers us a spiritual message, which is the really important thing.

We are encouraged to come to our own conclusions regarding the interpretation of scripture, but to do so taking into account the discoveries of science and the heritage of Christians who have gone before us.

Example: Take the story of how the universe was created by God in seven days (Gen 1). The sciences of astronomy, biology, and paleontology have revealed a very different picture of the origins of the universe, including the earth and plant, animal and human life. What is more, the discoveries of archaeology have demonstrated that many centuries before the Bible story was written, stories of creation and the flood similar to those in the Bible were current in the ancient Near East. *But it is not crucially important that the Bible and science do not always agree, because these Bible stories have a greater purpose—they are testimonies to God's power and tell us that behind everything else there is God.* They are like great poems and novels: what they tell us may not have literally happened in the ways they are narrated, but they remind us of great truths.

Thus we approach the Bible with both *reason* and *faith*.

Example: *Reason* helps us make sense out of what we read in the Bible. If on the surface, literally, it doesn't make sense that Jonah survived "three days and three nights in the belly of the whale," reason still can lead us to see that this is a story of God's providence in helping a disobedient man come to his senses. We can learn from the bad things that happen to us. *But faith will always be required.* There is no scientific or mathematical proof of the existence of God, or that God cares for us, or that Christ is our savior. *These are basic messages of the Bible, and they are all to be accepted by faith.*

Earle Hilgert
Professor of New Testament Emeritus
McCormick Theological Seminary