Bible 101 for Atheists

Atheist Presentation December 2012

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Introduction

[Tonight's presentation of the Christian Bible by an atheist to a society of atheists and agnostics that is not a simple bible-bashing exercise is interesting, to say the least. Imagine a similarly dispassionate presentation of Richard Dawkin's *God Delusion* or Christopher Hitchin's *God Is Not Great* to a local Hillsong evangelical discussion group.]

Tonight I want to talk about the English Bible today – or more correctly Bibles - and introduce you to the evangelical Christian tensions over new translations from a hopefully dispassionate and secular perspective. Secondly, I want to consider biblical stories as on-going cultural myths and histories with a particular look at the story of Exodus. And, finally, I shall make a few comments about the Gospels, the first four books of the New Testament, which appear to be biographies of Jesus. This may also give us some ideas as to how atheists and agnostics could palatably read biblical texts.

As I am considering the Bible as an important social document – an influential collection of ancient folklores, stories, poems, and myths - my purpose is neither to denigrate the text nor to venerate it. There are many sites dedicated to detailing the inconsistencies and absurdities of the text if treated as historical and religious truths without my repeating similar analyses here.[1]

I am not a biblical scholar, just an enthusiastic observer with amusingly negligible religious upbringing. I grew up in a religiously-indifferent, secular family where Christianity was seen as purely a cultural artefact. Until the last 10 years, my religious education never went past colouring in the holy lands during primary school religious instruction. My epiphany came when a religious friend said that I was arguing from a position of ignorance about Christianity and the Christian Bible. I accepted that criticism and have corrected and am correcting that situation with even some post-graduate studies. So my knowledge has changed even if not my beliefs.

Some Popular Expressions

We have a surprisingly large number of literary references in English with biblical origins that have no longer any religious significance. Here are a few quoted from the web-site http://www.squidoo.com[2]

> **Nothing but skin and bones** - *All my intimate friends detest me; those I love have turned against me. I am nothing but skin and bones* (Job 19:19-20)
>
> **I escaped by the skin of my teeth -** *All my intimate friends detest me; those I love have turned against me. I am nothing but skin and bones; I have escaped with only the skin of my teeth*. (Job 19:19-20)
>
> **There's a time and a place for everything** - *There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under heaven (*Eccl 3:1)
>
> **Going the extra mile -** *If someone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles.* (Matthew 5:41)

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[1] http://www.infidels.org/library/modern/donald_morgan/inconsistencies.html is a good staring point.
[2] http://www.squidoo.com/everyday-sayings-that-come-from-the-bible

> ***United we stand, "divided we fall"** - Jesus knew their thoughts and said to them, "Every kingdom divided against itself will be ruined, and every city or household divided against itself will not stand". (*Matthew 12:25) and not the 1970's song from *Brotherhood of Man*

> ***Scapegoat*** - *Aaron shall bring the goat whose lot falls to the LORD and sacrifice it for a sin offering. But the goat chosen by lot as the scapegoat shall be presented alive before the LORD to be used for making atonement by sending it into the desert as a scapegoat.* (Leviticus 16:9-10)[3]

Later Uses of the Bible

We also find biblical references and illusions in speeches and important literary works. Stephen Prothero, a professor in the Department of Religion at Boston University, quotes an example from a speech by Ronald Reagan in 1980 as a former governor before becoming a president of the United States. His closing words were:

> *We can meet our destiny – and that destiny to build a land here that will be, for all mankind, a shining city on the hill.[4]*

This was drawn from an early popular sermon by John Winthrop called *A Model of Christian Charity* written in 1630 where he says, *'For we must consider that we shall be as a city upon a hill'*, which, in turn, comes from Matthew 5:14, *'You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hidden'[5]*. This with other sentiments became the basis of the so-called Manifest Destiny[6] and 'American exceptionalism'[7] that we still see today as United States' self-appointed commission to proselytise their culture, liberalism, and democracy throughout world.

Is the Bible…?

The Christian Bible as a core of Christian faith has, like Christianity itself, affected the world's cultures in many fundamental ways and continues to do so to this day. So*, is it great literature?* I am not so sure. Admittedly there are many wonderful parts, especially in the earlier Jewish writings, but those are set amongst large tracts of banality[8]. I differ with Richard Dawkins who believes the Bible is great literature but agree that all people should have some familiarity with the Bible as a significant part of our Christian-derived culture. Ultimately it may be well-nigh impossible to be objective about the literary merits of the Bible independently of our previous exposure and associated faith claims.[9] *Is it great moral and ethical instruction?* The majority of the biblical stories are not about morality or ethics as such but about God's dealings with the people of Israel. And that even includes the later Christian writings where the early followers of Jesus saw themselves as the true inheritors of Israel. So you might be better off reading Peter Singer or A.C. Grayling for ethical

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[3] *Scapegoat* was first rendered by William Tyndale in his 1526 English New Testament as *(e)scape goat*.
[4] Prothero, S., *The American Bible*, HarperOne, New York, 2012, p. 47
[5] NRSV, *Matt 5:14*
[6] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Manifest_destiny
[7] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/American_exceptionalism
[8] See interesting discussion on this very point: http://whyevolutionistrue.wordpress.com/2012/05/21/is-the-bible-great-literature/ and Richard Dawkins in the Guardian: http://www.guardian.co.uk/science/2012/may/19/richard-dawkins-king-james-bible
[9] In fairness, my criticism of the text may also result from the limited translation choices between the majestic but largely inaccessible Authorised Version (King James) on one hand and the clichéd committee versions, driven by theological needs rather than literary merits, on the other.

advice. [10] *Is the Bible a reliable and authoritative source of historical information?* No, it is easy to imagine a university history department, rejecting the Bible as genuine historical research with its inconsistent and unverifiable historical claims. It seems more like a poorly-researched historically-set religious polemic than any sort of serious historical work. I am not denying that biblical stories may contain some historically accurate facts in the texts. Problem is separating those facts from the religious polemics, and it seems that only religious scholars are interested in such a project. [11]

I should also mention that non-religious scholars may be more interested in the development and maintenance of the biblical books as ancient human literary endeavours rather than any historical claims. I shall consider the Bible as history shortly.

So Why Read the Bible?

So why should atheists, agnostics, the 'unchurched', and any other non-Christian group take notice of the Bible? [12] The most obvious reason is its on-going influence on our culture and, as literate people (and I'm sure we are), we should find it worthy of study to understand those influences. This is especially so when more than two billion people today tick the Christian box in surveys and, presumably, see the Bible, having special significance, even deriving its importance from some sort of extra physical source.

At a more mundane level, I enjoy having some academic knowledge (at least a smattering) when speaking to Christians. It can be disarming with comments like "I like reading Mark as the first gospel. Even though it's a disappointing that we don't know who wrote it and where (or even when), it is still interesting to see how this gospel provided a narrative template for Jesus's preaching, trial, and death for the subsequent gospels of Matthew and Luke. What do you think?" Most Christians believe that Matthew is the first gospel.

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[10] Jennifer Knust, assistant professor of religion at Boston University, discusses the Bible as a dangerous and contradictory rulebook on sexual behaviour in *Unprotected Text*. She says*,"…biblical teachings regarding desire, marriage, and the human body are entirely inconsistent and yet thoroughly fascinating. If one book recommends polygamy, the next recommends celibacy. If one revels in erotic desire, the next warns that desire is evil, a source of nothing but trouble. If one assumes that women should be prophets, the next tells women to sit down and remain silent. If one assumes the children and property are the aim of human life, the next longs for the sex-free life of angels. And so on. The Bible does not offer a systematic set of teachings or a single sexual code, but it does reveal sometimes conflicting attempts on the part of people and groups to define sexual morality, and to do so in the name of God*. Knust, J. W., *Unprotected Text*, HarperOne, New York, 2011, pp. 16-17.

[11] The search for *Ancient Israel* is the battleground of religious scholars between the 'maximalists' and the 'minimalists'. The maximalists believe the biblical texts should form the basis for historical research for Ancient Israel while the minimalists see the biblical texts as later fictional creations about Israel's past, and therefore they deny the very existence of Ancient Israel. See Dever W. G., *What Did the Biblical Writers Know & When Did They Know It?*, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2002 for a middle position that leans toward the Bible as an important historical text. Stavrakopoulou F, & Barton J. eds., *Religious Diversity in Ancient Israel and Judah*, T&T Clark International, London, 2011, contains articles that explore a great religious diversity including polytheism of ancient Israelites than are directly reflected in the biblical texts.

[12] It appears that atheists do already have a fair religious knowledge according to a Pew Forum religious knowledge poll conducted in May/June2010. As quoted on their web-site: '*Overall, the three groups that perform best in this survey are atheists and agnostics (who get an average of 20.9 out of 32 questions right), Jews (20.5 questions right on average) and Mormons (20.3 questions right).*' http://www.pewforum.org/U-S-Religious-Knowledge-Survey-Who-Knows-What-About-Religion.aspx

And, if you need more convincing than that, you can become an interesting family repository of useful biblical information. My partner's daughter is called Salomé and is well aware of the 'dancing daughter of Herod story'. I mentioned to her that the name, Salomé, is never mentioned in the gospels but comes from a Jewish historian, Josephus. Also there is a completely different Salomé who, as a follower of Jesus, discovered the empty tool after his crucifixion with other women. I felt that mentioning an earlier Jewish leader of the same name would be taking my cleverness too far.[13]

So tonight, I want to give you a whirlwind and selective guide to the Bible. We shall look at:

- **Bible today** – its structure, canonical texts, and multiple English translations and controversies.
- **History and biblical history** – differences and similarities, including uses of archaeology and, in particular, as applied to the story of Exodus, both as an on-going cultural mythic story and as history.
- **Gospels** – challenging ways of seeing the gospels, as narrative stories, as Jewish scripture rewrites, and as many oral and written faith statements.

The Bible Today

Structure

The *Christian Bible*, hereafter referred to as 'the Bible', consists of two libraries of books or short books[14] – the Old Testament (typically 39 books for Protestants) and the New Testament (27 books). The two other large Christian traditions, Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox, have more books in their Old Testaments than Protestants, and these are commonly called *the Apocrypha*. The Christian Old Testament is drawn from Jewish scriptures with essentially the same text but structured differently. The structure of the Old Testament follows an early Greek translation of the Hebrew text, known as the *Septuagint*[15].

Many modern Christian scholars today consider terms like *Hebrew Bible* and *Jewish Bible* to be less offensive to Jews than the traditional Christian name of *Old Testament*. However I prefer the term *Old Testament* as it recognises we are not dealing with the same thing. It acknowledges that Christians completely reinterpreted and restructured earlier Jewish scriptures to produce a different set of books that prophesise Jesus as their messiah[16]. Incidentally, today's Jewish Bible is also known as the *Tanakh*[17].

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[13] Hasmonean (Jewish) queen between 76 to 67 BCE http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Salome_Alexandra

[14] Gospel of Mark (KJV) has around 14,000 words. This paper has around 12,000 words. See http://catholic-resources.org/Bible/NT-Statistics-Greek.htm for Greek statistsics and http://www.biblebelievers.com/believers-org/kjv-stats.html for KJV statistics.

[15] *Septuagint* was a 3rd century BCE Greek translation of the Hebrew text, needed as the majority of Jews lived outside of the lands of Israel and spoke Greek rather than Hebrew.

[16] The first creation story of Genesis gives a good example of Christian creative reinterpretation of Jewish scriptures. The tradition Jewish understanding, consistent with creation stories of other surrounding civilisations, is that God created order out of chaos from an existing formless void. There was a pre-creation state. Unlike the later Christian interpretation that was no sense of creation from nothing (*ex nihilo*). Compare the following translations: *In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth*. (**KJV**) *In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth* (**NIV**) *When God began to create heaven and earth* (**JPS 1985**). The Catholic

The biblical books are traditionally accredited to over forty authors and cover creation to 400 BCE (Old Testament) and from around 6 BCE, birth of Jesus, to late First Century CE (New Testament). As mentioned previously, the biblical narratives cover God's dealings with the people of Israel, including even the later Christian stories. For the record, the actual authors of many biblical books are largely acknowledged as unknown by scholars, despite traditional religious claims.[18]

Christian Attitudes

With more than two billion Christians in the world today, the Bible is seen as having a special status of religious scripture, varying from the inerrant word of God written through inspired human authors to a sort of vague reverence for its special spiritual authority. For traditionalists:

> *All scripture is inspired by God* (*God-breathed* in some translations) *and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work.* 2 Timothy 3:16-17 NRSV

On the other hand progressives, a minority amongst the Christian communities world-wide but more popular here in Australia, express a more liberal and inclusive perspective about its status:

> *We receive the Hebrew and Christian scriptures known as the Bible, as a collection of human documents rich in historical memory and religious interpretation, which describe attempts to address and respond to the 'sacred'. It forms an indispensable part of our tradition and personal journeys. We claim the right and responsibility to question and interpret its texts, empowered by critical biblical scholarship as well as from our own life experiences. We accept that other sources – stories, poems and songs – imaginative pictures of human life both modern and ancient, can nurture us and others, in a celebration of the 'sacred' in life.[19]*

You will notice a non-exclusive claim to authority in the progressive position that is still largely absent with traditionalists. To many traditionalists, these progressive beliefs are considered blasphemous.

History

The original languages of the Bible were predominantly an early Hebrew for the Old Testament and an early every day or commercial Greek[20] in the New Testament. *Aramaic* was the Semitic language

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Study Bible has a good discussion of this in Senior D., Collins J.J., and Getty M.A., *The Catholic Study Bible*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2011

[17] *Tanakh* is an acrostic for *Torah* (Pentateuch), *Navi* (Prophets), and *Ketuvim* (Writings) compared to the typically Christian divisions of Law, Historical, Poetry, and Prophets.

[18] In the ancient world authorship accreditation was essential for authority and acceptance with few checks that we have today. In fairness some authorship claims may have been by students deliberately showing deferential honour. The NT writings of Paul are a good example. 13 books have Paul as their author. Seven are accepted by scholars as genuinely written by him with three rejected and three others in dispute. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pauline_epistles

[19] Progressive Christian Affirmation Hunt, Rex A E http://www.rexaehuntprogressive.com/prayersaffirmationscollection/affirmationsmanifestos/the_canberra_affirmation.html

[20] The Greek of the NT is called *Koine*. It was written as a series of capitals with no punctuation, spacing, or paragraph separations. In fact today's chapters and verses in English biblical text were published with the *Geneva Bible* in 1560.

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spoken commonly by the people during the so-called *Second Temple period* (539 BCE – 70 CE),[21][22] which covers the period of the Jesus stories. [Aramaic is the language of Jesus in the Mel Gibson's film *Passion*[23] *of Christ*.] The word, *bible*, itself comes from the Greek *biblion* and an earlier *byblios* (papyrus). Initially, scriptures were maintained as rolls of papyrus (scrolls) but were later replaced by sheets of papyrus bound together as a book called a *codex* for greater convenience.[24]

As well as the Bible being translated into many languages of the world, there are, perhaps surprisingly to some, many different English translations as well[25]. Most people are familiar with the *Authorised Version* or commonly known as *King James Version* or *King James Bible*, commissioned by James I of England as a way of bringing together warring factions of his Christian subjects. It was first published in 1611[26], even though today we use a later 1769 revision. There were other earlier English Bibles, such the *Bishops' Bible* and *the Geneva Bible* and *the Great Bible* promoted by King Henry VIII, but none had the full Royal imprimatur of *the Authorised Version* and therefore lacked its widespread support and acceptance.

Historically, the *King James* has been the most popular English Bible and the one often quoted publicly. However the top selling one today is probably the *New International Version* (NIV) from its publisher, Biblica (http://www.biblica.com/), with its latest revision in 2011. First published in 1973 (New Testament) and 1978 (full Bible), the NIV came from US evangelical dissatisfaction with existing translations. By contrast, the *New Revised Standard Version* (NRSV) in the King James tradition is popular with academics as a more neutral translation and less driven by any particular theological bias. Before discussing how these translations are made, let me mention some other popular English Bibles today. Roman Catholics use the *New American Bible* (NAB) in the US, the *Revised Standard Version* (RSV) in other Western countries, and the *Jerusalem* and *New Jerusalem* Bibles elsewhere. Eastern Orthodox followers use the *King James* as I understand. There are less formal, almost folksy translations like *Good News Bible* and the *Message* as well. English translations of Jewish scriptures, similar to the Old Testament text, are also available with two excellent examples being *the Jewish Study Bible* from Oxford University Press and *The Five Books of Moses* by classicist Robert Alter.[27]

We do not have any original biblical documents. We do not have copies of the originals or copies of those copies and so on. The earliest extant record of a canonical New Testament text is a fragment from the Gospel of John, known as P52[28], and is dated around 125CE, a date still debated. As a comparison, the crucifixion story is typically dated around 30-33CE. The earliest full examples of codices, collections of Christian biblical books, are dated from around 4th and 5th centuries[29]. They

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[21] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Aramaic_language

[22] Modern Aramaic is spoken by half a million speakers today. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Neo-Aramaic_languages

[23] *Passion* means suffering.

[24] The Isaiah Scroll found amongst the Dead Sea Scrolls measured twenty-three feet in length. Wegner Paul D., *The Journey from Texts to Translations*, Baker Academic, Grand Rapids, 1999, p. 30

[25] A summary of modern translations: http://www.cokesbury.com/freedownloads/bibletransguide.pdf

[26] The traditional Anglican version of the Lord's Prayer comes from Matthew 6:9-13 of the 1611 edition of the King James and not today's 1769 edition. Another smaller version of the Lord's Prayer appears in Luke 11:2-4.

[27] Berlin, A. and Brettler, M. Z. editors, *The Jewish Study Bible*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2004. Alter, R., The Five Books of Moses, W. W. Norton & Company, New York, 2004

[28] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rylands_Library_Papyrus_P52

[29] *Codex Vaticanus* (325–350), *Codex Sinaiticus* (330–360 CE), and *Codex Alexandrinus* (400-440 CE)

differ considerably with ordering of the New Testament books and also have additions, not part of today's Christian canon[30], such as *Epistle of Barnabas* (an anti-Jewish polemic more so than even accepted scripture) and *Shepherd of Hermas* (Jesus as a spiritual man and not as god-man). Some scholars suggest the early popularity of alternate Christian theologies, like Marcion's belief[31] in an Old Testament God different to and lesser than the New Testament God and, hence, the rejection of the Jewish scriptures, prompted the main Christian hierarchy to proceed aggressively with text canonisation with New Testament unanimity around 5th century and official acceptance as late as 16th and 17th centuries.[32]

Today's Translations

The English translations are actually based on accepted or reconstructed Hebrew and Greek texts. The Old Testament and the Hebrew Bibles come from the 14th and 15th century Masoretic Hebrew texts[33][34], supplemented by the *Septuagint* translations for some Christian traditions and the recent Dead Sea Scrolls discoveries in the 1940's[35]. The New Testaments come from reconstructed Greek texts. The King James and its derivatives come from an earlier *Textus Receptus* ('received text'), while later English translations come from *Novum Testamentum Graece* (Nestle-Aland Greek)[36] and United Bible Society Greek New Testament[37]. For that reason alone the new translations like the NRSV and NIV are considered to be better founded than the earlier King James.

In this overview, I want to mention how the translations to English are done. Not unexpectedly, most (but not all) of the well-known English Bibles are completed by large groups of translators. As an example, the NIV translation was overseen by a committee of 20 people, supported by hundreds of religious scholars. However you will still find many one or two person projects, especially distributed through the Internet.[38] The popular *Amplified Bible* with alternate translations and explanatory notes embedded in the text instead of footnoted was essentially one person's effort, Frances Siewert of the Lockman Foundation[39].

Some other notable one-person modern translations include those by Robert M. Price (an extended New Testament version), Willis Barnstone (the New Testament), Hugh J. Schonfield (the New Testament), David Rosenberg (the Hebrew Bible), Robert Alter (the Hebrew Bible), and Everett Fox (the Hebrew Bible). Most popular translations, like the NIV, continue to address Christian

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[30] *Canon* refers to those texts are accepted as authoritative scripture (of correct beliefs), from Greek meaning rule or measuring stick.

[31] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Marcion_of_Sinope

[32] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Biblical_canon

[33] '*The MT was primarily copied, edited and distributed by a group of Jews known as the Masoretes between the 7th and 10th centuries CE*' http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Masoretic_Text

[34] The Leningrad Codex is the oldest complete text of the Hebrew Bible (in Hebrew) http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Leningrad_Codex

[35] Up to the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls the earliest copy of *Isaiah*, Jewish Bible and OT texts, was the Codex Leningrad, 1000 CE. The version found in the Dead Sea Scrolls as dated 100 BCE. There are differences that are referred to at http://www.ancient-hebrew.org/31_masorite.html and use of Dead Sea Scrolls in common biblical translations http://maxwellinstitute.byu.edu/publications/books/?bookid=44&chapid=226

[36] http://www.nestle-aland.com/en/home/

[37] http://www.ubs-translations.org/cat/biblical_texts/greek_scriptures_and_reference/new_testament/#c198

[38] I noticed a recent example of Ruth Magnusson Davis translating the Matthew Bible into modern English. http://www.newmatthewbible.org/index.html

[39] http://www.biblegateway.com/versions/Amplified-Bible-AMP/

constituencies who see the biblical texts as sacred. These latter versions however are typically completed by scholars with classical education, seeking better literary rather than religious translations.

Here atheists and agnostics have a distinct advantage of traditional Christians. We are not driven to retain particular takes on 'God's word', and therefore we are better able to appreciate the literary beauty and power of any new translation unencumbered by background theological demands.

Translators need to decide on the style of translations varying from 'word for word' (literal) to 'thought for thought' (dynamic) to 'paraphrase' (free translation). 'Word for word' attempts to retain the *form*, words and structure, of the Hebrew or Greek as much as possible. This creates text of very formal English with a resonance that most recognise. Not surprisingly a recent survey showed that most believers preferred this style as it retains the majesty and awe they seek in biblical text[40] rather than its meaning. Perhaps this is my cynical view. The Interlinear[41] translations with the original text and English side-by-side and the *King James* are examples of this type of translation.

'Thought for thought' seeks to strike a balance between modern day language and the idioms and meanings of the Hebrew and Greek text.[42] This is probably the most popular approach with the NIV as a leading example. And finally the 'Paraphrase' is the folksy end of the spectrum with the *Message* and *Good News Bible* as common examples. Here is a simple comparison.

> *Proverbs 18:24*
>
> - *A man that hath friends must shew himself friendly: and there is a friend that sticketh closer than a brother.* **KJV**
> - *A man of many companions may come to ruin, but there is a friend who sticks closer than a brother.* **NIV (1984)**
> - *Friends come and friends go, but a true friend sticks by you like family.* **Message**
> - *A man friends ruin there friend who A brother* **Interlinear with original Hebrew word order** (read right to left)

Another factor in English translation is the theological imperatives of the translators. *Isaiah 7:14* from the Old Testament tells of a prophecy by Isaiah to king *Ahaz* of Judah that God will destroy Israel's enemies. The confirmation of this prophecy will be the birth of *Immanuel* to a young woman of childbearing age. The conservative King James and NIV, amongst others, translate this as 'virgin' with a clear reference to Mary and Jesus in the New Testament. This is consistent with traditional Christian re-interpretations of Old Testament as predictions of the New Testament stories. Jewish translations as well as more liberal Christian ones like NRSV prefer 'young woman'.[43]

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[40] http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2011/09/30/bible-translation_n_989651.html#s382641&title=Holman_Christian_Standard

[41] *Interlinear Bibles display the Bible in two languages, such as English and Greek—helpful for those learning Bible languages, or for accessing specific words.* Quoted from http://www.christianbook.com/html/static/interlinear.html

[42] Creates '*tone and rhythms of modern-day … speech while retaining the idioms and meaning of the original languages*' http://www.mardel.com/bible-translation-guide.aspx

[43] http://www.biblicalheritage.org/Isa/isa-07-14c.htm

Translation Controversies

I want to finish this section with three controversies associated with the English Bible and its translations – introducing gender-neutral language; reducing anti-Jewish rhetoric in Christian biblical writings; and promoting the King James as uniquely God's true word, the so-called *King James Only Movement* by its critics. They may give you some insight to the thinking of conservative Evangelical Christians.

Sexism

More and more today's society sees masculine descriptors like 'he', 'man', and male titles as less acceptable for the generic terms of men and women. Many bibles translators have responded by releasing newer editions with more gender-neutral language. As an example, the NRSV Bible, derived from the earlier RSV, has used recently discovered document sources like the *Dead Sea Scrolls* to make improvements; has removed many archaisms; and as importantly removed examples of 'linguistic sexism',[44] a term used by one of its editors. The Jewish Publication Society, the largest publishing house of English versions of Jewish scriptures, published *The Contemporary Torah, A Gender-Sensitive Adaptation of the JPS Translation*[45] in 2006 with a gender-neutral adaption of the Society's earlier translation, *The Torah* (1962).

However conservative Christians have resisted these language changes, seeing them as both moving away from God's words and changing the role and power relationships between men and women.[46] [47]The problems that the evangelically-driven NIV translators faced are particularly instructive. The publishers, Biblica, released a Language Inclusive version (NIVI) in 1996 to the UK. It was later discontinued due to public outcry by conservative US Christians with one article describing the revision as 'feminist seduction of the evangelical church'[48]. Not only was the NIVI never released in the US, but the publisher even shelved plans a 1997 NIV revision.

In 2005 Biblica released the TNIV (Today's) with many gender changes from the Inclusive Version. Not surprisingly, except to Biblica, TNIV was roundly criticised by conservatives as again being driven by a feminist-led agenda[49]. The charge was led by the very conservative sounding *Council of Religious Manhood and Womanhood* with its Web self-description of, '*In 1987, a group of pastors and scholars assembled to address their concerns over the influence of feminism, not only in our*

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[44] *During the almost half a century since the publication of the RSV, many in the churches have become sensitive to the danger of linguistic sexism arising from the inherent bias of the English language towards the masculine gender, a bias that in the case of the Bible has often restricted or obscured the meaning of the original text.* Bruce Metzger writes on the NRSV translation. http://www.ncccusa.org/newbtu/reader.html

[45] Stein, D. S., Revising Editor, *The Contemporary Torah*, The Jewish Publication Society, Philadelphia, 2006

[46] One area of concern by conservative Christians is the translation of *1 Timothy 2:14* where NIV changed its rendering between the 1984 and 2011 editions from '*do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man*' to '*do not permit a woman to teach or to assume authority over a man*'. The second, more recent translation apparently allows women to assume church leaderships without breaking scripture, if invited do so. The earlier translation would enforce a total banning of women in these roles and is preferred by many conservatives. Discussed in http://www.christianpost.com/news/report-75-percent-of-tniv-gender-related-problems-in-updated-niv-bible-50191/

[47] Useful links to the gender-neutral controversy for Christians: http://www.bible-researcher.com/links12.html

[48] http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/1997/june16/7t7052.html

[49] For a remarkably vitriolic attack see Terry Watkins response at http://www.av1611.org/kjv/tniv_intro.html. He uses words like 'treason' and 'radical, feminist agenda' and diatribes like '*The NIVI is so drenched in feminist changes and so corrupt, it cannot legally be sold in America.*' This is a remarkable insight to the conservative US Evangelical mind.

culture, but also in evangelical churches. Because of the widespread compromise of biblical understanding of manhood and womanhood and its tragic effects on the home and the church, these men and women established The Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood.'[50] The latest NIV version is last year (copyrighted 2010) and has many of the gender changes of its failed predecessors since the much-loved 1984 edition. Again there has been criticism though somewhat more subdued.[5152] To put this into context, these gender-sensitive changes were similar to those brought into most other mainstream Bibles. Here is one example of changes, taken from the criticisms mentioned in the footnotes, *Genesis 1:26*.

*Then God said, "Let us make **man** in our image, in our likeness,..."* NIV (1984)

*Then God said, "Let us make **human beings** in our image, in our likeness,.."* NIVI (1996)

*Then God said, "Let us make **human beings** in our image, in our likeness, ..."* TNIV (2005)

*Then God said, "Let us make **mankind** in our image, in our likeness,..."* NIV(2011)

Anti-Jewish Christian Texts

Jewish groups have long agitated for changes of how they are referenced in anti-Jewish Christian biblical texts. For example, the Greek *hoi Ioudaioi*[53] occurs 150 times in the Gospel of John and the Book of Acts. So in John 18:36, the Greek has traditionally been translated as *the Jews*:

*Jesus said, "My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my servants would fight to prevent my arrest by **the Jews**. But now my kingdom is from another place."* NIV (1984)

*Jesus answered, 'My kingdom is not from this world. If my kingdom were from this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over to **the Jews**. But as it is, my kingdom is not from here.'* NRSV

Some translators have responded by changing references from 'the Jews' to 'Jewish leaders'. Here are some examples:

*Jesus said, "My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my servants would fight to prevent my arrest by **the Jewish leaders**. But now my kingdom is from another place."* TNIV

*Jesus said, "My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my servants would fight to prevent my arrest by **the Jewish leaders**. But now my kingdom is from another place."* NIV (2011)

*Jesus answered, "My Kingdom is not an earthly kingdom. If it were, my followers would fight to keep me from being handed over to **the Jewish leaders**. But my Kingdom is not of this world."* New Living Translation (2007)

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[50] http://www.cbmw.org/

[51] See news article covering major criticisms: http://www.christianpost.com/news/new-niv-bible-still-draws-criticisms-over-gender-related-passages-47746/ and
http://www.touchstonemag.com/archives/print.php?id=10-03-040-r

[52] Response by NIV to criticisms: http://www.niv-cbt.org/wp-content/uploads/cbt-response-to-cbmw-review.pdf

[53] http://www.bible-researcher.com/burke1.html

Interestingly enough, many of the popular newer translations like NRSV and New Jerusalem Bible have retained their reference to 'the Jews', while, ironically, the conservative NIV had little problems making the changes.[54]

King James Only Movement

Finally, before considering history and biblical history I want to mention briefly an even quirkier end of Christian (protestant) conservatism, The *King James Only* (KJO) movement. This movement, if it could be called that, works on three beliefs. Firstly, the writers of the biblical texts, in Hebrew and in Greek, were guided by God in their writings, and so the thoughts and words were God-given. This belief is not uncommon with conservatives, and often why they reject the 'thought-for-thought' English translations that I mentioned earlier.[55] Secondly, KJO supporters believe that the source documents chosen by the translators around 1600 were and continue to be the closest we have to the God-given originals. And, finally, the 1600 translators were uniquely god-inspired in their translations that have not been replicated since.

Part of the KJO debate seems to be the denigration of B.F. Westcott and Fenton John Anthony Hort, the authors of a reconstructed New Testament Greek in 1881 used as a primary source for modern biblical translations, subsequent to the King James. One author, Gail Riplinger in *New Age Bible Versions*[56], even suggested they were involved with séances, necromancy, and the like. Her analysis is commonly dismissed on the Internet.[57]

Here are some commonly-held beliefs stated on one of the KJO web-sites[58][59][60]:

> *…one who believes that God has given infallible Scripture in the original Greek and Hebrew writings and that He has preserved that in the Hebrew Masoretic and Greek Received Text and that we have a beautiful translation of it in the English language in the Authorized Version…*
>
> *…one who believes modern textual criticism is heresy…*
>
> *…one who believes that God has preserved the Scripture in its common use among apostolic churches through the fulfillment of the Great Commission and that He guided the Reformation editors and translators in their choice of the Received Text and that we don't have to start all over today in an to attempt to find the preserved text of Scripture…*

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[54] An alternative approach would be to change the names of Jesus and others in the New Testament to their Aramaic equivalents like *Yeshua* (for Jesus) and *Yohanan* (for John). This would show the selective hatred of the Jews by later Christians (even today by some) and reduce the possibility of ignoring Jesus' own Jewishness and that of the Gospel writers. Many literary-based translators, like Willis Barnstone, suggest this approach.

[55] Ryken, L. Choosing a Bible http://www.areopage.net/PDF/Ryken_Choosing-A-Bible.pdf Ryken argues for 'word-for-word' literal translations of the Hebrew and Greek texts into English as minimising the scholars mixing translation and commentary into God's inspired words. In Ryken's mind, God directed not only the thoughts but also the original word choices.

[56] Riplinger, G. A., *New Age Bible Versions: An Exhaustive Documentation of the Message, Men & Manuscripts Moving Mankind to the Antichrist's One World Religion*, A V Pubns, 1993

[57] James Richard May: http://www.kjvonly.org/james/may_reviews.htm and Fred Butler (although a KJO supporter criticises Riplinger) http://www.fredsbibletalk.com/fb019.html

[58] http://www.wayoflife.org/database/kjo.html

[59] http://vintage.aomin.org/kjvo.html has a number of KJO links

[60] http://www.kjv-only.com/ collects criticisms of the KJO movement.

> *…one who rejects the theory that the "preserved" Word of God was hidden away in the Pope's library and in a weird Greek Orthodox monastery at the foot of Mt. Sinai…*
>
> *…who believes it is important to have one biblical standard in a language as important as English and who believes that the multiplicity of competing versions has created confusion and has weakened the authority of the Word of God...*

This author rejects the notion that the King James is more authentic than the Hebrew and Greek sources used by the translators. He and most of other KJO supports believe the King James is the closest English translation to the original texts.

History and Biblical History

Modern History

We commonly use 'history' in three distinct ways. History can refer to events that have occurred at particular times and places. It can also be the reconstructing or making sense of those past events using some commonly-agreed methods and assumptions. And finally it can refer to the university or college departments that do that process of retelling the past. Today we shall consider history as the process of reconstructing past events. Also, in most cases we mean human history only, where non-human history is referred to purely as a background to human events.

Today's approach to history and its emphasis on evidence grew out of the Enlightenment and influence of the natural sciences. *Leopold von Ranke* (1795 – 1886) is particularly credited with founding the source-based approach to historical research.

Furthermore, at different times in Western history, historians have adopted commonly-held historical models or philosophies when writing history. In the Western tradition they have been *cyclical* – 'history repeating itself' (ancient times up to 100CE), *providential* – 'progressing to salvation' (Christian times until 18th century), and *progressive* – 'continual human improvement' (post-Enlightenment until recent times, often associated with modernity).[61] Today, in a post-modernist era, we are in a period of greater uncertainty about previously accepted ideas of objectivity and truth and about the aims, methods, and sureties of history telling.

Up until the mid-20th century and prior to the challenges of post-modernism, most historians believed that collecting evidence would lead inevitably to the explication of the truth about past times. Evidence would consist of any existing artefacts of the event, whether they are textual or non-textual in nature.

Textual evidence could be any meaningful text and symbols on paper, parchment, papyrus, stone, and metal. Today it covers digital and oral history evidence as well. Textual evidence sources include diaries, letters, taxation records (ever since large human settlements there have been taxes and tax collection records), commercial documentation, news reports, eyewitness accounts, previous histories, and any official records of events. Non-textual evidence is typically from archaeological work – settlement or civilisation traces through pottery, house foundations, multiple settlement layers in cities, and burial sites just to mention a few. Often non-textual evidence provides the social

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[61] Discussed in: http://cliopolitical.blogspot.com/2005/08/introduction-to-historical-method-what.html

context rather than direct evidence confirming or denying the actuality of the event. This has always been the great misuse of archaeology by biblical scholars with a Bible in one hand and a pick in the other, seeking to confirm biblical narratives with specific archaeological findings.

In the last few years there has been greater recognition of the interpretative role of the historian and his or her own social circumstances. It is quite legitimate for different historians to arrive at different conclusions from the same evidence without any obvious analytical errors. Despite this recognition, historical analyses, with their explicit referencing to verifiable evidence and also being subjected to open critical discussions, make history stand apart from fictional writing and cultural and religious story-making and story-telling.

Historical Research Ideals

Here are some commonly-held assumptions, ideals, and attitudes by historians in no particular order[62][63][64]:

- Research and interpretations operate in a naturalistic framework. Supernatural explanations are not part of the historian's ambit.[65]
- All research should be referenced back to physical evidence.
- The historian's own social circumstances and experience are an intrinsic part of the interpretative process.
- On the other hand, historians attempt to be objective as much as possible by minimising any personal biases or, at least, by making personal influences explicit.
- Historians evaluate evidence for its relevance and reliability, examining genuineness of the evidence; closeness to the event; independently verifying sources; original motives for production (e.g. theological rather than historical); author reliability; other historians' analyses about the evidence; and consistency with other evidence (e.g. archaeological findings).[66] These are only some criteria used.
- There has been a traditional emphasis on human agency. However more recently this is balanced by incorporating social forces. So sociological and anthropological models of similar societies are used to assist the interpretation of the evidence.
- Analogies are also commonly used for interpretation. It could be as simple as we expect humans of some 2000 years ago to have had similar physical capabilities and limitations of people today, such as the inability to fly unaided.
- Recently historians are placing more emphasis on the histories of the disenfranchised – women, lower socio-economic sections of society, minority religious and ethnic groups.

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[62] Advice on historical documentary research: http://staff.kings.edu/bapavlac/evalsources.html

[63] Historical approach to research: http://rmc.ncr.vt.edu/wp-content/uploads/2008/05/q7-historicalmethodsinforesources.pdf

[64] Introduction to the Historical-Critical Method as applied to biblical texts: http://www.wfu.edu/~horton/r102/hc-method.html

[65] Robert Web provides an excellent introduction to history and theology and their differences when applied to studying the Jesus stories in the New Testament Gospels. Webb, R. L. "The Historical Enterprise and Historical Jesus Research in Bock", D. L. and Webb, R. L. (eds) *Key Events In the Life of the Historical Jesus*, William B. Eerdmans, Cambridge, 2009.

[66] This implies at least two different criteria for truth – correspondence to reality and internal consistency with other accepted truths. The nature of truth has been a major topic of Western philosophy for its 2 500 year history. See http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/truth/ for a detailed introduction.

These groups were not the powerful or often illiterate and therefore were unable to contribute to later textual evidence. Not surprisingly, this can be a very difficult area of historical research.[67]

Biblical History

Both the Old and New Testaments present much of their text as narratives and, therefore, implicitly are historical in nature. However unlike modern historical techniques there are no references to external evidence supporting the various authors' claims. I should note that this was common with ancient historical works in general.

Biblical History Assumptions

Major social and cultural differences of 2000 to 3000 years ago contributed to very different understandings and representations of their world and its workings compared to ours. Here are a few.[68]

- There was no debate regarding the existence or non-existence of a god or gods. The important question was 'what kind of god is this?' especially in a polytheist world.
- Names reflected the god's or a person's inner nature and therefore name changes are extremely important in the Old Testament stories. There was an associated belief that to know one's name meant to have some power over a person or thing.
- A primary purpose of biblical history is to explain 'why' things happen and that 'why' was invariably linked to divine action.
- 'Holy wars' were commonly conducted and were believed to be directed by and for the benefit of a god or gods.
- Words had the power to set forces in motion with curses and blessings potentially invoking forces that could not be retracted. This may help to explain the evolution of the Jewish belief in not uttering the most sacred name for their god.[69]
- Time and dating had a schematic significance compared to our linear view of time today. So kings' reigns, genealogies, and time periods are stated in artificially systematic ways to achieve certain literary or theological purposes.[70]
- Numbers, like one, two, seven, and 40, had special meanings beyond their arithmetic functions. For example, seven was a number of perfection while 40 often meant a

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[67] A good example is *A People's History of Christianity series: The Lived Religion of Christians in the First Two Thousand Years*, a seven volume set that: *Using newly developed research methods, over one hundred scholars uncover the neglected side of church history as they offer glimpses of the religious ideas and consciousness of "the people"--their assumptions, beliefs, values, habits, longings, terrors, anxieties, and comforts. This is history "from below," and the revelations and insights are fascinating. Each volume includes ten to twelve essays by leading experts in the field about the lives of ordinary Christian women and men of the time. Included in each volume are over three dozen graphics and maps, an eight-page color gallery, as well as extensive bibliographies* .(from own web description). Series is published by Augsburg Fortress.
http://www.augsburgfortress.org/education/academic/apeopleshistoryofchristianity/vol1.jsp
[68] The social understandings drawn and summarised from Efird, J. M., *the Old Testament Writings*, John Knox Press, Atlanta, 1982, p.p. 2-6
[69] Another explanation often given is the gradual disuse of a name with no need unlike the polytheist religions. Later Jewish religious leaders encourage the restrictions to give a sense of awe and mystery.
[70] Davies, p. 26 quotes an example of the separate kingdoms of Israel and Judah with exactly 20 kings each after Solomon, even though Judah lasted some 100 years longer. This is more likely to be a contrivance than coincidence.

generation or a very long time. The number 40 recurs frequently throughout the biblical texts.[71] Even today some still feel the number 13 is unlucky. Numerology as the 'purported divine, mystical or other special relationship between a number and some coinciding observed (or perceived) events'[72] is still very popular. And the Chinese are renowned for believing in luckiness and unluckiness of numbers with their similarities in sound to desirable and undesirable words.[73]

- The survival (and importance) of a group was more important than an individual. People were only individuals in their expression of relationships with others within their groups. This made honour/shame a major social force affecting people's behaviours. Unlike today there was no sense of an internal 'self' independent of other group members.

- Groups had a 'corporate personality' with people past, present, and future were part of that group and were treated as living.

- All events were perceived to have occurred for purposes and reasons and not from impersonal physical causes and effects. We still even have residual beliefs of such thinking today with expressions like 'it was meant to be' and a vague sense of cosmic justice or comeuppance.

More specifically there are differences between modern history and biblical history. Some worth noting are (again in no particular order):

- The primary aim of the biblical texts is theological in nature, telling the stories that demonstrate the relationship between God and the people of Israel rather than providing a historical record of the Middle East.

- Biblical histories often supported by an automatic and unquestioned public respect as being truthful, particularly amongst more religious societies. Media organisations often feed this notion as well with glossy 'documentaries'. [History channel on Foxtel paid television is a good example of this.]

- Biblical history was written with the 'divine hand is perceived'[74] throughout its writings. The modern naturalist approach to historical research, of course, excludes such thinking.

- Biblical historical story telling usually serves a single constituency or demand, rather than independently retelling broader, multi-faceted perspectives. The biblical narratives tell of the story of 'Ancient Israel' rather than the history of early Palestine.

Story of Exodus

The story of Exodus is the most important biblical narrative of the Hebrew Bible and continues to be fundamental to Jewish self-identity and religious observances today. Exodus also inspired and continues to inspire the foundational stories of liberation for Christianity and Islam as well as many political liberation movements, including that of the United States. For Christians, the Jesus stories commonly recast Jesus as the new Moses. Ironically, although not surprisingly for us, there is virtually no extra-biblical historical support for the Exodus story, but more about that later.

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[71] Gowan, D. E., (ed.), *The Westminister Theological Wordbook of the Bible*, Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, 2003, p.p. 346-349. James A. Durlesser provides a detailed description of the special meanings of numbers in the biblical text.
[72] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Numerology
[73] http://www.weirdasianews.com/2008/08/25/china-attraction-to-numbers-and-their-meanings/
[74] Davies, P. R., Memories of Ancient Israel, Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville,2008, p.2

A summary of biblical story of Exodus, in the *Book of Exodus*, from 'Peninsula Bible Church Cupertino'[75]:

> **Departure from Egypt** (chapters 1 through 15): This includes the historical setting (chapter1), the birth, rescue and escape of Moses (chapter 2), the call of Moses (chapter 2-3), increased suffering (4:1-7:13), the plagues (7:14-11:10), the Passover and departure (chapter 12 to 13:16), and the crossing of the Red Sea (13:17-15:21).

> **Mount Sinai and the Law** (chapter 16 to 24): Right after the crossing of the Red Sea the Israelites travel into the desert where they run out of water (15:22-27), they then complain about the food and God provides their daily them manna and quail (chapters 16 and 17). They again run out of water (17:1-7) and are attacked for the first time by the Amalekites (17:8-16). Moses sets up a government structure (chapter 18) and finally after three months they arrive at Mount Sinai. Here Moses is given the Ten Commandments (chapter 20) which is followed by the Book of the Covenant (chapters 21-23) and the covenant is confirmed (chapter 24).

> **Mount Sinai and the Tabernacle** (chapter 25 to 40): The people are given instructions for the building and furnishing of the tabernacle (chapters 25 to 40:33). However right in the middle of these instructions there is the terrible rebellion of the people where Aaron creates the golden calf, which is followed by punishment, repentance, intercession and forgiveness resulting in the new set of stone tablets (chapter 32 to 34). Finally, at the end of the book the Glory of the Lord fills the Tabernacle (40:34-38).

The Exodus and Judaism

According to Avery-Peck[76],

> The Egyptian bondage, the Exodus, and the events of Sinai comprise the most important narrative in the Hebrew Bible. With this story, we move from the lives of a small group of individuals – The Patriarchs and their families – to the events through which the Israelite nation is created and, in the covenant ceremony at Sinai, becomes finally and inextricably bonded to the God who created the world.

And later he says,

> …in the biblical depiction, the Israelites do not achieve knowledge of God through their own spiritual awakening or even as a result of God's simple and direct actions in responding to the circumstances in which the people find themselves… Instead, God's power over nature and nations is highlighted: to promote God's purposes and desire, God manipulates history…

Only after the destruction of the Second Temple in Jerusalem around 70CE and the subsequent decentralisation of Jewish religious practices did the religious leaders recast religious concerns about God and faith. They moved from faith based on God's explicit intervening with external political

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[75] http://www.pbcc.org/homefellowships/smallgroupquestions/exodus/background.pdf
[76] Avery-Peck, A. J., The Doctrine of God, in *the Blackwell Companion to Judaism* eds. Neusner J. & Avery-Peck A.J., Blackwell Publishing, Malden, 2003, p.p. 213-214

events and demonstrations of power to those affecting individual control and life with the family and people's own discovery of God's power.

Today Jews continue to celebrate the story of Exodus with the yearly Jewish festival of the Passover or *Pesach*.

The Exodus Story and US Cultural History

According to Stephen Prothero, 'the Exodus story may be *the* American story – the narrative Americans tell themselves to make sense of their history, identity, and destiny.' [77] For the colonial Americans, Egypt was recast as England and Zion as the New World. In turn the new Constitution was likened to the laws given at Mount Sinai, and George Washington portrayed as the new Moses. Even Abraham Lincoln was initially portrayed as Moses upon his death – the person failed to see his people to the promised land – later to be replaced by the Christ motif of dying for the sins of the nation with his death on Good Friday.

The influence of the Exodus story continued throughout US cultural history. Martin Luther King likened himself to Moses as a liberator of the black Americans in his 'I've Been to the Mountaintop' speech in 1968[78].

> Now, what does all of this mean in this great period of history? It means that we've got to stay together. We've got to stay together and maintain unity. You know, whenever Pharaoh wanted to prolong the period of slavery in Egypt, he had a favorite, favorite formula for doing it. What was that? He kept the slaves fighting among themselves. But whenever the slaves get together, something happens in Pharaoh's court, and he cannot hold the slaves in slavery. When the slaves get together, that's the beginning of getting out of slavery. Now let us maintain unity.

And later…

> Well, I don't know what will happen now. We've got some difficult days ahead. But it really doesn't matter with me now, because I've been to the mountaintop. And I don't mind. Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. And He's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over. And I've seen the Promised Land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the promised land! And so I'm happy, tonight. I'm not worried about anything. I'm not fearing any man! Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord!!

Exodus and History

The Exodus story has a number of problems when considered as a historical narrative. They include:

- The Exodus story is a much later, uneven weaving of many traditions with different backgrounds and viewpoints.[79] Traditional textual analysis has suggested at least two distinct strands in the narrative, J (YHWH) and P (Priestly) with different styles and

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[77] Prothero, p.18
[78] http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/mlkivebeentothemountaintop.htm
[79] Efird, p.p. 29-30.

theological interests. It is likely the P writing was a later expansion of J. These traditions were written to explain Israel's origin from exploited peoples (J) as well as to create a sense of national identity with an on-going covenant with YHWH (P).

- The Exodus is written as a grand conflict mythic saga, focusing on a single heroic figure of Moses, with major aspects having a supernatural character rather than historical. The non-supernatural, historical claims seem to be:
  - o Israelites worked as slaves to build Egyptian cities of *Pithom* and *Ramesses* (Genesis 1:11).
  - o Ten plagues were inflicted on Egypt with the last being the death of every 'first-born of man and beast'. (JPS Exodus 13:15).
  - o Two million men, women and children (estimated from the biblical claim of 600,000[80] men) fled from Egypt pursued by the Pharaoh and his army. All Egyptians were killed in the pursuit at the Red Sea or 'Sea of Reeds', depending on the translation.
  - o Beyond the story of Moses, the Israelites invaded the land of Canaan to form the nation of Israel.

- There is no extra-biblical support for the historical claims of the Exodus story as well there are conflicting historical claims.
  - o There are no Egyptian records of natural disasters that could correspond to the plagues of the Exodus, including the nation-wide deaths of first-borns. Similarly there are no records of a mass exodus of two million people.[81] The scales of events, as described, also seem highly improbable. Defenders of the biblical history suggest that Egyptians would not document such disasters, even though we have Egyptian records of the invasion and occupation of the Hyksos.
  - o There is a major biblical dating conflict of the Exodus. 1 Kings suggests the escape happened around 1450 BCE (480 years before the building of Solomon's temple in Jerusalem). However the city of Ramesses would have not been built until the reign of Ramesses II (1279-1212 BCE). To complicate matters the names for cities *Pithom* and *Ramesses* are better considered as two generic terms for Egyptian cities rather than specific occurrences. This is similar to saying Pharaoh than a specific ruler.[82]
  - o There are no material traces of two million people having fled Egypt and wandered the deserts for some 40 years. According to one site it took 20 days to travel to Mount Sinai of which only eleven of those days were dedicated walking at an average of 26km per day.[83] Imagine evacuating the people of Brisbane (2.1 million) and them walking for some 360km to the Northern New South Wales city of Grafton and then contemplating the logistics and long-term physical evidence of such an event. Defenders have sought to re-interpret the numbers, reducing the size of the exodus leaving Egypt to a few thousand people.

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[80] 603 550 is quoted in Exodus 12:37.
[81] Wikipedia requotes Karl Butzer saying that there were 3-3.5 million only in Egypt in total. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Exodus
[82] Redmount, C. A., *Bitter Lives in the Oxford History of the Biblical World*. Coogan, M. ed., Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1998
[83] http://www.bible.ca/archeology/bible-archeology-exodus-route-travel-times-distances-days.htm
http://www.bible.ca/archeology/bible-archeology-exodus-route-kadesh-barnea-jordan.htm

- o There is no mention in Egyptian archives to Israel, only a mention of general 'Asiatics', a term used to refer to any people coming from the general region of ancient Syria-Palestine.
- o There is no archaeological evidence of any large invasion into the land of Canaan as described in biblical accounts.

Bible as History

Let me finish by summarising my beliefs on the using of biblical texts as a worthwhile historical source. At the very best, I see these stories as providing an interesting literary background to any historical research with conceivably some historical facts, inseparably embedded within the religious polemics.[84] At the very worst, biblical stories can be misleading and deceptive with their importance being artificially inflated to those of 'sacred' truths. I have noticed that religious scholars – and they seem to be the only ones using the biblical texts for research any way - approach the texts with an automatic sense of respect for their authority and are almost diffident and apologetic when wanting to differ. You also find much of their historical analyses littered with attempts to reinterpret biblical texts to keep their validity while accommodating contrary non-biblical evidence. The Israelite numbers leaving Egypt in the Exodus story is a good example of this.[85]

The overall problem is that, throughout their history, the various peoples of Israel have been relatively insignificant in their own times (even being grouped by the Egyptians with many others as simply the 'Asiatics'). This is despite the premier role given later by the Jewish religious elites in their own biblical texts. So Israel's insignificance leaves us with little or no external historical evidence of their existence. As insider religious writings are all we have and with the public significance already given to them, biblical texts become overwhelmingly accepted as truth despite the lack of solid supporting evidence. 'It is plausible' is a common plea by religious scholars for accepting biblical events. Incidentally, a similar argument of insider writings with contemporaneous historical insignificance could be made of the New Testament writings and the stories of Jesus.

In 1997, John Shelby (Jack) Spong, retired bishop of the Episcopal Church in the U.S., wrote of the Gospels:

> *'I do not today regard the details of the gospel tradition as possessing literal truth in any primary way. I do not believe that the Gospels offer us either reliable eyewitness memory or realistic objective history. I do believe that the Gospels are Jewish attempts to interpret in a Jewish way the life of a Jewish man in whom the transcendence of God was believed to have been experienced in a fresh and powerful encounter.'[86]*

Gospels – Biographies or Something Else

Introduction

I want to finish by mentioning a few words about the Gospels, the first four books of the New Testament and a cornerstone of Christian belief and scholarly research about Jesus. To most

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[84] See my earlier comments regarding the scholarly battle between biblical 'maximalists' (Bible as history) and biblical 'minimalists' (Bible as fiction).
[85] See *Numbers and logistics* at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Exodus
[86] Spong J. S., *Liberating the Gospels: Reading the Bible with Jewish Eyes*, HarperOne, 1997 p. 20

Christians they are accepted as biographies, even though for many years they have recognised both the similarities of the narratives and their awkward differences. Going as far back as 160CE Christian history has been littered with amusing attempts to harmonise what essentially seem irreconcilable stories.[87] For example, most Christians believe Jesus uttered seven unrelated expressions at the cross while dying an agonising death over supposedly a three hour period. How do we know this? As no single Gospel contains all seven sentences, this needs to be an amalgamation of all Gospel accounts, as none of them can possibly be seen as a false record of his final hours. They are just considered incomplete.[88] At times I imagine Jesus, dying on the cross, saying "Oh, by the way, I nearly forgot…" as he adds another saying.

On a similar theme, one of my favourite questions for Christians is "*Was the Last Supper a Passover meal?*" I then sit tight waiting for a knowledgeable Christian to reconcile the Synoptic Gospels account - Matthew, Mark, and Luke – 'yes, it was' with that of John 'no, it wasn't'[89].

Textual Criticism and Beyond

Over the last 300 years many religious scholars have studied the biblical texts as human documents, even though they usually still treated them as in some way sacred or special. Previously, treating the gospels as anything other than divinely-inspired truths would have been precarious to one's career and life. Various types of textual criticisms have been popular to examine (1) textual similarities to explore gospel interrelationships or (2) textual differences to explain author additions and alternate sources or (3) presence of smaller self-contained units[90] to identify possible earlier traditions. The emphasis has usually been on the written documents.

Although religious scholars have used textual criticism to make great progress, like Mark as the first gospel despite contrary Christian claims, many scholars felt these approaches were ultimately too limited to meet their needs. Here you need to understand the religious mind-set that pervades so much of biblical scholarly activity, including the related search for the historical Jesus. Biblical scholars seem driven to find truth and certainty from even the smallest textual detail, much more than you would expect see in other non-religious academic research. I often summarise the major problem with the historical Jesus project as 'seeking too much from too little'. In most of their writings you can sense an assumed sacred status still being applied to the biblical texts despite the scholars' rational language. We must remember they are actually dealing with much later Hebrew and Greek reconstructions of the 'originals', which we do not have. In so many ways, these scholarly efforts still have many characteristics of a religious pursuit.

In recent years religious scholars have sought other methods to explore the gospels. Some have used sociological models of communities analogous to early Middle Eastern ones to understand the cultural assumptions behind the gospel texts. Other scholars have explored the essential relationship between the earlier Jewish scriptures and later Christian writings. Julie Galambush, professor of

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[87] *Tatian's influential 'Diatessaron' harmony which dates to about AD 160 was perhaps the very first harmony."*http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gospel_harmony

[88] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sayings_of_Jesus_on_the_cross

[89] See http://catholicismpure.wordpress.com/2011/04/21/when-was-the-last-supper/ a discussion of the theological needs of the accounts

[90] *A pericope in rhetoric is a set of verses that forms one coherent unit or thought, suitable for public reading from a text, now usually of sacred scripture.* http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pericope

religious studies, in the *The Reluctant Parting*[91] describes the Jesus followers as Jewish sects and their writings were created from and only make sense in light of existing Jewish scriptures. Randel Helms, a literature professor, in *Gospel Fictions*[92], goes further by suggesting that the Gospels are actually fictional creations about Jesus using Jewish sacred texts. For example, Helms uses literary higher criticism[93] to show the transformation of the baptism of Jesus story as different authors 'corrected' earlier writings to meet theological needs. He also concludes that the authors of Matthew and Luke sought to write out Mark from Christian scriptures

Another interesting area of research explores the dynamic interplay of written and oral story-making and story-telling in early Christian communities. For these scholars the search for an original 'Mark' or 'Matthew' or any biblical text for that matter is a badly misguided project, as early communities never had any 'original' texts. Today we are left with later authorised versions from variety of sources that has been 'hammered out' through church compromises and disputes rather than any imaginary first copies.[94] Furthermore, Bart Erhman in *Lost Christianities*[95] adds to this sense of diversity by describing the remarkable variations of early Christian beliefs that have been largely erased from memory by the subsequent church histories.[96] As you can imagine, many conservative Christians would see all of this academic work as highly blasphemous.

For tonight I want to introduce yet another approach that treats the Gospels as fictional stories without necessarily accepting or denying any factual claims – *Narrative Criticism*. Unfortunately I have a brief time to touch on narrative criticism, but my written presentation has references for further research.

Narrative Criticism[97]

This approach sees each Gospel, like Mark, as a separate narrative set in its own story world with a narrator, characters, plot, and settings. This form of criticism requires that the gospel is read as a whole story and treated separately from any other gospel. Both activities that are very untypical for most practicing Christians, as they usually hear Sunday sermon gospel extracts and will happily mix and match gospels to complete missing Jesus stories. For example, Christians would use the birth narratives form Matthew or Luke to compensate for Mark's omissions. This is not surprising as they consider all gospels as truth and can be mixed as required. However this is not part of narrative criticism.

Narrative criticism also has to do with the analysis of the self-contained gospel story world with no reference in any real historical events. The only historical interest for narrative criticism is seeking to

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[91] Galambush J., *The Reluctant Parting*, HarperCollins, New York, 2005

[92] Helms R., *Gospel Fictions*, Prometheus Books, New York, 1990

[93] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Historical_criticism

[94] Horsley R.A., Draper J. A., and Foley J. M. eds., *Performing the Gospel*, Fortress Press, Minneapolis, 2006

[95] Ehrman B., Lost Christianities, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2005

[96] Shinan A. & Zakovitch Y., *From Gods to God*, The Jewish Publication Society, Philadelphia, 2012 explores how writers of the Jewish biblical texts suppressed or wrote out earlier unacceptable religious myths and legends that were closer to stories from surrounding cultures.

[97] I have drawn these ideas from Rhoads D., Dewey J., and Michie D, *Mark as Story*, Fortress Press, Minneapolis, 3rd Edition, 2012 and Malbon E. S., 'Narrative Criticism', in *Mark & Method* eds. Anderson J. C. & Moore S., 2008, p.29. I would recommend both as very good starting points for further research.

explore the typical cultural and religious assumptions that were made by the assumed listeners or readers at the time of writing.

So typical narrative criticism guidelines for reading Mark, for example, as a story would be:

- Read the story as a whole and preferably in one reading. Or listen to a recording to get closer to the original listeners' experience. Remember that only three to four per cent of the population were literate.
- Read the gospel independently of other gospels
- Avoid modern cultural assumptions. We live in highly individualistic societies that work on vastly different assumptions to those of the Middle East some 2000 years ago where person's identity was defined by family and society relationships.
- Avoid interpreting the stories through the eyes of modern theologies and thereby overlaying a modern conception of Jesus. For example, it is unlikely the original listeners of Mark would have seen the Jesus as 'meek and mild'.

So what are some typical characteristics we see in a narrative like Mark's gospel?

- The *author* is not part of the narrative but uses its characteristics to manipulate the storytelling to shape the attitudes and responses of the potential audiences. In this sense the author could be compared to today's film director.
- The *narrator* of the story is its embedded storyteller and not the author. The narrator can be one of the characters and therefore limited to the experiences of that character. Or, alternatively, a narrator can be an unidentified voice, external to the story. This narrator may limited to the experiences of one character or may be omniscient with an unlimited awareness of all characters and past and future events within the plot. This latter approach is typical of the gospel narrators.
- The *settings* provide the important backgrounds to the story. The different physical locations of the story are some obvious aspects, such as use of Galilee and Jerusalem. Political configurations like Roman occupation of Palestine; use of dangerous seas and winds; mixture of Israelite and Gentile territories; as well as the use of public and private locations are important aspects of the Markan settings. Also remember the original readers or listeners would see the cosmic world of God, angels, Satan, and devils and the physical world of people and animals as different aspects of the same world. 'Supernatural' is a much more modern concept.
- The *Plot* is the arrangement of events and their connections. We are interested in underlying unity (are there any gaps?); stages of narrative (beginning, middle, and end); connections between events; and plot outcome – tragedy or triumph? There are other aspects as well.

  For Mark, two themes stand out -the *arrival of God's rulership* with Jesus as the human agent and the resulting *conflict* with (1) evil spirits, illness, nature and (2) Pharisees, scribes, Romans and (3) disciples. Another famous theme for Mark is the so-called *Messianic Secret* where Jesus deliberately hides his true identity by commanding his followers and recipients of his healing to secrecy about his divine nature. This combined with the disciples' obtuseness created the desired listener response of suspense and acceptance as they were

well-aware of his divine nature. [98] Narrative criticism would see these aspects as part of the deliberate author or speaker manipulation to evoke desired listener and reader responses and possibly the rejection of opposing views. Think of viewing suspense films where only the audiences are aware of pending dangers to the story protagonists. Directors and writers regularly use these techniques to heighten viewer involvement and commitment.

- The story consists of *characters* may be seen as individual agents or as part of a larger character group. Jesus would be the only character as an individual agent in Mark with the character groups being authorities, disciples, and other minor characters. The narrator brings the characters to life through their speaking and their actions.

- The *ideal audience* – readers and listeners – is the imagined target of the narrator. The ideal audience is derived from critical analysis of the story and its rhetorical techniques. Unlike actual audiences the ideal audience will not vary over time. According to Rhoads, Dewey, and Michie in *Mark as Story*, Mark's ideal audience will receive the rule of God and have the courage to follow Jesus whatever the consequences[99].

Concluding Remarks

The stories, poems, and imageries of the Christian Bible with its earlier Jewish inheritance form important part of our Western heritage. They often are the bases of our cultural mythic stories and, as we saw, the Exodus story is a powerful example of an on-going story. At one level, biblical characters like Moses, David, and Jesus and events like the Exodus and the Crucifixion are part of our literary and cultural canon with the characters and events of other great classic literature like Dante's *Inferno*, Melville's *Moby-Dick*, Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice*, and Homer's *Odyssey*. Even some films can resonate with us and imprint powerfully onto our social psyches. One web-site suggested ten films including *Super Size Me* and *An Inconvenient Truth* that have changed society.[100] However, at another level, the traditional significance given to the Christian Bible, rightfully or wrongfully, makes its stories, characters, and ethos start apart as more potent and longer-lasting in their effects on our social understandings.

Atheists and agnostics usually reject the supramundane and historical claims of biblical texts, as they rightfully see them as really loose collection of ancient human documents addressing topical social and religious concerns. However, as I have mentioned, the biblical images and metaphors continue to resonate powerfully throughout our secular society often in non-religious ways. They are an important part of our social makeup and identity. Our Western society is truly the inheritor of Greek, and Roman traditions on one hand and Jewish and Christian traditions on the other, and, as such, we are beholden to appreciate these as part of 'what we are' for today and into the future.

Thank you.

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[98] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Messianic_Secret
[99] Rhoads, Dewey, and Michie, p.138
[100] http://www.toptenz.net/top-10-movies-that-changed-the-world.php