

Sermon: "It Ain't Necessarily So - So What?"  
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Delivered at Wildflower Church, January 13, 2008

*Now a man from the house of Levi went and married a daughter of Levi. The woman conceived and bore a son; and when she saw that he was a fine baby, she hid him for three months. When she could hide him no longer, she got a papyrus basket for him and plastered it with bitumen and pitch; she put the child in it and placed it among the reeds on the bank of the river.*

*The daughter of Pharaoh came down to bathe at the river, while her attendants walked beside the river. She saw the basket among the reeds and sent her maid to bring it. When she opened it, she saw the child. He was crying, and she took pity on him... She named him Moses, because, she said, I drew him out of the water."*

The story of the baby Moses from the New Revised Standard translation of Exodus, which we heard paraphrased during the Time for All Ages and which many of us learned in Sunday school or religious school as children.

Here's another story for you, from a text even older than the Hebrew Bible. It's a portion of a Neo-Assyrian text from 7th century BCE that describes the birth and early childhood of Sargon of Akkad, a legendary king of Mesopotamia who may or may not have reigned from about 2,334 to 2,279 B.C.E. This narrative is told in the first person.

*My city is Azupiranu, which is situated on the banks of the Euphrates. My...mother conceived me, in secret she bore me. She set me in a basket of rushes, with bitumen she sealed my lid. She cast me into the river, which rose over me. The river bore me up and carried me to Akki, the drawer of water. Akki, the drawer of water, took me as his son and reared me.*

I won't read you the all rest of Sargon's story, but he becomes cupbearer to the king, a part of the royal household, and eventually defeats the king and establishes a great Sumerian empire.

Which of these ancient legends is so?

I grew up -- and many of you probably did also -- being taught that the first story was historical fact, the literal truth, the word of God. I never knew the second story existed until I went to college.

When I learned in a UT Department of Drama classroom from a theater history professor, who must have had some agenda in addition to theater history -- that Sargon's legend with its many parallels to the tale of little Moses in the bulrushes predated the Bible by hundreds of years, it was yet more ammunition for the assault on my literal Christian faith that education and reason were mounting against me at that time. "Well, well", I said, "Sportin' Life was right: It *ain't* necessarily so, is it?"

Fast forward in my life about 35 years to another college class. This one a graduate level course at a Christian divinity school. One of my required courses at Perkins is Interpretation of the Old Testament. And, in OT 6301, I learned many more things about the Bible that -- were I still in the same literal frame of mind I was in as an undergraduate student -- would be making me say again and again, "The things that you're liable to read in the Bible, it ain't necessarily so."

But -- I'm more sophisticated now in my understanding of what "truth" really is -- and I believe you are, too. So, I'm going to share with you a few of the things I've learned, and then you decide what relevance this collection of myths, fables, folk tales, legends, sagas, short stories, and historiographic writings, which Christians call the Old Testament and Jews call the Tanakh or the Hebrew Bible, might have for you -- for someone who is not a Biblical fundamentalist or even for someone who does not see the Bible as sacred at all.

The first mistake we make in thinking about the Bible is to think of it as one book. And, one can see why we might think that. Here it is, as we have it -- it's a book! We tend to view the Bible in the same way we would view a novel (well, maybe *two* novels, the Old *and* New Testaments) - as a continuous, largely chronological story, a difficult novel with too many oddly named characters to keep track of and a somewhat disjointed plot - but a single book, nevertheless. How many of you, at some point in your life, tried to read the Bible "from cover to cover", "from start to finish", as if you could somehow get to the end and find out how the story comes out?

Well, the Bible, of course, is really a collection, a gathering together, of many different small books. The Greek word, *biblia*, from which we get the name "Bible", is plural; it means "books", not "a book" or "the book". In fact, the original Hebrew texts were inscribed on many separate papyrus scrolls. It was much, much later that they were arranged into a fixed sequence, into the book we know.

You may already be aware that Jews, Roman Catholic Christians, Protestant Christians, and Orthodox Christians did not all choose the same scrolls for their versions of this "book" and did not arrange them in the same order. And so, *The Bible* is somewhat different for each of these groups.

You may also be aware that there were many more of these religious writings floating around before the Bible as we know it was created. The lists of what particular books would be accepted as scripture took shape over time until at various times one church council or another decided it was time to nail things down for once and for all, and created the official "canon" of that particular religious branch, choosing the writings that most closely supported their own theological views.

But, where did these books come from in the first place? I remember as a child viewing a filmstrip in the Saturday catechism class I attended. One of the frames showed a man sitting at a table with some sort of writing instrument in his hand. In the air above his head, was God the Father, speaking directly to the man, the words obviously flowing in

a glorious and continuous stream from God's mouth into the mind of the writer and onto the scroll, which he was covering in Hebrew characters. That is not exactly how the Bible came to be.

An ancient people we call the Israelites, lived for thousands of years, beginning in the Middle Bronze Period about 2,000 years before Christ, in the hills of a tiny piece of land at the end of the Mediterranean Sea. They were distinguished from their closest neighbors, the Canaanites, not by genetics, not by language, not by methods of agriculture or daily customs, but by their religion. The only thing that was different about the Israelites was that they worshiped a god -- one of many gods worshipped in this part of the world at this time -- whose name was Yahweh. And, as pre-literate people do, they told stories - stories about themselves. Stories about what made them unique. Stories they could tell their children so as to say, "This is who we are; this is who you are. This is where we come from; this is our story."

These ancient peoples had absolutely no notion of history in the way we conceive of it. They only understood stories, designed to show the uniqueness and the greatness of themselves as a people. In the case of the Hebrew people, these were stories about Yahweh and his interactions with them. The stories were fashioned and refashioned into folktales, fables, legends, and sagas. As is the case with folktales, different families or people living in different parts of the land told some different stories and differing versions of the same stories. The stories were changed, embellished and elaborated on, again and again, as time went by.

Then, after hundreds of years of this storytelling, people began writing some of the stories down. Different people wrote them down at different times. Later writers took earlier versions and revised them, added to them, edited them so that their own particular theological and/or political (it was the same thing in those days) points of view were put in the best light (this revision is called "redaction" in Biblical scholarship). Then, these *written* scrolls lay around in temples, in tents, in jars in caves, who knows where, for hundreds of more years. Even the most ancient scrolls that survived had obviously been copied and recopied by hand for centuries, and the original written manuscripts had long been lost or destroyed. By the time Jesus arrived on the scene, the Hebrew texts used in the synagogues were *already* far, far removed from their origins.

The story of translation after that time is fascinating in itself, but we don't have time to go into the textual problems caused by the translation of the Bible from Hebrew into Greek, then into Latin and then, of course, into English, German, and every other language in the world.

One of my fellow students at Perkins told a story -- most likely apocryphal itself -- about a Methodist pastor he heard of who started using the Revised Standard Version of the Bible in his services. His parishioners complained that he "using a translation" to preach from, rather than the King James Version they were used to! So, the next Sunday, he read all the Old Testament Readings in Hebrew and all the New Testament readings in

Greek. The folks in his congregation got the point and let him preach from the RSV after that.

But, leaving aside problems in textual transmission and even leaving aside the cross-cultural sources of various tales in the Bible I alluded to by comparing the narratives about Moses of Egypt and Sargon of Akkad - and there are many more examples of that -- there is plenty of *internal* evidence in any English translation - including the King James -- that shows us the Bible could not come from a single source.

Let's begin "In the beginning", shall we? With the Creation Story in Genesis, that our friends the anti-evolutionists are so eager to call science. An even moderately careful reading of Genesis reveals that there are two different and conflicting Creation Stories in its first book. In the first creation story, Genesis, Chapter 1, Yahweh -- and the word in the Hebrew is always Yahweh here, never the more encompassing translations we have such as "god" or "Lord" -- Yahweh - out of nothing, simply by speaking, creates the natural world.

In this version of the story, it takes him six days to do all this and then on the seventh day he rests. In this version, Yahweh creates the animals first, and finally, man and woman simultaneously. Genesis 1:27 "In the image of God he created him [the man] male and female he created them." There is no mention of the Garden of Eden and Adam and Eve are not named here.

In the second creation myth found in Genesis, which begins at Chapter 2, verse 4, the whole creation takes but one day. Here, the man is the first creature created, and this time, Yahweh does not simply call him into being with his words. He has to take the dust of the earth and form it into a human, into whom he breathes life. Then, Yahweh makes a beautiful garden, called Eden here, for the man to live in; then, Yahweh says, "it is not good that the man should be alone" (v. 18) and so Yahweh creates all the animals. Yahweh names the man "Adam", and then Adam himself gets to name every "beast of the field", but he does not find a "help meet" for himself among them. But to remedy this, Yahweh doesn't just say, "Let there be woman", the way he said, "Let there be light" in the first version of the story; no, this time, Yahweh has to perform a little surgery to make what he wants. He anesthetizes Adam - puts him into a deep sleep - removes a rib, closes the incision back up, and then forms the woman out of Adam's rib.

Two rather different versions of the same story, which most of us have patched together in our own minds -- taking a piece of one narrative and a piece of the other -- into what we *think of* as a single, coherent Biblical Creation story.

The Old Testament is riddled with these different and often conflicting versions of the same story - not always placed side-by-side in the narrative as they are in Genesis 1 and 2, but there, nevertheless, and obvious to the even moderately careful reader. Noah takes 7 pairs of clean animals into the ark in Genesis 7:2; in 7:15-16, he only takes 1 pair. The Ten Commandments are given to Moses twice in Exodus in two

slightly different versions (Ex. 20 and Ex. 34) and in Deuteronomy 5, he gets them again.

For the ancient Hebrews, this was not a problem. They were not looking at these stories through the lens of either history or science -- as we are inclined to do. As Western civilization progressed, however, the obvious conflicts and contradictions in the Biblical narrative *did* become problematic to Christians. Although the early church and today's Biblical literalists attempt to explain away these contradictions with arguments I cannot comprehend, today all Jewish, Catholic, and Protestant Biblical scholars, except the most conservative, agree on how these contradictions came to be. It's called "the Documentary Hypothesis": the conclusion that the Bible as we have it is of composite authorship - that the consistent irregularities in it can best be explained by positing that there were previous, independent sources - originally separate documents -- which redactors took and drew together into a mostly coherent work.

Textual scholars have identified at least 4 of these sources: one is called the Yahwist, called "J" for short because it was a German scholar who first identified it. The Yahwist was the earliest writer, probably about 900 B.C.E. The Yahwist is the most primitive source. His Yahweh is very much in the mold of the personal tribal god who walks among the people, talks with them and interacts with them directly, puts his hands into the mud -- the way the ancient Middle Eastern gods of many different cultures did in their mythologies. The Old Testament was written for a world of many gods, and Yahweh was thought of as just one among them, albeit the most powerful one.

Then there is a source known as the Elohist - only fragments from the E source can be identified, but he seems to be writing in about the 800's. The J and E sources are very closely combined, and it is difficult to separate them, but the Elohist uses a more generic name for god, "Eloheim", a plural noun, which *might* refer to gods other than Yahweh and to goddesses, as well.

Then we can identify a third source, the Priestly writer - or P. The Priestly writer often gives us completely different versions of the same stories the Yahwist has given us. He has an interest in liturgical and legal matters - priestly matters. He writes in stately, authoritative language - "Let there be light!" he says. He speaks about how to properly sacrifice animals and what the punishments for various infractions of Yahweh's laws are. The P source, probably writing in the 500's, is actually fairly easy to identify because of its distinctively priestly tone.

There is one other source identifiable by scholars called the DH - not standing, in this case, for Designated Hitter but for "Deuteronomistic Historian". The DH is a self-contained theological work, most likely written in the 700's, comes in at Deuteronomy and continues through the Historical Books - Joshua, Judges, Ruth, and so on

And so, the Bible we have is not a single book, dictated by God to a Hebrew scribe, but instead, is this fascinating ancient document that -- because earlier layers of theology were left in by the redactors and not completely erased from the text -- shows us how a

people's conceptualization of their God and their religion - and themselves - developed over hundreds and hundreds of years.

We can see Yahweh becoming less "down and dirty" and more removed -- still involved with the people but from farther afar than earlier. We can see the change from Yahweh's being thought of as just one of many existing gods - toward the true monotheism the Jews held by the time of Jesus.

This is interesting, no? But, really -- why should you care? If you don't believe this is the inspired word of God, what's the point? To use the Bible as a source of moral guidance? Ten Commandments notwithstanding, the Old Testament is not a particularly moral book, by modern standards. Yahweh is often a jealous, even arrogant, and capricious god. He's not at all fair - or even rational - with his punishment -- he goes around smiting just about everyone, -- the enemies of Israel or his own Chosen People, and often times perfectly innocent people, with equal vengeance and fury. Many of his laws seem to have no moral purpose at all but only to be designed as little tests for the Israelites, to make sure they are toeing the Yahweh's line. One might convincingly argue that we could learn more about how to live a good life by studying the teachings of the Buddha or the Tao, than by studying the Bible - especially the Old Testament.

The argument for knowing the Bible is often made that the Bible is such a foundational document of Western civilization that to be ignorant of it is to be almost illiterate, and I agree. But that argument begins to carry less and less weight as we become less Eurocentric and more focused on worldwide literature and culture. In the coming century, perhaps a knowledge of the Koran will be as important, or perhaps we should be reading texts from Latin American, rather than focusing so much on the writings of an ancient Semitic culture.

I know why *I* need to learn about the Old Testament. It's a required course for me. I am studying to be a minister -- a minister who will be operating within a larger religious community where this particular book is the coin of the realm, and I'd better know something about it in order to be able to understand and to communicate with my Jewish and Christian colleagues. Besides, our own faith of Unitarian Universalism sprang from these same sources, and I believe it is my obligation as a minister of our faith to understand those sources. And personally, I am interested in the Bible because I feel most at home with these scriptures of the religion I grew up in; I am still climbing Jacob's ladder, I guess. I'll probably never get off of it. So, I personally need and want to understand as much about the Bible as I can.

But what about you? It *is* effective, when debating with Christians, to be able to support your views with Biblical arguments. Is that a good enough reason for you to study the Bible? So you can fight fire with fire, so to speak. It *is* most effective when arguing for women's rights, for gay rights, for racial justice, for environmental responsibility, for other progressive causes, to be able to quote chapter and verse in support of your position. But, I don't know if that's enough of a reason for *you* to study the Bible.

Is a good enough reason that the Bible is full of “transcendent metaphors [for] creation, liberation, and resurrection”, as UU minister John Buehrens says? Yes, there are rich and wonderful stories in the Bible that we can mine for their transcendent meaning. But -- you know, there are stories just as wonderful to be found in Native American mythology, in African tribal tales, in Hindu, Greek and Roman stories -- in all the other mythologies we have preserved from various ancient cultures.

I've said this many times, and I'll say it again now because it rings so true to me. A young child I knew gave the best definition I've ever heard of mythology. She said, “a myth is a story that's not true on the outside, but is true on the inside.” The Bible contains wonderful stories that are not true on the outside -- in terms of historical or scientific fact -- but *are* true on the inside. We can learn from the Bible about human relationships with each other and about the relationships that humans seek with the Divine, as well. But that might not be enough reason for you to study the *Bible*.

Although some would disagree with me, I'm not going to argue that you *should* study the Hebrew or the Christian Scriptures. We are each on our own spiritual journey. In our free and open religious tradition, what guidebook or books you carry with you along the way, are up to you. You are free to read those texts that resonate with you and ignore those that don't. We *have* to pick and choose, of course; no one has the time to become literate in the sacred texts of all the religions of the world, all the moral and ethical philosophy, all the insightful secular writings that might possibly inform our decisions and shape our character. We simply don't have the time.

Yes, there are cultural reasons for most of us in favor of our choosing the Bible as at least one of our primary sources of wisdom. But -- it might be that you would be better served by careful study of the Tao Te Ching, of the Buddhist sutras, the Hindu Vedas, or some other sacred writings. They ain't necessarily so, either, of course. And they are “true on the inside”, too, of course. Every bit as “true” as the Bible.

So, I suggest you do just as the Old Testament redactors did and like the early church fathers did when they set the Christian Canon: pick your own favorite wisdom book or books. This time, *you* get to choose whatever sources of wisdom speak most eloquently and clearly and most truly to you. It's your spiritual path, and you are in charge of it.

But remember, that not only are you in charge of it, you are also responsible for it - “a free and *responsible* search for truth and meaning” is what we affirm and promote. I have come to understand through what I've learned in my Old Testament class, that there is a condition attached to the study of any scripture: we are obligated, I believe, to interpret whatever wisdom texts we choose -- especially if it is wisdom from a time and place far removed from our modern ways of viewing the world -- with as much knowledge and understanding as possible about how, by whom, about whom and for whom those texts were created. I don't think very many readers of the Bible come to it understanding and accepting that obligation. But, I believe it is only by knowing the “outside truth” about scriptures - a little bit of which I've told you this morning -- that we

can we truly begin to apprehend the “inside truths”, the real meaning these stories can have for us.

So, I say to you this morning: go out there and read your Bibles or your Koran or your sutras or your Vedas or your Ralph Waldo Emerson or whatever it is you will read. But take responsibility for reading them carefully, seriously, knowledgably and intelligently -- and with the respect due to the people and the cultures -- and the gods -- who first brought them into being. If you do that, your journey will be richer and your path will be clearer and you will come to understand what for you - really *is* necessarily so.

I offer you my blessing and all the support I can provide to you on your journey. I thank you for all the help you have given and continue to give me on mine.

Amen. Blessed Be. Shalom.