

134 Reading the Bible backwards

Have you ever seen, at close quarters, a child growing up, and watched how their language and behaviour develops? I find it fascinating with my grandchildren – especially the language side, of course. And this made me think about Jesus growing up, and how frustrating it is that we know so little about his childhood, apart from that episode where he got left behind, in the temple.

But let's think about it: as Jesus grew, he would presumably have learned to say 'Mama' and 'Dada' (well, the Aramaic(?) equivalent), yet this is God-in-human-form we're talking about here. Jesus knew the Father, intimately, and yet here he was as a baby unable to express himself, other than crying to let his parents know he was hungry or had filled his nappy – how strange!

Anyway, as he grew to adolescence, and went to the synagogue (each week?), learned to read and write, and had annual(?) visits to the temple, I wonder what was going through his mind?

Presumably, the human Jesus would have watched his human parents and learned from them – and from the Scribes and Pharisees – about the religion of the day, and as he learned to read, he would have read the Scriptures. I wonder what he thought?

Of course, Jesus has the massive advantage that, as he's reading those Scriptures, he already knows what the Father is really like. I wonder if he had the same struggle I've had these past few years? I wonder what he thought, for example, when he read that his loving heavenly Father had, in one situation, apparently told the Israelites to slaughter every man, woman and child?

So I think this is my point for today. When Jesus read the Scriptures, did he just take them at face value and say, "Well, if the author says that's what God told them to do, then those were indeed God's actual instructions."?

No, I don't think so. When Jesus read the Scriptures, (a) (as I've said) he knew what God was really like and (b) he knew (as I've begun to realise) that the authors were people of their time and culture. Based on that, he would then be able to interpret the Scriptures.

Jesus knew that his Father was gradually trying to draw people *away* from their Ancient Near East (ANE) view that the gods had to be appeased. (At least God managed to convince Abram about child sacrifice!) The Father wanted to show them how much he loved them, but that takes time, so when the OT authors spoke about God as telling them to do this and that, some of what they wrote would have been affected by their partial (distorted) understanding of God.

Don't worry, I'm not chopping out the bits of the Bible I don't like; indeed, I think I've now got a much *higher* view of Scripture than I've ever had. How amazing that God could inspire people who had such a distorted view to write such wonderful and insightful words. Despite the negative impression that some of their words might give us about God, we see within those words flashes of the jewel-like truths that would emerge when Jesus came to earth. Think about all those wonderful predictions that came true in Jesus – just brilliant!

So yes we *can* trust the Bible 100% – as Jesus did – even though it says things about God which, I'm sorry, simply aren't true. God was willing to be misunderstood by his people (and here I'm

back to Greg Boyd's excellent book that I looked at in [124–129]), for the greater good of communicating the truth to us, a truth that we can still learn from thousands of years later.

I now feel that I understand, better than ever, what Jesus meant when he said “Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfil them.” (Mt 5:17) Jesus wasn't chucking any of the (OT) Bible out; rather he was showing us what God was *really* trying to communicate through it. Presumably that's why he got so cross with the Pharisees, when they saw the OT as a book about “what you ought and ought not to do”, and not about showing us the incredible self-sacrificing love that God has for us.

So this is what I mean by reading the Bible backwards: not until Jesus showed us what God was really like could we understand and appreciate what God was trying to communicate when he inspired the OT writers.

And the process doesn't stop there. The authors of the *New Testament* didn't have an infallible view of what God was really like, either; they too were creatures of their own time and culture.

Once again, we have to look at what the NT authors wrote (inspired by God, yes) and ask, what principles were they giving us that we can apply today? The New Testament, like the Old Testament, is *not* a guide to “what's right and wrong” (and how much terrible damage we have done by making that mistake over the centuries!); it tells us, gloriously, what God is really like, so then we have to apply *that* knowledge to help us see how to relate to God and to one another.

So when someone (Christian or not) says, “The Bible says we should [or, more likely, we *shouldn't*] do such and such”, you have my full permission to tell them that they are reading their Bible the wrong way round: “Please find out *first* what God is really like (i.e. what Jesus was like), and *then* you can start to interpret the Scriptures and maybe think about ethics/morals.”

Bless you all!

Paul Bev. 11.10.20