

*God's
Human
Future*

Seminar on God



Human Future

David Galston, series editor

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God's Human Future

The Struggle to Define Theology Today

David Galston



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Regretfully every book holds an error in some form or another. Even more regretfully the sincere help and inspiration of everyone above did not prevent me from making some, whether in the judgment of a subject or in the explanation of an idea. All errors herein contained are mine. I hope that, despite errors or misjudgments, this book makes a contribution to thinking about theology and its value today.

Introduction

The writing of these pages is intended to be popular in style, which means equally accessible to anyone. This accessibility, though, is somewhat modified by technical terms and abstract thoughts. In an effort to soften these two aspects of the book, I offer here some comments of orientation and a few explanations.

In much of the text I rely on two types of theology, called Enlightenment and Covenant theology, that loosely derive from two Western cultural experiences of language and religion. The first is the tradition commonly called the Proto Indo-European tradition (PIE). Basically, Western traditions that arose in Europe and were transported to North and South America share a deep history with traditions that arose in India and were (eventually) called Hinduism. The archaeological link is found in the roots of languages that share common histories and deep cultural memories. The word “much” in English is a simple example, for it appears in cognate forms in ancient Latin (*magnus*), Greek (*megas*), Celtic (*maige*), Persian (*mazant*), and Sanskrit (*mahant*). In fact, it even occurs in ancient Hittite (*mekkis*), which also arises from the PIE tradition.¹ The common linguistic relationships do not translate directly into shared religious beliefs, but neither do they isolate the people of these languages. One common denominator is the manner in which gods are portrayed as interactive beings who represent a hidden, stable reality behind the appearance of the chaotic and stormy fluctuations of nature. This could be called “Avatar” theology because it is about the individual worshiper finding divine qualities behind natural fluctuations and within the self.

The second tradition identifies those cultures of the Ancient Near East (ANE) which, though distinct, have always mixed with the Indo-European tradition. The ANE cultures include Canaanite

populations like the ancient Israelites and dominating populations like the Amorites, Assyrians, and Babylonians. These peoples also shared linguistic characteristics broadly named the Afro-Asiatic linguistic family and held certain religio-cultural features, like the imagery of cherubs, in common. Cherubs in particular hovered around kings and represented the blessings of the deity upon the governing royal figure. But of course royal figures do not always carry out the divine will, so here also are the great prophets of the Bible who courageously speak out against their governments in the name of the divine who is no longer recognized in the halls of power.

There is some merit in this very basic and deeply historical division, and some books depend on its existence. Thorleif Boman's highly regarded and now classical book *Hebrew Thought Compared with Greek* is an example.² Avatar theology seemed like a good name for the PIE tradition because, with the popularity of the same-named movie, it was bound to strike a chord. An avatar is an incarnation of the divine, but it is also the realization of the divine essence in wise individuals. Still, though perhaps this analysis is loosely accurate, Ancient Near Eastern cultures and Indo-European cultures have mixed together at least since the days of the Sumerian city-states found along the Tigris dating to 3000 BCE and earlier. Accordingly, though I name two types of theology, I do not mean a hard distinction. What I intend is to discuss models of theology that I hope will prove to be constructive when it comes to thinking about the history of theological understanding as it developed in the Western experience.

Covenant theology arises from the Bible, particularly the Torah, with the image of God in an agreement or covenant with a nation and a people. The agreement is quite mutual, as later rabbis expanded it, in that both God and the people are accountable to the Torah (or Law) and its interpretation.³ Enlightenment theology arises from the wisdom tradition in which the actualization of the divine reality happens in the lifestyle of individuals or communities.

The influence, in Christianity, of Greek philosophy is strong here, but biblical examples can be found in Job and Ecclesiastes as well as, for Christians particularly, the parables of Jesus. The Torah in these instances effectively becomes incarnate through a vision of a re-imagined world (as in parables) or in the question of the meaning of life (as in Ecclesiastes) or even in the problem of justice before the face of suffering (as in Job). In Greek philosophy, it is a matter of the principle of the divine realized in the life and practices of an individual or community. In the Bible the enlightenment image is also present when the Torah is ingested by prophets like Ezekiel (3:3) and Jeremiah (15:16) to become part of the very breath of the individual. When it comes specifically to Christianity and generally to the question of the future of religion in the West, one must deal with and name the background and, often, the combination of the biblical tradition and Greek philosophy. The way I have chosen to contemplate this combination is to use the words Covenant and Enlightenment theology.

The concerns of the opening chapters, I sincerely hope, are not too difficult to follow. But later chapters that address concerns about the future of Western theology do rely upon abstract thoughts. The early chapters on what is the Bible and on types of theology serve to set up some operating assumptions that handle bigger questions. The bigger questions arise when considering how a human being that we know as Jesus of Nazareth became God, and not just any God at that. Jesus became the Avatar or Incarnate God of Christianity who is the divine principle of the universe at the same time as he is busy in common life. There is no definitive way to understand how this metamorphosis happened. But it is incredibly important to understand the structure of what happened and why it made sense. My attempt to present the comical nature of the historical Jesus in contrast to the Church's creation of Jesus Christ occurs in the middle part of this book. The key idea here is to address how God, following the Roman era, was understood as the ontological principle of the universe. This is a difficult word, but it

means that God was related to the order of beings in the cosmos from the upper echelons of angels to the lower strata of peasant farmers and all things in between. Everything had its place in the order of being.

The ideas that sustained Jesus as the principle of creation and the same identity with God could not survive the Enlightenment period. Every time the world changes, God changes, and when an old world stops working so does God. It is hard to talk about the future of theology if the conversation does not include recognizing why the old idea of God in heaven no longer works. It does not make sense anymore to think that at the end of history a Messiah will return to clean up the mess human beings have made and to restore the stasis or perfect order of the universe. This old idea was God understood as fullness. We could say that in the old idea God was the biggest being around who had a hand on a light switch called time. But this God does not exist anymore, and in its place there is a poetic role for God that I call the God who almost is. What I am saying with this expression I hope will be clear, but it does lead to two points.

The first point is that theology betrays itself when it holds on to the old version of God and thereby emphasizes a closed version of religion. I will try to show that both types of theology, Covenant and Enlightenment, have “closed” or time-controlling expressions. To close theology is to limit the theological expression to final aims and ultimately unquestionable conclusions. The closure of theology is the silencing of theology and its removal from the human scene. Most often the techniques used to accomplish such closure are the extreme understanding of the apocalypse or end of time and the common use of allegory as a way to interpret parables. In contrast to these tempting ways to understand theology, I will offer, in the end, open ways to engage theology as Covenant and as Enlightenment.

The open form of theology will rely almost exclusively on the parables of the historical Jesus as insightful ways to remember that

theology is poetic vision and reconfigured meaning in the midst of the situation of life now. Theology does not answer the question, what is the meaning of life? In parable, theology raises the problem of meaning in life but also awakens the problem or re-presents it as the creative task of life. This does not mean that every theologian must tell parables, but it does mean something like this: the act of theology is a parable. With such an act as its foundation, the task of theology is to re-imagine, re-create, and even permanently re-cast the world with engaging hope. This task requires, and even is in itself, an open form of expression. It requires a new and open way to understand Covenant and Enlightenment theology.

As the reader travels through these pages, my hope is to encourage the consideration of the value of religion for the human future. In the course of expressing this hope I will certainly uphold the understanding that religion is a human creation, but I will definitely resist the temptation to regard it as a human waste of time. Indeed, I attempt to end this work with the understanding that God's future and the human future are the same thing and that, as such, when we speak about theology we are speaking about God's human future.

1

What Is the Bible?

Socrates was regarded as the wisest person of his time, but like the Jesus of history, no one really knows that much about him. Socrates is mostly legend. Life is like that. We think we know a lot about a subject until the time comes to talk about it. Then we realize we do not actually know that much after all. Socrates, at least as legend has it, thought that this peculiar human predicament was an advantage. It is best to know that we do not know; only on this score can we claim a modicum of wisdom.

It is not an easy task answering the question, what is the Bible? even though at first glance, it should be obvious. The Bible is a book. That is one thing assumed to be commonly known. Everyone knows that the Bible is at the very least a book, and, through our collective cultural experiences, we all know that the Bible is more than just a book. The Bible holds uncommon authority in Western history and everyone presumably needs to know at least a little bit about it if for no other reason than to appreciate great Western literature like Shakespeare. Still, once the surface is scratched, it turns out that underneath the cultural level basic knowledge about the Bible is piecemeal, even among the well educated and, more surprisingly, especially among Bible fundamentalists. Before it is possible to talk about God and the Western tradition of theology, the presupposition of that tradition, which is the Bible and its authority, must be encountered. It is important to know all that we commonly do not know about the Bible.

The first commonly unknown thing about the Bible is that it is not a book, not at all. The word Bible is from the Greek plural for book, *biblia* or books, which is also the same in Latin. The Latin *biblia* is at the root of the French word *bibliothèque*, which means library. The Bible is a collection of books. It is a book of books, not singular but plural. In fact, in many instances, even individual books in the Bible are not single but compiled texts of diverse authors and materials. The “book” of Genesis, the first in the Bible, has several detectable authors whose stories have been woven together as one. Genesis is more like an anthology than a book, and the Bible as a whole is like a library.

The Bible, then, is better called a collection, holding different points of view and different forms of writing. In relation to any given topic the Bible can say many different things. The authors of the Bible did not know each other and never thought, in their lifetimes, that their writings would exist clustered together in something commonly regarded as sacred. So, it is entirely understandable why we can encounter the speculative philosophical writing of Ecclesiastes and the serious legislative writing of Deuteronomy in the same collection. The Psalmist (69:24) calls for the cursing of one’s enemies, and the Apostle Paul says to bless those who curse you (Romans 12:14). These contradictory sayings exist in the same assortment because they come from different writers, different situations, and different times. Neither the Psalmist nor Paul, the Genesis authors nor the writer of Ecclesiastes, ever thought that they would all be in the same commonly regarded “book.”

Parables, like a famous Jesus parable or the lesser-known one stated before King David by Nathan the prophet (2 Samuel 12:1–4), are not the same kind of writing as *narratives* about Jesus or David found in the Christian Gospels or the Books of Samuel. The legends of Moses recorded in Exodus are not the same style of writing as Proverbs and do not hold the same intention. If we ask a provocative question like, what does the Bible say about sex? there is no single answer and there cannot be. Because the Bible is a library,

the answer to the question, of course, is lots of different things. The Apostle Paul raised his concerns about “immorality” (1 Corinthians 6:9–10), listing several items but not sex before marriage—a fact that bothered the Protestant reformer John Calvin (1509–1564). Calvin might have, but did not, understand that preferred marriage customs in sixteenth-century Geneva were a different kettle of fish from what concerned Paul. Meanwhile, at Proverbs 5:19 we read about the delights and infatuations of great love, including the writer’s joy in the female body.¹ To ask what the Bible says about sex is like asking what a library says about sex. Unlike Calvin, we must recognize that it will say lots of things and not assume that it will say what we want or think it should say.

When a preacher holds a Bible in hand and proclaims that the “Bible says” something definitive about salvation or family or sex, the preacher only demonstrates ignorance. The Bible cannot be reduced to a single idea or a few catchy phrases. Modern Christians who extol “biblical family values” have probably never read the Bible. The Bible tells lots of stories about families, but exemplary moral families are hard to find in its pages. Additionally, the prudent and largely fabricated notion of “family values” is not a biblical concept. No such expression is to be found anywhere in the Bible. In relation to the Bible one can talk about ancient family practices, structures, obligations, and indebtedness, but not values. The saying attributed to Jesus to the effect of hating your family (Luke 14:26) indicates that “family” here is quite different from what we mean today. To Jesus, the family was a set of economic obligations that one must leave behind, which is something both liberating and risky.

The Bible has almost only dysfunctional families in its content who get caught up in incest, polygamy, lying, and overall drunkenness. Even Mother Mary of the holy family does not get off the hook. When the gospel writer Matthew recounts the genealogy of Jesus, the writer deliberately mentions women of questionable background. Recounting the family line, Matthew includes Tamar

(the woman who had children with her father-in-law at Genesis 38:15–17); Ruth (a Moabite woman who provocatively enters a mixed marriage with a Jewish man against the prohibition of Deuteronomy 23:3); Uriah’s wife (the Hittite Bathsheba whom David forced into adultery and whose husband he then arranged to have killed at 2 Samuel 11:2–17); and finally Mary (with Joseph called at Matthew 1:16 “the husband of Mary,” indicating Jesus was not the son of Joseph but a child of an unknown father). Matthew’s point in this genealogy (Matthew 1:1–16) is to address rumors about the reputed dishonorable birth of Jesus. Matthew’s idea is to prod the reader into recognizing that women of apparent dishonor, like Tamar² or Ruth, and their children are no barrier to the work of God.³ It is actually terrific theology, but it is not based on family values.⁴

Neither is the Bible primarily nor even particularly a moral work. Again, only those who have never read the Bible could think otherwise. The Bible is supposed to be holy: a symbol of purity and spiritual authority, full of inspired words. Its integrity is so beyond reproach that it is commonly used to swear an oath. But this imagined sacredness attached to “The Bible” does not really exist. The Bible has outlandish stories of revenge, of common brutality, of genocide, of prejudice, and of seething hatred. In Exodus 6 God declares the divine intention to bring the people to the land “I swore to give to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob,” stating, “I will give it to you for a possession” (6:8), but when Moses is before Pharaoh the words are hidden and misleading. God tells Moses to say to the Pharaoh, “Let my people go that they may worship me in the wilderness” (7:16). This latter request is an ambiguous not liberating statement. Does it mean that permission is being sought to leave Egypt but then come back? A bit later in the reading Moses clarifies that what he really wants to do is to undertake a three-day journey (8:27). Pharaoh imagines that this might be fine, saying, “I will let you go to sacrifice to the Lord your God in the wilderness, provided

you do not go very far away.” The Pharaoh even adds, “Pray for me” (8:28). This account is not really history but storytelling with a bit of sleight of hand mixed in at the Pharaoh’s expense. Still, it cannot be upheld as an example of truth-telling, even though this is what the Bible is supposed to be.⁵

The strange and misleading interactions of diplomacy mixed with lies between Moses and the Pharaoh might compose only petty incidences in the Bible, but around this same story are gathered dismal tragedies and immoral acts like genocide. Remarkably, in the Bible God issues the first threat of genocide against the Jewish people (Exodus 32:10). Following the making of a golden calf, God is so angry with the people as to be moved to “destroy” them. The fearless Moses has to indicate how embarrassing such an act will be for God. After all, the Egyptians will think that God is crazy, having just delivered the people from slavery. In the book of Numbers, the story is retold with Moses being even more blunt, asking God, “what will the gentiles think” of a deity so frustrated at not being able to fulfill a promise (Numbers 14:15–16)? Moses has to compromise God before the nations in an effort to remind the deity that godliness involves holding the qualities of love (14:18).

There are incidences in the Bible where God lacks even a hint of moral fiber. Again, in Numbers, the people complain that God is causing the loss of life, but God’s response is to send a plague and take even more lives (16:41–49). God advises on many occasions to destroy the cities of one’s enemies, including the indiscriminate murder of all men, women, and children regardless of innocence; at Joshua 6:20–21 all the animals of Jericho are added to the list of indiscriminate slaughter. The Christian Bible ends with the book of Revelation where God celebrates getting even with humanity through a final bloodbath of executions and plagues. There are many examples of immorality in the Bible, and the greatest ones are reserved for God. Still, the record of violence is not really by or about “God.” It is the human beings who wrote these texts who

bear responsibility for their content. For the modern reader, though we cannot simply change these historic texts, we can be responsible for how we chose to interpret and use them.

Many people who grew up in the Western cultural setting gained the basic idea that the Bible is a book of truth and authority. The idea arrives almost automatically as if by cultural osmosis, by the act of absorbing impressions about the Bible in the way people talk of and use it. These impressions express common assumptions about the Bible as a symbol of integrity, but they do not arise from actually reading the Bible. The real content of the Bible betrays its humanity in both its beautiful and disparaging prose. The Bible holds the prejudices of ancient cultures and through them invokes the many tragedies of modern life when people take it too seriously as supernaturally revealed truth. These comments do not discount the amazing things that can be found in the Bible, such as stories of forgiveness, of courage, of compassion, of justice seeking, and of peace. Inasmuch as some biblical writers relay the narrow-mindedness of their time, others rise above their time to express images of everlasting inspiration like swords being beaten into ploughshares (Micah 4:3), like the poetic call to let justice roll down like a river (Amos 5:24), and like the amazing vision of a time when a lion will lie down with a calf and when a child shall lead us (Isaiah 6:11).

The writers of the Bible were human beings like us, and, what is more, the Bible is a human creation, arising as it did over centuries as an amalgamation of writings and oral traditions. In its pages, the Bible mixes ancient poetry with epic narratives, wisdom writing, and prophetic announcements. Sometimes its pages are inspiring and sometimes outrageous. They are so, and are both, because they are the creation of human beings. Again, no writer of the Bible could ever have imagined his or her effort one day would form part of a sacred collection. The Apostle Paul never imagined, and never could have, that his sometimes pedestrian letters and private comments would end up as sacred writing; the prophets loved to pronounce “thus says the Lord,” but even they would be shocked

to know that the context of their words are often given absolute and timeless authority. It was only with the passing of eras, over the long stretch of Western cultural history, that *biblia*, the assorted collection, became Bible, the authoritative book.

The “real” Bible, which is a collection of books, is neither a retelling of historical facts nor a record of biographical information. The Bible is an amalgamation of genres. This is likely the most significant point when understanding the Bible today. Our contemporary culture is highly literalistic due to our constant use of technology based on numerical patterns, expected repetitions, and reliance on automation. In antiquity, there were forms of technology, but the forms, like threshing wheat, were labor intensive. Mathematics was also in use, but nowhere near the level that relativity or quantum mechanics or string theory demands today. Nothing like the idea of gravity or an expanding universe existed. Darwin, of course, was unknown. As a consequence, the ancient world did not live with the assurances of predictability or the expectations of the automated recurrence of things. Ancient people had no technical means to assume such comfort, and this meant that the ancient mind could not take things literally. No promise could be made that a journey from Alexandria to Rome would be on schedule. You could certainly take such a trip, but you certainly could not count on a schedule. Life was shorter, harder, and largely outside among the natural elements, in the market, and within the open porticoes, large amphitheaters, and courtyards. The uncertain nature of daily life meant that the fleshly body was not supervised with the careful attention we hold today. Instead, the physical world, which was full of daily challenges and changes, acted like an untrustworthy surface hiding things unseen, unchanging, and unambiguous. To convey this unseen world to a reader and hearer, the writers of the Bible relied on genres, that is, on different “kinds” of writing to open up the horizon of the unseen.

This attempt to open up the horizon of the unseen means that biblical writers used heroic forms of writing in place of our

contemporary idea of facts. Someone like Moses is not a historical figure—though Moses may well have lived—but a hero. The writer of Deuteronomy provides Moses with several oratory speeches that easily compare to typical ancient hero speeches like those found in Thucydides.⁶ The important thing about the speeches is not that they contain facts but that they relay a writer's theology, that is, the writer's theo-centric view of the world.

The writers of the Bible used stories to open up different views of the horizons, whether those horizons are, positively, about the promises of a peaceful world or, negatively, about the vengeance of an angry God (let the reader beware); every writer of the Bible relayed in heroic narratives about great figures, like Abraham, expressions of theology—those elements of life that inspired the ancient reader or hearer who lived in a changing and unpredictable world. Such vision was not, then or now, meant to be “literal” as a fact but more like a metaphor of hope or a symbol of character. The heroes inspired artistic conceptions found in wisdom literature that questioned, for example, as in the book of Job, whether or not belief in the promises of God spills out as blessings in life. Job answers that question negatively: even great belief in God does not mean an end to or explanation of suffering. For others, like the prophet Isaiah, heroic stories inspired visions of God's universal compassion for humanity. Isaiah speaks of Israel, the people who know the Torah, as the light to the nations. This very task of showing the way of God to the world, of being the light, comes from the cache of heroes found in Jewish tradition. But again, none of these forms of writing, these genres like narrative writing, biographical writing, wisdom writing, and prophetic writing, are literally true. They are inspirationally true in the sense that they project a vision for the future—both positive and negative—from the heroic past. If a modern reader turns to the Bible looking for facts about history, the spirit of the biblical writers will be missed and the Bible will become something easily mocked. A literal, modern mind will conclude that the Bible means to state a fact when recounting the creation of the earth in six days. This

conclusion is way off base, for the point of that myth is theology, not science. The six day creation story serves to orient or focus the attitudes of human beings. The story places the audience in the world as those who bear responsibility for it. It places human beings in the picture of nature and orients their concept of life accordingly. It is once again heroic writing, but this time in the form or genre of a cosmogony or originating myth about the world.

The Bible then, from its historic narratives to its aphoristic parables, is a collection of forms of writing. Each form of writing is heroic in nature; that is, each form is a project or vision of life rather than a literal explanation about how things work. Each form of writing expresses the imagination of a writer who projects against the incertitudes of nature something conceived as meaningful and directive. It is not necessary, consequently, to believe anything a biblical writer says in order to understand what a biblical writer means. Only the latter focus correctly understands the Bible as an amalgamation of genres, as a collection of writings, and as assorted expressions of theology.

If the first key to reading the Bible involves understanding genres, the second involves being aware of sources. What sources did biblical writers draw upon to write in the genres they did? Identifying sources helps us understand another commonly unknown thing about that Bible, which is that the authors of the Bible did not write the Bible. The authors of the Bible used sources or previous writings and various preexisting oral traditions to put their stories together. Biblical scholars today have well over 250 years of hard work behind them when identifying the evident sources used by the ancient writers of the Bible. Although there are always so-called “merchants of doubt”⁷—scholars of dubious authority who deny such sources ever existed—in real scholarship there is no substantial controversy over the fact that biblical writers used previously existing sources. The E source, which refers to the earlier Elohist writer and teller of tales, is an example of a preexisting source used throughout the books of Genesis to Numbers.⁸

For devout Christians it can be shocking, at least where the Bible is concerned, to discover that each Christian gospel is not the writing of an individual but a cut-and-paste amalgam of sources used to create a theology. A gospel is more accurately understood as a theological presentation than a retelling of history. A “theology” in this sense is an arrangement of beliefs, and each New Testament gospel arranges the material of the sources to favor one form of belief over others. Each gospel writer put together a theology from preexisting sources that were either written or oral. Only for the sake of convenience have the names of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John been attached to each gospel in the Christian Bible, but in fact no one knows who compiled these gospels. We do not know if each gospel was the work of an individual or a community. What we do know is this: each gospel addresses the concerns of a different community, and each community drew upon preexisting sources.

The most famous or infamous source, depending on one’s point of view, for the Christian gospels is called the Q Document or, more appropriately, the Q Sayings Gospel. Q is the common written material found when comparing Matthew and Luke. These two gospels share many verses not found in Mark. The common material used by Matthew and Luke obviously predates these two gospels that use it, and the material is called Q from the German word for source, which is *Quelle*.⁹ Matthew and Luke relied neither on eyewitness accounts nor divine inspiration when recording sayings of Jesus. They relied on Q, a document that they could modify for their own purposes. Then, like Q, the Gospel of Mark can also be found in the pages of Matthew and Luke, which means that Mark, too, already existed as a source when the authors of Matthew and Luke, whoever they were, compiled the pages of their accounts. So Matthew and Luke copied from their sources, Mark and Q, adding things in and taking things out as their judgments dictated and their theological reasons demanded. Both Matthew and Luke created their gospels from Mark and Q, which means both gospels are collections rather than books. Both are compositions of theology rather than re-

cords of history. Meanwhile the Gospel of Mark had its own set of sources, which means that Mark was not an eyewitness to the life of Jesus either but, like Matthew and Luke, was a composing theologian. Mark's sources are certainly harder to detect, for there is little to compare Mark to. Instead, one has to draw out from Mark the traces of preexisting written and oral traditions. Still, like Matthew and Luke, Mark is a collection turned into a theology.

The Gospel of John is its own kind of problem, for it is so different in style and content from the three other gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke. This distinction, however, does not grant John a different status. Like the other gospels, it uses sources, is not an eyewitness account, and is a theology rather than a biography. In the case of the Gospel of John, the major source is the Signs Gospel, which was a collection of seven signs or miracles performed by Jesus. It is possible to isolate the seven signs of Jesus in the Gospel of John and, from this act, reconstruct with significant success the source that John used to relay the "miracles" of Jesus and the point of them. The miracles, a modern reader must constantly remember, are not history but theology; the signs show the identity of Jesus, which acts to secure the belief of Christians. Jesus' turning water into wine (John 2:1–11) is the first of the signs, but it is not a miracle in the literal sense. It is a story or theology used to express the glory of Jesus and to show the reader that, like the disciples, their belief in Jesus is secure. To reduce the miracles in John to debate about whether Jesus factually performed the signs is silly because such debate ignores exactly what John is writing about, which is theology. Theology is a creative, interpretive presentation of an author who uses and modifies stories to make a point. In the Gospel of John, signs make the point, but it is amazing how in our time many readers of the Gospel insist on missing the point due to reading a story literally.

When it comes to the study of the Christian gospels, then, the right question does not involve asking about accuracy. To be sure, the gospels hold the remnants of earlier traditions that presumably

relate to the historical Jesus, even if tangentially, but the sources are not collected in order to establish facts about Jesus. The gospels are theologies about Jesus, which means that the right question is always about the theology the gospel writers hold. There is no command from Jesus that goes like this: “Remember in particular this saying and favor it over others.” Instead, a modern reader has to figure out what sources a gospel writer used and what editorial biases a gospel writer held. These two observances help identify the theology of the gospel writer.

Since Jesus never left behind a saying about what to remember or what to ignore, three points are easily made. First, the gospel writers got to choose out of their sources what they thought was the important point. We can only read the consequences of their choices. We don’t know why the gospel writers made the choices they did, but we can ask about the theology their choices represent. This leads to point number two. The gospel writers were as human as we are, and, in the dilemmas of their lives, had to make choices to form theologies. Looking back, we don’t have to agree with their theologies but we do have an obligation to understand them as best we can. The third point is that the central focus on beliefs about Jesus is a phenomenon of Christian history. Beliefs about Jesus are confessions that arose after the lifetime of Jesus and are not things that Jesus believed himself. We can be assured that Jesus did not confess beliefs about himself. Confessions about Jesus assume nascent theologies held by the gospel writers within the context of emerging Christianity. Just as it is not necessary to agree with the gospel writers, it is not necessary to restrict Christian theology to only one set of confessions about Jesus.

A last word concerns the practice of using the historical critical method to understand the Bible. Historical criticism is a general term that identifies the use of modern critical (tested) methods to understand how the Bible is compiled and how it employs the genres and theologies we have discussed. The criticism itself is often criticized somewhat categorically just for being a “method,” for us-

ing a method always assumes a certain degree of bias built in to the way it is employed. Still, historical criticism clearly remains a primary way to understand the Bible. Even though every critic must account for the biases he or she brings to the subject, the point of historical criticism is to block the biases of our modern world in order to enter the mindset (or biases) of the ancient world. I certainly have my biases, but my biases are my problem. They are not a problem for Mark, for example, or Matthew. My question needs to be what is Mark's bias or Matthew's or Luke's, etc.? And in order to have a chance at answering that question, I have to block the biases I bring to the text. That is the aim of the historical critical method. It is not about criticizing the Bible as if it were something insufficient. It is about blocking the modern worldview so that the ancient text and worldview can be seen as it is, which is a compilation of genres and theologies. Historical criticism demands that the Bible not hold unquestionable authority but that it be allowed to hold its own biases, which of course it will have because it is a diverse collection of writings. Naturally we can question how successfully the historical critical method achieves its aim, but we cannot question the fact that it holds outstanding value when it comes to understanding the Bible in the appropriate context of its own world.

After we recognize that the Bible is a collection of diverse writings, does it still have authority? The answer is twofold: yes it does, and no it does not. The Bible has authority not because it is a policy manual or a set of bylaws about life. It has authority, rather, because it is symbolic of the virtues of a particular cultural experience. In Western history, that symbol is quite powerful due to the historic authority the Christian Church held in the European experience. With the rise of modernity, of nation-states, and of citizen rights, the authority of the Bible as a document representing human knowledge and divine power has passed away along with the centrality of Christianity. Technical science has replaced the Bible as official "knowledge," and the Bible can hardly stand up to science anymore. Still, this does not mean that the power of the Bible as a

symbol has passed away. It still represents, and perhaps always will because of its history and in spite of its content, the honor of truth, commitment, and integrity.

Yet, the Bible should not, since it never really did, have authority in the matter of normative human behavior. The reason why the Bible contains ancient laws governing the practices of Israelite males, for example, is because the males did things they ought not to do. There is no need to have laws for things that nobody does. For instance, there is no need for laws about living at the bottom of the ocean since no one can do that. There is only a need for laws to govern what people do but shouldn't do. Laws are negotiated within community settings and according to the activities in which people engage. In our time the internet has brought forward new and complex questions about society and the rights of individuals in relation to the collective well-being of a nation. As the electronic age continues to evolve, laws continue to be modified, negotiated, and legislated. The Bible was (is) no different. In its pages God's mind can change either through negotiation or with new information. How many righteous people are necessary to save a city from destruction? In Genesis, God initially thought fifty was the right answer, but Abraham negotiates with the deity. An agreement was struck at ten (Genesis 18:22–33). Or, compare Exodus to Deuteronomy. The second book is later than the first and it changes or modifies laws accordingly. In Exodus the Ten Commandments are given at 20:1–17, and they start off quickly with, "I am the LORD your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. You shall have no other God before me." This command suggests that even though there are many gods out there, Israel shall not have another one ahead of or higher than the Lord God. Deuteronomy 5:1–21 records this same law but modifies the effect of its meaning. It uses a preamble that involves Moses telling the people that these laws are a covenant that shall be learned and carefully observed. These warnings are given prior to the command to have no other god. It is clear that for the Deuteronomist

the concern is pitched more intensely. Apparently people liked having other gods, maybe not “before” but certainly after, and in addition to the Lord God, so the Deuteronomist is far more serious. In Deuteronomy the Ten Commandments are modified and slight revisions are made. The emphasis is on God commanding (verses 5:12, 15, and 16) with the warning that obedience means blessing and implying here—but explicit elsewhere in Deuteronomy—that disobedience means a curse (16). The Deuteronomist uses repetition to underline the fact that the Sabbath is for both menservants and maidservants and that when we say “cattle” we mean “your ox, your ass, or any of your cattle” (14). These differences are clarifications that address new challenges and relay a new, and somewhat more stringent, theology. Throughout Deuteronomy we can observe these adaptations of Exodus and recognize that a different time and context has influenced a different rendition of what the law says and means. So, does the Bible have authority such that it should not be challenged or changed? Not even the Bible thinks so.

The modern problem of the authority of the Bible arose with the advent of science and evidence-based explanations about the world. Before the seventeenth century, the Bible was the only book of “science” around. It was used to explain the origin of language (supporting the erroneous conviction that Hebrew was the first human language), the geographical age of the earth (thought to be about six thousand years), the origin of life (*ex nihilo* at creation), and medical treatments (practices of social exclusion, bloodletting, and casting out demons). These forms of knowledge, which today are more like superstitions, do not pass any test of evidence. Each conviction, once assumed to be “knowledge,” fell to the level of nonsense with the advent of science. Today, no one would claim there is an original human language, and in any case the Western base languages of Latin and Greek are Indo-European languages, not Afro-Asiatic ones (as Hebrew is). No one anymore would try to link English organically to Hebrew. No modern physician would recommend casting out demons as a serious treatment for disease.

Not even modern Christian fundamentalists, or at least very few, obey the Bible literally when it comes to serious health care. Then, there is so much evidence for the 4.5 billion-year-old earth and the evolution of life upon it that it has become a form of comedy to oppose these obvious facts. The Bible is not able to hold authority like it once did in the Middle Ages. As such it is extremely important in our time that people of a progressive mind allow the Bible to turn the page, so to speak, from being a book of authority to being a collection of ancient writings that witness to the trials of human history and the struggles for human wisdom.

In light of the Bible being a compilation of ancient genres and theologies that witnesses to humanity's creative and troubling struggles for truth, there remains today a deep and necessary need to promote a new age for religion. Such a need exists precisely because the Bible no longer holds, beyond the symbolic level, the moral, scientific, and legislative authority it once did. The Bible no longer serves the Western tradition in this fundamental way. In place of literalistic debates over the authority of the Bible there can be a new age of realism and honesty that seeks to understand its contents. The spirit of such an inquiry sees religion as a human creation and thus raises the question about religion as a human value. The question does not concern whether or not the Bible, or a religion, is true. That question is now obsolete. The question is the value of religion. Does religion as a human creation have a value for humanity and for our collective future?

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