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“Debunking Religion: The Bible”

Psalm 19:7-10

Next week, Eric and I are headed to Williamsburg, Virginia, where our son, Adam, is graduating from William & Mary Law School. The last time we were in Virginia, we took the opportunity to visit some Presidential homes – Montpelier, Mt. Vernon, Monticello. When going through AshLawn Highland, the home of James Monroe, the guide showed us a picture hanging on the wall in the parlor. It’s a painting you have probably seen before and I included it in the insert in your bulletin today.

The artist, Emmanuel Leutze, painted this depiction of an event that happened in 1776. It’s pretty clear that Leutze wasn’t an eye-witness to the event since he painted it almost a century later – in 1851. Had he been there, he would have known that he got a few things wrong.

James Monroe, who later became a President, is supposedly the young man holding the flag in the painting. James Monroe was present at the crossing and subsequent battles. However, we know from his writing that he was not in a boat crossing with others – he was already on the other side. Maybe Leutze put him right behind General Washington to bring attention to him because he would become a President.

Another thing that Leutze got wrong was the flag being flown. The flag in the painting is what is known as the “Betsy Ross” version. It’s very likely that this flag wasn’t even created yet. Again, the artist probably did this on purpose; perhaps to show that the fight was for all the states in the Union.

But that's not all – notice the rower by Washington's knee who is a person of color. This is not an historical depiction, but a commentary on what the artist thought about slavery, which was not as much of an issue in 1776 as it was in later years.

I could go on and tell you that Washington was only 44 at the time of the crossing – and this doesn't look like a 44 year old man... and that the weather was cold and snowy... and that the crossing occurred at night when the light of the moon couldn't be seen.

The point is that when we think of Washington and the troops crossing the Delaware, we might call to mind this depiction. And yet, it's historically inaccurate. It's downright wrong. But the artist was commenting on the event with his own philosophy and his experience as an American a century later. And those are important points even though they are not based in historical fact.

We can read the Bible in much the same way that we understand Leutze's painting. It isn't always historically accurate – but it tells us important truths. We are continuing our “Debunking Religion” series and today we are talking about the Bible. Don't forget to email me your ideas for topics, scriptures, theologies, or other things you would like me to debunk!

Before the Bible starts to collect dust on your coffee table, you need to know a bit about how it came to be. As a child, I was brainwashed – I mean trained – by more orthodox fundamentalists. One good thing I can say about my childhood church – they taught me the Bible and theology. By 3rd grade, I had all of the books of the Bible memorized in order and could beat most adults at the “Find the Scripture Quickest” game. By 5th grade, I was half way done memorizing the 109 Catechism Questions and Answers of the Westminster Catechism. (I did make the mistake once of putting the words to a rhythm and got in trouble for it... after all, we all know that a musical beat is a tool of the Devil!). I was taught that you never laid the Bible down and then put other books on top – like a hymnal. That was disrespectful to the Bible.

All of this is to say that I learned a lot at an early age about the Bible. But it wasn't until my late teen years that I started falling in love with it. I don't know if this resonates with any of you, but I am absolutely enthralled with book stores and libraries. I like their smells, row after row of books - fascinating books, scary books, picture books, joyous stories, tales that make you cry – oh, books have always been friends of mine. The Bible is just that ... a collection of books.

You see, Christianity began without a master plan – in a sense, it just happened. Literature developed only as the need arose, and it was written to meet the needs of the moment. The earliest documents we have in the NT are the letters of Paul, written in the 50's C.E., about twenty years after Jesus. Paul didn't write his letters to be saved for future generations, much less to be placed for all eternity into a collection of "The Bible".

The earliest gospel is Mark, written about 70 C.E. By then, the sayings and stories of Jesus had been circulating in oral form from the very beginning of the Jesus movement.

These early writings became part of a growing collection of early Christian writings that mushroomed all over the Mediterranean world. Different faith communities had access to and used different writings. There was no plan to distribute Paul's letters or the gospels to all the new churches. It took many generations for the concept of an "orthodox" list of writings to develop, and many more generations for such a list to take definitive and authoritative shape. It took more than 300 years to gather and approve a "canon", or authorized list of scripture.

The Bible started out as a handwritten work. As more copies were needed, more were copied by hand. Like any copy, mistakes were made. There were notes in the margins. Like any ancient document, the copies we have are not easily read – they may have smudges, misspellings, poor handwriting, holes and even fragments from age, and errors.

The New Testament was written in Greek during the late first and early second centuries. The oldest manuscripts were written on papyrus and the later manuscripts were written on leather called parchment. More often than not, they were not written by eyewitnesses to Jesus' life, but by second or third hand sources. This allowed what I spoke about last week – myths and legends about Jesus – to develop and be incorporated into the writings.

Bringing those ancient writings into English form is more complex than we might realize. First, you have to decide which version of the text to use. We have no originals of any NT text. We have only copies, and the earliest copies we have, in only fragmentary form, date from the second to third centuries CE.

The advent of a printing press changed our culture dramatically. Now, Bibles could be produced in quantity and at a lower cost. More people became literate. No longer did the priest have to read and interpret the ancient word alone. Now, it became a book accessible to all. It was as if *God* was accessible for the first time to *everyone*.

Seminarians and other students of the Bible are taught what is called **exegesis**. It is a method of Biblical interpretation meant to get down to the nitty-gritty regarding the text with intellectual and spiritual integrity. Exegesis involves looking at the:

- Historical context – understanding the text within its own place & time
- Literary context – in what genre is this written... poetry, letter, historical report, prophecy, fable, or liturgy. How does this text fit with its surrounding texts? What is the purpose of this text?
- Theological context – what was the overarching philosophy used by this writer? Paul had different theological views than did any of the gospel writers. And the books differ in thought and theology.
- Social and Cultural context – recognizing that the reader brings his/her own culture and experience to the text.

In other words, using these tools of exegesis, we learn to read the Bible seriously, but not literally. People who say that they have read through the entire Bible don't impress me as much as those who study and meditate on it, finding passages that speak to their souls. I've always found that the best way to read the Bible is to use it. Read it. Interact with it. Love it.

That's what the psalmist meant, I think, when she wrote our text for today:

The law of the LORD is perfect, reviving the soul. The statutes of the LORD are trustworthy, making wise the simple. The precepts of the LORD are right, giving joy to the heart. The commands of the LORD are radiant, giving light to the eyes. The fear of the LORD is pure, enduring forever. The ordinances of the LORD are sure and altogether righteous. They are more precious than gold, than much pure gold; they are sweeter than honey, than honey from the comb. Psalm 19:7-10

Resource Used:

Smith, Dennis E., editor. *“Chalice Introduction to the New Testament”*. Chalice Press: St. Louis.