

Why I am not a Fundamentalist

Ian C. McKay, November 2004

I was brought up in Glasgow among Exclusive Brethren, whose perception of Christian doctrine was unequivocally fundamentalist. When I was about five years old my older brother, then aged about 10, told me that everything in the Bible is true. I was startled by this concept, and thought about it for a long time. I never forgot it. Even at the age of five, I could see that this principle, if true, was rather important. I did not doubt my brother's word: he was usually a reliable source of information.

What is a Fundamentalist?

The label *Fundamentalist* dates from the early 20th Century, when a series of 12 volumes were published in Los Angeles under the collective title of *The Fundamentals: A Testimony to the Truth*, edited by a board chaired by R. A. Torrey. These volumes set out a meticulously detailed account of Christian doctrine, broadly similar to what the Exclusive Brethren believed at the time. A version of the volumes has been reproduced on the Internet at <http://www.geocities.com/Athens/Parthenon/6528/fundcont.htm>

The most distinguishing characteristic of fundamentalist doctrine, as exemplified by these twelve volumes, is that it is based on a more than usually literal interpretation of the Bible. Most mainstream Christians and most Bible students regard the book of Job, for instance, as a brilliant epic poem that delves into deep and dark dilemmas of faith, and grapples passionately with the perennial problem of why God allows evil to exist. By contrast, fundamentalists read it as both poetry and as literal history. Even the passages in which God and Satan make wagers about how Job will react to disaster, are construed as literal

verbatim transcripts of actual historical conversations.

Figurative language

To be fair, of course, even fundamentalists do make some small concessions to the existence of figurative language. When Jesus says he is a door, or a road, or a vine, then they all accept that these are purely metaphors. When he describes how a mustard seed grew into a tree, some of them concede that this may not actually have happened in a literal sense, and when the Bible says that the earth cannot be moved (Psalm 93:1; 1 Chronicles 16:30) and that the Sun moves round the Earth (Ecclesiastes 1:5), they are now mostly agreed that this is a description of what appears to happen, not the best astronomical account of what actually happens.

Nor do fundamentalists such as the Exclusive Brethren ever make the mistake of assuming that the literal historical meaning is the only meaning. Indeed, they are much more ready than most Christians to see several meanings both literal and figurative in the one passage.

Transcription errors

Fundamentalists also mostly accept that the Bible contains some transcription errors. None of the original manuscripts has survived: the earliest of the known manuscripts large enough to be studied by textual analysis are third or fourth generation copies.

At the time of the translation of the King James Version, the translators knew of about 2000 New Testament Greek manuscripts sufficiently old to be relevant to the job of trying to reconstruct the most probable original

text, but no two of these manuscripts agree exactly.

More than a third of all verses in the New Testament contain variants, according to Aland, *The Text of the New Testament*, with the variants being particularly concentrated in the Gospels and the Revelation. Stroebel (*The Case for Christ*) mentions having seen estimates of about 200,000 variants in total, which sounds rather a lot, when you consider that there are only about 138,020 words in the Greek New Testament.

By contrast, the Old Testament, despite having been through far more generations of copying than the New, contains fewer transcription errors. Until the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls, the earliest Old Testament manuscripts known dated from the 9th Century AD, and showed relatively little variation among manuscripts. Owing to the discoveries at Qumran, we now know that some Old Testament books changed very little in 1000 years.

Deliberate transcription errors?

There are now more like 10,000 ancient New Testament manuscripts known, and these have shed further light on what the original sources may have said. From these we know that some of the verses in our current New Testaments were probably not written until about the 5th Century, because they are absent from all of the earlier manuscripts. Among the late additions discussed in *The Text of the New Testament*, by Kurt and Barbara Aland, are Matthew 5:44, 6:13, 16:2b-3, 17:21, 18:11, 20:16, 20:22, 20:23, 23:14, 25:13, 27:35; Mark 7:16, 9:44, 9:46, 11:26, 15:28; Luke 4:4, 9:54-56, 17:36, 23:17, 24:42; John 5:3b-4, 7:53-8:11; Acts 8:37, 15:34, 24:6b-8, 28:16, 28:29; Romans 16:24 and 1 John 5:7-8.

An extreme case of very late addition is seen in the words *in heaven: the Father, the Word, and the Holy Spirit; and these three are one. And there are three that*

bear witness on earth. These words occur in no Greek manuscript earlier than the 9th Century, and yet they are still found in the King James Version, the New King James Version and the 21st Century King James Version (1 John 5:7-8). The obvious suspicion is that they may have been inserted to provide support for the doctrine of the Trinity.

The story of the woman taken in adultery (John 7:53-8:11) is an intriguing example. In our modern translations it occurs only in John, but it is not in any of the earliest manuscripts of John. It is also absent from the Codex Vaticanus, the Codex Sinaiticus and most of the later Greek manuscripts. Nor is it in any of the earliest translations of the Bible (Syriac, Coptic and Armenian). On the other hand, it does occur in a few early manuscripts of Luke, coming after Luke 21:38. It is written with a style and vocabulary characteristic of Luke.

This example creates problems for people who think that the Bible derives its authority from the direct divine inspiration of the original authors, faithfully preserved by copyists. But it creates no problem at all for most Christians, because the story carries its own moral authority, and its own hallmark of divine compassion, regardless of its authorship or its date.

The earliest versions of Mark's gospel finish with the women finding the empty tomb, and do not mention Jesus' appearing to his disciples, or his ascension into heaven.

Translation errors

Fundamentalists also mostly accept that the Bible contains some translation errors. If the consensus opinion among Hebrew scholars is that *A virgin shall conceive* is more correctly translated as *The young woman is with child*, then so be it. If the King James translation of Job 21:24, *His breasts are full of milk, and his bones are moistened with marrow*, was changed in the revised

version to *His pails are full of milk, and the marrow of his bones is moist*, then most people can accept the change without a major crisis of faith.

Deliberate translation errors?

In the preface to my copy of the New International Version of the Bible, it says the translators were united in their commitment to the authority and infallibility of the Bible as God's Word in written form. I suspect that this commitment may have led them into eccentric and sometimes blatantly false translations of some verses, particularly those verses that appear to contradict other passages, or appear to condone wanton violence. The violence tends to be softened, and some verses containing contradictions are either made ambiguous or frankly falsified.

A few examples are given by Bruce M. Metzger, a textual scholar of Princeton Theological Seminary, in his book *The Bible in Translation*. Many other examples can easily be found by comparing different translations of the many verses that pose problems for fundamentalists.

Jeremiah seemed to be aware of deliberate attempts to falsify the Bible: *How can you say, 'We are wise, and the law of the LORD is with us'? But, behold, the false pen of the scribes has made it into a lie.* (Revised Standard Version, Jeremiah 8:8)

To be fair to the NIV, I should also say that it incorporates some useful new insights and meanings that have arisen from modern bible scholarship and are absent from most other translations, and it has achieved a commendable beauty and dignity in its style of prose.

Printing errors

It is universally agreed that printing errors also occur. One edition had, in Exodus 20:14, *Thou shalt commit adultery*. So perhaps there was just a touch of justified irony in the misprint of

another edition, which said *Printers* (instead of "Princes") *have persecuted me without a cause*, Psalm 119:161.

No other errors?

But apart from transcription errors, translation errors and printing errors, the Bible, according to fundamentalists, contains no other errors. The original manuscripts when first written were perfect and infallible. The authors were not merely motivated or inspired by God: what they wrote were the very words of God.

The text most commonly quoted in support of this doctrine are the words in 2 Timothy 3:15-16, *And that from a child thou hast known the holy scriptures, which are able to make thee wise unto salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus. All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness* (King James Version).

What exactly were these scriptures that the author was referring to? The fact that Timothy had known them from childhood tends to rule out the New Testament. Most probably he was referring mainly to the Septuagint, which was the best-known version of the Old Testament in 1st century Palestine. When Jesus or the Apostles or the Evangelists quote from the Old Testament, the version that they quote from is usually the Septuagint.

But the 66 books that most fundamentalists recognise as perfect and infallible do not in fact include all the books of the Septuagint that the author of 2 Timothy was probably referring to. When Martin Luther was preparing his German translation of the Bible, and later some other translations, he decided to relegate to an appendix all those Old Testament books that were not available in the Hebrew language; in some cases because their original Hebrew text had been lost, and in some cases because they had originally been

written in Greek or in Aramaic. The appendix was described as containing books good to read, but not equal to holy writ. Nearly all fundamentalist churches and sects took this a stage further and entirely excluded from their Old Testaments all those books that Luther had classified as apocryphal.

If fundamentalists insist, as most of them do, that 66 books and only 66 books are divinely inspired, they must explain why the Epistle writer did not qualify his advice to Timothy. He did not say *All scripture is given by inspiration of God, except for those written in Greek or Aramaic*. They must also have some reason for believing that Martin Luther made the right decision. Was Martin Luther also in some sense inspired?

If so, it seems a frail and inconsistent sort of inspiration. He also wanted to exclude from the canonical section of his bible the books of Job, Jonah and Esther; and in the New Testament he and his followers also excluded Hebrews, James, Jude and Revelation for more than a century, on the grounds that they were not in fact written by apostles, and had no apostolic authority. Some of his followers for years also excluded from their canon the second Epistle of Peter, and the last two Epistles of John, but eventually they decided to restore some of them to full canonical status.

The Apocrypha

In view of the fact that nearly all churches have accepted the reversal of some of the decisions of Luther and his followers, it is worth perusing the Old Testament books that he excluded to see what sort of books they were. A collection of them have been published several times under the name of *The Apocrypha*, and most of them have always been part of the versions of the Bible used by most Christians, including members of the Roman Catholic and Greek Orthodox Churches. You can read most of them in the New American

Bible, available online at <http://www.nccbuscc.org/nab/bible/>

Some of these apocryphal books, to me, do not ring true. The first book of Esdras is attributed to Ezra the Scribe, but clearly was not written by him. It contains some rousing language, some beautiful and uplifting sentiments and some poignant allusions, but the best parts of it have just been copied from other Old Testament books. It is almost as plagiaristic as the Book of Mormon. The second book of Esdras is apocalyptic in style, rather like the Revelation, but I would describe it as imaginative rather than inspired.

Most of the apocryphal books are written in much the same style as the other Old Testament books, incorporating history, legends, poetry, exhortation, prophesy and doxology. In places they get a bit dreary. But a few are unequivocally, stunningly, awesome. I challenge anyone to read the Book of Wisdom, or the book of Ecclesiasticus (also known as Sirach) and tell me truthfully that they are not as beautiful, uplifting and inspirational as any books of the Old Testament.

Do you remember that wonderful poem in Proverbs 8, where Wisdom reminisces about her early existence before the World began?

*The LORD possessed me at the beginning of His way,
Before His works of old.
I have been established from everlasting,
From the beginning, before there was ever an earth.
When there were no depths I was brought forth,
When there were no fountains abounding with water.
Before the mountains were settled,
Before the hills, I was brought forth;
While as yet He had not made the earth or the fields,
Or the primal dust of the world.
When He prepared the heavens, I was there,
When He drew a circle on the face of*

*the deep,
When He established the clouds above,
When He strengthened the fountains of
the deep,
When He assigned to the sea its limit,
So that the waters would not transgress
His command,
When He marked out the foundations of
the earth,
Then I was beside Him as a master
craftsman;
And I was daily His delight,
Rejoicing always before Him,
Rejoicing in His inhabited world,
And my delight was with the sons of
men. (new King James Version)*

If you appreciate this kind of poetry, then you will enjoy reading the Book of Wisdom and the book of Ecclesiasticus (or Sirach), which contain much that is written in the same style and is just as hauntingly beautiful.

The book of Judith is another apocryphal book that I would recommend as well worth reading. It is essentially a short historical novel, written with reverence, and portraying vividly the virtues of piety and courage. As its drama unfolds, it becomes more and more difficult to lay the book down; and the same may be said for the additions to the book of Daniel. The First Book of Maccabees is of considerable historical importance, and it provides the only scriptural basis for the Feast of Dedication, or Hannukah, which Jesus appears to have attended (John 10:22).

The main relevance of all this to fundamentalism is that if you are simply going to accept by faith a particular set of books, and regard them as in a unique class of their own, then you first have to decide which set of books to accept. And if you are honest, you will admit that some of the people who chose the various different canons may not have chosen very well. The boundary line between inspired and uninspired books is not actually as obvious as we would like it to be.

Were the Biblical authors fundamentalists?

Do the books of the Bible claim to be the actual words dictated by God? Well, some do and some don't. Many of the Old Testament prophets repeatedly used the phrase, *Thus saith the Lord*, as in 1 Samuel 15, for example, *Thus saith the Lord of hosts ... go and smite Amalek, and utterly destroy all that they have, and spare him not; but slay both man and woman, infant and suckling, ox and sheep, camel and ass.*

One has to ask whether God was really inciting his people to conduct a campaign of genocide, or whether Samuel just thought so. Can we really feel comfortable about attributing to God the same sort of policy as was instigated by Adolph Hitler, Pol Pot, Idi Amin, Genghis Khan and other mass murderers? Is it not wiser to assume that Samuel, along with the authors of Deuteronomy, Joshua, Judges and Jeremiah, was merely using God's name to lend support to military campaigns and slaughter of children?

The author of Luke's Gospel, on the other hand, seems to indicate that he did not get his gospel directly from God. He begins by describing how he researched the written records and verbal accounts handed down to his generation by those who witnessed the ministry of John the Baptist and Jesus. And we know from studying the rest of the gospel that his account of events is, as he indicates, based partly on earlier documents. One of these earlier documents that he probably used was Mark's gospel, many verses of which he reproduces or paraphrases. What he does not say is that he just wrote what God told him to write. If this gospel were simply written to miraculous dictation, there would have been no need to research the evidence, and he would not have needed the written and verbal accounts handed down from eyewitnesses.

Other derived passages

Many other biblical passages also contain evidence of having been derived in part from earlier writings. The "sayings of the wise" (Proverbs 22:17-24:22) consist of extended proverbs, each introduced by a preface. This section contains several sayings that appear to have been derived from a piece of Egyptian wisdom literature, *The Instruction of Amenemope*, (about 1100 BC). The Hebrew author appears to acknowledge this existing work as a source that he quotes from. The Egyptian work comprises 30 chapters, and the Hebrew text refers to its thirty sayings. (Proverbs 22:20 *Have I not written thirty sayings for you, sayings of counsel and knowledge*, New International Version). The same Egyptian work appears to be a source of several other Biblical passages. You can read a detailed, objective, scholarly study of the Egyptian-Hebrew influence at <http://www.jvl.net/~jrblack/diss.html>

If the writer of Proverbs were writing simply to direct divine dictation, would he have used an earlier Egyptian document as source material? Did the Egyptian writers have direct divine inspiration too? Is it not more likely that his inspiration amounted to something rather less direct than verbal dictation?

The story of Noah's ark closely parallels a much earlier story incorporated in the Epic of Gilgamesh, which is possibly the oldest work of literature ever discovered. It is written in the Accadian language in a cuneiform script on clay tablets. Tablet XI, which contains the story of the flood, is usually on display in the British Museum. It and the story of Noah in Genesis undoubtedly had a common source, and that source, whatever it may have been, existed many generations before the book of Genesis was written.

Literary genres

A history book, a scientific textbook, a book of poetry, a novel, a drama, a hymn book, a discursive essay, a book of practical advice, a book of collected letters, a book of statute law, a recipe book, an inventory of goods, are all quite different in style and in purpose. All of them except the scientific textbook are represented by passages in the Bible, and all of them can be used to communicate truth.

Tolkien's novels about hobbits, elves and other mythical creatures portray vivid truths about the epic battle between good and evil; C. S. Lewis's *Chronicles of Narnia* contain deep spiritual symbolism: what Christian can read about Azlan without recognising who is really being portrayed?

Most of the Psalms, Proverbs, Song of Songs, Ecclesiastes, Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Job, and large parts of Isaiah and Jeremiah are written in the form of poetry. In translation, this is not always obvious to the modern reader. Proverbs and Ecclesiastes are of the genre known as wisdom literature, which was well established in ancient Palestine, Egypt and Mesopotamia. The Song of Songs is a love poem. The Psalms are a hymn book, intended to be sung to music. The Kings, Chronicles, Ezra and Nehemiah were intended to be read as history. Leviticus and Deuteronomy are largely books of law. And many of the books are clearly prophetic.

What would happen if we accidentally put some of the books in the wrong category? What if a misguided librarian put Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* in the History section, and an equally misguided teacher used it as a textbook of history? It would only be a matter of time before someone noticed that the book mentions the sound of a clock striking, long before striking clocks were invented. After sufficient research, other internal and external discrepancies would be found, and the historians

might decide that this Shakespeare guy was a fraud, and his books were sheer rubbish.

What if a book of poetry was wrongly classified as a science textbook? Consider the lines from Shakespeare's 33rd sonnet, describing the morning sun,

*Kissing with golden face the meadows green,
Gilding pale streams with heavenly alchemy.*

A literal interpretation of this beautiful verse would imply that the sun makes physical contact with the meadows, and causes a chemical change in the water of the streams, coating them with a layer of gold. A misguided scientist might conclude that the book was riddled with error, and this Shakespeare guy was an impostor pretending to understand chemistry.

These absurd misclassifications are to me no more absurd than what fundamentalists have done with parts of the Bible, and the consequences have been that some masterpieces of literature have been brought into disrepute. Lay members of the public have been left with the impression that many parts of the Bible were written by impostors and fraudsters.

Much has been written by others about misinterpretation of the early chapters of Genesis, so I shall not weary the reader by going over old ground, save to say that in these chapters Adam and Eve are symbols of early humanity, and their story vividly depicts several salient messages, notably the creative power of God, the essential brotherhood of man, and the role of sin as a source of human suffering. It is not a history book, any more than it is a recipe book telling you how to make humans.

Nor is it a literal physical description of the structure of the Universe. The firmament of Genesis 1: 6-10 can hardly be regarded literally as an inverted bowl over a flat earth, as the ancients imagined, keeping out the water except

when its windows were opened and the water fell as rain.

Jesus' warnings against being too literal

Jesus himself is on record as teaching people not to interpret biblical passages too literally, materially or physically.

For example, on the basis of Old Testament prophecy (Malachi 3:1; Malachi 4:1-6), the Jews expected Elijah to return to Earth before the coming of the Messiah. Most of them probably expected him to look like Elijah, speak like Elijah and answer to the name of Elijah. They almost certainly expected him to arrive as a fully-grown adult, and be received with public acclaim. Some of them probably expected him to return to Earth in the same manner as he was taken up into Heaven, riding in a chariot of fire. But what they got was John the Baptist, who arrived as a baby via his mother's womb, lived rough, probably looked scruffy, and denied that he was Elijah (John 1:21).

But Jesus taught that the coming of John the Baptist was in a spiritual or figurative sense a fulfilment of the promised return of Elijah (Matthew 11:13-14; 17:12-13; Mark 9:13). Elijah and John both spent a long time in the wilderness, both wore a hairy garment and a leathern girdle about their loins, both began their ministry abruptly, and both were known for the sternness of their reproof; so the metaphor was apt. But the fundamentalists of Jesus' time made the mistake of expecting something more literal, more spectacular, something more like magic.

Similarly, Jesus taught that the central theme of his ministry, the coming of the Kingdom of God, was to be interpreted spiritually, not literally, physically and materially. His followers made the mistake of interpreting Old Testament prophecy (Zechariah 9:9-10; Micah 5:2-6) as meaning that the Messiah would take military and political power, establish himself as King in Jerusalem,

and lead a military campaign against Syria.

But in Luke 17:20-21 it says, *And when he was demanded of the Pharisees, when the kingdom of God should come, he answered them and said, The kingdom of God cometh not with observation: Neither shall they say, Lo here! or, lo there! for, behold, the kingdom of God is within you.*

Similarly, in the Gospel of Thomas, 113, *His disciples said to him, "When will the Kingdom of God come?" It will not come by watching for it. It will not be said, 'Look, here!' or 'Look, there!' 'Rather, the Kingdom of God is spread out upon the earth, and people don't see it."*

There are also numerous passages where Jesus taught his listeners that the Kingdom of God would be established during their own lifetimes (Matthew 10:23; 16:28; 24:34; Mark 9:1; 13:25-30; Luke 9:27; 21:32), which all help to confirm that the literal, physical, material, political kingdom expected by literalists was not the kind of kingdom that Jesus was talking about.

In 2 Samuel 7:16, God promised that Solomon's kingdom would last for ever. Well, in the literal, physical sense, it did not. It is in a spiritual sense that the kingdom has continued to this day.

Let us turn now to some other important biblical passages that fundamentalists and sometimes Catholics have taken too literally, thereby bringing them into disrepute.

Nativity stories

The nativity stories in Matthew and Luke conform with what was a well established literary genre. Similar nativity stories had been told about many religious leaders, including Krishna, Buddha, Dionysus, Mithra, Horus, Adonis and Attis. Common elements often found in these stories include the appearance of a new star, the birth of a child to a virgin mother and an adoptive father in humble

surroundings, often on a journey away from home, on a date equivalent to our 25th of December, visitors who come to pay their respects to the new child, a wicked king who plans to kill the infant, the adoptive father being warned in a dream, an escape from the wicked king, and the slaughter of other innocent children.

But is it possible that the nativity stories in the gospels, although showing more than accidental resemblance to earlier stories, could also have been historically accurate? Couldn't the earlier stories merely have been like prophecies, forerunners to a real epoch-making historical event?

It is difficult to take this view, because if the nativity stories are construed as literal history, it is very difficult to reconcile Matthew's nativity story with Luke's. At most one of them could have been literal and historical. Matthew's nativity story is set in the year 4 BC, since the birth according to Matthew occurred shortly before the death of King Herod (who is known to have died in 4 BC), whereas Luke's story is set in the year 6 or 7 AD in the year when the first census was held while Cyrenius was Governor of Syria. It is known that Cyrenius became Governor of Syria in the year 6 or 7 AD and in the same year there was a census held throughout Judea, which by that time was annexed to Syria.

It is also very difficult to reconcile the genealogies in Matthew and Luke. Both genealogies comprise a long list of men's names, tracing Jesus' ancestry back to King David and Abraham or beyond, via the male line. The two lists of names show a fair measure of agreement from Abraham down to David, and this part agrees not too badly with the Old Testament. But from David down to Joseph (the father of Jesus) the two genealogies are very different in length and, apart from David, Joseph and Jesus, there are only three names that occur in both lists – and these three names do not occur in the same order. In other words, in this

section of the genealogies there is no more agreement between them than could have occurred by accident.

Other aspects of the two nativity stories are also rather difficult to reconcile. Matthew has the Holy Family fleeing to Egypt immediately after the birth, and they remain there until King Herod dies, whereas in Luke they are in the Temple at Jerusalem only days after Jesus' birth, and go from there to their home town of Nazareth. Matthew gives the impression that Joseph and Mary's home was in Bethlehem before the birth: there was no mention of a journey before the birth, and the wise men visit the newborn child in the house, not in a stable or an inn. Matthew explains that after the death of King Herod, Joseph heard that Archelaus was reigning in Judea, and so was afraid to go there, so they went to live in Galilee in a town called Nazareth. Luke, by contrast, says that Nazareth was their home town even before the birth, and describes their journey to Bethlehem for purposes of the census. But he makes no mention of a journey to Egypt, or the slaughter of the innocents. In Luke they went to Nazareth not as refugees, but simply because that was their home.

External historical evidence is also difficult to reconcile with the nativity stories. King Herod was certainly a brutal character, and his misdeeds were well documented by historians, but none of them mentioned the slaughter of the innocents, which, if it were historical, would probably have been deemed worthy of mention.

The requirement for Joseph and Mary to travel to Bethlehem to register their names seems historically implausible, since the purpose of the Roman censuses was to enable the Government to raise taxes. For this purpose they would need each citizen to register in the town where he lived, not in the town where a distant ancestor lived.

I could go on and on, but I think I have made my main point. It is that the nativity stories belong to a literary genre

that is quite distinct from history, and I don't imagine that their original authors intended for a moment that anyone should construe them as history. The nearest type of literary genre in modern times is the historical drama, whose purpose is to depict in a vivid and stirring way just how important were the events on which the drama was based. To the authors of the nativity stories Jesus' birth was an epoch-making event comparable with the creation of the world – an event to be treated with awe and reverence. And their writings depicted this as vividly as they knew how.

Their purpose may be compared with that of some great paintings of the Nativity – an expression of the emotional and spiritual impact that the event had, as perceived by the artist. Historical accuracy is not what a great religious painting is about; nor is it what the gospel nativity stories are about.

A more modern work that may illustrate what I mean is Milton's *Ode on the Morning of Christ's nativity*. This poem is not his best known, but for sheer quality and beauty I doubt that there is any poem in the whole of the English language to match it. He depicts as no other English writer has done, feelings of exhilaration, wonder and reverence; and he portrays as no other English writer has done the sheer immensity of the event. But he would probably be dismayed and distressed if anyone tried to interpret his poem as literal history, for this would surely be to miss its whole meaning and purpose, and potentially bring it into disrepute.

We have seen how Luke, as suggested by his own opening words and confirmed by textual scrutiny, made use of earlier documents when composing his gospel. There are indications from textual analysis that the nativity story may have originally been written not by Luke, since its literary style and vocabulary differ from the rest of the gospel. Nowhere in the rest of the gospels or the epistles does Jesus or anyone else refer to the nativity stories,

which might indicate that they were a late addition to the gospels. In a version of Luke's gospel thought to be a copy of the version used by Marcion around 140 AD, there is no nativity story, and the gospel begins with the ministry of John the Baptist. Another distinction between the nativity story and subsequent parts of Luke's Gospel is that the latter appear to be based on history more than the nativity story was.

The Ministry of Jesus

The ministry of Jesus, unlike the earlier parts of the Gospels of Matthew and Luke, did not conform with an established literary genre. It was so original and so immensely moving that it hardly seems possible for four rather ordinary men, the authors of the four gospels, to have merely made it up.

There are linguistic clues too that indicate historical authenticity. Where the words of Jesus and John the Baptist are quoted verbatim, there are clues to indicate that, unlike the surrounding narrative text, the direct speech has been translated from Aramaic to Greek. For instance, when John the Baptist says that from these stones God is able to raise up children, it seems a strange choice of words in Greek or in English: why stones? Why children? However, in Aramaic, the native language of 1st century Palestinians, the word for stones is almost identical to the word for children, and so the Baptist's choice of words gave his preaching a memorable impact.

When Jesus teaches his disciples to pray, the words in Greek do not form any discernible pattern of rhythm or rhyme, but in Aramaic they appear to make use of both rhythm and rhyme. Would Greek writers who just made up the story of Jesus' ministry have bothered to engineer such clues? I hardly think so.

The Gospel of Thomas

The Gospel of Thomas is not well known among Christians, since it was not discovered until 1945, long after the canon of scripture had been put together, but its original version is now thought to be about as old as the four canonical gospels, and this means that it carries some weight as a possible source of historical evidence. It only survives in the Coptic language, apart from a few fragments of the earlier Greek version, and even the Coptic copy is incomplete.

It is largely a collection of the sayings of Jesus, and it serves consistently to confirm the general tenor of Jesus' teachings. Many of the sayings in it are more or less the same as in the other gospels, but there are other sayings unique to the Gospel of Thomas, and they all sound like the sort of things Jesus might have said. They have an authentic sound to them, and they include some deeply thought-provoking remarks. Their possible historical authenticity makes them intensely interesting to anyone who wishes to follow the teachings of Jesus. You can read them, along with other ancient Christian documents, at <http://gbgm-umc.org/umw/bible/noncanon.stm>

While I know of no reason to believe that all the details of words and deeds attributed to Jesus in any of the gospels are accurate, there can be very little room for doubt about the tenor of his ministry and his main messages: they are just too consistent to have arisen from transcription errors or from diverse authors, just too original to have been made up or plagiarised by the evangelists, and just too precious to lose.

The Crucifixion

When we come to events surrounding the crucifixion, a comparison of the four gospels gives much the same picture of partial but not complete agreement. This is only to be expected if the four accounts were based on real historical

events but not written down for several decades. But some of the discrepancies appear to be more than simple lapses of memory: they sometimes appear to have symbolic meaning.

Take for instance the day and time of crucifixion, which all the gospels record relative to the Feast of the Passover. To refresh your memory about the Passover timetable you may wish to look at Exodus 12. The Passover was celebrated once a year on the 14th day of the month Abib (later known as Nisan), and the week from the evening of the 14th to the evening of the 21st was known as the feast of unleavened bread. The Passover lamb was chosen and segregated on the 10th day of the month and slaughtered and roasted on the 14th day, which was called the day of Preparation of the Passover. On the evening of the 14th the whole household or group of households would then eat the Passover feast, which would include the roast lamb.

Now, the three synoptic gospels, Matthew, Mark and Luke, record unambiguously that Jesus ate the Passover feast with his disciples and was crucified the next day: to be precise, they indicate that he was crucified at the third hour of the 15th day of Nisan (about 9 a.m. by our clocks), and he died at the 9th hour (about 3 p.m.)

John's gospel (chapters 18 and 19), by contrast, emphasises by repetition that Jesus was crucified on the Day of Preparation of the Passover, i.e. on the 14th day of Nisan. To be precise, John indicates that he was crucified shortly after the sixth hour (midday) on the Day of Preparation. The symbolic significance of this timing is that Jesus was crucified at the time allocated for the sacrifice of the Passover Lamb. Thus the theme of Jesus as the Lamb of God, which was introduced early in John's gospel, now reaches its climax, and its terrible meaning finally becomes clear.

None of the synoptic gospels mentions the title Lamb of God and none of them

draws the analogy between Jesus' crucifixion and the sacrifice of the Passover Lamb. Thus there appear to be spiritual and symbolic reasons for at least some of the historical discrepancies between different gospels.

Factual errors in the Old Testament

The Old Testament too contains hundreds, and perhaps thousands of factual discrepancies, many of them in passages that were probably intended to be factual and historical. For example, according to 2 Samuel 24:1, God caused David to number the people. Yet in 1 Chronicles 21:1 it is Satan who causes David to do this most evil thing. And from that point onward, these two accounts of the same events continue to contradict each other.

But factual and historical errors in the Bible are not by any means its only hallmarks or even its most important hallmarks of human weakness and fallibility. According to the Old Testament authors, God instituted numerous laws, commands and practices that hardly anyone today would see as morally defensible. It is well said that the Lord gets the blame for a lot of things, not only among today's Christians, but also among the prophets, lawgivers and chroniclers of the past. And there are also many evils that appear to be condoned by the Bible, without being positively prescribed.

Questionable Morality in the Bible

Today's standards of morality in the Western World may leave something to be desired, but at least most of us regard as morally indefensible such acts as genocide, infant sacrifice, selling your daughter, the death penalty for children, and the death penalty for relatively minor offences.

It is therefore disturbing to find in the Old Testament that the death penalty is mandatory for anyone who curses his

father or mother (Leviticus 20:9, Exodus 21:17), strikes his father or mother (Exodus 21:15), does any work on the Sabbath (Exodus 31:15), for example gathering sticks (Numbers 15:32-36), blasphemes (Leviticus 24:16), goes near the Tabernacle (Numbers 1:51), approaches the Sanctuary (Numbers 3:10), charges excessive interest on a loan (Ezekiel 18:13), is found not to be a virgin when she is married (Deut 22:20-21), fails to seek the Lord God of Israel (2 Chronicles 15:13) or looks into the ark. On the other hand, if a man beats his servant so badly that he or she dies a day or two later, he is not to be punished at all (Exodus 21:20-21).

If a child curses his father or mother, wouldn't it be better to try some milder form of correction, short of the death penalty? I do not wish to imply that the death penalty was in actual practice inflicted on children who cursed their parents: in Matthew 15:1-4, when the scribes and Pharisees criticise Jesus' disciples for transgressing the traditions of the elders, Jesus quotes this Mosaic law as an example of a law that even the scribes and Pharisees did not obey. I am just suggesting, as I think Jesus was, that it is unthinkable to take this particular Mosaic law literally.

According to 1 Samuel 6:19 *God struck down some of the men of Beth Shemesh, putting 50,070 of them to death because they had looked into the ark of the LORD. The people mourned because of the heavy blow the LORD had dealt them.* Was this the same merciful, loving and forgiving God as was revealed by Jesus, or was the Bible just wrong about the reason for the terrible death toll?

The campaign of genocide, including the slaughter of children, incited by God according to 1 Samuel 15:3 has already been mentioned, and seems by today's standards to be morally indefensible. But there are many similar passages. For example, in Deuteronomy 20: 16-17 we read, *of the cities of these people, which the LORD thy God doth give thee for an inheritance, thou shalt save alive*

nothing that breatheth: But thou shalt utterly destroy them; namely, the Hittites, and the Amorites, the Canaanites, and the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites; as the LORD thy God hath commanded thee.

Our armed forces today sometimes disgrace themselves by mistreating civilians and prisoners after a military campaign, but the breaches of the Geneva Convention are usually the work of a minority of relatively low-ranking officers. It is rarely that the command to commit an atrocity comes from the top, and on those occasions when it does, the commander is usually prosecuted for war crimes.

It is therefore disturbing to read that Moses treated prisoners with atrocious cruelty, and apparently with total impunity, and the biblical record does not contain so much as a hint of disapproval. Numbers 31:14-17 (King James Version) tells us that *Moses was wroth with the officers of the host, with the captains over thousands, and captains over hundreds, which came from the battle. And Moses said unto them, Have ye saved all the women alive? Behold, these caused the children of Israel, through the counsel of Balaam, to commit trespass against the LORD in the matter of Peor, and there was a plague among the congregation of the LORD. Now therefore kill every male among the little ones, and kill every woman that hath known man by lying with him. But all the women children, that have not known a man by lying with him, keep alive for yourselves.*

Perhaps cruelty to children is the crime that provokes the most extreme revulsion in most of us. So can we consider the prophet Hosea to be divinely inspired when he wrote *Samaria shall become desolate; for she hath rebelled against her God: they shall fall by the sword: their infants shall be dashed in pieces, and their women with child shall be ripped up* (Hosea 13:16), or was the Psalmist divinely inspired when he wrote *O daughter of Babylon, who art to be destroyed; happy shall he*

be, that rewardeth thee as thou hast served us. Happy shall he be, that taketh and dasheth thy little ones against the stones? (Psalm 137:8-9)

The mistreatment of children is particularly disturbing when the deed is committed by the children's own parents. But Exodus 21:7 appears to condone selling one's daughter into what was effectively slavery, *And if a man sell his daughter to be a maidservant, she shall not go out as the menservants do*, and Judges 11 appears to condone Jephtha's sacrifice of his own daughter. And then, of course, you have Lot, a just and righteous man according to the Second Epistle of Peter. On one occasion (Genesis 19:8) he offers his virgin daughters to a crowd of rapists and on another occasion (Genesis 19:32-36), when drunk, he gets his own daughters pregnant.

Repetition

Have you ever noticed just how often drunk men tend to repeat themselves? Well, so do careless editors, if they accidentally incorporate the same source document more than once into an anthology. This can also happen if one of the documents used as a source was plagiarised by its author from one of the other authors. All of these things can arise from the weaknesses and errors of fallible authors, but you do not expect it to happen in a divinely inspired book, especially one comprising the very words of God. God does not get his needle stuck in a groove, or accidentally press the photocopier button twice.

There are, of course, many examples of repetition used very effectively in the Bible for emphasis, and as part of a poetic structure, as in Psalm 136. Some verses occur as many as twelve times, quite deliberately (see Numbers 7:12-83).

But there are other examples of passages that occur twice without any such plausible excuse. In most instances the repetition does not look

like the result of infallible, direct, verbal inspiration: it looks more like a simple human error. For example, Isaiah 37 (the whole chapter) is an exact copy of 2 Kings 19; and Isaiah 38 is an almost exact copy of 2 Kings 20:1-8. Also, 2 Chronicles 9:11-26 are a repeat of 1 Kings 10:12-27, as are several passages in Chronicles and Kings. Psalm 53 is an almost exact copy of Psalm 14. The last two verses of 2 Chronicles are the same as the first two and a half verses of Ezra, and the Chronicler ends the last verse abruptly in mid-sentence.

Prophecy

It has been suggested to me that a study of predictive prophecy and its success rate would be a test of biblical infallibility. There are three serious limitations to this kind of study.

First, many prophecies are open-ended, with no time limit set for their fulfilment. In a sense, such a prophecy is safe to make because it can never be conclusively falsified by subsequent events. For example, Isaiah 19, in the prophecy against Egypt, predicts that the waters of the Nile will dry up completely. As far as I know, this has never happened, and it would create mayhem, or possibly annihilation of a whole population if it did happen, but a fundamentalist could always say that we just have to wait a bit longer and it will happen eventually. Given global warming, maybe he would be right.

Another prophecy against Egypt that has not to my knowledge ever been fulfilled is seen in Ezekiel 29:9-12. Again, maybe we just have to wait a bit longer. Mind you, where there is an open-ended prediction that a certain event will *not* happen, then this is a bolder prediction than saying it will happen, because it is potentially capable of being falsified by events.

Secondly, where prophecies appear to have been fulfilled, we sometimes have to depend on bible scholars and archaeologists to tell us whether the

prophecy was written before or after the event predicted, and this may lead to irresolvable argument. This is a particular problem with the prophecies in Daniel, which was possibly the last of the Old Testament books to be written.

A third thorny problem for the proposed test of inerrancy is that many prophecies are written in somewhat figurative language, so it may not be possible to agree about what event or person the prophecy refers to. This is a particular problem with the Old Testament verses referred to by the author of Matthew's gospel. Although Matthew very frequently quotes Old Testament verses and applies them to the Messiah, which is reasonable enough if done in a metaphorical sense, a close examination of the context of the verses that he quotes shows that their immediate, or literal, application is nearly always to someone else.

Despite these three limitations, there are still, in fact, some prophecies that could perhaps be used as a test of inerrancy: namely those prophecies that are fairly unambiguous in their meaning and are accompanied by an explicit or implied time limit for their fulfilment, and were probably made before the event predicted. And there are also those prophecies that predict that a certain event will *not* happen. But when I study these, my impression is that they weaken rather than strengthen the fundamentalist's case.

For instance, when Ahaz the King of Judah was faced with the task of defending Jerusalem against a combined assault by the Kings of Israel and Syria, Isaiah gave him a reassuring prophecy, which he said was from God, to the effect that the attempted conquest would not succeed (Isaiah 7: 1-7).

¹ *And it came to pass in the days of Ahaz the son of Jotham, the son of Uzziah, king of Judah, that Rezin the king of Syria, and Pekah the son of Remaliah, king of Israel, went up toward Jerusalem to war against it, but could not prevail against it.*

² *And it was told the house of David,*

saying, Syria is confederate with Ephraim. And his heart was moved, and the heart of his people, as the trees of the wood are moved with the wind.

³ *Then said the LORD unto Isaiah, Go forth now to meet Ahaz, thou, and Shearjashub thy son, at the end of the conduit of the upper pool in the highway of the fuller's field;*

⁴ *And say unto him, Take heed, and be quiet; fear not, neither be fainthearted for the two tails of these smoking firebrands, for the fierce anger of Rezin with Syria, and of the son of Remaliah.*

⁵ *Because Syria, Ephraim, and the son of Remaliah, have taken evil counsel against thee, saying,*

⁶ *Let us go up against Judah, and vex it, and let us make a breach therein for us, and set a king in the midst of it, even the son of Tabeal:*

⁷ *Thus saith the Lord GOD, It shall not stand, neither shall it come to pass. (King James Version)*

But according to II Chronicles 28: 5-8 Ahaz was in fact defeated in the attack by the kings of Israel and Syria, with more than a hundred thousand men slaughtered; and the assailants took hundreds of thousands of prisoners and plunder back to Samaria and Damascus.

⁵ *Wherefore the LORD his God delivered him into the hand of the king of Syria; and they smote him, and carried away a great multitude of them captives, and brought them to Damascus. And he was also delivered into the hand of the king of Israel, who smote him with a great slaughter.*

⁶ *For Pekah the son of Remaliah slew in Judah an hundred and twenty thousand in one day, which were all valiant men; because they had forsaken the LORD God of their fathers.*

⁷ *And Zichri, a mighty man of Ephraim, slew Maaseiah the king's son, and Azrikam the governor of the house, and Elkanah that was next to the king.*

⁸ *And the children of Israel carried away captive of their brethren two hundred thousand, women, sons, and daughters, and took also away much*

spoil from them, and brought the spoil to Samaria. (King James Version)

Ezekiel 26:7-14 prophesied that Nebuchadnezzar would destroy the city of Tyre.

⁷ *For thus saith the Lord GOD; Behold, I will bring upon Tyrus Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon, a king of kings, from the north, with horses, and with chariots, and with horsemen, and companies, and much people.*

⁸ *He shall slay with the sword thy daughters in the field: and he shall make a fort against thee, and cast a mount against thee, and lift up the buckler against thee.*

⁹ *And he shall set engines of war against thy walls, and with his axes he shall break down thy towers.*

¹⁰ *By reason of the abundance of his horses their dust shall cover thee: thy walls shall shake at the noise of the horsemen, and of the wheels, and of the chariots, when he shall enter into thy gates, as men enter into a city wherein is made a breach.*

¹¹ *With the hoofs of his horses shall he tread down all thy streets: he shall slay thy people by the sword, and thy strong garrisons shall go down to the ground.*

¹² *And they shall make a spoil of thy riches, and make a prey of thy merchandise: and they shall break down thy walls, and destroy thy pleasant houses: and they shall lay thy stones and thy timber and thy dust in the midst of the water.*

¹³ *And I will cause the noise of thy songs to cease; and the sound of thy harps shall be no more heard.*

¹⁴ *And I will make thee like the top of a rock: thou shalt be a place to spread nets upon; thou shalt be built no more: for I the LORD have spoken it, saith the Lord GOD.*

But historians, if they are to be believed, tell us that Tyre did not in fact fall to Nebuchadnezzar. Eventually the siege was lifted and a compromise peace settlement was agreed (Asimov, *Guide to the Bible*, p587-588); but 240 years later Tyre was destroyed by Alexander the Great and, in contradiction to the

prophecy of Ezekiel, it was in fact rebuilt (Howell-Smith, *In Search of the Real Bible*, p40-41). I am not a historian, so I cannot give an expert assessment of the accuracy of these facts, but I know of no historians that contradict them. Indeed, the New Testament confirms that Tyre existed during Jesus' ministry (Mark 7:24) and at the time of Peter's escape from prison (Acts 12:20). And according to the Association for Rural Development Aid, Tyre still exists and had a population of 132,111 in 1996.

Moreover, in Ezekiel 29:17-20 the prophet seems by implication to admit that his prophecy had not been fulfilled.

¹⁷ *In the twenty-seventh year, in the first month on the first day, the word of the LORD came to me: ¹⁸ "Son of man, Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon drove his army in a hard campaign against Tyre; every head was rubbed bare and every shoulder made raw. Yet he and his army got no reward from the campaign he led against Tyre. ¹⁹*

Therefore this is what the Sovereign LORD says: I am going to give Egypt to Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon, and he will carry off its wealth. He will loot and plunder the land as pay for his army. ²⁰ I have given him Egypt as a reward for his efforts because he and his army did it for me, declares the Sovereign LORD .

In the process of making this admission, Ezekiel has made another prophecy: that Nebuchadnezzar would conquer Egypt, an event that we would almost certainly know about if it had ever taken place.

I sense that this is getting a bit tedious. There are dozens of other examples that I could quote. But let me just add a very brief example from the New Testament. Matthew 12:40 says, *For as Jonas was three days and three nights in the whale's belly; so shall the Son of man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.*

The most natural interpretation of *three days and three nights* is a period of about 72 hours, whereas the most

natural interpretation of the gospel accounts of burial and resurrection imply that Jesus was in the grave from the evening of Good Friday to very early in the morning on Easter Sunday – a period of about 36 hours. I have seen people indulging in verbal acrobatics and ingenious chronological models in an attempt to reconcile these figures, but their arguments always appeared artificial, contrived and ad-hoc. The simplest explanation is that Matthew, as was his wont, was just applying Old Testament verses inappropriately, even to the extent of putting words in Jesus' mouth.

What does all this mean for fundamentalists?

I once was a fundamentalist myself, and I ate, drank, breathed, prayed, worshipped and preached among fundamentalists, so I know how they think. One of the fears that lurk in their minds is that if we concede that the Bible is only a human and fallible attempt to record the history of God's relationship with man, then what grounds do we have for believing anything, such as the existence of God and the resurrection of Jesus?

The fear is that their faith may crumble away to nothing, leaving them with no purpose in life and no guidance on how to live it. Roman Catholics do not have quite the same fear, because their criterion of truth is what the Church says, and particularly the Pope. The Taylor/Symington/Hales branch of the Exclusive Brethren similarly need not worry about fallibility in the Bible, because their criterion of truth is what their leader says. But for most fundamentalists the fear is very real, and I have no wish to distress them.

Let me offer some constructive suggestions therefore to those fundamentalists whose faith is built, not exactly on rock, nor on sand, but on a thin, brittle crust of certainty, a crust that is liable to crumble if you probe it ever so gently with the sword of truth.

First, you don't need a perfect and infallible Bible in order to have a living, active and fulfilling faith. Most Christians have one without the other. There are reasons for belief that do not depend at all on a literal interpretation of the Bible, and there are reasons for disbelief that do arise from a literal interpretation of the Bible.

I once heard a Sunday School teacher expressing dismay at a lesson in which children were being taught a very literal approach to an allegorical bible story. She said, with a shake of the head, "This is the sort of lesson that breeds young atheists." She did have a point. Fundamentalism can bring the Bible into disrepute. Fundamentalism has sadly been successful in convincing many people that large sections of the Bible pretend to be history, when clearly they do not pretend to be anything of the sort.

So what are the reasons for belief that do not depend at all on a literal interpretation of the Bible?

After allowing for the insertions, deletions, confusions and maulings that the gospel records have suffered, there remains a hard core of the teachings of Jesus. While historical accuracy is no longer available to us, there can be little doubt about the tenor of his ministry. It is consistent, it is stunning, it is liberating; in places it is awe-inspiring. If you are convinced that it is right and have experienced its power, and you feel drawn by the words "follow me", then do you need any more justification?

Some readers may feel that they do in fact need more justification for belief. The classical philosophical arguments have largely failed, and the argument from design has largely been demolished. The Bible is no longer totally reliable, so where is the evidence for God now?

Try looking deep within yourself and, as far as feasible, deep within others. Have you ever encountered examples of sheer, pure, unconditional goodness?

Have you ever felt inspired to spread and communicate the love of God to someone? Do you ever experience the Wisdom from above, which is pure, peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere? Do you ever have a sublime experience of love, joy, peace, long-suffering, kindness, goodness, fidelity, meekness, self-control?

If you have experienced these things, then you are not alone. The Bible, with all its frail human imperfections, contains many records of people who have experienced the same power guiding them, motivating them, acting in and through them.

Admittedly, none of these experiences could be presented to a sceptic as a proof of the existence of God. They are not a proof. Nor could you present to a sceptic proof of the existence of love. Love is something that you have no doubt about if you have experienced it, and no knowledge of if you have not experienced it. I know of no way in which I could prove the existence of love, or even describe it, to someone who had never experienced it.

In the Epistles of Paul, most of which are probably genuine, Paul repeatedly refers to such experiences and attributes them to the indwelling presence of the Spirit of God. He describes the Spirit as bearing witness with our spirit. He describes our unvoiced prayers as the Spirit interceding with groanings that cannot be uttered.

Isaiah 57:15 describes a God who dwells both in heaven and in people. *For thus saith the high and lofty One that inhabiteth eternity, and whose name is Holy: I dwell in the high and holy [place], and with him that is of a contrite and humble spirit.*

In Matthew 18:20, in a passage that appears to refer to the future, Jesus is recorded as saying that he will be with his disciples wherever they are gathered together. In Revelation 3:20 he is also seen as promising to dwell with anyone

who hears his voice and opens the door.

In the New Testament we read the words and observe the deeds of Jesus' disciples after his departure. Some of their words and deeds are noticeably Jesus-like. It is almost as if Jesus was still alive within his followers. We get the same impression in some non-canonical writings, such as Clement's Epistle to the Corinthians. In ways that are not easy to define, he seems to breathe and exude and communicate the love of God. And we can see that the history of the world was radically changed by these people. Something very powerful was at work.

Again, none of this could be presented to a sceptic as a proof of anything. It simply suggests that in some sense the spirit of Jesus is still alive in his followers. It does not tell us anything about what happened to the atoms and molecules that made up his body. But then, maybe atoms and molecules are not very important. Our atoms and molecules do not define our identity. Even the atoms and molecules that make up a living body are continually being lost and replaced.

Resurrection

Resurrection and life after death are not very consistently depicted by the Bible. Some Old Testament passages appear to contradict the doctrine. For example,

Job 7:9 As the cloud is consumed and vanishes away, so he that goeth down to the grave shall come up no more.

Psalm 6:5 For in death there is no remembrance of thee: in the grave who shall give thee thanks?

Ecclesiastes 3:19 For that which befalleth the sons of men befalleth beasts; even one thing befalleth them: as the one dieth, so dieth the other; yea, they have all one breath; so that a man hath no preeminence above a beast.

Ecclesiastes 9:5 *The dead know not anything, neither have they any more a reward.*

Ecclesiastes 9:10 *For there is no work, nor device, nor knowledge, nor wisdom, in the grave, whither thou goest.*

Isaiah 26:14 *They are dead, they shall not live; they are deceased they shall not rise.*

Isaiah 38:18 *For the grave cannot praise thee, death can not celebrate thee: they that go down into the pit cannot hope for thy truth.*

On the other hand, other passages give examples of people who have been raised from the dead. Elijah was said to be instrumental in the resurrection of a child; Elisha in the resurrection of a child and a man; Jesus in the resurrection of Lazarus and Jairus's daughter. And we also have the report in Matthew 27 that *the graves were opened; and many bodies of the saints which slept arose, And came out of the graves after his resurrection, and went into the holy city, and appeared unto many.*

Maybe some of the conflicting passages could be reconciled by accepting that resurrection does occur in some sense of the word, but not in another sense. The exact nature of resurrection is not made entirely clear to us in the New Testament. Paul's account of what resurrection means differs somewhat from other accounts. In 1 Corinthians 15 he says *it is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body.* And in 2 Corinthians 5 he says, *For we know that if our earthly tabernacle house be destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens. For indeed in this we groan, ardently desiring to have put on our house which [is] from heaven.*

In these passages Paul indicates a difference between the body that is buried and the body that is raised. The body that is buried is destroyed, and the resurrected body is a spiritual body, a building from God, a house not made

with hands ... our house which is from heaven.

On the other hand, other descriptions of resurrection depict it in a much more physical sense, as in the quotation from Matthew 27 in which the bodies came out of the graves, not out of heaven.

When the Bible appears to deny resurrection in some passages, but depicts it as a physical event in other passages and as a spiritual event in yet others, it is not surprising that different Christians have differing conceptions of what resurrection means. But do we really need to enforce a uniformity of interpretation? The early church leaders disagreed about some very fundamental principles, such as whether gentiles could be accepted into the church, but they did not split into two churches merely because they disagreed.

Conclusions

The Bible is a wonderful human record of the relationship between God and man. Much of it is justly described as inspired, in the sense that its authors were inspired and motivated by their faith, or by God. Parts of it have great power to instruct, uplift and inspire the reader. But its text cannot possibly be regarded as the actual words, perfect and infallible, dictated by God.

The Bible contains many different literary genres, including allegory, poetry and drama, which were probably never intended by their authors to be construed as literal history. Their allegorical or poetic style can often communicate complex ideas and feelings more vividly than plain prose could. But they are not history. To insist that the authors intended them as history has given many people the impression that they were written by fraudsters and impostors. Fallible the authors may have been, but fraudsters and impostors they were not.

According to the gospels, Jesus taught that the prophecies concerning the

return of Elijah and the coming of the Kingdom of God were to be understood in a spiritual sense, not in the immediate, literal, physical sense that most people thought. If Jesus did not interpret prophecies in their most literal sense, it ill behoves us to be more fundamentalist than he was.

The Bible also contains a great deal of literal history, intermingled with the marks of human frailty, fallibility, and error. The errors are too great and too numerous to be explained away by ingenious, contrived, ad-hoc explanations. It is better just to accept that the errors are there, and learn how to distinguish truth from error, just as we have to do daily in everything else that we read.

Different churches recognise different books as worthy of inclusion in the Bible, and many different canons of scripture have been compiled in different ages. Some of those books not included in the Protestant bibles and others not included in Catholic bibles have great spiritual power, in no way inferior to those that are included. So the content of any particular canon of scripture cannot reasonably be regarded as final, God-given and perfect.

An infallible bible is not needed in order to have a living, active and fulfilling faith. Indeed, the alleged infallibility of the Bible has often been seriously damaging to the credibility of Christian teachings, seriously damaging to the reputation of the Bible, and seriously damaging to faith.

If we do not have a universally accepted criterion of truth, of course, there will inevitably be diversity of understanding of divine truth. But it is acceptable to disagree. Separating from everyone who disagrees with you is only a convenient way to avoid having your views exposed to scrutiny. And an enforced unity of belief is only a sham unity. The early church leaders disagreed about many things. Let us allow free and open discussion.

The human species is exceptional in its capacity for speech and thought. To suppress freedom of speech and freedom of thought has a dehumanising effect and is just not acceptable. I shall even allow fundamentalists to disagree with every word I have written, and still regard them in the spirit of brotherly love.

If you are a fundamentalist and are happy with your version of the Christian faith, then I have no wish to persuade you to change. Persuasion is no part of my personal mission.

My target audience are those who already feel that there is something seriously wrong with the fundamentalist teachings in which they have been brought up, but cannot find the words to explain to their friends exactly what is wrong. I am writing this to provide support to those who wish to escape from fundamentalism, either as seekers after truth, or as fugitives from oppression; those who are in the same vulnerable, stressful condition as I was in 1968, faced with the agonising choice between losing their friends, family and home or losing their commitment to truth, wisdom and enlightenment.

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