VARIETIES OF RELIGIOUS INTERPRETATIONS

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My talk this evening is on various interpretations of the Bible. One characteristic of the Bible is the certainty it inspires. Perhaps the high water mark for that certainty by what we would now call a public intellectual was represented by Bishop Samuel Wilberforce. Wilberforce is best known today for being on the losing side of a debate with Thomas Huxley on the theory of evolution. The debate took place on June 30, 1860 at the Oxford University Museum.

Wilberforce was a man of great intellect and a wide range of interests. Five weeks before the debate, he reviewed the *Origin of the Species* in the periodical, the "Quarterly Review." No less an authority than Darwin described the review in a letter to a friend as being "uncommonly clever."[1] It was only because of the stature of Wilberforce as a thinker that the debate took on such legendary proportions. In fact, the report of the debate may simply be just legend.[2] But, as the editor said in the film, "Who Shot Liberty Valance?," "When the legend becomes fact, print the legend." The turning point in the debate came when Wilberforce asked Huxley whether it was through his grandfather or his grandmother that he claimed his descent from a monkey.

With this question, Huxley is reported to have said "The Lord hath delivered him into my hands." And then Huxley delivered his famous, but perhaps apocryphal, retort:

> I am not ashamed to have a monkey for my ancestor; but I would be ashamed to be connected with a man who used his great gifts to obscure the truth.

The debate was not won on the merits of evolution. In fact, Huxley's victory had little to do with evolution. Rather, Huxley won by exposing Wilberforce's arrogance in using religion to dictate to scientists the conclusions they were allowed to reach. That arrogance was based on Wilberforce's belief in the certainty of the biblical text. As he wrote in classic Victorian, baroque English in his book review of *Origin of the Species*:

> No more can [the natural world] contradict His word written in His book than could the words of the old covenant graven by His hand on the stony tablets contradict the writing of His hand in the volume of the new dispensation.[3]

Wilbeforce's trump card was not based on argument as much as an appeal to the authority of the Bible.

As an aside, Huxley got in the last word. When it was reported that the Bishop died from head injuries as the result of a fall from a horse, Huxley is reported to have said: "Wilberforce's brains had at last come into contact with reality, and the result had been fatal."

Of course, faith accounts for much of the certainty Wilberforce displays. But to the extent that faith is based on reliance of the actual text of the Bible, is it justified?

Looking at the text alone, the answer is clearly no. Wilberforce, in the quote I just read from his book review, is confident of the continuity from the Old to the New Testament. As he states, the same God who had his words written on the

stony tablets does not contradict the writings in the volume of the new dispensation. But, God the Father of the New Testament would hardly recognize Yahweh, the God of the Old Testament. Even limiting our reference only to the Old Testament, there is a bewildering array of different and inconsistent representations of God. We have God as an impersonal force who created the universe in 6 days as recounted in the first creation story of Genesis. This God invokes the characteristics of the god Alfred North Whitehead described in *Science and the Modern World*. Whitehead's god is the actual process of development and change. Here, in the first chapter of Genesis we see that process in action. Each day more of the universe is created. Only with Whitehead, the process does not stop on the sixth day but continues as creation itself continues to change.

This distant, aloof God is far different from the personal God who appears later in chapter 24 of Genesis when Abraham's servant seeks a bride for Isaac.

> O Lord, God of my master Abraham, grant me good fortune this day, and deal graciously with my master Abraham: Here I stand by the spring as the daughters of the townsmen come out to draw water; let the maiden to whom I say, "Please, lower you jar that I may drink," and who replies, "Drink, and I will also water your camels" – let her be the one whom You have decreed for Your servant Isaac. Thereby shall I know that You have dealt graciously with my master." Gen. 24:12

Here we have a God who has such an intimate relationship with Abraham's servant

that the servant can tell God how God is to identify Isaac's future wife. Far from being the impersonal God of the creation story, this God is identified as the God of the servant's master, Abraham. He is the personal God of Abraham. This idea of a personal god is very much a part of our contemporary view of the divine. It is reflected in the Sunday School song, "Jesus loves me, this I know," as well as the frequent contemporary use of the 23rd Psalm, "The Lord is my shepard," in funeral services.

Then we have the merciless, vindictive, tribal God of the Conquest who provides one of the earliest examples of divinely directed "ethnic cleansing." The prophet Samuel orders King Saul to go and slay the Amalekites, both man and woman, infant and suckling, ox and sheep, camel and ass. The sin for which the Amalekites are punished took place generations earlier when they assaulted Abraham as he traveled through Canaan. Saul puts to death all of the Amalekite people except their king and allows the Israelites to take the unblemished animals as spoils for sacrifice. When Samuel learns that Saul has spared the life of Agag, the King, what does Samuel do? He hews Agag in pieces before the Lord in Gilgal.

Not only are the biblical representations of God varied, we also have the famous doublets. These are two versions of the same event: two creation stories, two stories of the naming of Isaac, two stories of Jacob's journey to Mesopotamia, two stories of the flood and on and on. In many cases, the stories are inconsistent and outright contradictory. The existence of the doublets was the basis for textual analysis that eventually led to the identity of four different texts: J for Yahweh, E

for Elohim, D for Deuteronomy and P for the Priestly text.

If these differences are as apparent as I have suggested, what explains the view that the Bible is seamless and entirely consistent. The answer, as James Kugel has noted, is interpretation.[4] In other words our understanding of the Bible is not based simply on the text but the text as interpreted throughout the centuries. Interpretation has always been associated with the written Biblical text. In fact, the ancient Hebrew of the original text consisted only of consonants, without any word separation, let alone word punctuation. There were simply no letters to represent vowels. At a basic level, interpretation was required to know whether BRD meant bird, bard, beard, broad, bread, or bred as in the past tense of "to breed." Where one sentence began and another ended was a matter of opinion. In addition, the meaning of words changed over time. We know this from our own experience with English. The words "lewd" and "silly" in Chaucer's time, some 600 years ago, meant uneducated and defenseless, not what we understand those words to mean today.[5] Similarly, many Hebrew words shifted in meaning. As Kugel has noted, basic terms such as "get" "take," "need" were expressed by new terms.[6] It was only with the Masoretic text written in Tiberias more than a millennium after scholars believe the last book of the Hebrew Bible was written that the Hebrew text with vowel points, word separation and punctuation, which we know today, came into being.[7] The Masoretic text put into writing an oral tradition that had existed for centuries in the Jewish community as to word use and punctuation.

Before the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls, the oldest Hebrew manuscript

was the Aleppo Codex which dates to about 960 A.D.[8] The Codex uses the Masoretic text and is the basis for the Hebrew Bible in use today. But is this the original Hebrew text? The simple answer is "no." The Dead Sea Scrolls establish that there were several texts of the books of the Hebrew Bible, not a single one, at the time the Scrolls were written. However, one of those texts was a proto-Masoretic text which is largely the same as the Aleppo Codex. The other texts were abandoned by the Jewish community around the first century.[9]

The Greek text of the New Testament is also problematic. There are issues created by the lack of word separation and punctuation. But the most significant issues involving the text of the New Testament, arise out of variations between the earliest known and least corrupted versions of the New Testament and later versions which became the basis of the New Testament we know today.

Interpretation of the Hebrew Bible was not only necessary to determine meaning but also to explain inconsistencies. In Genesis 15:13, the Israelites were oppressed for 400 years. In Exodus 12:41, the period of oppression expanded to 430 years. This inconsistency, according to later commentators, was not a mistake but an illusion clarified by proper interpretation. The inconsistencies were viewed as examples of the cryptic nature of the text. This cryptic nature of the text spoke out for the necessity of interpretation. In Chronicles, which is a retelling of Samuel and Kings, Genesis is interpreted to describe the import of the Davidic monarchy. But a reader of Chronicles would not distinguish the interpretation of Genesis from the book of Genesis itself. Both the interpretation of Genesis in Chronicles and the text

of Genesis carry the same weight. They are both part of the canon which makes up the Bible. The point I wish to make is that the interpretation of the text became an actual part of the text. As a result, there are layers of meaning in the text.

Analyzing these layers creates new understandings of commonly held views. For example, many of us think of Charleton Heston when we think of Moses. The tablets he holds we believe to be the 10 commandments. But the text of Exodus, as William Schniedewind, points out, indicates that what God gave to Moses was not the ten commandments but the architectural plans for the Ark.[10] In ancient cultures, the drawings of a god's dwelling were a critical piece of intelligence. It was only over time, as writing began to replace oral traditions and Judean kings declared their laws were divinely inspired, that the tablets changed their character from architectural plans to the tablets Charleton Heston carried in the movie. What happened to the Ark? Just as in the Spielberg movie, it disappears, but less dramatically. Schniedewind argues that the disappearance of the Ark allowed the writers of Deuteronomy to claim the missing tablets had the ten commandments written on them.[11]

Interpretation was not only used to explain inconsistencies but also to show the relevance of the biblical text for the reader. For example, Jeremiah prophesied that the Israelites would "serve the King of Babylon for 70 years." Jer: ch 25:11. This prophecy of a 70 year exile was later used by Daniel to mean 490 years. By interpreting 70 years to mean 490 years, Daniel moved the relevance of Jeremiah's prophecy four centuries into the future, close in time to when in fact many scholars

believe Daniel actually wrote his text.[12] This reinterpretation of biblical texts to make them relevant to a contemporary reader is not an old discarded tool. It was used by the early church to show that various passages in the Old Testament predicted not only the coming of Christ but his crucifixion. Every holiday season when the Messiah is performed we hear sung the verses from Isaiah , "unto us a child is born," the child, of course, referring to Christ.

Harold Bloom criticizes the early Church fathers who took passages in the Hebrew Bible to foretell the coming of Christ.[13] He complains that this form of interpretation misreads the Hebrew Bible. Of course, Bloom is right. I have used the terms Hebrew Bible and Old Testament without defining them. They are not different names for the same book. The Hebrew Bible, Tenach, is different from the Christian Old Testament primarily in the order in which the books appear. The Hebrew Bible is divided into three sections, the Torah, the Prophets and the Writings. The Christian Old Testament reorders these sections so the that the Prophets appear at the end of the Old Testament. This re-ordering highlights the Christian reading of the Old Testament by placing the prophets who were interpreted as predicting the coming of Christ immediately before the New Testament in the Holy Bible. As Bloom points out, by reading the prophets to emphasize the coming of Christ, the original meaning of the prophets is lost or at least diminished. However, Bloom is wrong to suggest that the early church fathers created a new method of interpretation. They did not. They merely found a new application for a method already in use by the writers and editors of the Hebrew

Bible. Ironically, Bloom criticizes the early church fathers for using an interpretative tool that originated in the writing of the Hebrew Bible.

The New Testament was not the last example of interpreting biblical text to predict the future. Many contemporary evangelicals still use it. This past November, the Reverend John Hagee told 3,500 of his followers in Washington that the war last summer in Lebanon was predicted by the Book of Revelations and Ezekiel and confirms that the Second Coming of Christ is fast approaching.[14] This ancient interpretative tool of biblical texts used by Daniel more than two millennia ago to show their relevance to contemporary problems is still in full force today.

Interpretation can also have a distinct political purpose. Chronicles was written after the Exile by supporters of the Davidic monarchy. The authors rewrote history of a bygone time to support a political model of the future.[15] Some scholars believe the United Monarchy under David never existed.[16] They argue it was a creation of the kings of Judah to support their ambitions over territory to the North of Jerusalem. By harking back to the golden age of David, the kings of Judah hoped to create political support to justify their expansion north of Jerusalem.

Some scholars, known as minimalists, go one step further and deny the historical existence of David. To the minimalists, David only existed as a legend and had the same historical substance as King Arthur. Recent archeological finds support the existence of the historical figure of David. In 1992 a fragmentary artifact was found at the biblical site of Tel Dan in northern Israel bearing the inscription, “House of David” in Aramaic, which was the lingua franca of

Mesopotamia for centuries. It has been dated to 835 B.C., 100 years after the reign of Solomon.[17] While the Tel Dan artifact provides evidence, however thin, for the historical existence of David, the archeological record fails to establish a culture which could support a kingdom David is supposed to have founded. The archeology reveals that in the 10th century, the area from Jerusalem to the south was sparsely settled and overwhelmingly rural with no trace of written documents or even signs of widespread literacy.[18]

As a side note, David's encounter with Goliath turns out to be a family affair. Anyone familiar with Caravaggio's painting of the young, athletic David holding the huge head of Goliath would not be mistaken for thinking Goliath came from a different planet than David. In fact, based on the genealogies in Samuel, Goliath turns out to be not only from the same planet but is, in fact, David's cousin. Every family has its own monsters but the family connection here undermines the notion of the Philistines as a separate kingdom. Instead, David's battles appear closer to tribal fights among related groups than wars between kingdoms. Tribal groupings are also more consistent with the archaeological evidence. But as far as the biblical narrative goes, the Philistines were a menace to Israel's existence. David melded the various tribes into a kingdom and as a result was credited for Israel's survival.

The Hebrew Bible is not unique in illustrating how writers and editors meddled with sacred texts. Examples can also be found in the New Testament. Comparisons of texts which became the New Testament we know today with the earliest Greek texts shows surprising examples of editorial license.[19]

Perhaps one of the most popular parables in the gospels is that of the adulteress which appears in John. Jesus is teaching in the temple and a group of scribes and Pharisees bring with them a woman who has been caught in the very act of adultery. They tell Jesus that under the law, she must be stoned to death. They want to know whether she should be stoned or shown mercy. If Jesus tells them to let her go, he will not be following the law. If he tells them to stone her, his teachings of love, mercy and forgiveness would be shown as empty of content.

What does Jesus do? He does not reply but starts writing on the ground. When they continue to question him, he makes the famous statement: "Let he who is without sin among you be the first to cast a stone at her." Those who brought the woman before Jesus start to leave until no one is left except the woman. Jesus asks: "Is there no one who condemns you?" She replies: "No one, Lord." He responds, "Neither do I condemn you. Go and sin no more."

What a wonderful story! Jesus comes across as a brilliant teacher. He remains true to the core values of his ministry by showing compassion to the scorned. At the same time, he frustrates his detractors by refusing to disobey the law. The tiny difficulty with the parable is that it does not appear in the earliest Greek versions of the Gospel of John or any of the other Gospels for that matter.[20] Some scholars believe the parable may have been a part of an oral tradition about Jesus. In later versions of the Gospels, the parable appears in Luke.[21] Most scholars believe it was added by a scribe.[22] Clearly, however, it was not originally a part of any of the Gospels. Its omission from the earliest texts of the Gospels casts

doubt as to whether the parable is an authentic depiction of Jesus and his ministry.

As an aside, the discovery that this parable was written by a scribe and not by one of the evangelists is hardly new. It dates back to the French scholar, Richard Simon, when his study, *A Critical History of the Text of the New Testament*, was published in 1689.[23] Simon was more famously known at the time for writing a textual analysis of the Pentateuch in which he concluded that Moses was not its sole author.[24] According to Simon, scribes wrote other portions even though they were divinely inspired. Such a conclusion to modern readers is eminently reasonable especially when one considers that tradition credits Moses with writing the following line from Ex. 24. "Moses the servant of the Lord died in the land of Moab at the command of the Lord." It is truly remarkable feat even for Moses to be the author of his own obituary.

Simon was born a Protestant who later converted to Catholicism and became a priest. How was he rewarded for his impressive scholarship and feats of textual analysis? He was expelled from his order. His books were placed on the Index and all but 6 of 1300 copies were burned. His study of the Pentateuch was translated into English by John Hampden, a follower of Simon. Hampden, however, recanted and repudiated his translation. This repudiation occurred, according to a contemporary writer, "shortly before Hampden was released from the Tower."[25]

I have saved the most significant and far-reaching interpretation of the biblical narrative for last.[26] This interpretation was the result of the destruction of Jerusalem and its Temple and the exile of the royal court to

Babylon. To appreciate the radical nature of this interpretation, one must understand what Jerusalem symbolized before the Babylonian invasion as well as the importance of Davidic covenant, which promised political survival to the House of David and its kingdom.

Jerusalem was not only the political capital of the Kingdom founded by David but also a religious center. Significantly, even after Solomon built the Temple, it was not the only cultic site sacred to the Israelites where sacrifices to Yahweh could be made. There were many others such as Gilgal, Shiloh and Shechem. The fall of the Northern Kingdom brought an end to some of these sites but others still flourished in Judah in addition to Jerusalem. It was not until the reforms of King Hezikiah, many generations after David and Solomon, that the Temple in Jerusalem became the sole site for cultic sacrifices. King Hezekiah simply destroyed all other places of worship outside Jerusalem.[27]

Jerusalem's status as a unique religious center was not based solely on its being the sole site for sacrifices. It status was also enhanced as a result of political developments. Hezekiah rejected Assyria's domination over the region. Assyria responded with a massive military action against his kingdom. Isaiah uses the metaphor of a flood to describe the Assyrian assault. "It rises over all channels and goes over all its banks; sweeping into Judah, it overflows and passes on reaching even to the neck." Only Jerusalem remained above the flood waters of extinction. Extinction is not too strong a word since the individuals who gathered in Jerusalem were the final remnant of both Israel and Judah.

For reasons which remain obscure, the Assyrian assault on Jerusalem failed and the Assyrians withdrew. As Isaiah reports, the residents of Jerusalem "went to the rooftops to dance and shout with joy and gratitude" of their release and salvation. This event re-forged Jerusalem as not merely a cultic and political center but, more importantly, a symbol of identity to the remnant of Israel and Judah that survived. The Assyrian retreat gave new legitimacy to Jerusalem and the House of David. It was during this period that a number of psalms were pulled together to emphasize David and his Holy City.

The Assyrian retreat reaffirmed the belief in the Davidic covenant. In this covenant, Yahweh promised David that, "Your house and your kingdom will be secure before you forever." 2 Sam. 7. The promise contains not even a hint that David and his descendants have any moral obligation to maintain the throne. The promise is unconditional. Even if a descendant of David misbehaves, he may suffer, but he and his family will not lose the throne. The political survival of Jerusalem and the House of David was believed to be a sign that the God of history favored the Israelites. Their survival was attributed to God's promise to maintain the House of David and Jerusalem as the kingdom's capital for all time.

But then the wheel of history turned with the Babylonian Captivity. One cannot overestimate the significance of this historical event on the development of the Bible as we know it today. The God of history who showed his favor on the Israelites when the Assyrians retreated suddenly, failed in his promise to David.

The sack of Jerusalem by the Babylonians made a mockery of the Davidic covenant. The eternal kingdom had ended. The family that would "never be cut off from the throne" was cut off from the throne. The Temple "where Yahweh caused his name to dwell" was reduced to ashes. Things that were said in the sacred writings to "exist to this day" did not exist anymore.

Modern archeology confirms that the area throughout Jerusalem was systematically destroyed. The land was depopulated. Even the language spoken by the people changed from Hebrew to Aramaic. The Babylonians were savage and ruthless. One example of this brutality can be found in the biblical description of Zedekia, the last king to rule from Jerusalem. The Babylonians set up Zedekia as their puppet. When he rebelled, he met a particularly gruesome fate. As told by the book of Kings, the Babylonians forced Zedekia to witness the execution of his own children then they put out his eyes, bound him in chains and took him to Babylon.

But for our purposes, our interest is not in the society left behind by the Babylonians but in the remnant of the royal court that the Babylonians took to Babylon where it reestablished itself. It was out of this court, most scholars believe, that the Hebrew Bible we know today took shape.

Insight into the thinking of the writers in Exile comes from Ezekial. Ezekial reports a group of elders approached him after Jerusalem had fallen and the Temple was destroyed. They asked, "how shall we live." What was their identity to be in view of the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple?

The answer came when Ezra traveled back to Jerusalem from Babylon 80

years after the Persians first allowed the Exiles to return. Ezra stood on a wooden dias at Water Gate Square and read from the Law from dawn to noon. What Ezra read was the Mosaic Torah. A massive reinterpretation of the biblical narrative had occurred. One can see the beginning of this new thinking in Jeremiah. Jeremiah's lament over the catastrophe that befell Jerusalem can be read as a prophetic prediction. The downfall was Yahweh's divine judgment on the Israelites. They have been punished because they turned away from Yahweh In answer to the question of why God permitted the Babylonian captivity to take place, the writers of the court in Exile concluded that the Israelites were at fault. They failed to follow the law of Moses and were punished for that failure. The biblical narrative shifted in its focus. The conquest by Joshua of Canaan and the rise of the House of David and Jerusalem was no longer central. In place of the political development of the House of David stood the Mosaic legacy and tradition.

What happened at the court of the exiled community in Babylon was not only a recognition of the spiritual power of the Mosaic Torah but a new understanding of history. The cause of the destruction of the Temple and the Fall of the House of David was not a divine flaw but a misinterpretation of the covenant. The interpretation of the Davidic covenant as an unconditional divine promise that the House of David would always rule Judah was wrong. The new covenant theology was based on Yahweh's forgiveness and the need to repeat afresh the commitment to obey Yahweh's laws. This covenant theology has its antecedents in ancient ideas from Babylonians and Hittites that history reflects consequences. Adversity befalls

a city because its residents displeased their god. As applied by the editors in Exile, the misfortunes that befell the Israelites were the result of their failure to follow Torah, the law of Moses.

It was the loss of Kingdom, Jerusalem and its Temple that forced the Israelites in exile to reinterpret the covenant between them and Yahweh. Yahweh's promise to David that his descendants would rule forever failed to explain its fall. Only a new interpretation of the covenant between Yahweh and his people, which placed a moral obligation on them, could explain the catastrophe that befell them. The biblical narrative was rewritten to reflect this new self-understanding of promise and fulfillment on the one hand and apostasy and punishment on the other. The writers de-emphasized the idea that political success was a sign of divine favor. Sinai replaced Jerusalem as the focus of God's interaction with the Israelites. Sinai, which was never possessed, could never be lost. This re-interpretation of the biblical narrative with its emphasis on the obligation of the individual to follow the laws of Moses had far reaching implications. The revelation from Sinai, which was the basis of the individual's obligation, formed the foundation on which Judaism and later, Christianity, were built.

1. Letter from Darwin to Lyell, August 3, 1860.

2. Lucas, J. R., "Wilberforce and Huxley: A Legendary Encounter," http://users.ox.ac.uk/jrlucas/legend.html.

3. Wilberforce, *Essays* I, 70-77.

4. Kugel, James L., *The Bible As It Was.* Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1997.

5. Ibid, p.4

6. Ibid., 6.

7. Levin, Christoph, *The Old Testament*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 6.

8. Ibid., 7.

9. Ibid., 14-16.

10. Schniedewind, William M., *How the Bible Became a Book*, (New York, Cambridge University Press, 2004), 131.

11. Ibid., 133.

12. Kugel, op cit, 3.

13. Bloom, Harold, *Jesus and Yahweh*, (New York: Riverhead Books, 2005), 41-51.

14. New York *Times*, November 14, 2006.

15. Kugel, op cit, 7.

16. Finkelstein, Israel, *The Bible Unearthed*, (New York: Touchstone Press, 2001), 128.

17. Ibid., 129.

18. Ibid., 132.

19. Ehrman, Bart D., *Misquoting Jesus*, (New York: Harper Collins, 2005), 81.

20. Ibid., 63-65.

21. Ibid., 65.

22. Ibid, 64.

23. Ibid., p. 102.

24. Friedman, Richard Eliot, *Who Wrote the Bible?*, (San Francisco: Harper, 1997), 22.

25. Ibid., 22.

26. Sanders, James A., *Torah and Canon*, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1972), 20-53.

27. Ibid., 127.