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Is the Bible a history book or a book of myths?
May 5th Connection Card at Glenwood

“And beginning with Moses and all the prophets, Jesus interpreted to them in all the scriptures the things concerning himself.”

Glenwood’s Memory Verse, Luke 24:27

READING 101:

The Art of **Interpreting** History and the Bible (and how to stay out of shouting matches.)

Is the Bible historical?

Is it true?

Is it a bunch of myths?

People who call themselves followers of Jesus and also people who do not identify as such ask questions like these aloud or silently every time the Bible is quoted. At Glenwood, someone asked this question anonymously on their Connection Card, but I have had many conversations -- in my office, in coffee shops, in bars, in every location I have served -- which raise these kinds of questions. Many people want to understand how Christian communities read an ancient anthology of texts as modern people and still finds truths that will empower them each day. In order to approach these questions, we need to return to the word that we focused on last time: *interpret*, the process of making meaning out of a text, a piece of art, an event or anything else. Interpretation is the way in which understanding takes place. When we can agree that everyone interprets the Bible -- there is no shortcut if Jesus interprets the Bible in Luke 24:27 -- then we must also relinquish the kind of certainty that comes from having the one ‘right’ interpretation. We are all, with our Lord Jesus, in a great conversation over how to interpret and understand the Scriptures, discovering what will be the most important readings for this time and place. Our success in reading comes from how well we engage in conversation. Are we exploring, listening, and communicating with each other clearly? Do we have shared rules for what will count as evidence? These things will determine whether or not we have a true conversation that might make a difference to us and our partner or whether we become stuck in our own opinions and ideas.

Some people read 2 Timothy 3:16, “All Scripture is inspired by God” and they interpret this line to mean “every seemingly historical claim made by the Bible must be accurate.” That then becomes a rule for their reading. The internet is filled with failed conversations between one reader who uses this as a rule and their potential conversation partners who do not share that rule.¹ We must do better than this. We must be more gentle conversation partners who agree on how we will talk to one another. Jesus commands his followers in John 13, “Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.” We must live this commandment in how we talk with each other, each as fellow interpreters, about that which is most important to us.

The Bible is not the only thing that needs to be interpreted. All history is... interpretation. History is a form of literature in which humans attempt to write-out important things from the past, all of which must be decisions made by the writer. Consider Churchill’s quote following his historic leadership of Britain: “History will be kind to me because I intend to write it.” Think about American History. Is American History ‘what one reads in a text book?’ Is it a list of all the things that happened? Every history-writer has to make choices about what to select as they tell a history. Who will be the center of attention, who made mistakes, and who will be left out? Think of how many histories have been written which minimized significant, ugly sides of American history: the genocide perpetrated on indigenous peoples, the suppression of women’s power, and the hundreds of years of horror in which people who lived in the United States kept other human beings in chains as chattel slaves, making up reasons to justify domination over their fellow humans with ideas like ‘race.’ Is the enslavement of Africans a side plot in US history or is it properly the *main* narrative? Those are choices that historians, as interpreters of events and historical documents, must make. Every time we do history, we are actually entering a conversation in the present trying to figure out how to agree upon a version of the past that can inform our future.

While the Bible contains stories from the past, history may not be a particular helpful word when we are discussing the Bible. *The Compact Guide to the Whole Bible*, shares some reasons why ‘history’ does not fit well as the genre of the Bible.

Christians don’t approach scripture merely because of historical curiosity. Since Scripture describes how God acted through Israel and in Jesus the Christ to redeem, restore, and reconcile the created order, Christians find the whole biblical text compelling for spiritual religious and

¹ 2 Timothy 3:16-17 NRSV: “All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work.” Potential questions for a more interesting interpretation might be: what does the author mean by Scripture, the Protestant Bible? What does inspired (literally, God-breathed) mean, and how does this word relate to historical claims?

theological reasons. Granted, there are aspects of Scripture that may be considered historical, but ultimately Scripture goes beyond history because Scripture testifies to divine activity. Historians deal exclusively with human activity.²

Dealing exclusively with human activity is a rule for conversation that guides the discipline of history. Is that a rule that we wish to use in a discussion about the Bible? For example, one interpreter at Glenwood raised the question of other miracle workers in first century CE Judea, how did they compare to Jesus? A historian might compare all the details available to them and lay these personalities from the ancient world side by side, deciding how to compare them and highlighting up what made them distinct. They would not have any evidence to determine that Jesus was a 'real' miracle worker in a way that the others were not because all the ancient literature claims miracles by special people. Historians can describe these characters but the conversation stops being historical if one partner uses their own faith as evidence to advance the idea that Jesus was a 'better' miracle worker. That then becomes a different conversation, which might run the risk of failing if the other partner wishes to discuss history and not religious beliefs. When we have a conversation as students of Jesus, on the other hand, we can calmly say that we do not follow these other miracle workers because our ancestors were witnesses to the resurrection of Jesus and we have trusted in their testimony. We might also say that we continue to find inspiration in the life, ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus beyond what we find in other stories.

In the same way, a historical conversation may not have a helpful set of rules when discussing Noah's ark. Despite the claims throughout the centuries of pieces of ark being discovered, there is once again no evidence that has convinced historians that such a huge boat was built before the Pyramids. The conversation then turns to the words of the Bible. In a conversation about ancient maritime vessels, the words of the Bible will not be accepted as evidence. In a conversation between Christians who read with the rule that all the Bible's claims are demonstrable fact, no further discussion is necessary: that rule determines that the ark must be discoverable. For many Christians, though, the reality or the truth of something like the ark does not lie in its being detectable by archaeologists; the truth of the story comes from human sinfulness and the willingness of God to use individual people to save future generations. For such readers, the boat itself is not what is most essential; the witness to a God who saves is.

To return to the question from the beginning, is the Bible a history book or a book of myths, we might ask now, 'for whom?' Who is in the conversation and what are they discussing? What rules have these conversation partners agreed upon and what would they like to explore together? Have they already decided they will not be persuaded on

² Wall and Nienhuis, eds., *A Compact Guide to the Whole Bible*. Grand Rapids: Baker 2015.

the historicity (or lack thereof) of a topic and are baiting the other person into feeling foolish? Many discussions are possible, but without conversation between mutually caring partners who agree on a topic and how it will be explored little will be gained or learned. The Bible is not simply a history book. The Bible is not simply a collection of myths, although the category of 'myth' has breadth and depth to include parts of the Bible that 'history' cannot. The Bible has stories of creation, of freedom, of kings and their downfall, the Bible has commandments given to a *people*, songs, prayers, and revisions of history.

People have made lots and lots of money selling 'the history of the Bible' books and television series. Whether for faithful or cynical reasons the topic generates so much money because many people have a significant attachment to the Bible's claims as historically accurate. As interpreter, so long as this rule is explained and defended, that is a fine position, though for reasons named above, such readers will not be able to engage with most historians and scientists who do not share that rule. An issue arises though when that rule, 'the Bible's claims are historically accurate,' becomes a way to sort people into good and bad, real Christians and false ones. For example, when a church says that they are 'Bible-believing' they are assuming a certain set of rules (which they may or may not share or defend) and those who do not share their rules are somehow bad or less than them. When people are using rules of reading to make themselves good at someone else's expense, then they are not reading as Jesus' followers. They are reading like Jesus' opponents.

All of these remarks are intended to help you clarify your own rules for reading. My interest is not to tell you what is historical and what is not because interpreting events or evidence has got to be more nuanced than that. Instead, I hope that you feel more confident as a modern reader of an ancient text. Is historical accuracy the thing that authenticates the Bible's power? Some people rely on this rule of reading. For many others throughout the centuries, the power of the Bible comes not through being the most exacting historical document, precise in every detail, but in the way God speaks to us through it, continually, to each generation. The truths of the Bible are not simply historical, they are spiritual, as in: relating to the depths of our longing and our belonging. The Risen Jesus, beginning with Moses and the Prophets, interprets all the things in the Scriptures concerning himself. When we read as a church, the revelation of God as Jesus, the forgiving victim, is the source of our power, nothing less.

Do you have a Bible verse or a 'key' that helps guide your reading? Many readers use Jesus' ethical instruction, "Love one another as I have loved you" in John's Gospel. They ask themselves, does this reading contribute toward 'loving' or not. Lutherans have special key verses that guide the way that we think about the entire

Bible. It is this topic of key verses, **interpretive keys**, that we will turn to in our next Adult Forum on Reading the Bible.