

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

PayPal

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *Scripture* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_scripture-01.php

QUESTION AND ANSWER

THE STORY OF THE FLOOD

When asked by a non-Catholic friend how Noah could possibly have accommodated so many animals in the ark I was at a loss for an answer, and when I read the account in Genesis for myself I found that Noah is said to have taken two of every sort of animal (Gen. 6:19), and yet seven pairs of all clean animals with a pair of the animals that are not clean (7:2). The Bible seems to be contradicting itself.

I am confident that you will be able to understand the somewhat difficult ideas you must grasp if you are not to misunderstand the Sacred Scriptures here, because you have already shown that you are a careful reader when you remark that there is a contradiction concerning the number of animals taken into the ark. This is a very good start, but I would ask you to reread very carefully the whole of this section, Gen. 6:5-9, 17, noticing the great number of repetitions, and many other discrepancies besides the one you mention. You may well get the impression that this passage in Genesis is like an attempt to tell a story to a group of your friends, all of whom know, or think they know, the same story. 'God said . . .' 'No !' someone interrupts, 'what He said was . . .' 'Noah took one pair . . .' 'I heard it was seven pairs,' protests someone else. 'It rained forty days and nights.' 'You're wrong there ! It was one hundred and fifty days.' And so on. If you could read it in its original Hebrew you would notice still more differences : two different styles, and even two different words to refer to God.

Now this leads us to the first important conclusion : Gen. 6:5-9, 17 is really two different forms of the same story about the Flood, which the sacred author has woven together so that readers used to either form would not be disappointed. This may seem a very strange thing to do, but it was the style in those days, rather to preserve the differing accounts than neatly to fit the different versions together as a modern editor might do. But because he had a different way of going about it you must not conclude that the sacred author was stupid, and did not recognise the difference between seven and two. The fact is, and here we have the important conclusion, he was in no way interested about the exact detail, because he was not writing the story to tell us what happened at the beginning of the world, in the way a newspaper reporter writes this morning about what happened yesterday.

The sacred author could not have written in this way even if he had wanted to do so. We sometimes forget that the first eleven chapters of Genesis, consisting of stories about how the world began, are very different from Chapter 12 onwards. Who knows how long a gap in time separates them? Some scientists maintain that man has lived upon this earth a million years, but Abraham (Gen. 12) lived about 1800 B.C. In other words Abraham belongs to history; but the first eleven chapters are outside the scope of history, and there is no reason why we should suppose that God worked a special miracle and handed out to the press, as it were, a descriptive record of what exactly took place when He created the world. The scientists are trying to reconstruct it, though, strangely enough, they seem to ignore the principal actor, God the creator.

He was never ignored by the ancient peoples, even though their reconstructions were very fanciful and quite unscientific. It is a fact that all ancient peoples had their popular stories about how the world began, and though their ideas were crude enough, with for instance many different gods, they all realised that man was not the king of the universe, and that he depended on greater ones than himself. These stories existed long before Abraham was called by God to be the father of the chosen people. He belonged to the Semitic peoples, and these had their stories of how the world began like everyone else. In fact we have discovered them, and the clay tablets on which they are written are nearly as old as Abraham: how old the stories themselves are no-one knows, but they are certainly much older than Abraham. Among these we find for instance a story about the great flood, which varies considerably but always bears a striking resemblance to the story in Genesis.

The simple truth is that they were common property to all the peoples who belonged to that part of the world. They all realised that a flood is a terrible catastrophe: if you lived in Mesopotamia, where the Euphrates and the Tigris so often flood the intervening land, you would realise it from experience. If the flooding is moderate it is a blessing for it irrigates the soil; but if it is excessive it is a catastrophe. The flood was to them what atomic energy is for us. They also knew, again by experience, that they were powerless to control the floods, and for them this could mean nothing else but that the floods were controlled by the gods. They must fear the gods, because the latter could destroy them whenever they were so minded, and people used to tell of how in the beginning the gods had actually done this. Why had they done so? Simply because they were capricious and enjoyed discomfiting mankind.

Stories such as this were common property. The descendants of

Abraham possessed them when God chose them, and led them under Moses into Canaan c. 1250 B.C. But their revealed faith told them that these capricious gods did not exist: there was only one God. Their faith told them that they need not fear the elements, even though they were beyond man's control, because nothing was beyond the control of God. Their faith told them that God takes great care of them—had He not freed them from Egypt? But their faith told them also that God hates wickedness, and that although He is their loving father and protector, He must punish the wicked.

This faith had its effect on everything that happened, and everything that happened provided the opportunity for reiterating it. They were not like us, who unfortunately make a rigid distinction between our faith and the ordinary happenings we call history, between our religious life and our secular life, between Sunday and the rest of the week.

Consequently the age-old stories of the Israelites concerning the beginning of the world must necessarily be stamped with their faith; they must provide one more opportunity of reiterating this faith, just like everything else in the Bible. There was no need to destroy them altogether: people don't like their traditions destroyed, and anyway to do such a thing is almost impossible. Instead the sacred writer did a much wiser thing, as we would expect since he was guided by the Holy Spirit, and he did something the Church continually does: he made use of these traditional stories, altering them as little as was necessary in order to teach the Israelites and us their children in the faith, that God has always been, from the very beginning and not just from the time of Abraham, the sole creator and master of the world, taking care of the good like a father, but punishing wickedness.

Gone then are the many gods; gone is the capricious and hostile way of acting; gone is the favouritism for no good and moral reason. But the details are there: it is still recognisable as the old and well-beloved story, simple, and perhaps to sophisticated modern readers rather childish. But in those days, although they knew just as well as we do the limited space available on any sort of boat, the difficulties of feeding animals and so on, they had a breadth of mind which enabled them to take the details for what they really are: details of a simple, fanciful and attractive story, which in no way interfered with the expression of the faith which it conveyed.

It told them nothing new, because all it told them was about God's power and His love, and about the need to be good like Noah. But these are truths of faith that we must hear not once but every day; and being human we get bored even with these, unless the same truths are put in many different ways: would you like to hear the same

BOOK REVIEW

sermon in the same words every week? You believe that God is all-powerful: but are there not times when the progress of modern science seems to contradict this? You believe that God controls all natural forces, but are you sometimes frightened at the power of atomic energy? You believe that God rewards the just and punishes evil, but do you not begin to wonder when you see the wicked prospering and the just suffering? In other words, do we not need to be constantly reminded of the truths of our faith, and in every possible way? One way, among many, is to reread Gen. 6:5-9, 17.

That is all you will gain by reading those chapters. But is it a little thing? If you wish to learn how the world in actual fact came into existence, how living things appeared, how long ago it was and so on, read the scientific books, where you may find a certain amount of reliable information, though not so much that is certain. Without doubt it is a very laudable thing to increase your knowledge of these things. But do remember how much more important it is not only to say with your lips 'I believe in God the father almighty, creator of heaven and earth,' but to be so convinced of this that the belief really affects your daily life. If you want to make your faith more strong and effective, read the Holy Bible.

T. WORDEN

BOOK REVIEW

Lucien Cerfaux, *The Four Gospels*. Intr. Leonard Johnston, tr. Patrick Hepburne-Scott. The Newman Press, Westminster Md & Darton, Longman & Todd, London 1960. pp. 145, 9s 6d.

What kind of books are the four gospels? What precisely is their aim? Are they biographies of Jesus? How far are they historically reliable? What is the explanation of the remarkable similarities between the first three gospels, similarities amounting to identity, and which make the divergencies all the more strange? Why is St John's gospel so different from the other three? How were these four short pamphlets composed? These questions have been raised for many years by the scholars, and far-reaching answers have been proposed. Now their investigations are making an impact on a much wider public. The time has long since passed when this kind of inquiry could be ignored or dismissed simply as an attack upon Christianity. Discussion concerning the historical reliability of the gospels, in spite of all its exaggeration, has done the great service of forcing our attention