

Bible: A Special Book, Part 1
John 1:1-14, Yr. B., September 6, 2016

Once upon a time, two pastors had this conversation. They talked about the biblical story of David single handedly killing three hundred Philistines. One pastor to the other: “What if the biblical authors exaggerated the number of Philistines that David killed? What if he only killed thirty instead of three hundred? Would that matter?” The other pastor replied: “If that were true, I would have to quit the ministry and renounce my faith. If I can’t believe everything in the Bible, then I can’t believe anything in the Bible.”

Sadly today, many Christians have this attitude when it comes to the Bible. Whether the Bible is credible and why, requires us to have a deeper understanding of it, regarding how it is formed, and under which situations and assumptions.

Let me share with you my understanding of the Bible. Christian life is inseparable from the Bible; our understanding and its application. Christian life needs guidance. The Bible offers us important testimonies regarding how ancient God’s people understood God, and it is a signpost for us. It is good to respect and learn the Word of God. But our respect is not blind. The Bible does not solve all the difficulties and challenges facing us today. Unlike us today, many people who followed God didn’t have the Bible as a reference.

Cultural background of the Bible

The Bible is essentially Jewish literature, composed with Jewish cultural backgrounds and social environment. Although they shared many similarities with Chinese culture, to understand the Hebrew Bible, we must understand early Middle Eastern cultures. Bible scholars call it the Near Eastern cultures. To understand the New Testament, we are obligated to understand the political context of the Roman era. We also need to understand its conflict with and the influence of Greek culture. Language and culture are closely linked and cannot be separated. If we think ancient Chinese classical writing is abstract, then to understand another culture is more challenging.

In my past sermons, I often point out the inadequacy of translations. Unless we know the Bible’s original languages, even English translations cannot fully grasp the meaning biblical authors give us. Understanding the Bible is lifelong. God's people need to listen to new discoveries and new understanding. If this is the case, we should just record the interpretation of a certain minister or theologian in a certain time, then repeat it millions of times. There is no need to go to Bible study class anymore or preach that text. Do you think this is biblical? I tell you, this is the way to save money. You may not need to call a minister!

The Bible comes from a Near Eastern culture. Through different time, the countries involved include Syria, Babylon, Egypt, Greece and the Roman Empire. The Hebrew Bible was written in Hebrew; the New Testament was written in Greek and Aramaic.

The Hebrew Bible has a hidden center, an important clue concerning why oral tradition turn into written scrolls. On top of changing times and the popularity of writing, we know that most of the books of the Hebrew Bible was written in the 8th century BCE when the Jews exiled to Babylon. The New Testament also has its shadow, it was when Jews lived under the rule of the Roman Empire and the fall of Jerusalem in 70 CE. So both the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament have hidden centre for their formation. It was when their country was under sieged by foreign nations. To understand the Bible one cannot give up understanding its political and social situation of the day. When we Chinese read the Bible, it is a cross cultural experience.

The Bible has yet to become a book

We tend to read the Bible as a book, a single complete book because we come from a culture where reading and writing is important. But in ancient times, most people were illiterate. In ancient Israel, the ability to read and write belong to a small handful of people, and it was a very expensive skill. We also sometimes forget writing is an invention that requires systemic learning, the support of institutions, and is a sign of a complex society.

Most biblical prophets convey their messages through speech, they did not write. We speculated that it might be someone else in another time turning oral messages into writing on behalf of Moses, Isaiah or Amos write their message. I need to point out: all those writers when they compose, they were not thinking about writing a book called the Bible. They did not have the concept of the Bible. They couldn't imagine that one day their writings would be collected to become a well packed book called the Bible.

At the time when stories were written down, they didn't not become the Bible. It was done later through collection and editing. Every month, I lead our Bible study group for seniors called Canaan Bible study. I pointed out to them, in addition to most of the original authors who cannot be ascertained, we need to see that the books in our Bible have been edited and modified multiple times. This is to reflect that in a different time, different biblical scribes had different background and political opinions. Regardless of any book of the Bible, when we read it, we must see it as the product of editing and revisions. The best we can say is those prophets may have said something like that in the Bible. We read texts through the eyes of their composers, their ways to response to their situations. And secondly, the meaning of texts always reflects its readers.

The difficulties of literal interpretation

It is for these reasons: cultural, circumstances, and language differences, when we read the Bible today, we must be cautions not to read Scripture by imposing 21st century worldviews. We read only the translated texts, and language and background cannot be separated. Jewish writings have its own characteristics, they are richly imaginative and creativity. Their authenticity does not limit to whether it is literally true. Writings could be exaggerated, and stories can be fictitious, for example, the Book of Esther, Job, and Jonah etc. This is the characteristics of ancient Near Eastern cultural. Today we are interested in fact and scientific evidence. Literal interpretations of ancient text, as if the stories happened exactly as it was told, does not help us, but creates a lot of moral dilemmas.

Our Bible is full of problematic texts. One such text which is included in our lectionary is Psalm 137: 8-9 (NRSV):

O daughter Babylon, you devastator! Happy shall they be who pay you back what you have done to us! Happy shall they be who take your little ones and dash them against the rock!

I do not know how you will react, I will be the first one to say this is not the Word of God!

A prerequisite to understand the Bible is to know that we are not the authors' first audience. The Book of Ruth was written to address a special need of a special need in society. The Book of Amos was written to condemn political leaders at the time when they neglected the poor with their unjust policies. They were basically not speaking to us. If their writings do speak to us today, we must first understand the reasons and social situations behind them. And make a decision.

When find some verses in the Bible that says servants or slaves to obey masters, these words are not written for the 18th or 19th century American slavery. The Bible does not support American slavery. When we find some verses that forbid women from learning, Paul was not speaking against educated women today. Apostle Paul was not discussing whether women could be ordained or not. We find some verses that says men committed shameful acts with other men. Paul was not addressing homosexuality in the 21st century. He was not talking about sexual orientation.

This is our challenge: When we face difficult issues of today's society, we turn to the Bible hoping to find some light. Sometimes we get overly excited. "Pastor! Find it! Find it! Yes! Yes! Yes! The Bible has talked about it. Here! Right here!"

I tell you: What the Bible says isn't the most important, how you and I understand what the Bible says is the most important.

The prerequisite to understand the Bible is to affirm the biblical writers wasn't talking to us. We are not their first readers. We certainly have to understand their situation and why they said what they said. After that, we need to think. We employ theological thinking and other knowledge, and consider our contemporary situation and the needs of society.

God's Word. Human Experience

What does it mean to respect the Bible? Respect the Bible is to respect the factors behind the creation of the book, to respect the Bible's original language and cultural background are very far away from us. Today, we generally say this book is the Word of God. Christianity throughout the ages points out that the Bible is God's Word, but it is also people's words. The Bible is a hybrid product between God and humans.

Today, we respect the Bible. That it is right. But this respect is not to get rid of thinking. Every time we read the Bible, we enter a cross cultural experience. Many scholars and I have this view: the Bible is actually a past experience humanity had with God's people, and their understanding of God got written down. This written document invites us to enter a dialogue, as if they were saying to us like this:

It is our experience, our understanding, even our witness. We write it down so that you can have a reference. We believe that God is with us when we write these words. But we believe that God is also with you. What is your situation? What are your challenges? Your situation are very different from ours. Even our situations have not been homogenous throughout the ages. If you read carefully, you will find that because of changes in society, people who write these scrolls have different opinions. It is obvious.

But we introduce to you our Jewish understanding of God to you, the main point is not that you must agree or disagree, believe it or not believe it. The point is as we travel on these roads we call humanity, we have these precious words as mirrors, so that you have a reference as you face today's needs and future challenges.

This is why the Bible is precious. It is precious not because each single sentence is the word of God, that we must obey and comply. Instead, it is how ancient people in the past showcase their experience with God. It is a record of humanity meets God. Finally, brothers and sisters, to love God and to love the Bible is not the same thing.

Let us pray