



Five Postmodern Questions about the Bible

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1) We cannot know what happened in history how can you present the Bible as true?

- § History is a matter of subjective opinion.
- § The quest for historical truth should not be embarked upon at all it is a fruitless, even impossible exercise.

How do we have access to history?

- § Mid 1800s history is an exact science, facts can be presented objectively. Von Ranke: the historian must present the past as it actually happened.
- § By 1920s ideal of historical objectivity under fire interpretation is the key.
- § By 1960s and post modernism complete historical relativism.

Pragmatic Hermeneutics

- § We have access to history via converging lines of evidence.
- § Written evidence
- § Eye witness testimony
- § Photographs/cartoons/paintings/etching
- § Archaeological remains
- § Inferential evidence

New Testament History

- § Written accounts by non-Christian sources
- § Eye-witness testimony
- § Inscriptions, paintings
- § The empty tomb, archaeology
- § Inferential evidence the transformed disciples

Luke s intentions: Therefore since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, it seemed good also to me to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the certainty of

the things you have been taught. Luke 1:3-4

2) Language has no fixed meaning how can the Bible say anything at all?

- § Don t take things literally
- § Interpretation means there is no inherent meaning
- § Transcendental Signifier
- § Authors intentions

3) Isn t the Bible sexist and out of date?

- § Jesus treatment of women
- § Women as New Testament witnesses
- § Women as theology teachers
- § Women in the Early Church

4) Why is the Bible any better than any other Holy Book?

Islam

§ The Torah (Taurat) and the Gospels (Injil) are declared by the Qur'an itself to be acceptable: "Say, O People of the Book! You have naught of guidance till you observe the Torah and the Gospel and that which was revealed unto you from your Lord" (5:68).

§ In fact, Muhammad is himself commanded to look at these Scriptures when in doubt (10:95).

§ However, Muslims claim that the Gospel (Injil) has been corrupted. Yusuf Ali comments that the Injil mentioned in the Qur-an is certainly not the New Testament and it is not the four Gospels as now received by the Christian Church, but an original Gospel which was promulgated by Jesus, as the Taurat was promulgated by Moses and the Qur-an by Muhammad (286).

§ Unfortunately there is simply no way for the Muslim to verify that this indeed the case. The Pentateuch and the four Gospels as we have them today were in existence during the time of Muhammad. Nowhere in the Qur'an is it stated that Christians known as People of the Book, did not possess the authentic Scriptures and the neither does the Qur'an claim that the Injil had been corrupted by Christians.

§ **Differences in the Qur'an and Bible** are not unimportant or minor. The Qur'an contains confusions of the original stories as recorded in the older biblical texts. Mohammed gives no reason for changing these details of the stories he alludes to.

§ The biblical texts written at the time and passed down by scribes with incredible attention to detail,

do seem to be more reliable than references made to stories hundreds of years after the events. Muslims insist that the Bible must have been corrupted because it undermines the Qur'an's grasp of history.

§ The circularity of the allegations made by the Muslim, that the Torah and New Testament have been changed and what we have now are not what Mohammed mentions in the Qur'an could be simply turned around. Using the same logic we could suggest that what Muhammad received was actually the true message of Judaism or Christianity, but Muhammad's followers distorted the Qur'an so that it ended up denouncing some of these doctrines!

§ **The so called miracle of the Qur'an** - there are no miracles related to Muhammad's life, but Muslims claim that the self-authenticating miracle in Islam is the Qur'an. The Qur'an we are told is totally unique and miraculous - its beauty and elegance are remarkable. The book itself is considered to be perfect, dictated by God and the ultimate expression of truth. However, it is very difficult to maintain that a written text is self-evidently perfect and miraculous. In fact if you do not have a prior commitment to the superiority of the Qur'an, is it possible to view it as qualitatively so unique that it must be miraculous? The Iranian Islamic scholar Sayyid Hossein Nasr comments that: Many people, especially non-Muslims, who read the Qur'an for the first time are struck by what appears to be a kind of incoherence from the human point of view. It is neither like a high mystical text nor a manual of Aristotelian logic, though it contains both mysticism and logic.

§ He then goes on to say The Qur'an contains a quality which is difficult to express in modern language. One might call it divine magic. [Image] that the errors in the Qur'an were so many that the grammatical rules had to be altered in order to fit the claim that the book was perfect.

§ Then there is the claim that the Qur'an has not been altered since it was recorded in Muhammad's day. Arthur Jeffrey, a noted European archaeologist, discovered Qur'anic texts which were written prior to their canonisation by `Uthman and he notes differences from what we have today. `Uthman, who compiled these suras, had a number of suras destroyed. This was probably due to the great differences contained within them. Jeffrey concludes: "There

can be little doubt that the text canonised by `Uthman was only one among several types of text in existence at the time." [Image][3] In the second sura alone there are almost 150 variations. These are the changes which Shi'ite Muslims point to themselves.

§ Discovery of some ancient Qur'anic fragments in Yemen in 1972 has led to increasing research of the textual development of the Qur'an. Gerd-R. Puin, is a specialist in Arabic calligraphy and Koranic paleography who is based at Saarland University, in Saarbrücken, Germany. He has been examining the Yemeni fragments since 1981. His findings reveal unconventional verse orderings, minor textual variations, and some artistic embellishment. Among the manuscripts some were palimpsests or versions which have clearly been written over even earlier, and then been washed off. What the Yemeni manuscripts seemed to suggest, is an *evolving* text.

§ Another problem with the idea of the Qur'an as the authenticating miracle of Islam is that one can only recognise the miracle and its beauty if one knows and can read Arabic. And even then one would need to be a highly sophisticated language student to begin to understand. There is real circularity to this argument.

§ Muslims also claim that the Qur'an is a miracle on the basis of Mohammed's illiteracy. How could such a work have been produced by an unlettered man? All scholars agree that Mohammed had at least several amanuenses or scribes. Hence, he could very possibly have composed the Qur'an. History records that Homer was blind and could not, in all likelihood, write, yet he authored the Iliad and the Odyssey, the two greatest epics of the ancient world. And couldn't we say that Shakespeare was a prophet for his eloquence in writing Othello, Hamlet, or The Merchant of Venice? These are works of literary genius. Mozart wrote his first symphony at the age of six; in fact, all Mozart's music was composed before he was 30 years old.

§ **In Contrast** - the Bible contains reliable accounts of the life, ministry and death of Jesus. These gospels are not written by Jesus himself. They are written by and from the testimony of those who knew him intimately. They are written in the life time of those who knew him and witnessed how he lived and died. Through these accounts we can make a decision about the person of Christ - will we receive the forgiveness he offers? Will we follow him? Once we do this we embark on a real

relationship with him. This new relationship will be helped and nurtured by reading the Bible, but it is Christ himself in his very person who is the eternal word of God. The *Encyclopaedia of Islam* (1981) suggests that "the closest analogue in Christian belief to the role of the Qur'an in Muslim belief is not the Bible, but Christ." Jesus himself is the eternal word. He is far superior to any book or text, he is God himself, coming in human form to live, die and be resurrected on this earth. Through his own self revelation God draws us to himself.

§ The clear intention of the Bible is that we might read it and believe: These are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God and that by believing you may have life in his name. [Image][5] They are sensible truthful accounts of events often given with an interpretation but the interpretation is not everything, enough facts and details are supplied to give us access to the events themselves.

Hinduism

§ Hinduism is an incredibly complex and diverse religion and it is difficult to avoid simplification if we are to bring it within manageable and understandable proportions.

§ The total mass of writings comprising the Hindu Scriptures is absolutely vast. The Vedas or sacred knowledge are comprised of four samhitas, collections of hymns written in ancient Sanskrit.

§ The date and place of their composition have been the subject of much scholarly dispute.

§ Indian tradition dates the Vedas to around 4000 BCE and assumes a North West Indian origin.

§ Western scholars since Max Muller [Image][6] assume a date of 1500-1200 BCE and consider the writings to be authored by Aryan invaders of India from southern Russia.

§ The texts were transmitted orally for over 1000 years and the earliest available Sanskrit writings on which Hinduism is based can be dated to 150 BCE.

§ The *Vedas* were transmitted orally but the necessary learning and recitation was only authorised for Brahmins.

§ Strangers and low-caste people were forbidden from hearing or speaking the scriptures.

§ The initial distinctions between the Aryan and non-Aryan people on the basis of colour (*varna*) evolved into the order of caste hierarchy which still survives in India today.

§ The corpus of writing is vast and we do not have space to analyse it in any detail the *Rg*

Veda alone consists of a collection of 1017 hymns divided into 10 books with an appendix of 11 poems.

§ It is important to note that the *Vedas* are not historical documents in the same sense as the Old and New Testaments. They record outbursts of praise to various gods as well as mythical stories.

§ It is not clear from the writings themselves whether the events recorded are intended to be understood as historical or imaginary.

§ A number of Hindu thinkers are themselves candid about this - Swami Vivekananda pointed out that Vedic scriptures make mention of a number of Krishnas. It does not matter which is which the possibility of a legendary mix up is allowed by him.

§ The dating of the various and diverse Hindu Scriptures is also a challenging prospect. One scholar writing about this comments: In spite of claims made by some, in reality, any dating of these documents that attempts a precision closer than a few centuries is as stable as a house of cards. [Image][7]

§ The contrast with the Bible is very clear here. Through successive generations different books of the Old and New Testaments were written in their historical contexts. These contexts can be scrutinised and the archaeological and extra biblical sources from the same times can be placed alongside the biblical writings. The Bible is clear in talking about itself that God reveals himself through these different people at different times but they all point forwards to the coming of his son: in the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us in his Son.

5) The Bible is out of touch on sex how can it be relevant for 21st century life?

§ We should probably start by looking at what the Bible actually says about sex before we decide whether or not this is out of date. God thought of sex he gave us this wonderful expression of love for another.

§ There is a whole book of the Old Testament which is devoted to extolling the beauty of sex and showing God's delight in what he has made pleasurable and good.

Homosexuality

§ The prominence of disagreement within the church on the issue of homosexuality has led to

this question being increasingly important.

§ Screaming headlines in our newspapers berate the church for being outdated or homophobic bishops are even quoted as calling traditionalists Nazis and other such pejorative terms.

§ Catch up? The assumption behind this argument is that the Bible was written in a moral context equivalent to the Victorian era in Britain when any sexual activity outside of marriage was frowned upon. However this is simply not the case. Homosexuality was widely practised in the Roman Empire as well as the preceding Greek civilisation.

§ Texts: New Testament biblical texts about homosexuality are particularly contentious and debated over the air waves. The texts in question are Romans 1:26-27, 1 Corinthians 6:9, 1 Timothy 1:10.

§ We also see Jesus statements about sexual purity. In Matthew 15:19 and Mark 7:21 Jesus condemns *porneia* meaning fornication or sexual immorality this is a catch all term which covers all kinds of sexual intercourse outside of marriage. Jesus speaking as a Jew to his own people about sexual morality would certainly have had the moral teaching of the Old Testament including its teaching about homosexuality in mind.

§ It is also important to draw a distinction between homophobia an irrational hatred or hostility towards homosexual people and a disapproval of homosexual practice for confessing Christians on biblical grounds. The Evangelical Alliance write: We cannot however accept that to disapprove of homosexual practice on biblical grounds is in itself irrational, hateful or hostile. The tendency of the gay lobby to brand any one who disagrees with their position homophobic is regrettable because it fails to consider the nuances of biblical interpretation and the consciences of Christian believers.

[Image][1] Sayyid Hossein Nasr Ideals and Realities of Islam London: George Allen & Unwin; Boston: Beacon Press, 1966. p. 47

[Image] Leiden: E. J. Brill 1937, pp 7-8

[Image][3] *ibid.* pp. 20-113

[Image][4] John 20:31

[Image][5] In Acts 13:7 Luke mentions the name of the proconsul in Cyprus. He is Sergius Paulus there is an inscription mentioning him in Cyprus&

[Image][6] F. M. Muller (1823-1900) is called the founder of the discipline of comparative religion. He did ground breaking work in Oxford

translating Hindu sacred texts and writing critical academic books in this field. It was Max Muller who first proposed the Aryan invasion of India Chronology which most western scholars of Hinduism broadly work within.

[Image][7] P. Olivelle Upanisads Translated from the Original Sanskrit. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996, p.36.

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