

Wonderful Words of Life: Divergence from Evangelical Orthodoxy in C. S. Lewis's Views on the Bible

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The Word of God?

The assertion that even in the 21st century a considerable percentage of North American evangelicals believe in a literal interpretation of bible is certainly not hard to illustrate. Controversy erupted in the news this week (December 2010) over the construction of a new theme park in Kentucky featuring a life-sized Noah's Ark attraction that will be built to the exact measurements stated in the Old Testament scriptures. The park is being built by the same evangelical ministry that is already operating the Creation Museum in Petersburg, Kentucky, which is dedicated to debunking the theory of evolution through the demonstration of biblically compatible theories, such as man's co-existence with the dinosaurs. The 1.2 million visitors who passed through the museum's gates in its first three years of operation testify to the popularity of creationism in the U. S. ("They paved Kentucky" 1). Indeed, according to a 2008 Gallup poll, 44% of Americans agreed with the statement "God created human beings pretty much in their present form at one time within the last 10,000 years or so" ("Evolution, Creation" 1). The same poll reported support for theistic evolution at 36% of the population, with naturalistic evolution trailing far behind at 14%. Over one hundred years after Darwin presented his paradigm-shifting theory in *The Origin of Species*, nearly 1 in 2 Americans reject what has become the foundation of modern biology.

Anchoring this sort of statistical result is American evangelicalism, with its deep commitment to a literal interpretation of the book of Genesis. The 1974 Lausanne Covenant affirms "the divine inspiration, truthfulness and authority of both Old and New Testament Scriptures in their entirety as the only written word of God, without error" (Baker 438). Similarly, at a conference of over two-hundred evangelical leaders in Chicago in 1978, including influential scholars like J. I. Packer, Francis Schaeffer, and R. C. Sproul, the *Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy* was agreed upon as a defense against perceived incursions of liberal views of scripture. The statement, in Article 12, agrees with the Lausanne Covenant that scripture in its entirety is inerrant, but goes much further, making it clear that where science and scripture disagree, scripture is always right. Again, from Article 12:

"WE DENY that Biblical infallibility and inerrancy are limited to spiritual, religious, or redemptive themes, exclusive of assertions in the fields of history and science. We further deny that scientific

hypotheses about earth history may properly be used to overturn the teaching of Scripture on creation and the flood” (Geisler 496).

Evidently, the established evangelical orthodoxy is that the Bible is to be taken literally. Even seemingly mythical accounts, such as the creation story or the Genesis flood, are defended as factual historical events. In contrast to this, C. S. Lewis, from his earlier works and continuing on in letters written near the end of his life, is seen to be at variance with the prevailing evangelical opinions.

The primary distinction Lewis made was in seeing the bible as *carrying* the Word of God rather than, as is widespread in evangelical circles, *being* the Word of God. In an average evangelical church, when people refer to “the Word of God” they mean the sixty-six books of the bible. This, however, is a peculiarly Protestant phenomenon. Biblical scholars, especially those in the Catholic and Orthodox streams, will point out that the use of the phrase “Word of God” in the bible almost never refers to written text. The “Word of God” is, rather, a translation of the Greek word “logos” and is seen by Lewis as referring to the revelation that God is trying to communicate to man throughout all of history, primarily in the person of Jesus Christ. Though it may seem like a subtle distinction, it leads to a markedly different handling of the scripture.

Essentially, such a view allows Lewis to make room for apparent mistakes in the text without rejecting its overall worthiness as a source of divine revelation. In *Reflections on the Psalms* (1958), Lewis admits that he has “no difficulty in accepting, say, the view of those scholars who tell us that the account of creation in Genesis is derived from earlier Semitic stories which were pagan and mythical” (110). He then goes on to detail a view of scripture that pays careful attention to the sort of document being read, whether poetry, history, or parable. He does not, however, think that attention to genre and the treatment of scripture as a literary source empties the text of its divine inspiration. Lewis outlines how in the re-telling of an earlier mythical story, the re-tellers “invention, his sense of form, his ethics, his ideas of what is fit, or edifying, or merely interesting, all come in” (110). Though this process of literary evolution, the tale itself may be imbued with a God-intended message or meaning, whether the author is consciously aware of it or not. Whereas the most conservative views of scriptural inspiration have God whispering the very words and sentence structure of sacred texts, to Lewis this is not likely or even necessary. Lewis feels that though in the process of God-influenced textual progression the “human qualities of the raw materials” will be apparent, this sort of imperfection in the details is not what matters (111).

The total result is not ‘the Word of God’ in the sense that every passage, in itself, gives impeccable science or history. It carries the Word of God; and we... receive that Word from it not by using it as an encyclopaedia or an encyclical but by steeping ourselves in its tone or temper and so learning its overall message (112).

In this view of scripture we see Lewis again staking out a sort of careful middle ground. He is not a theological liberal, seeing the Old Testament as nothing more than documentation of various human authors' beliefs and feelings about God, but neither is he a conservative dedicated to proving propositions through a rigidly literal reading.

In a 1953 letter in response to a reader's request for clarification, Lewis restates the need for differentiated analysis according to genre when dealing with bible texts. Lewis argues that "sound critical reading reveal[s] different *kinds* of narrative in the Bible" (*Collected Letters, vol. 3* 319). He compares the story of Jonah and the whale with the historical accounts of King David or the New Testament narratives, contending that the Jonah story has "the air of being a moral romance," rather than being "pegged... into any historical situation" (319). He goes on to point out that even Christ of the gospels was not explicit as to whether or not every story and parable he told was pure fiction, as historical record and accuracy was never the intended purpose of the stories (319). To Lewis, there is ample room in the Old Testament, just as Christ demonstrates in the New Testament, for divine truth to be transmitted through both history and mythological storytelling.

What he does want to make clear however, again revealing his middle-ground position, is that just because he views stories like the account of Jonah as non-historical, this in no way renders every miraculous account untenable. Unlike much of the liberal theology of his day, Lewis does not reject miraculous intervention out of hand, and he is not shy about making this perfectly clear.

This is not a "rationalistic approach" to miracles. Where I doubt the historicity of an Old Testament narrative I never do so on the ground that the miraculous as such is incredible (319).

Liberal theologians tend to separate historical accounts from mythological ones according to the presentation of miraculous events. For Lewis, miracles were not the crucial touchstone. In a 1955 letter, Lewis repeats that he never thinks "a story unhistorical because it is miraculous" (653). Instead, he reiterates that the reader needs to recognize varying literary forms, which are then handled appropriately according to their genre. Instead of miraculous accounts being the touchstone of historicity, Lewis thinks that historical accounts will generally concern themselves with historical details, whereas mythic fiction ignores them.

All the same commonsense and general understanding of literary kinds which would forbid anyone to take the parables as historical statements, carried a very little further, would force us to distinguish between (1.) Books like Acts or the account of David's reign, which are everywhere dovetailed into a known history, geography, and genealogies, (2.) Books like Esther, or Jonah or Job which deal with otherwise unknown characters living in unspecified periods, and pretty well proclaim themselves to be sacred fiction (653).

In a 1959 letter to Clyde Kilby, Lewis seems to express a certain misgiving about the motives of evangelical doctrines of inerrancy, wondering if the seeming obsession with historicity might not be missing the point altogether. Wondering aloud why it might be that “neither in my own Bible reading nor in my religious life as a whole does the question in fact ever assume that importance which it always gets in theological controversy,” he makes the comparison between the Old Testament story of Ruth, and that of the Greek tragedy *Antigone* (1044). Both he sees as outstanding literary sources. Both communicate important and timeless truths. This being the case, he doesn’t see the point of arguing over whether or not Ruth is historical. It’s a meaningless argument for, as he says, the story “would still act on me as the Word of God if it weren’t [historical], so far as I can see” (1044).

In the same letter, Lewis returns to the idea that where the historicity of a given fact is vital to God’s revelation, it will be obviously historical.

[T]he value of some things (eg. the Resurrection) depended on whether they really happened: but the value of others (e.g. the fate of Lot’s wife) hardly at all. And the ones whose historicity matters are, as God’s will, those where it is plain (1045).

This is a note-worthy stance in light of Lewis’s willingness to posit a non-historical creation account. Evidently, Lewis sees the resurrection of Christ as necessarily historical, but would not say the same about the creation story. Biblical literalists are not so extreme that they suppose Christ’s parables and hyperbolic statements like “if your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out” (Mt. 18: 9) should be taken literally. The Genesis creation account though, they say, must be literally interpreted. The creation account as a historical documenting of actual events is seen as pivotal. In this conception, the interpretation and understanding of the rest of God’s biblical revelation rests on the literal validity of Genesis 1 and 2. One creation website warns that if modern science’s contradictory views are accepted, “how can one tell what any part of God’s Word, and in particular Genesis, actually means?” (“Do I Have to” 1). In the churches and youth conferences of my youth this notion was often repeated and not to be forgotten.

Lewis, however, seems to demonstrate in *The Problem of Pain* (1940) that he applied to Genesis 1 and 2 the same attitude that he had toward the stories of Ruth, Job, and Jonah — he was at best unconcerned with questions of their historicity. In a discussion of the fall of humanity in Genesis he remarks, “For all I can see, it might have concerned the literal eating of a fruit, but the question is of no consequence” (76). His belief in biological evolution (to be discussed at length in the following section) probably reinforced this indifference. The thrust of the creation account was not, for Lewis, concerned with historical accuracy. Rather, it was inspired mythology, carrying a divine revelation regarding humanity’s spiritual condition.

Throughout Lewis’s writing, his stance on scripture remains consistent — it is not the letter of the

text itself that is sacred but the understanding of the divine to which the text leads. Lewis repeats in a 1952 letter that it “is Christ Himself, not the Bible, who is the true Word of God,” along with his suspicion that evangelical notions of inerrancy are used in a way that lead to abusive uses of out-of-context passages of scripture (*Collected Letters, vol. 3* 246). He asserts that reading the Bible, “in the right spirit and with the guidance of good teachers” will bring us to an understanding of God’s revelation, but goes on to insist that such reading be done “for our spiritual life, not for controversy or curiosity” (246). He ends the paragraph by making this point explicit, alluding to a violent tendency toward using favored texts to bludgeon opponents instead of honestly seeking personal spiritual understanding.

But we must not use the Bible (our ancestors too often did) as a sort of Encyclopedia out of which texts (isolated from their context and read without attention to the whole nature and purport of the books in which they occur) can be taken for use as weapons (246).

Lewis demonstrates in his response to inerrantist claims his commitment to a common ground of “mere Christianity”. The argument for the evangelical view of the Bible, to Lewis, was not compelling. In fact, he viewed it as a grand waste of spiritual energy considering its tendency to divide Christians.

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