

Editorial Reflections

Losing Faith—A Partial Response

The man who wrote the testimony on page 13 clearly declares his continuing faith in truth, which is to say he is willing to believe whatever seems to be true, or whatever he is able to believe. He is not a total “unbeliever” but merely a person whose collection of things that appear to be true is not as large as before.

That is, a number of things that across the years he thought or hoped might be true, he now no longer believes to be true.

Much of what he mentions at this stage as having to give up would appear to be things that may have to him seemed shaky for some time. He has now gradually lost hope of them turning out to be true. In other words he never did really fully believe them.

To my way of thinking many of those things I think he is quite right to give up. For example, he notes that the New Testament reflects the likelihood of Jewish scholars gaining some significant insights from Zoroastrians while in captivity in Babylon.

In making this very significant observation he is essentially giving up the “belief” that God has not revealed any truth to any group other than those in the Jewish tradition, and that the Jews did not need to learn, and could not learn, from truth to be found elsewhere. Okay, such a “belief” may be found in some “Christian” circles. But it was never true. It is not something taught in the Bible but is a common assumption only in certain streams of Christianity.

However, to be fair to the Bible such a view must be given up! The Bible does not portray the Jewish people as the only people on earth in whose midst God has been at work, nor that they can't or don't need to learn from other nations what God may have shown them. A clear case is in Genesis 20 where Abraham admits, guiltily, that in contacting Abimelech's group (which was outside of the Covenant) he had said, “There is surely no fear of God in this place (20:11).” In this case it is Abimelech who has righteous insight.

Thus, there is no inherent problem for this Caltech graduate to come to the place where he decides he cannot go on holding even tentatively some of the ideas and practices of certain Christians. To arrive at such a decision is, incidentally, like Muhammad refusing (rightly) to “believe” in the Trinity *as taught by the particular form of Christianity* with which he was in touch. Evangelicals today would agree with him, because we also do not believe in the kind of Trinity those particular Christians taught. Thus, you could say accurately that Muhammad properly “lost his faith” in that form of the Trinity. Good riddance.

This Caltech man, this highly believing man, seems to me to be reacting properly to what amounts to a huge amount of “overbelief” (my term) focussed on a lot of somewhat silly forms of Evangelical Christian cultural baggage.

He respects the earnestness but (rightly) doubts the validity of a number of narrowly or even widely held beliefs within our Evangelical culture.

He has also “given up his faith” trying to explain away a number of disturbing things in the Old Testament, as if the Bible asks us to emulate or approve of all the gruesome and barbaric things it reports.

He may not realize that many things in the Bible are the result of a perfectly reasonable increased understanding which the Bible unblushingly reflects without the pretension of insisting or teaching that in the Bible there is “no progress of understanding.” This subject is, admittedly a bit difficult, because, for one thing, at the time the OT was put together as a book, later insights and interpretations are sometimes mingled with earlier understandings.

An instance which he mentions, but does not pursue in detail, is something I ran into just this morning as I was reading in 1 Chronicles. It is the startling contrast between II Sam. 24:1-24 and I Chron. 21:1-24. I have for some time considered these two passages to constitute the “Rosetta Stone of Biblical Hermeneutics.” In Samuel the NIV says “God incited David (to do wrong).” In Chronicles the parallel account says “Satan incited David (to do wrong).”

As I see it, the centuries-earlier passage speaks in terms of God's overall sovereignty, while the post-exilic (post-Zoroastrian) passage now speaks specifically of the initiative of an intermediate being (Satan) that was, indeed, created by God not to do evil but with the same kind of freedom a robot does not have—the freedom angels and humans do have, namely, the freedom to do evil. The later passage also may incorporate some more precise figures (not greatly different) for the results of David's census. And, there are many other small differences between these two Biblical accounts of the same event, differences of the kind a later editor (ancient or modern) writing a totally new account would readily make.

In this case, the Bible does not attempt to pretend that either of these accounts was dictated from heaven. Thus, here is one more example where we do well to “lose our faith”—that is, lose our specious faith in the idea that our Bibles were dictated by God in the way the Qur'an and the Book of Mormon are claimed to have been. Rather, we believe that “holy men of God spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost (2 Pet. 1:21, KJV).” The key word here is “men.” It is not a case of dictation, clearly. In this case the post-exilic

account seems clearly to have been improved. We see similar editorial differences between the synoptic gospels.

On the other hand, the OT in other cases apparently is quite happy for the reader to see the same event in two very different perspectives. Take for example Genesis 45. In verse four Joseph refers to the fact that his brothers sent him to Egypt. In verse eight he tells them *they did not send him but God did*. Verse eight thus speaks from God's sovereignty. Verse four speaks equally accurately of the human instrumentality. This is parallel to the Samuel/Chronicles passages. It is similar to the apparently contradictory ideas that God gave His son to die for our sins and that a "hideous strength" mercilessly tortured and killed the most innocent man in history. Both are true.

In other words, many simplistic views of the Bible may need to be given up. Believing in an *inerrant Bible* is different from believing in *inerrant interpretations*.

Interestingly, this Caltech man explains that he "still believes" the concept of evolution does not contradict Genesis. Oh, oh: he believes something I don't! That is, I seriously wonder if Genesis is making any reference to the "old earth" at all.

Actually, this is precisely the source of my favorite example of maybe having to give up long assumed interpretations of the Bible. I am thinking more and more of the possibility (which I think should at least be considered!) that the lengthy "geologic ages" occurred before Genesis 1:1, and that no matter what you think about all those vicious animal fossils that have been dug up, you can't interpret the non-carnivorous life described in Genesis to be the same thing. Most people unthinkingly assume that way back when Genesis was written there was knowledge of a planet, solar system, galaxy, and indeed an entire universe and that precisely the beginning of all that is what is being referred to in Genesis 1:1. Certainly it is easy for us unthinkingly to read our knowledge today into something that was put together only a few thousand years ago when Genesis came into oral tradition or was later written down.

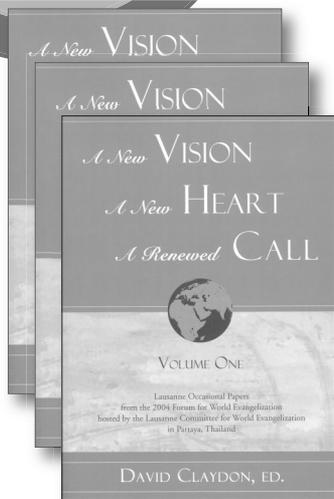
Now, I would not be giving this example if I had not discovered that the Dr. Merrill Unger, who for 19 years was chair of the OT department at Dallas seminary, clearly espoused that view way back in 1958 in the pages of the *Bibliotheca Sacra*, and then, later described it in 1966 in his *Unger's Bible Handbook*. The Handbook was printed by Moody Press in 24 editions between 1966 and 1980 in a total of 500,000 copies.

Please understand that the idea that the long geologic ages occurred before the Genesis account of a "new creation" takes place is, as an idea, not something I "believe" in the same way I believe some other things. This idea, however, does commend itself to me as the interpretation which is most fair to the Bible. I feel we must be very cautious that we do not find ourselves demanding that the Bible say what we would like it to say, or saying what we expect it to say, or even saying what many people think it says.

Why this "new creation" concept seems desirable is, of course, the fact that it allows for both young earth and old earth views to be true. But there is something else that is the thing most important for me. If the thousands of forms of life that are now extinct lived before Genesis 1, their pervasively violent, perverted, distorted, carnivorous, predatory character could then be conceived to be the evil work of Satan and his rebel angels after his "fall." This more concrete idea of a first fall would suggest that the second "fall," that of Adam, resulted in the rejection of the *newly created, undistorted* life forms of chapter one, forcing them into the larger planet where they would interbreed and intermarry with the *long-perverted* other forms of life. Result? A gradual reversion (note the subsequent declining ages of the human lineage created in the image of God) to the pre-Genesis perversity and viciousness that had been created as the result of Satan's earlier fall. This then provides a rationale for the need of the new beginning described literally and accurately in Genesis.

For me, then, this would define a much more complex mission for redeemed man: to destroy the works of Satan. Since God is extensively blamed and his glory stained by common assumptions that there is no Satan and all evil is His "mysterious will," our mission is to "reglorify" God precisely by seeking in His Name to restore all evidences of Satan's perversions in both man and beast, in all forms of life, in particular to eradicate those forms of life—virtually all viruses, many bacteria, most parasites.

This kind of activity would seem to be highly crucial in restoring the reputation of God, who is now being blamed for all sorts of evil. This basic type of amplification of mission can thus uniquely empower evangelism. As this Caltech man implies, who wants to be in heaven forever with a God with a stained and gruesome reputation? **IJFM**

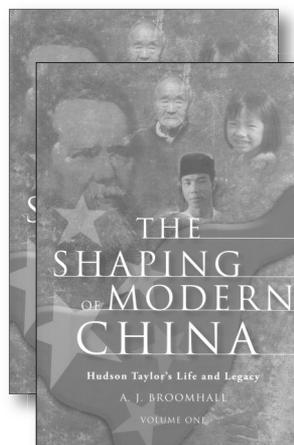


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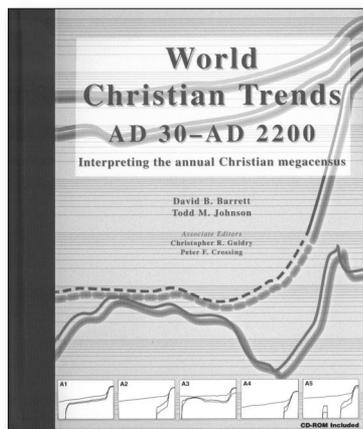


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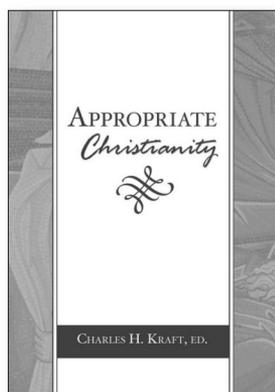
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