

What Really Happened to Me: Demythologizing the New Testament

As I suggested in yesterday's post, the reason I've been trying to show that biblical scholars who still revere the Bible but recognize that it is, even so, filled with mistakes, discrepancies, and contradictions is to explain what happened to my faith once I realized that the Bible was not the inerrant revelation from God that I had always assumed it was.

It is amazing how often people tell me – usually with a touch of personal complacency – that the reason I lost my faith was that I was a fundamentalist. If I had only had a more reasonable understanding of the faith (like *them* for example!) then the problems I encountered would not have led me to become an agnostic. In their view, I am at heart still a fundamentalist.

In their view I had thought (as a fundamentalist) that if every word in the Bible can't be completely true and accurate, then none of it can be true and accurate, and that for that reason, once I realized there were mistakes in the Bible, my only recourse was to become a raging atheist. In other words, they thought that I continued to have a fundamentalist view of things (it's all or nothing when it comes to the Bible) and that I had then "thrown out the baby with the bathwater." If I had a nickel for every time someone has told me that (about myself) I could buy a condo in Paris.

I don't know exactly why people are so eager to tell me why I became an atheist, while assuring me that they themselves would never, thank God, have to go that route. But they are. It wouldn't be too hard, I suppose, to come up with some pretty simply psychological explanations, but I'm really more

interested in this thread to talk about what really did happen to me. And what happened is not that I went from being a fundamentalist to being an atheist overnight once I realized the Bible had mistakes.

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(As a side note, a conservative evangelical long-time colleague of mine, Craig Evans, with whom I have long been friendly and with whom I've had a number of public debates, once wrote a book in which he explained about me, in the opening pages, that once I realized there were differences among the manuscripts of the New Testament I decided that I could no longer be a Christian. That is nowhere near the truth. For one thing, I had known there were differences among the manuscripts from virtually the very moment I had become a conservative born-again Christian back in high school. We talked about such things. I wrote papers about the issue when I was a 19-year-old at Moody Bible Institute. The variants of the manuscripts were part of my life from the outset of my fundamentalist faith. But what especially annoyed me was that Craig was someone I had known for years. Why couldn't he just ask me about it, rather than write – in a published book, to be read by fellow conservative evangelicals – what was simply false, even if thinking it was *true* was somehow comforting to himself and to his readers, all of whom could see how simple-minded I must be to leave the faith for some such silly reason?)

The short version of the story of what really happened to me is this. When I was a graduate student at Princeton Theological Seminary, it was still a time when most critical New Testament scholars throughout the world thought that one of the – or probably the single – most important New Testament scholar of the twentieth century was a German named Rudolph

Bultmann (1884-1976). Among Bultmann's many, many important contributions to the study of the New Testament was a theological approach he called "demythologizing."

The basic idea behind this approach was that the Bible is not a factual book with no mistakes, an inerrant revelation that can speak directly, without remainder, to the modern world. It is rooted completely in its own historical context – in fact, in a wide range of contexts, since the authors of Genesis, Amos, Matthew, Paul, and Revelation (and all the others) were living in their own contexts. For the New Testament the contexts were all connected with the first century. So too with Jesus himself – a first-century Jew living in Palestine. In these ancient contexts there were certain assumptions about the world, about God, about reality that informed their ways of thinking. They accepted certain "myths" about God and reality that don't any longer make sense in a modern scientific world. We today have very different sets of assumptions about – well, about everything. And so we can't simply pretend that we live in their world, assuming what ancient people themselves assumed.

To make sense of what is really at stake in ancient writings such as those found in the Bible – if we want them to have any relevance and meaning for our lives – we have to strip them of their mythological assumptions (those held by ancients) and reconfigure them in light of our own assumptions. When you remove the mythological underpinnings of ancient writings, you "demythologize" them.

I am not going to go deeply into Bultmann's own way of doing this. It involves his personal commitment to the existentialist philosophical movements of his own day in Germany, including especially those being developed by the influential philosopher Heidegger. Even in the early 1980s, when I was first recognizing the "truth" of the demythologizing project, I did not buy into Bultmann's own conclusions about the existential meanings of the biblical

texts. I was not particularly enamored of Heideggerian philosophy.

But I did come to see the merit of treating the stories and prose of the New Testament in a way that recognized that it was thoroughly packaged in light of first century beliefs, world views, and assumptions of the world that I, as a twentieth century person, no longer shared, but that if *retranslated* into a modern idiom continued to be deeply meaningful.

In a sense, I realized that the Bible had to be translated. Not simply translated from the ancient Hebrew and Greek into modern English, but even more, translated into terms that made sense in my own world. And when one did that, one could still see the power and vibrancy of the biblical message for one's thoughts, beliefs, and life. I'll say a bit more about that in the next several posts.