

# Sacred Writings & Sagacious Reading

A Sermon by Fritz Hudson  
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## Opening Reflection

"The Bible is a book written for men, in the language of men, and its meaning is to be sought in the same manner as those of other books. ... We profess not to know a book which requires a more frequent exercise of reason than the Bible."

These words, by William Ellery Channing, were at the core of the 1819 sermon "Unitarian Christianity," which proclaimed our birth as a religious movement. This morning I want to explore the role of sacred scripture in religious life.

Protestant Christianity, itself, was formed around this issue. It was the translation of our Jewish and Christian scriptures into vernacular languages, first into English by John Wycliff in 1384, and later into German by Martin Luther, which laid the groundwork for the entire the Protestant movement. It also led many individuals to make their own examination of scripture and to draw their own understandings of its character and significance.

To kindle our considerations this morning, I want to share with you something of the work and thoughts of two such individuals.

Thomas Jefferson is the first.

Late in his life, in a letter to the young Peter Carr, Jefferson wrote:

"Read the Bible as you would read Livy or Tacitus. The facts which are within the ordinary course of nature, you will believe on the authority of the writer, as you do those of the same in Livy or Tacitus. The testimony of the writer weighs in their favor, in on scale, and their not being against the laws of nature does not weigh against them. But those facts in the Bible which contradict the laws of nature must be examined with more care and under a variety of faces. Here you must recur to the pretensions of the writer to inspiration from God. Examine upon what evidence his pretensions are founded, and whether that evidence is so strong as that its falsehood would be more improbable than a change in the laws of nature in the case he relates."

"In the New Testament there is internal evidence that parts of it have proceeded from an extraordinary man; and that other parts are from the fabric of very inferior minds. It is as easy to separate those parts as to pick out diamonds from dunghills."

Earlier, during his Presidency as a matter of fact, Jefferson had been led by this light to put together his own "cut & paste" version of the Christian gospels. It was for his own devotions, published only long after his death.

The "Jefferson Bible" as its now called, begins with no mention of a "word" being "made flesh" nor of an angel's annunciation of Jesus' coming birth to a virgin. The words he chose as the appropriate beginning for Jesus' story were simply "There went out a decree from Caesar Augustus" from Luke's second chapter. The text then retains all of the natural events of Jesus life along with his teachings and parables, but with none of the miracles ascribed to him. And it ends, with no mention of any post-death

appearances by Jesus, no ascendance into heaven, but rather again quite simply "Now in the place where he was crucified there was a garden; and in the garden a new sepulcher, wherein was never man yet laid. There laid they Jesus. And rolled a great stone to the door of the sepulcher, and departed" from Matthew's next to last chapter.

Elizabeth Cady Stanton's is the second work I wish to share with you.

As a prominent leader of the late nineteenth century women's movement, one of her projects was a commentary on Jewish and Christian scriptures, known as "The Woman's Bible." Here are words from its preface.

"From the inauguration of the movement for woman's emancipation the Bible has been used to hold her in the "divinely ordained sphere," prescribed in the Old and New Testament.

The Bible teaches that woman brought sin and death into the world, that she precipitated the fall of the race, that she was arraigned before the judgment seat of Heaven, tried, condemned and sentenced. Marriage for her was to be a condition of bondage, maternity a period of suffering and anguish, and in silence and subjection, she was to play the role of a dependent of man's bounty for all her material wants, and for all the information she might desire on the vital questions of the hour, she was commanded to ask her husband at home. ...

These familiar texts are quoted by clergymen in their pulpits, by statesmen in the halls of legislation, by lawyers in the courts, and are echoed by the press of all civilized nations, and accepted by woman herself as "The Word of God." ...

Listening to the varied opinions of women, I have long thought it would be interesting and profitable to get them clearly stated in book form. To this end six years ago I proposed to a committee of women to issue a Woman's Bible, that we might have women's commentaries on women's position in the Old and New Testaments."

The opening commentary in the Woman's Bible focuses on a passage in Genesis Chapter 1, verses 26-28, as follows "And God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness ... So God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them."

Stanton writes:

"Here is the sacred historian's first account of the advent of woman; a simultaneous creation of both sexes, in the image of God. It is evident from the language that there was consultation in the Godhead, and that the masculine and feminine elements were equally represented. Scott in his commentaries says, "this consultation of the Gods is the origin of the doctrine of the trinity." But instead of three male personages, as generally represented, a Heavenly Father, Mother, and Son would seem more rational.

If language has any meaning, we have in these texts a plain declaration of the existence of the feminine element in the Godhead, equal in power and glory with the masculine."

The Woman's Bible's final commentary is on this passage from Revelations, chapter 28, verses 3 through 5: "So he carried me away in the spirit into the wilderness; and I saw a woman sit upon a scarlet colored beast, full of names of blasphemy, having seven

heads and ten horns ... And upon her forehead was a name written "Mystery, Babylon the Great."

And Stanton writes.

"It was the custom at that time for public women to have their names on their foreheads, and as they represented the abominations of social life, they were often named after cities. The writers of the Bible are prone to make woman the standard for all kinds of abominations. ... Why so many different revising committees of bishops and clergymen should have retained this book as holy and inspiring to the ordinary reader is a mystery. ... Very, we need an expurgated edition of the New and Old Testaments before they are fit to be placed in the hands of our youth ... especially if we wish to inspire our children with proper love and respect for the Mothers of the Race."

### Sermon

"O Timothy, keep that which is committed to thy trust, avoiding profane and vain babblings, and oppositions of science falsely so called." (KJV I Tim.6:20)

I most recently heard this passage, from the first letter to Timothy canonized in the Christian scriptures, a week ago last Friday, at the Westside Church in Omaha, at something called the "Back to Genesis Seminar." "The oppositions of science falsely so-called," the 1000 or more of us there were urged to avoid were the oppositions of "evolutionary science" to "creation science" (so-called). And the authority for creation science, of course, was none other than sacred Jewish and Christian scripture itself, the account of creation contained in the book of Genesis, to be specific - both accounts contained there, I suppose, however miraculously reconciled.

Scripture is no authority for science, I think I can say flatly; observation and analysis are its only gauges. My newsletter column this past week voiced my response to creationism's intrusion into our state's science education. This morning however, I want examine the nature of sacred writings and their appropriate role in our culture. How do writings become viewed as sacred? What is their value, for us and for our world, and how would our reading of those scriptures best utilize that value?

In our Anglo-Saxon world, of course, Judeo-Christian scripture, "the Bible," has acquired a symbolic power which transcends any contact with its actual contents. Merely putting our hand on its cover while promising to tell the truth or uphold our constitution is deemed to increase the likelihood that we will keep our vow. This power, of course, comes from the inherited belief that something of God, perhaps the only concrete and understandable evidence of God, is somehow present between those covers - as if God could almost reach out from under them and bite our hand if we spoke hypocritically. We learn this respect as children, by simple observation of our public rites, long before we ever open the book. When we actually do open it, say at 8 or 9 years old, hoping to read the words which will reveal God to us, we're often in for a let-down. Amidst the wonderful stories we remember first hearing by word of mouth, our actual reading first reveals to us that, as an author, God is often boring. I can't tell you how many times I fell asleep over Leviticus or Chronicles in my first attempts to read the Bible cover to cover. A little later, usually, we'll find that the God's purported record of events at times crosses well over the line separating the wondrous from the ridiculous, as Thomas Jefferson did. And then later still, we'll probably find some of what God purportedly wrote to guide us is morally repugnant, as Elizabeth Cady Stanton did. Only if we learn, and then look behind, the process which gave these works their proclaimed ultimate value, only if we learn how these writings came into

existence, indeed only if we recapture the very spirit with which the Bible itself came into being, I will suggest, can we re-find for sacred scripture an appropriately important place in our lives.

"In the beginning" - not of the universe, but of the Bible, I mean - the only of its words regarded as God's were the ten commandments, carried as they were by the Israelites in the ark of the covenant. At their creation, and in most cases, for decades or even centuries thereafter, all the other writings currently collected in the Bible were accepted as very human creations, sometimes original with the author, more often handed down as oral history until finally recorded by a scribe. Furthermore these writings were merely a few of many similar writings in circulation at the time. The earliest material, such as the Song of Deborah now found in the Book of Judges, dates from 1150 BC. The myths and legends found in Genesis date from 1000 to 900 BC. The teachings of the first prophets recorded by their followers - Amos, Hosea, Isaiah - date from around 700 BC. None of the writings were given any special status until long after they first appeared. Indeed for the first 600 years or more of the life of the Israelite nation, from 1200 to 621 BC., aside from the commandments in the ark of the covenant, the only words thought to come from God were spoken, not written. They were the warnings and promises spoken by prophets while in a trance, and even if they were later recorded, no special status was given to those records, since their divine character was evidenced only at the time and in the place and circumstances where they were spoken.

The story of the first time any special attention was paid to a written narrative is recorded in the second book of Kings, Chapter 22 and 23:

In the eighteenth year of King Josiah, (that's 621 BC. the king sent Shaphan the son of Azaliah, son of Meshullam, the secretary, to the house of the Lord, saying, "Go up to Hilkiyah the high priest, that he may reckon the amount of the money which has been brought into the house of the Lord, ..."

And the Hilkiyah the high priest said to Shaphan the secretary, "I have found the book of the law in the house of the Lord." And Hilkiyah gave the book to Shaphan, . . . and Shaphan came to the king, . . . and Shaphan read it before the king.

And when the king heard the word of the book of the law, he rent his clothes. And the king commanded Hilkiyah the priest, . . . saying, "Go, inquire of the Lord for me, and for the people, and for all Judah, concerning the words of this book that has been found; for great is the wrath of the Lord that is kindled against us, because our fathers have not obeyed the words of this book, to do according to all that is written concerning us.

Scholars agree that the book Hilkiyah sent to Josiah found was probably the main portion of the book of Deuteronomy, the supposed final speech of Moses before he dies, which instructs Israel in all the laws it must follow and warns it of all the punishment that will come if they do not obey. As you may know, Deuteronomy repeats much of the material later gathered in Exodus through Numbers, material which dates from around the ninth century BC., though it is written as if spoken by Moses some 300 years before even then. And the conclusions Moses draws in Deuteronomy, the warnings he gives, are very similar to those voiced by Amos, Hosea, and Isaiah, primarily in the eighth century. By the time Josiah got the book, some of what those prophets had been predicted had actually come true: the northern kingdom had fallen, Jerusalem was besieged, and it looked for all the world as though God was punishing his chosen people. Scholars conclude that the book of Deuteronomy was both written and placed in the temple some time during Josiah's reign itself to give the prophetic message one last chance of saving Jerusalem by putting the message into the mouth of Moses. When Josiah accepted and committed the kingdom to following the instructions placed in Moses' mouth, he suddenly introduced a new idea into our culture: God can speak to us out of the past through a written narrative. From that

time forward, the Judeo-Christian culture became a "People of the Book". But the immediate question became: "Which Book?"

If the writer of Deuteronomy had had his or her way, Deuteronomy would have been God's only book. In its fourth chapter Moses says, "And now, O Israel, give heed to the statutes and ordinances which I teach you and only them. You shall not add to the word I command you or take from it." But what of all the other material the culture had collected about Moses, the material that eventually became Exodus, Leviticus, and Numbers? And what of all the earlier prophetic writings that contained the same warnings and promised the same judgments? Did not God speak through those mouths too? Josiah had introduced an idea that was hard to contain.

Indeed, if history had treated the Jewish culture differently, Judeo-Christian sacred scripture might never have been formed into a fixed canon. In the Hindu culture, for example, which never suffered absolute destruction and dispersal as did the Jews, various writings have taken on various degrees of stature simply based on how long they have survived and how widely they are read. We can only presume that this process also operated at first in ancient Israel.

Once the Jewish kingdom was completely overrun, 100 years after Josiah's reign, and the people were spread all over the Middle East, however, the natural process of weeding out and preserving the culture's literature took on a more intentional character. With the destruction of the Jerusalem temple, Judaism lost its heart. To substitute, the institution of the synagogue was developed to keep the cultural tradition alive by teaching the people the literature handed down from the time of the Jewish kingdom. Since the Jewish leaders were most concerned with somehow preserving the culture's integrity despite the dispersion, pressure developed to agree which tradition would be preserved.

And so it was that the writings that survived and were widely read were gradually gathered into a corpus which consensus granted divine authorship. By 400 BC., the Torah, the first five books of the Bible, had been accepted. By 200 BC., the books from Joshua through Kings and the major prophetic books had reached their current form. These compilations are not uniform; they include materials from several traditions often portraying the same events in different ways. Genesis contains two different creation stories. Isaiah's story is told in Kings and also in the book bearing his name. It even has apparent internal contradictions. Goliath, "the shaft of (whose) spear was like a weaver's beam" is killed by David in First Samuel (17:5,50), but by Elahan in Second Samuel (18:19). The reason for these overlapping inclusions in the divine canon was their independent popularity and evocation of the cultural identity. In the same way, writings which came into being during the period from 400 to 200 B.C. were gradually sifted and evaluated through the short-lived revival of the Jewish state under the Maccabees. Some, like the book of Esther, Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Solomon were openly condemned by the rabbis, but remained in circulation because of popular demand. When the Jews were again suppressed by the Romans and the temple was destroyed again in 70 AD, a renewed need to reach agreement on the common tradition resulted in councils around 100 A.D. which fixed the current Hebrew Bible.

The Christian community naturally inherited its willingness to find God speaking in the written word from the Jews. Indeed it based most its claims for Jesus' divinity on the argument that he fulfilled the written prophecies preserved in the Jewish scriptures, even though it often misinterpreted the Jewish prophecy or unwittingly used writings not part of the Jewish canon because it was working with Greek translations. For example, the entire claim that Jesus was born of a "virgin" might have been avoided if the Christians had

known that Isaiah had prophesied that Emmanuel would be born of a "young woman", the correct translation of the Hebrew, not necessarily a "virgin" as it was translated into Greek. And, just as in the Jewish context, when the Christian writings first appeared, they made no pretense of being divinely inspired. Luke says, at the beginning of his gospel, that "many have undertaken to compile a narrative of the things which have been accomplished among us." As a matter of fact, research has uncovered evidence of 23 different gospels in circulation during the first and second centuries and 24 versions of the Acts of the Apostles in addition to the one that Luke wrote. When Paul's letters first began circulating beyond the churches to whom they were addressed, there is no evidence that they held any more sway than those of other apostles or Bishops such as Ignatius. John's Apocalypse is only one of seven known to have been current at the time. As a letter from a believer of the time indicates, no book was deemed as valuable as a personal conversation with one who had actually seen and heard the apostles.

But, just as in the Jewish world, the natural process of sifting and preservation according to popularity was cut artificially short in the Christian community by the sudden need to preserve the community's integrity in the face of persecution. In 303 AD, the Emperor Diocletian began burning all Christian writings and the community had to decide which ones it would most try to preserve, which ones it would make enough hand copies of to insure that some would escape Diocletian's flames. Out of that process developed the rigid canon we have inherited.

With this full story before us now, we can speak clearly about the nature of these sacred writings - indeed about all writings held sacred by the cultures of the world - the Rig Veda, the Dhammapada, the Analects, the Avesta, the Koran? They are the precious anthropological records of our species' longest enduring efforts to make sense of life and find a meaningful place for us in it. The first thing that must be said of the synagogues' and early churches' creation of canons is that they succeeded in their primary task, they preserved for us these records of their souls in much of their variety and complexity. For that we can only be profoundly grateful. They must never be lost, never wholly ignored, never become the baby thrown out with any bath water.

And yet as Professor Kingsbury Badger wrote years ago, "Canons do not belong in liberal religion any more than creeds do." ("Onward by Oxcart" Unitarian Universalist Register-Leader March 1963. p.4) Ralph Waldo Emerson, at a meeting of the Free Religion Association, once heard a young minister exclaim that the words of the gospels could not be matched in the sacred books of any other religious tradition. Emerson responded, "The gentleman's remark only proves how narrowly he has read." "Make Your Own Bible," Emerson urged elsewhere. "Select and collect all the words and sentences that in all your reading have been to you like the blast of triumph." (Divinity School Address, 1837). Thomas Jefferson anticipated his instructions by a full generation. Elizabeth Cady Stanton followed them. Indeed the earliest of Hebrews and Christians were engaged in precisely that same task until their cultural survival required that they sacrifice their collective creativity to save their very identity. We, thank God, need make no such terrible sacrifice. Emerson's instructions are as alive for us now as they were for all those others then.

And how then should we read those words held sacred longest among us? "What do we do when we read that God made woman out of a man's rib? Or that a snake spoke to Eve? Or that Methuselah lived for 969 years? Or that there was once a world flood that drowned all creatures except those on the Ark? ... Or that dead men rose from graves and awoke from the dead? I'll tell you what we do," Charles Stephen said once from this pulpit, "we enjoy it, as we would enjoy a poem or a fairy story or a novel." (The Uses and Misuses of the Bible (1995) p.4)

And yet, "because the Bible is such a magnificent book," ... it is appropriate to resent its mistreatment and to resist those who claim too much for it ... Superstitiously believing that it was so written and so translated that God conveys a special message through its every verse, is to miss its meaning, and to profane its true significance." (Charles Stephen. The Source and Meaning of the Bible (1982) p.4)

Scripture's true significance for each of us is to be what it has always been for all of us. Just as, biologically, ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny, so spiritually, growth and development within each of us must in some way retrace the growth and development of our culture. Yesterday's scripture may well be today's "profane and vain babblings," it cannot be "our final answer," and still it must be the starting place for any significant search.

We can revere the past; with study we can almost understand it; but we cannot live in it, or by it. It is of course wondrously comforting to imagine that the truth of life for all time was somehow revealed and transmitted from its beginning. But the reality is that we live only forward in time, and the present and the future teach their own truth.

Let us read sacred scripture, then, as it speaks to us, always as our starting place, just as Channing himself did, when he preached at our birth. From Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians, Chapter 5, verse 20, he began that sermon reading: "test everything; hold fast to what is good." Even that which has already stood the test of all time lives on only in continuous testing.