

## "That Was Then, This is Now"

### The myth of historical distance and the periodization of Scripture

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One of the major objections that people--especially young people--pose when asked why they do not study the Bible is that they do not believe that a document whose subject matter and writers are thousands of years old could have any true relevance to today's culture. Usually such objections have two foundations: first, the belief that human intelligence has "evolved" or grown over the centuries; and second, the belief that the greater the passage of time between an event and a reader, the less the relevance to the modern reader.

#### HUMAN INTELLIGENCE

The first objection, that of ever-increasing human intelligence, is one that involves two basic errors. Let's look at the first. Many people today operate on the assumption that since our technology--especially that which involves the operation of a computer--is something that the "average" person cannot understand and thus we should conclude that our technology shows we as a race are becoming more and more intelligent. The specialization of multiple branches of science, medicine, and many other disciplines does indeed reflect the operation of human intelligence in these areas. We might look back at the early cultures of the earth and conclude that since they did not have the high level of technology that we have--instant global communication, space travel, other feats--that we might label their intelligence in accordance with their technological accomplishments as being "primitive."

However, it must be noted, as one sage has put it, we "stand on the shoulders of giants." The rapid acceleration of technological advances is exponential in nature: the greater the base of knowledge, the *easier* it actually becomes to build upon it.

What we would call "primitive" cultures, in contrast, were the ones who formulated ideas which computers "automatically" operate upon, observations which underlie all scientific work today. Let's look, for instance, at the field of astronomy. How many years of observation led to the conclusions that the stars take the same positions in the night sky at the same time each year? How exact, for instance, would this observation have to be in order for temples in ancient Egypt to have statues hidden deep in recessed rooms with only one light source--a ray of light at an equinox? Furthermore, many of the "primitive"

accomplishments of such cultures still at the end of the twentieth century AD evade our understanding--how were the pyramids built, for instance?

However, an examination of the role of human intelligence itself does not solve this dilemma from a Biblical point of view. One would have to conclude that if human intelligence were indeed increasing, it would lead to both moral and ethical advances as well. It is untenable to believe that mankind in any way is getting better--just more adept at carrying out our own selfish desires. We use what we know for "the perfection of means"--using whatever means we have at our disposal and carrying their potential out to the point of completeness. If we have the means to work with genetic material, many people have concluded that we should perfect those means by cloning. If we have the ability to create energy from atoms, we must be authorized to use that energy for whatever purpose we can visualize.

The problem has a deeper foundation--the erroneous assumption that human intelligence alone is capable of making assessments about what is inherently good. Though our culture has enthroned human intelligence and creativity as gods, the Creator of all things--including the intelligence of man--would not take such a challenge to His position lightly.

## HISTORICAL DISTANCE

The second objection that people have to reading the Bible as a document relevant to their contemporary lives has to do with the perception that such relevance decreases with the passage of time from the events and writers of Scripture to the present day.

A review of the concepts of facts and representations can shed some light on this situation. As discussed in detail in "Basics of Representational Thinking," we can see that the facts of our existence are only accessible through representations. Only in the present moment of experience--as brief as the Biblical "twinkling of an eye"--do we actually access the facts of our existence, and that, as always, through representations. Once an experience passes from our momentary view, it is available for us, again, only through representations.

Man was not ever intended to, nor created with the capacity for, evaluating his own experiences. From childhood where "folly is bound up in the heart of a child" to adulthood where "there is none that understands" (Romans 3:11), we are inherently ruled by our own desires and sinful nature. Thus we actually create, through representations, our own pasts to suit our own nature.

Only by accessing the superior intelligence of the Being who stands outside time and all circumstance can we correctly assess our own experiences. Once they pass out of the "present" into the "past" they exist only as representations.

The same was true of every person of whom we read in the Bible. When David woke up the morning after his encounter with Goliath, for instance, the previous day existed only as a representation. And what might he have remembered about that day? Perhaps the glint of the sun as it shone in his eyes. Maybe the roughness of the sound of Goliath's voice. Perhaps the chafing of his sandals on his ankles after the long journey to the Valley of Elah to bring provisions to his brethren. David would have had a very extensive inventory of symbols--sights, smells, sounds, feelings--about that experience. However, the Holy Spirit of God, in moving upon the mind of the anonymous writer who recorded those events, chose just those details that were most important for the building of faith of generations to follow. David's memories of that day would fade, change, and adapt to his own mind as he lived out the years that would follow. But the record of that day, written by the Holy Spirit, would be more accurate than the memories of the central participant, David himself.

The same is true of those disciples who walked away from the Last Supper with Jesus. As they wiped the crumbs from their lips, the taste of the wine still in their mouths, the memories they carried of the sights, sounds, feelings of that night became subservient to the completely accurate selected details chosen by the Holy Spirit to convey through Matthew, Mark, John, and the others who conveyed information about that night to Luke and Paul.

Those men who actually experienced the event, therefore, had a less accurate view of what transpired that night than did the Holy Spirit. For them to understand the meaning of it, they would have to see what the Holy Spirit saw, not just what they experienced or remembered. The only way that they could accurately "remember" that night was through the representations of the Holy Spirit.

In other words, they could no more "get into" the past they had experienced than we can "get into" our recent past. Such things are only accessible through representations, and if we want accuracy, we must see things as the Holy Spirit chooses to represent them. If a disciple wanted to accurately "remember" that night, he would do it through the Holy Spirit's representations--which might include details unavailable to each disciple who was actually there (for instance, only the Holy Spirit knew why Judas left--John 13:28-29.)

Thus it can be accurately stated that someone looking at the Gospel of John in AD 1999, or a reader in AD 1500, or the apostle Peter himself as he walked across the Kidron Brook with Jesus to the garden where He would be betrayed--would be equidistant from the events of the Last Supper. The events of that night became representations--and the only accurate ones were those of the Holy Spirit.

In a very real way, we are asked to appropriate the Biblical past as if it were our own. The ancient Israelites did this through looking at events of the Biblical past as if they had actually lived through them. In Deuteronomy 6:20-21, fathers were instructed to tell their children "We were slaves in Egypt" even though the men and women who had actually passed through the Red Sea were all dead and buried in the desert. Even to this day, when Jews participate in Passover celebrations, the father of a family will solemnly tell his children, "I was a slave in Egypt. ...." because he chooses to see the past of three thousand years ago as if it just happened to him.

Anything that happened in the Bible is accessible to each of us, therefore, in precisely the same way the events of yesterday are accessible to each of us: through representations: the Biblical ones just as near, just as relevant, and infinitely more helpful to our souls.