

## Inspiration and Incarnation

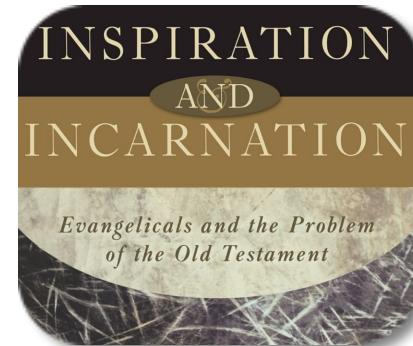
---

Evangelicals and the problem of the O.T. (a summary by Pat Evert)

I believe with all my heart that honesty with oneself is a central component to spiritual growth. Being part of God's family is ultimately a gift to us, not something we need to obtain.

**1 - Getting our bearings.** The Bible is ultimately from God and it is God's gift to the church. When new evidence comes to light we need to be willing to adjust our doctrine accordingly. I want to allow the evidence to affect the way we think about scripture as a whole.

- 1) The Bible's uniqueness; why does it fit so nicely in the ancient world?
- 2) The Bible's integrity; why does the Old Testament say different things about the same thing?
- 3) The Bible's interpretation; why do the New Testament authors handle the Old Testament in such odd ways, almost out of context.



The starting point for our discussion is that **Christ is both God and human, so is the Bible.** How does Scripture's full humanity and full divinity affect what we should expect from Scripture? The human dimension of Scripture can make the Bible seem less unique, less Bible-like than we had supposed. God uses human languages as inadequate as they are, to communicate Himself to us. The Bible is connected to its own world as a necessary consequence of God incarnating Himself. The Bible is not unique to its environment. The human nature of Scripture is a gift, rather than a problem.

**2 - The Old Testament and ancient near Eastern literature.** The Genesis story is firmly rooted in the worldview of its time. Christians recoil at any suggestion of the Genesis story as being similar to that of mythologies of the ancient world. Is it not likely that God would have allowed His word to come to the ancient Israelites in a way they understood? What the Bible is, must be understood in the cultural context in which it was given. The Bible seems to be relativized, it appears to be just another text from another ancient people, this one called Israel. The Bible, being the word of God, ought to be accurate in all of the details, for God cannot lie or make errors, and unique in its own setting since it is God's revealed word. The Spirit leads us into truth, He does not simply drop us into the middle of it. Why cannot God use the category we call "myth" to speak to the ancient Israelites? After all, the culture of ancient Israel was oral rather than written. Are we motivated to protect our theology rather than to engage the available

evidence? God entered into a relationship with Abraham, He met him where he was. The difference in Genesis is that the God of Abraham was distinct from the gods of the surrounding people. God transformed the ancient myths so that Israel would focus on their God. Their context was not a modern scientific one but that of myths. It is a fundamental misunderstanding of Genesis to expect it to answer questions generated by a modern worldview. But the book is prepared to answer questions like, "is Jehovah, the God of Israel, worthy to be worshiped?"

What it means for God to speak in a certain time and place is that God meets people where they are. He speaks and acts in ways that make sense to them. What makes this real and revelatory is not that they are new but, if obeyed they would reform us into a godlike community. Israel's uniqueness is seen in: 1) that Yahweh is their only God and 2) they are not to have any idols. This is the message to the nations, this is the law of our God who delivered us from Egypt, and the wisdom of our God who created the heavens and the earth, we worship Him. The reason the nation Israel went into exile was that it's kings persisted in practicing idolatry. The reporting of historical events - historiography - always involves the shaping of history for particular purposes. All this is to say that **the central function of the Old Testament may not be there to tell us what to do, it may be part of a larger story that God brings to an end many hundreds of years later in Christ, and the story which ends with the incarnation of God's Son**, had an incarnational, dimension from the start. Each generation, by the power of God's Spirit, has to make the gospel message its own by wrestling with how the gospel connects with the world in which that generation is living.

**3 - The Old Testament and theological diversity.** What does such diversity tell us about what the Bible is and who God is? - a God who has given us Scriptures that look like this. The reader is expected to invest energy in discerning whether a certain proverb is relevant for a certain situation. There is more to wisdom than simply reading a proverb. One must also have the wisdom to read the situation, to know whether a proverb is fitting. The question is not whether the proverb is correct, but when it is correct. In this fallen world, the Preacher observes that the wise life is not always rewarded as it should be. The friends of Job fell into the trap thinking that the Bible - and by implication God himself - is one dimensional, disconnected from the complexities of human existence.

The books of Samuel through Kings explain the exile to an exilic audience. The Chronicles speaks to those who have returned from exile. The burning question was not, "what did we do to get kicked out of the land?" But, "now that we are back, what do we do? Are we still God's people? Will He have us back?" **There is in the Bible a built-in dynamic quality that invites readers to consider the situation into which the Bible is being applied.** At times, when circumstances are right, even the divine command to sacrifice was set aside in favor of other weightier matters that required attention. Paul does what he does because the situation calls for it. Paul has Timothy circumcised not in order to save him, but that there would be no unnecessary obstacle for the Jews to be saved.

There is no image by which God is to be worshiped other than the image which He Himself fashioned - His own incarnation. In various places in the Old Testament, God acts more as a character in the story. He acts more humanlike than Godlike. After Abraham passes the test God says, "Now I know." In Genesis 6, God becomes aware of man's wickedness and reacts to it. In Exodus 32, God is ready to destroy the Israelites for idolatry, but Moses changes God's mind. Are God and His actions dependent upon our behavior? Doesn't the Bible give us an accurate presentation of what God is really like? There are diverse portrayals of God in the Old Testament. He finds things out, He feels grieved about events, He changes His mind. Should we set aside part of God's word in an effort to defend Him? This is itself a self-contradiction. All Scripture is profitable - even parts that don't fit easily into our molds. We must ask why God would do it this way. Why does God's word look the way it does? He said it the way he meant it to be. It will always be bigger than we can comprehend. **How fully God participates in history, that he incarnates Himself throughout Israel's history.** For God to reveal Himself means that he accommodates Himself. To be understood, He condescends to the conventions and conditions of those to whom He is revealing Himself. This shows us a God who goes very low to know His people and to make Himself known. Not only is the Bible the word of God, but Christ Himself is the word. The Bible is God's word in written form; Christ is God's word in human form. It is in Him, the embodied Word, that the written word finds its unity. Christ is the final destiny of Israel's story and it is to him that the Scriptures as a whole bear witness. Christ is the ultimate example of how God enters the messiness of history to save His people. The diversity of Scripture bears witness to God's revelation rather than detracts from it.

**4 - The Old Testament and it's interpretation in the New Testament.** To put it simply, the New Testament writers were explaining what the Old Testament means in light of Christ's coming. In Luke 24 in order for them to understand the Scriptures it was necessary for Jesus to open their minds. He is saying that all the Scriptures speak of Him in the sense that He is the climax of Israel's story. Much has happened historically including the passing of political control, first from the Babylonians to the Persians, the Greeks (Alexander the great), and the Romans. The Apocrypha which means "hidden things," a name that contains the books therein were not included in the Jewish canon. In Isaiah 49:8, the redemptive work of God, which for Isaiah was focused on one people rescued from a foreign country at one moment in history, is seen by Paul as being "super-fulfilled," in God's final, once for all, redemptive act for all of humanity.

In Genesis 12,13 and 24 "the seed" or offspring is plural. But Paul, in good second temple fashion, uses it to make a profound point about Christ and His people. Christ alone is truly Abraham's seed, the one who embodies Israel's ideal. The church is Abraham's seed (collectively), but only in so far as we "belong to Christ," the seed (singular). The church is Abraham's offspring, but only because Christ was Abraham's seed first. He began with his conviction that God is the focus of the New Testament and then read Old Testament seed theology in light of that, God's redemption of Israel from sin (Paul).

For Hebrews, the 40 year period is not defined by wrath, as in Psalm 95, but by God's activity, His works. Anger is what follows this 40 year period, if his readers do not rid themselves of a "sinful unbelieving heart" (Hebrews 3:12). The author knew exactly what he was doing, and not the slightest bit of suspicion is raised on the part of his readers. The New Testament authors do some odd things, by our standards, with the Old Testament, but these things can be explained by taking note of the interpretive context in which the New Testament writers lived. They took the Old Testament out of one context, that of the original human author, and placed in another context, the one that represents the final goal to which Israel's story has been moving. The term I prefer to use to describe this eschatological hermeneutic is Christotelic, **needing to see Christ in every, or nearly every Old Testament passage**. What constitutes a Christian reading of the Old Testament is that it proceeds to the second reading, the eschatological Christotelic reading - and this is precisely what the apostles model for us. It is to ask oneself, "what difference does the death and resurrection of Christ make for how I understand this part of the Old Testament?" **Our anchor is not what the Old Testament author intended, but how Christ gives the Old Testament its final coherence**. The coming of Christ is so climactic that it required the New Testament writers to look at the Old Testament in a whole new light. They were so consumed by Christ that their understanding of God's past actions were brought under the authority of God's present act, the climax of His covenant with Israel, the person and work of Christ. And so their minds were illumined to see what was largely hidden to the human authors of the Old Testament, but was always the goal and intention of the divine author. Revelation necessarily implies a human context. When God speaks and acts, He does so within the human drama as it is expressed at a certain time and place and with all the cultural trappings that go along with it. The Old Testament is open to multiple layers of meaning. I would expect multiple layers of meaning in so far as no one person, school, or tradition can exhaust the depths of God's word. Biblical interpretation is a true community activity. We rely on the witness of the church through time (with the hermeneutical trajectory set by the apostles as a central component), as well as the wisdom of the church in our time - all of which is the direct involvement of the Spirit of God. Biblical interpretation is like a pilgrimage, the longer we walk and the more people we conversed with along the way, the richer our interpretation will be. The end of the path is not simply the gaining of knowledge about the text, but of God himself who speaks to us therein.

**5 The big picture.** The uniqueness of the Bible is seen not in holding cultures at arm's length, but in the belief that Scripture is the only book in which God speaks incarnately. As it is with Christ, so it is with the Bible - the coming together of the divine and human sets it apart from all others. God's gospel is one, but multi-dimensional. Christ is the goal of the Old Testament story, meaning that He is the ultimate focus of Christian interpretation. The primary purpose of Scripture is for the Church to eat and drink its contents to better understand who God is, what He has done and what it means to be His people, redeemed in the crucified and risen Son. The problem is that Christians erect a wall of hostility between them, and churches, schools

and denominations split. We need:

- *humility* on the part of scholars to be sensitive on how others will hear them and on the part of those whose preconceptions are being challenged.
- *love* that assumes the best of brothers and sisters in Christ, and does not look for differences of opinion to go on the attack.
- *patience* to know that no person or tradition is beyond correction and therefore no one should jump to conclusions about another's motives.