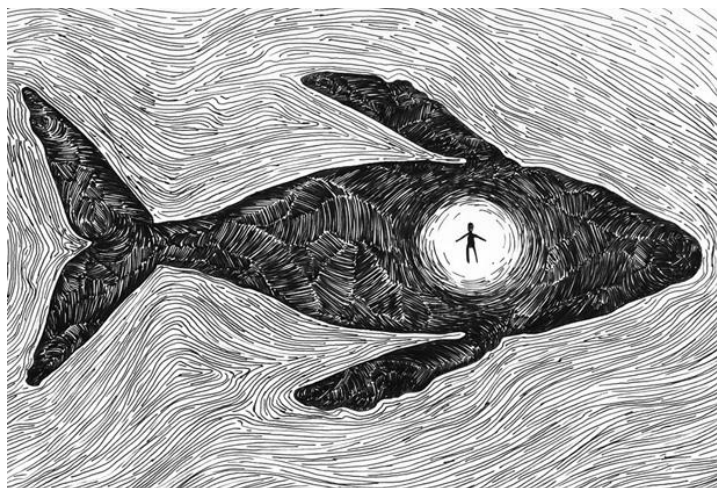


# The Bible

## *A Whale of A Tale*



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*Ad Maiorem Dei Gloriam*

*This paper conveys a conversation between Father Al, Pastor of St. Ambrose Church of CACINA and one of his parishioners who was disturbed by recent statements made by priests that the story of Jonah and the stories told in Genesis about creation were essentially myths. How could the Bible, authored by God “be a ‘myth’ when it is God’s Word?”*

Hi Jack, it's good to see you again. I appreciate your being open to meeting with me to discuss your concerns about Mother Elizabeth's sermon last week.

"Thank you, Father. Yeah I was pretty upset when I heard Mother say that a lot of the Bible stories I was raised with were, in her words, myths. Like they were made up fairytales or something. Is she right?"

Well Jack, I'm afraid she is, although "myths" may be too strong a word for a lot of the scriptures. I like the word "stories" since a lot of what the Bible says is trying to tell just that, a story. I am also pretty sure she didn't mean everything in the Bible is a myth. But let's start with the basics. First of all, the Bible is not a book. It's a library of books. Here is a trick question. How many books make up the "Old Testament?"

"I don't know I'd say about 35 or so, maybe more" said Jack.

The answer is it depends on whom you are asking. For Jews who call the Old Testament - the Tanakh - which stands for the *Torah* or the Five Books of Moses, The *Nevi'im* or The Writings, and the *Ketuvim* or the Prophets - there are 24 books. For Protestants there are 39, Catholics 46 and Orthodox Christians 51. So, what is and what is not 'the Bible' is determined not so much by God Himself, but by rabbis, priests, popes, kings, etc. who have determined what is in, and what is out, for whatever their theological and political reasons were.

Regardless of how many books you have in your Bible, each one of them has an author (or several authors), who has a style of writing, a time and place when it was written, an intended audience, and a message that its author wanted to convey to that audience, etc. Some of the books are stories about how and why the world began, or about how God's people were established; some are stories of great heroes and leaders both real and legendary; some are books of rules; some are prophecies - which themselves require a whole other set of explanations; some are poems and songs and even love letters; some are mystical visionary texts, and so on.

There are many Christians who are from a tradition where the Bible must be taken literally and where every word is considered an exact revelation from God Himself. They are called Evangelicals or Fundamentalist. It sounds like you may be from such a tradition.

"Yes, I was raised Southern Baptist but converted to Catholicism in order to marry Marge. And you are right, that was how my folks taught us - how they still are to this day. Dad often said, '*It's in the Bible, God said it, I believe it, that settles it!*' He was tough as nails. Things were right or wrong - black or white - Bible true or not."

Well he is in good company. About 25% of Americans claim to be from that Fundamentalist tradition. But most Christians, including us here at CACINA - take a deeper view of Scripture. We take very few texts literally, word for word, and there are many reasons for this. For one, the Bible often contradicts itself. Look at the New Testament for example. Each Gospel relates the story of the Crucifixion, right? In

Mark, Matthew, Luke and John, Jesus is crucified between two thieves. In Mark and Matthew however the texts say: "Both thieves mocked him." Yet in Luke's Gospel we read that one thief mocks him while the other thief rebukes the first, and asks Jesus to remember him when He enters His kingdom...what we have come to know as the "Story of the Good Thief." Well somebody must be wrong? Either both thieves mocked Jesus or only one did. So just like God can't make a square circle, he can't make contradictory statements true at the same time. There are a ton of such contradictions in the Bible. Taking the Bible literally makes little sense for most Christians. Instead we rely on scholarship to help us find the deeper meaning to what the various passages are saying to us.

Jack said, "I remember that classic movie – what was it called? *Inherit the Wind* – about the Scopes monkey trial. My Dad got real angry at the TV and started yelling 'Ain't nobody gonna convince me the Bible ain't the revealed unshakable Word of God!!' But I remember thinking Clarence Darrow made a good point. So, what you are saying Father Al, is that the Bible's truth may be below the surface of the words in the story."

You got it Jack! God is like that you know. The true and deeper and more significant message from God is often veiled or hidden and we must dig it out. Do you remember the story of Moses when he ascended Sinai to receive the Commandments and he begs God to let him see God's glory? And God says:

*"I Myself will make all My goodness pass before you, and will proclaim the name of the LORD before you; and I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show compassion on whom I will show compassion." But God said, "You cannot see My face, for no man can see Me and live!"... Then the LORD said, "Behold, there is a place by Me, and you shall stand there on the rock; and it will come about, while My glory is passing by, that I will put you in the cleft of the rock and cover you with My hand until I have passed by. Then I will take My hand away and you shall see My back, but My face shall not be seen."*

God reveals only so much and leaves the rest for us to uncover through our life lessons, through encounters with His creation and through prayer. So too the Bible requires study and thought and prayerful reflection for it to speak to us.

Today, in addition to having input from serious sciences such as archeology, anthropology, astronomy, physics, biology, chemistry, linguistics and so on, we are also lucky to have developed many tools that are specific to ancient literary studies and in this case, the Bible. Collectively, they define a field called "Hermeneutics" also known as "Biblical exegesis" – that attempts to draw out and find that deeper meaning. People get Doctorates in this stuff! Are you still with me Jack?

"You are making some sense, Father. I always thought Dad's literal interpretation was kind of silly. I mean who actually believes that the universe was created in seven days?"

You bring up another good point Jack. One of the big issues with fundamentalism is that it comes to many conclusions that cannot be verified by either serious research from fields like archeology, or that contradict objective history and science. For example, although according to the Bible, God kicked

Egypt's butt before Pharaoh finally agreed to let the Israelite people go - remember the plagues and the killing of all the first born in the land, and the loss of Pharaoh's entire army when the sea collapses on them, etc. Well there is zero archeological evidence that any of that happened....in of all places Egypt, where they kept meticulous records of just about everything. Did you know there is no non-Biblical record of there ever having been a King David? Or a Moses? Or an Abraham? Let alone a Garden of Eden? or Noah's Ark? or a Tower of Bable? ...

And as for coming up against science, in the 1600's, the Church persecuted Galileo as a heretic because his claim that the earth revolved around the sun, denied Biblical teaching that the Earth was the center of the universe. They quoted a bunch of biblical verses as their proof - Psalms 93:1, 96:10 and 104:5, Ecclesiastes 1:5, and 1 Chronicles 16:30. Yet name me a church leader today that would claim the earth is the center of the universe! Name me even a fundamentalist preacher who would! Would even your Dad? Of course not! So how can something that was once believed as Biblical revealed truth for thousands of years, now not be true? Either science is wrong, or the Bible is. And in this case, it's NOT science.

"Yep I see where you are going Father. So, can you tell me about some of these techniques?"

Sure Jack! There are quite a few but let me review some main ones with you:

**Form Criticism** seeks to find literary patterns in the text to determine its original form, context, tradition and its sociological setting. Its developer Dr. Rudolf Bultmann, called this finding the text's *sitz im leben* or its real-life situation. For example, if I said: 'Saint Theresa beat Saint Ignatius today in over time,' you might think a beefy Carmelite nun beat that crap out of some Jesuit priest in what was a long struggle! But if you knew the "form" in which that text sat – its *sitz im leben* - was a sports page, you'd know that the text was referring to the results of a game. Here's another example, if I said John is gay in 1900 people would understand he was happy and carefree. If I said the exact same sentence in 2000, we'd understand he was a homosexual, right? If a word can change so drastically in 100 years due to its life situation, its *sitz im leben*, imagine how the meaning of words used in the Bible might change over thousands of years? We need to understand how texts and words were understood by those who first heard them if we want to know their true meaning.

**Etymology** is related to Form Criticism. It seeks to find the underlying meaning of words by tracing back its roots and then seeing how the meanings of words evolve over time. For example, one of the names for the devil is Beelzebub. Its root is from the Hebrew meaning "lord of flies"! But it is intended as a mocking alteration of *Ba'al Zevul* – or "Ba'al the exalted", one of the Canaanite names for their god BA-AL. Therefore, understanding where words come from can tell you a lot about what the author is meaning.

**Redaction History** is a kind of Form Criticism that focuses on how the authors of a text (the redactor(s)) have shaped and molded the narrative to express their theological goals. For example, in St. Mark's Gospel there are many hints that he is writing to non-Jewish Christians in Rome. For example, he makes no attempt to define long genealogies to legitimize Jesus as a member of David's royal lineage. Romans and other Gentiles wouldn't care about that. Also, it's the demons, those who are healed and the

Gentile characters who all recognize who Jesus is. But the Jews, the Chosen People, don't see who He is. Mark's theological message: the Kingdom of God is not exclusive to Jews. You Romans and all people are called to discipleship in Christ.

**Demythologization** is an attempt to minimize the myth and find the original kernel of truth in a text. "Myth" here does not mean that the text is a total fairytale, but it seeks to find what may have been the agenda of the author of the text. For example, were the sacred authors of Genesis really interested in describing the exact details about "how" the universe came about, or just the theological point that it was created miraculously by God?

**Type Scenes** are literary conventions that are repeated over and over in literature to set up a situation. An example is a quest. Very often authors place the hero of their story on a journey wherein he finds his destiny. Abraham, Moses, most of the Apostles and even Jesus all go on quests.

**Literature comparisons** happen when an author borrows heavily from other known literary stories from their environment either to show similarities with that preexisting tradition or to contrast the author's story from the pre-existing tradition. The Genesis stories are our sacred authors' attempts to contrast Israel's concept of how and why Israel's God created the universe with the creation myths of the neighboring Babylonian and Canaanite gods and other stories that were prevalent throughout the ancient Near East. Our Genesis authors – or better yet, our "redactors" - knew well the *Enumah Elish* story of Babylon's gods Marduk and Tiamat. Our authors want to show how the transcendent the God of Israel acts in comparison to them.

And there are other tools to use and devices to look out for. Things like the use of irony, humor, mockery, etc. Jack, when we put it to practical use, the process of discerning deep scriptural meaning looks something like this:

- ✓ First, we establish the context of the passage within the specific biblical book and the literary form of the book itself.
- ✓ Then we establish the historical setting or context for the text.
- ✓ Next, we analyze the content of the text and apply whatever critical methods that are useful.
- ✓ Finally, we are ready to look for the theological lesson and meaning for us as readers in today's world. Prayer is a great assist at this step.

With this as a basis, let's take a deeper look into the Book of Jonah, which is how our discussion started.

"Honestly Father all I knew about Jonah was that he got swallowed up by a whale. But after Mother spoke I went home and read the Book of Jonah for the first time. I gotta tell you it's pretty weird. So, as you were talking I started to think: What is the real point of that story. Maybe the whale is just a symbol or something. I guess that was what Mother Elizabeth was trying to say."

Indeed, she was. Let me ask you, when you hear the term "prophet" what comes to mind?

“Well somebody who can tell the future! But I know from Sunday School, Father that the Bible prophets are not fortune-tellers. They are leaders who answer God’s call to go to the people, or the king, or the temple priests and remind them of their covenant with God. Guys like Samuel, Jeremiah and Isaiah...”

Good! Now do you notice anything different about our boy Jonah? He doesn’t answer the call – he runs in the opposite direction from it - even to the point of getting into a boat to get as far away from God’s mission as he can. And despite how disobedient he is, and how rebellious he is, God will have none of it. Even though he is cast overboard in the storm, God has him swallowed by a great fish, in whose belly he languishes for 3 days. Jonah refers to the fish’s belly as “the nether world” so even Jonah is telling us that the fish is a symbol of being cast into hell, a place of desolation where one ponders and is faced with the chance of conversion. And that is exactly what Jonah does, he repents and asks God to deliver him. So, the fish vomits him out, returning him to his starting point. Can you see the lesson here Jack?

“It’s kind of as we discussed about original sin! God is always there in the background. He never gives up on us – even if he has to pick us up by the backs of our necks and put us back on track!”

You got it! By the way Jonah means “dove” in Hebrew – hardly a name for a firebrand Old testament prophet. And sure enough he is anything but dove-like. He is stubborn and depressing and obstinate. So, there is some of that irony or humor coming through when the sacred author names him “Dove”. When the “Dove” finally obeys God and goes to Nineveh, the capital of Israel’s arch enemy, to deliver God’s threat that they repent or be destroyed. He only uses 5 Hebrew words that translate to English as: “*Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!*” And BAM!... the Ninevites listen to his message and repent immediately! He doesn’t even have to work at it! All, from king to lowliest subject even the animals humble themselves and repent. Hmm! So, pagans respond to God’s call better than Israel does? I wonder if that might be one of the lessons here? Anyway, seeing their repentance, God changes His mind and opts to show His mercy and does not carry out the punishment He had planned for them

At this, Jonah gets VERY angry. He complains and starts to sulk. He is angry because the Lord spares them. How can God forgive Assyrians, Israel’s sworn enemies? Any thoughts on the deeper lesson here?

“You mean that ours is a God of forgiveness?” says Jack.

Yes – TRUE – but go even deeper Jack. God shows mercy to our enemies, right? Why then does Jonah sulk and get angry at God? What is the sacred writer asking? What is God asking? Perhaps it is ‘How do you feel when God opts to forgive and even bless your enemies’? Do you celebrate, and are you happy for them? Or do you sulk? Do you get envious? Do you think they don’t deserve God’s mercy? God is asking “Jack, are you OK if I bless those you don’t like? That don’t like you?”

“I got it. It’s the same lesson Jesus teaches when the owner of the vineyard pays the latecomers the same wages as those who have toiled all day in the hot sun! Why do we think God’s mercy and generosity is limited by our measly, flawed, selfish way of looking at things? As Jesus said, the same loving God makes the sun to shine and the rain to fall on the just and unjust alike. He is ALWAYS there!”

Now you can see the deeper meaning of this book, Jack. And it has nothing to do with a big fish! It is a lesson in the profound love of God, and how we humans should appreciate it for the boundless generosity that it is. It is that very boundlessness that gives us confidence that we can always rely on it. Because if he can forgive despicable people like Jonah’s Ninevites, he will forgive anything we do.

“So, Jonah IS a myth - a fictitious story – you might say “A Whale of a Tale!” as Jack laughs a deep belly laugh! ...a myth with some big symbols but that is really meant to teach a deep lesson of God’s mercy!”

Yes, Jack it sure is. Hey, it’s Friday in Advent. How about some Fish & Chips for lunch? I’ll buy!