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Answering Your Question: The Bible and Traditional Beliefs

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Answering Your Question: The Bible and Traditional Beliefs

Abstract

"Christians must acknowledge that our readings of Scripture are subject to criteria for determining their validity."

Posting about Biblical interpretation from *In All Things* - an online hub committed to the claim that the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ has implications for the entire world.

<http://inallthings.org/answering-your-question-the-bible-and-traditional-beliefs/>

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Comments

In All Things is a publication of the [Andreas Center for Reformed Scholarship and Service at Dordt College](#).

Answering Your Question: the Bible and traditional beliefs

 inallthings.org/answering-your-question-the-bible-and-traditional-beliefs/

Benjamin Lappenga

Christians often talk about the need to avoid reductionism, especially scientific naturalism. But what about the opposite extreme—isn't it dangerous also to focus too little on science, and let ourselves be shaped too much by superstition or 'traditional' beliefs? Isn't this why many Christians today still think that the Bible teaches that the black race was cursed by Noah, or any other number of traditional beliefs that get passed down generation to generation as 'Biblical' even though they aren't? Yonatan

To respond to this important question, it will be helpful to clarify a few terms. By “reductionism,” the questioner seems to mean (for example) the tendency to shove God out of the picture by seeking answers solely through scientific method, which admits only empirical evidence. For some, this gives rise to an opposite problem: answers are sought with little attention to validation or scrutiny. As the questioner phrases it, some Christians “focus too little on science,” and thereby seek answers from sources that are unsuited for the questions asked of them.

These extremes are related to the notion of a “God of the gaps,” where belief in God is maintained because there are things we cannot explain otherwise. The problem, of course, is that as our knowledge inevitably grows, God shrinks. Dietrich Bonhoeffer offers a corrective: “We are to find God in what we know, not in what we don't know.”¹ There is a lot of truth in this—Christians should marvel no less at the things we learn from observation and study than at the things of God that speak to us on other levels of knowing.

So far, so good, but the questioner raises the more particular problems relating to Biblical interpretation. Although Christians of all stripes look to multiple sources to formulate and defend their beliefs, most (rightly) view the Bible as privileged and primary. As we know from experience and from reflection on interpretation (hermeneutics), it isn't possible to do and believe “what the Bible literally says.” Texts simply do not work this way, and there is always something we bring (assumptions, beliefs, expectations, etc.) that influences meaning. However, it is important here to distinguish between what the questioner calls “traditional beliefs” (superstitions) and Tradition in the sense of the things Christians of all times and places have affirmed (the “rule of faith,” roughly summarized in the Apostle's Creed). The latter, since the earliest decades of the church and even before the finalization of the canon, has centered our readings of Scripture within the story of God's creative and redemptive work. The former, by contrast, are (mis)readings of Scripture that get perpetuated for any number of reasons: convenience, political expediency, ignorance, manipulation by others, etc.

The following is by no means exhaustive, but allow me to put forth three proposals that might serve as a corrective to the kinds of problematic beliefs described above:

1. Christians must acknowledge that our readings of Scripture are subject to criteria for determining their validity.

These criteria include not only the scrutiny of the rest of the canon and the “rule of faith,” but also attention to the embeddedness of language within a specific set of socio-historical assumptions. So, for example, since the “curse of Ham” (on a linguistic, theological, or any other level) never implied anything to do with “blackness” until the development of folk etymology in the early medieval period, this interpretation and its dreadful implications have no place in Christian thinking or practice.²

2. *Christians should celebrate creation as the “theater of God’s glory,” and therefore pursue scientific discovery with a posture of awe and expectation rather than fear.*

The conversations around “faith and science” have been happening for a [long time](#), but for many Christians the topic remains fraught with suspicion and fear. One part of the solution is to embody the words of Scripture itself, which are ripe with a posture of trust and wonder (e.g., Psalm 8 [NRSV]: “When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you have established...O Lord, our Sovereign, how majestic is your name in all the earth!”).

3. *Christians should remember that our beliefs are only genuine if our lives are carried out within the community of God’s people and are marked by the transformative power of the Spirit.*

If our beliefs result in retreat from the world, hatred toward human beings, neglect of the marginalized, or the desecration of the earth, something has gone awry, no matter how long a tradition has been around or how sound our exegesis seems to be. “By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another” (John 13:35 NRSV; cf. Gal 3:5).

Footnotes

1. *Letters and Papers from Prison* (New York: Macmillan, 1972), 312. [↩](#)
2. Read more on the “curse of Ham” in a *New York Times* article called [“From Noah’s Curse to Slavery’s Rationale.”](#) [↩](#)