



James C. Peterson

Listening Together

With the title *Perspectives on Science and Christian Faith*, this academic journal takes into account that, from the beginning, churches have carried forward the Hebrew scriptures (the Old Testament), and added texts that were connected to the apostles and that were recognized by all the churches as anointed by God for instruction and reproof.¹ These additional writings were eventually bound together as the New Testament. The texts embody the interest and language of their human authors, and tradition says that, by God's grace, they are trustworthy in all that they affirm. Some Christians describe this scripture with the specific term "inerrant," being without error. The guarantee of being without error has been described as important so that the reader does not have to pick and choose what is true. All that they teach is true.

The most widely cited statement of inerrancy was drafted in October of 1978 and is called "The Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy." The writers of the declaration wanted to be quite clear that what they saw in the Bible as without error, is what the Bible affirms—not what first comes to mind to someone reading it in Chicago two thousand years later. There are things that a modern reader might expect the text to mean that are not what the text is actually saying.

One might read that God sends his rain on the just and the unjust,² and think that the text is teaching that God afflicts the just and the unjust. "Don't rain on my parade," is an old American saying. Anticipated baseball games can be rained out. So the plain, straightforward meaning of rain is a downer, right? Actually, since this was written to people in something of a desert, where they desperately needed the infrequent rain, rain would be perceived as a great blessing: water from the sky, free to drink and to raise food! What that particular text is teaching is that God generously blesses the just and the unjust too. What is without error, true, trustworthy, and so, authoritative, is what the text means, not what any one particular reader reads into it.

People often confuse the authority of scripture with the authority of how they in particular read it. Inerrant scripture does not guarantee that readers are always inerrant. One person's plain meaning of a text, may not be the plain meaning evident to someone else. A heartbreaking example of such an error can be seen in the following excerpt from an exegetical sermon in 1860. The preacher E. N. Elliott proclaimed that Genesis 9:25 teaches that God established slavery through Noah's curse on Ham for all people of African descent.³

May it not be said in truth, that God decreed this institution (slavery) before it existed; and has he not connected its existence with prophetic tokens of special favor, to those who should be slave owners or masters? He is the same God now, that he was when he gave these views of his moral character to the world.⁴

Was Elliott right that Genesis 9:25 teaches that people of African descent should be slaves three thousand years later in South Carolina? To reach this conclusion, he had to read into the text much that was not in the text:

1. That Ham's actions could be punished in all his descendants for future generations forever.
2. That Noah had the authority to pronounce this punishment of enslavement for all of Canaan's descendants.
3. That Canaan's descendants were all black Africans.

Are any of these assumptions present in the text, or even defensible?⁵ The warning here is that we, too, might sometimes see in scripture what we want, rather than what is actually there. It takes careful study to hear what is being taught by the text. That is what is true and trustworthy.

If our reading of the Bible and the sciences appears to disagree at some point, it is an opportunity to make sure we are getting right our reading of the science and our reading of the Bible, because God's Works

Acknowledgment

and God's Words will not clash if we understand them rightly. All truth is God's truth.

Scientists know that they make mistakes in understanding the data. One of the most powerful aspects of the scientific method is delighting in finding and correcting incomplete theories. Christians know as well that we are mistake prone. We need due modesty in claiming to relay the message of scripture. Indeed James 3:1 warns that teachers of scripture will be judged with greater strictness. If one is convinced that the Bible is without error in what it teaches, it is imperative to listen carefully for what it is teaching, and not to proclaim something as its voice which is not.

So how do we do get this right? We have to listen carefully to the original context, as it is written for us, not to us. We also gain much from community as we

check and learn from each other in the sciences, and in Christian faith, and here in this issue. ∞

Notes

¹2 Timothy 3:16-17.

²Matthew 5:45.

³Craig S. Keener, *Paul, Women, and Wives* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 1992).

⁴E. N. Elliott, "The Bible Argument: Or, Slavery in the Light of Divine Revelation," in *Cotton Is King, and Pro-Slavery Arguments*, ed. E. N. Elliott (Augusta, GA: Pritchard, Abbott & Loomis, 1860), 463.

⁵Elizabeth Fox-Genovese and Eugene D. Genovese, *The Mind of the Master Class: History and Faith in the Southern Slaveholders' Worldview* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005); Eugene D. Genovese, *Roll Jordan Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York: Vintage, 1976); and Mark A. Noll, *The Civil War as a Theological Crisis* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2006).

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Editor-in-Chief

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