

Philosophy 1600 Honors: Philosophy of Religion

Discussion Relevant to Exercise 1

I. The Fundamentalist View of the Bible

According to the Fundamentalist view, the Bible, interpreted literally, is free of all error: every assertion made in the Bible, interpreted in the natural way, is true.

When the question of whether everything in the Bible is literally true is raised, many people think immediately of the conflict between the theory of evolution and the account of creation in chapter 1 of *Genesis*. For many people seem to believe that a literal interpretation of *Genesis* was plausible enough until Charles Darwin, and the theory of evolution, appeared on the scene. In fact, however, many people who had thought about the matter in a serious way had concluded, much earlier, that it was very unlikely that *Genesis* was literally true. This conclusion was based upon a number of points, but perhaps the two difficulties that people noticed most two that were connected with the story of Noah's ark. First, there was the problem of the number of animals there would have to be on the ark. For while it had never been especially easy to believe that at least a pair of every kind of animal could be crammed into the ark, the difficulty became even more severe as explorers travelled to new lands, and brought back reports of animals that had never been seen before. It became clear that the number of different species was far greater than anyone had imagined. It therefore seemed quite incredible that all of those different species of animals should have been present on the ark.

A second problem was even more serious:

"Ever more and more difficult, too, became the question of the geographical distribution of animals. As new explorations were made in various parts of the world, this danger to the theological view went on increasing. The sloths in South America suggested painful questions: How could animals so sluggish have got away from the neighborhood of Mount Ararat so completely and have travelled so far?"

"The explorations in Australia and neighboring islands made matters still worse, for there was found in those regions a whole realm of animals differing widely from those in other parts of the world.

"The problem before the strict theologian became, for example, how to explain the fact that the kangaroo can have been in the ark and be now found in Australia: his saltatory powers are indeed great, but how could he by any series of leaps have sprung across the intervening mountains, plains, and oceans to that remote continent? And, if the theory were adopted that at some period a causeway extended across the vast chasm separating Australia from the nearest mainland, why did not lions, tigers, camels, and camelopards force or find their way across it?"

(A.D. White, *A History of the Warfare of Science with Theology*, page 48.)

The two points just mentioned - the number of animals on the ark, and the problem of explaining the later distribution over the earth of different species - were the two considerations that before the advent of the theory of evolution most impressed people who had given some serious thought to the question of whether *Genesis* was literally true. But if one reads *Genesis* carefully, one notices that there are, in fact, a number of passages that seem to count heavily against the view that everything in *Genesis*, interpreted literally, is true. For, in the first place, there are passages which certainly appear to contradict one another. And in the second place, there are passages which advance beliefs which seem highly implausible, and which, in some cases, one has *very* strong evidence against.

II. An Explanation of the Presence of Contradictions in *Genesis*?

Once one is acquainted with the case against the Fundamentalist hypothesis concerning the nature of the Bible, and one has abandoned the idea that the Bible can be viewed as resulting from divine dictation, infallibly recorded by human writers, there is nothing surprising in the fact that *Genesis* contains a number of implausible claims. Such implausible beliefs about the world, and about human history, are commonplaces in ancient documents. But what about the presence of contradictions? Wouldn't one expect even a purely human document to be internally consistent?

The explanation of the fact that there are contradictions in *Genesis* is, however, straightforward. The reason is described by Sir James George Frazer, in his discussion of the contradictions involved in the two accounts of creation in chapters 1 and 2 of *Genesis*:

"The flagrant contradiction between the two accounts is explained very simply by the circumstances that they are derived from two very different and originally independent documents, which were afterwards combined into a single book by an editor, who pieced the two narratives together without always taking pains to soften or harmonize their discrepancies." (*Folk-Lore in the Old Testament*, page 4)

Frazer then goes on to describe the grounds for holding that *Genesis* involves a combination of two earlier documents. The evidence is of two sorts. The first consists of verbal differences:

"... To take the verbal differences first, the most striking is that in the Hebrew original the deity is uniformly designated in the Jehovistic document by the name of Jehovah (Jahweh), and in the Priestly document by the name of Elohim, which in the English version are rendered respectively by the words 'Lord' and 'God'. In representing the Hebrew Jehovah (Jahweh) by 'Lord', the English translators follow the practice of the Jews, who, in reading the Scriptures aloud, uniformly substitute the title Adonai or 'Lord' for the sacred name of Jehovah, wherever they find the latter written in the text. Hence the English reader may assume as a general rule that in the passages of the English version, where the title 'Lord' is applied to the deity, the name Jehovah stands for it in the written or printed text. But in the narrative of the flood and throughout *Genesis* the Priestly writer avoids the use of the name Jehovah and substitutes for it the term Elohim, which is the ordinary Hebrew word for God; and his reason for doing so is that according to him the divine name Jehovah was first revealed by God to Moses, and therefore could not

have been applied to him in the earlier ages of the world. On the other hand, the Jehovistic writer has no such theory as to the revelation of the name Jehovah; hence he bestows it on the deity without scruple from the creation onwards."

(Folk-Lore in the Old Testament, pages 136-7)

Thus, if one compares the two accounts of creation in chapters 1 and 2 of *Genesis*, one can see that in the first one the word used in the English translation to refer to the creator is the word 'God', whereas in the second account it is "Lord God". Similarly, if one examines the story of Noah, one can see, first, that sometimes the term "Lord" is used, and sometimes the term "God", and secondly, that if one divides the account up into passages that involve the term "Lord", and those that involve the term "God", then one has two accounts, each of which is consistent within itself, but which contradicts the other account.

The second reason for holding that there were originally two independent documents is, of course, the contradictions themselves:

"But the material differences between the Jehovistic and the Priestly narratives are still more remarkable, and as they amount in some cases to positive contradictions, the proof that they emanate from separate documents may be regarded as complete. Thus in the Jehovistic narrative the clean animals are distinguished from the unclean, and while seven of every sort of clean animal are admitted to the ark, only a pair of each sort of unclean animal is suffered to enter. On the other hand, the Priestly writer make no such invidious distinction between the animals, but admits them to the ark on a footing of perfect equality, though at the same time he impartially limits them all alike to a single couple of each sort. The explanation of this discrepancy is that in the view of the Priestly writer the distinction between clean and unclean animals was first revealed by God to Moses, and could not therefore have been known to his predecessor Noah; whereas the Jehovistic writer, untroubled by any such theory, naively assumes the distinction between clean and unclean animals to have been familiar to mankind from the earliest times, as if it rested on a natural difference too obvious to be overlooked by anybody."

(Folk-Lore in the Old Testament, pages 137-8)