

Title:

Misinterpreting the Middle East Crisis as an Apocalypse

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Summary:

Some Christians today are rejoicing at the bloodshed in the Middle East, believing that it's a sign of the Second Coming. This illustrates some people's desire to find simple answers to complex issues coupled with an erroneous conception of the Bible. Complex issues usually require complex solutions. However, when the Bible gets involved or invoked, the issue gets a little thornier.

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Article Body:

Why is it that some Christian congregations can rejoice at the recent bloodshed of innocent lives in the Middle East? It's unthinkable that people, totally misusing the Bible and the Book of Revelation, can be that crass and bloodthirsty. The same could be said as people chose to interpret Hurricane Katrina's effect on New Orleans as God's divine punishment for the hundreds of sinful residents of that evil city. I've heard similar accounts about public congregational prayers of gratitude to God for allowing an earthquake to kill thousands of "infidel" Pakistanis.

These examples illustrate some people's desire to find simple answers to complex issues coupled with an erroneous conception of the Bible. We all want simple answers to our questions. We want to be able to sort things out in ways that are meaningful to us. However, most of us know that - however wonderful that would be - it simply isn't in the cards. Complex issues usually require complex solutions. However, when the Bible gets involved or invoked, the issue gets a little thornier.

This un-Christ-like behavior is a phenomenon that comes from believing in the Bible literally. This literalism leads to bibliolatry - an idolization of the Bible.

Although using the Bible literally is very unbiblical, it is not new. It is one

of the major bones of contention between priests and prophets in the Old Testament, between Jesus and the priestly class in the New Testament, and between Jewish Jesus groups, including Gnostics, and the Hellenistic Christ Congregations in the development of the early Church and selection of the Books of the Bible.

Biblical literalists seem to believe that Abraham (a Bronze Age nomad - c. 1700 BCE), King David (an early Iron-Age mid-eastern monarch - c. 950 BCE), the Apostle Paul (a first century educated Roman citizen and a devout Jewish Pharisee), and they (as twenty-first century Americans) view faith in God in exactly the same way. For these biblical literalists faith is faith is faith. What Abraham believed and how he expressed his belief, is what David believed and practiced, and what Paul believed and practiced. Consequently, that is what they think they believe and practice today. People who believe this way simply do not understand the Bible.

It seems to me the Bible tells the rather straightforward story of the constant tension between people's desire for an explicit, prescribed set of approved behaviors that we understand and think God will bless, and God's (Spirit's) actual issuance of "fuzzy" moral guidelines.

Some examples of these fuzzy guidelines:

Micah: "What does Yahweh require of you? To do justice, and to love righteousness, and to walk humbly with your God." (Mic 6:8)

Jesus: "Love your neighbor as yourself." But who is my neighbor? Jesus answered with the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37). The point? God loves the hated Samaritan who helps someone in need.

We don't like "fuzzy" guidelines or suggestions. We want specifics that are true all the time and under all circumstances. We want assurances - guarantees. We want teachers to tell us if we do A, B, and C we'll get a "gold star." We want to know specifically what God wants. We like explanations to be explicit, cut and dried, and predictable. We like a religion that reassures us we're on the winning side. And that's not fuzzy.

In the Old Testament this tension between the explicit and the fuzzy bubbled to the surface early: The covenant with God was given its first shape under Moses during the Exodus. This was followed by the continuing struggle between the ever organizing Old Testament priesthood and the prophets. Priests talked about how rites, rituals, and the Law (Torah) must be kept to ensure God's blessing. All the major prophets railed against these ideas - that it was love, justice, and

humility that God wanted, not obedience to elaborate rite and ritual.

In the New Testament it took only about 150 years for Jesus' transformational "fuzzy" message of the Kingdom of God (or the Kingdom of Spirit) - which exists within you in the Eternal Now - to be institutionalized by various Jesus groups as a newer form of Judaism and by Paul as a message that the Kingdom incorporated both Jews and non-Jews. Then the Jesus groups dissolved and Paul's message was overcome with his attempts to reinvent Israel's scriptural history.

For 14 years Paul experienced the freedom of Jesus' Kingdom of Heaven in the Damascus/Antioch Christ congregations. It was exhilarating, life-changing, transforming. He began to understand that these Christ congregations, which he once loathed because they undercut his beloved Pharisaic Judaism, had stumbled on to something truly revolutionary: God's love and presence was not reserved for Jews alone but included all of mankind and was here and now. Nevertheless, he was a Pharisee. He knew the Law (Torah) as well as accepted oral interpretations (the embryonic Midrash) and he just couldn't let that go. So he became preoccupied with integrating his personal transformation with his knowledge of the Law. He verbalized his sense of this new reality in terms of redefining Israel's history and thus the meaning of the Law.

As Paul tried to rationally justify his insight, he began moving from the Christ of faith to the Christ of theology. Later biblical writers and early Church fathers began picking up on Paul's discussion of correct behavior and newly-stated scriptural history. They continued to expand them, getting further and further away from Paul's Gospel of Freedom. Finally, early church fathers picked up on the Christ of theology and continued the construction of an elaborate, unified dogma. So now the words of Jesus had morphed into the doctrines of Salvation, Christology, Trinity, Original Sin, Atonement, Incarnation, and Apostolic Succession.

Lost was the sense of freedom that had so influenced Paul. Within 150 years of Jesus' death, the fuzzy had been replaced once again with the explicit.

Contemporary biblical literalists are using the words of the Bible in much the same way as the Old Testament priesthood used the temple rites and rituals. If you listen closely, it is no longer faith in Jesus or in God's love that matters and transforms lives. There seems to be only two things that matter. First, what matters is the belief in the very words of scripture that one must have faith in, must obey, and must follow. Secondly, what matters is the theology you espouse - a theology that was extrapolated over 300 years immediately following Jesus' crucifixion. The theology you espouse and faith in the scriptures - that is what makes you a Christian. That is what will "save" you.

Since Christians who know the Bible literally believe that faith is faith is faith - no accounting for linguistic or historical context - they are in a position whereby any scriptural reference can be used - literally - to support any preferred position, including an interpretation of the Book of Revelation that allows them to rejoice in the horror of war in the Mideast. What the biblical literalists do not understand is that to use the Bible in this way puts them at odds with the very prophets they claim to cite, just as the blind use of rite and ritual put the Priestly Class at odds with these same prophets.

I believe many of these Christians not only believe the Bible literally, but have made the Bible an idol - treating the very words of the Bible in the same manner Israel's priestly class treated the temple rites and rituals in the Old Testament. For Israel's priests the temple rites were holy, sacred, almost magic-like, to be believed without question, and were absolutely necessary for God's blessing. If we substitute "words of the Bible" for "temple rites and rituals," we are describing many of today's fundamental and evangelical Christians.

The prophets railed against this simplistic idea of what it is that pleases God. Jesus, for example, in telling the parable of the Good Samaritan, railed against this simplistic idea of what it is that pleases God. Paul would turn over in his grave if he knew the early Church was using his temporary lists of behavioral do's and don'ts as Pharisaical litmus tests for Christian behavior. Paul would have railed against that simplistic idea.

There has always been a tension between the faith, itself, and our attempt to communicate it in a rational language at a given historical period. An authoritarian religious system, either of the Roman Catholic type - with papal bulls & edicts - or fundamentalist/evangelical type - referencing the Bible literally - so confuses the authority of the Church, the Bible, the creeds, and the faith of the people that the tension between God, as we understand God, and our human understanding is removed. Without that tension the doors are opened to idolatry—in this case a blind worship of the Bible itself—which Webster's defines as bibliolatry.

Righteousness and faith are not equivalent to some form of absolute belief about what's in the Bible or the New Testament. To believe something literally happened, just because it's in the Bible, is not the mark of a true Christian. Biblical literalism does not equate to faithfulness.

We can use the Bible and other Spirit-filled writings just like the earliest of Christians used their Scriptures and other material to try to understand their

personal transformations. Generations of others have experienced a spiritual awakening before we've come along. Those experiences of theirs included grappling with the difficulty of recognizing the spiritual awakening when it happened, as well as the difficulty in verbalizing it after it had been recognized. Just as the initial Christians used their Scriptures and other writings to help them, we can do the same. That's the timeless value of scripture. Transformed, we begin to focus on the miracles we now see in our own lives, using scripture to help us find the words to communicate those events.

The key words are "our own."

But if our sense of personal transformation has not developed, then we'll be operating from an understanding that's very similar to the children's ditty, "Jesus Loves me this I know, for the Bible tells me so." If we cannot see Spirit's or God's wonders in our own lives, then we'll resort to looking for those wonders elsewhere. It becomes very easy then to say, "Well, we're not sure how God has touched our lives, but we sure believe He touched Paul's life. Maybe if we believe that strongly enough, we'll get to Heaven." Then, in no time we'll be saying, "Well, we cannot really see how God is working miracles in our own lives, but He sure zapped New Orleans! Praise God! At least He's still out there and alive. Hallelujah!"

Paul felt free enough to restate the accepted narrative of Israel's history as he wrestled to explain an answer to the question: "Who was Jesus and why did he die?" If Paul felt confident enough to reconstruct his scriptural heritage, we should have the courage to fully understand, then strip away, the cultural trappings of biblical writers so that we can use the Bible for spiritual guidance rather than as a literal religious instruction manual.