

Is the Bible History or Myth?

Sermon Transcript by Rev. Ernest O'Neill

Last Sunday we tried to talk about the question, "Is there a God". You probably remember the conclusion we came to. The existence of a God of some kind is the most plausible and the most satisfactory explanation of the existence of our world, the existence of ourselves, the order and design of the universe and the presence in us of conscience and a sense of moral obligation to live better than we're doing.

In other words, we came to the same conclusion as that great giant of our own age, Einstein, who said, "My religion consists of a humble admiration of the illimitable superior spirit, who reveals himself in the slight details we are able to perceive with our frail and feeble minds. That deeply emotional conviction of the presence of a superior reasoning power, which is revealed in the incomprehensible universe, forms my idea of God." We felt, yes, Einstein is right. If you let your mind work in an ordinary cause and effect kind of logical way, the way it normally operates in everyday life, then you'll conclude that there is a supreme being of some kind.

Most of us agree with that. I think most people in the world feel deep down the same way as, of all people, even Mao Tse Tung. Most people feel even like Mao that there is somewhere a supreme being to whom we will have to give account after this life is over.

Where we differ is what that supreme being is like. That's where we have trouble. Most of us believe there is a supreme being of some kind, but in a way you must agree that's not the big issue. Because if that supreme being is a cruel tyrant then that will greatly affect the way we live in this life. If that supreme being is a kindly father that will affect greatly the way we live in this life.

So the big issue is not so much, is there a God -- because it's very hard to explain the universe apart from that. But the real question is, what is He like? What is the supreme being like? I'd ask you to look with me at some of the information that our forefathers down through the centuries have passed on to us, about their experiences of the supreme being.

Here's one that was written in 900 B.C. It's one of the most ancient books we have. Here is part of what this person says about the supreme being. "Zeus now addressed the immortals. What illimitable thing it is that men should blame the gods and regard us as the source of their troubles when it is their own wickedness that brings them sufferings, worse than any which destiny allots them."

So that person obviously said in 900 B.C., God - Zeus -- talks to some other gods and says, "Why do men blame us for all the misfortunes that they suffer?" He laments that fact. You know what your reaction is. You say, "Wait a minute, that may be one of the oldest Greek books that we have available, it may have been written in 900 B.C. but this is "The Odyssey" by Homer. Homer was not describing anything real when he wrote "The Odyssey".

It's in fact a novel about the wanderings of Odysseus after the sack of Troy. Homer certainly has taken a basic history but he has then added to it myths and imaginary stories of all kinds. Certainly by reading Homer's "Odyssey", you can find out what he and his contemporaries thought the supreme being was like. You can tell what his people and his friends thought, but you can't say that he was describing facts. All he was doing was giving his idea of what the supreme being might be

like through the words of Odysseus.

In other words, it's foolishness to take what is a novel and treat it as if it is actual fact. Of course all we have here in books like Homer's 'Odyssey' are the author's own imaginary ideas of what God is like.

Well let's go to another man who is not a novelist by any means. Buddha is the recognized leader of millions of people in the world today. Buddha, in 500 B.C. had certain experiences. Those experiences are trusted by millions of people today as being authoritative accounts of what the creator of the world is like. Here in fact is the record of his first revelation in 500 B.C. when the great seer had comprehended that, "Where there is no ignorance whatever, there also the karma-formations are stopped."

Then he had achieved a correct knowledge of all there is to be known, and he stood out in the world as a Buddha. He passed through the eight stages of transcendental insight and quickly reached their highest point. From the summit of the world downwards, he could detect no self anywhere, like the fire when its fuel was burnt up. He became tranquil. He had reached perfection and he thought to himself, "This is the authentic way on which in the past, so many great seers who also knew all higher and all lower things, have traveled on to ultimate and real truth and now I have obtained it."

Now you can see what Buddha thought about the supreme being behind the universe -- or can you? Well, you can't, because he doesn't even mention it. Buddha hardly even believed that there was a supreme being. Most of his sermons are concerned not at all with the possibility or existence of a supreme being but they are concerned with a method of transcendental meditation by which one can psychically and psychologically escape from some of the disadvantages of this present world.

In fact Buddha is not concerned with the supreme being and his writings do not tell us anything about the supreme being. Buddha's own method of salvation did not concern the supreme being at all. There is a further problem. The Buddhists do not have the same attitude to history as we have and so, it's very hard to find out what Buddha originally said in 500 B.C. For the next 1500 years, all kinds of people added to his words and added their own meditations. In the Tibetan version of the Buddhist scriptures, you have 325 different volumes. It's almost impossible to distinguish between what Buddha said and what all his followers over the next hundreds of years thought.

Well, let's go to a book that does not have that problem. There is a book that was formed and settled (as far as its content is concerned), shortly after the man received the revelations. That's the Koran. Mohammad lived about 600 A.D., about 600 years after Jesus. Here is the record of Mohammad's first revelation.

According to Moslem tradition, one night in Ramadan, about the year 610, as he was asleep or in a trans, the angel Gabriel came to Mohammad and said, "Recite". He replied, "What shall I recite?" The order was repeated three times until the angel himself said, "Recite in the name of your Lord the Creator who created man from clots of blood. Recite, your Lord is the most bounteous one, who by the pen has taught mankind things they do not know."

When he awoke, these words we are told, seem to be inscribed upon his heart. If you read the Koran, you read that Mohammad says, "The creator of the world is merciful and forgiving but he is also stern and righteous in his judgment and that he demands faith in his

servant Mohammad." But where did Mohammad get that information?

Well, partly from what he knew of Christianity because it had been in the world for 600 years by that time. He got it partly from what he knew of Judaism. He refers often to Abraham and to the early Jewish fathers, because it had been in the world for three or four thousand years before Mohammad. But otherwise, he gets it from his own personal, subjective, mystical experiences. That's where he gets his information.

In other words, when Mohammad says, "The creator of the universe, I'll tell you what he is like. He is like this and this and this", apart from Christianity and Judaism, the only other source Mohammad has for those revelations, is his own personal, subjective, mystical experience which actually no one can contradict because no one was inside his mind but himself. But equally well, no one can confirm.

Now do you see that that's the place we're left when we begin to look for information on the creator of our universe? You really come to a place where you're stymied. Because all you face is Homer, the Buddhist scriptures, the Koran, the Mormon scriptures, all kinds of writings by men who are speaking only from their own personal subjective experience.

In other words, it's like asking a person, "What is the creator of the world like?" And he says, "Well, I think he is like this." You can't get hold of any hard evidence on him. You can't get anybody who says, "Well, he did this and this and this and this and here it is, now you observe for yourself." Somehow, we can't get any information on the actions and words of our creator so that we can tell what He is like ourselves. All we do is, we face opinions of other men and women. The tragedy is they're no different from ourselves.

Mohammad was no different from the rest of us. He died like an ordinary man. He himself didn't claim to perform any miracles at all. He didn't claim to be in any unique way related to the creator of the universe. It's the same with Buddha, the same with all the others like Zoroaster and Confucius. We're facing only men's personal opinions and ideas of what the Creator of the universe is like -- until you come to this book, the Bible.

I cannot express sufficiently to you how absolutely unlike all the other books, this book is. The other books are subjective accounts of men's mystical visions. This book is a book of facts about the activities of our creator over thousands and thousands of years. That's the difference.

I don't know if you really see it if you haven't studied closely ancient books. You'll have a feeling, "Well, this is one like the others." No, this is a history book. Mohammad's Koran is the activities of himself during his lifetime and then of his own mystical visions. This book [the Bible] is almost a year-by-year, century-by-century commentary on the actual actions and words of the creator of the universe, which of course is really the only way for one to know a person.

I can tell you, "Do you know Jimmy Carter is like this and this and this?" And you can say, "Well, that's your opinion. If I knew him as you knew him, maybe I'd feel the same way, but I don't." Until you see the man's actions or hear his words for yourself, then you can tell. This is the record of those actions and words.

Turn if you would to Genesis 6:13. That's the kind of information you get. You don't get an account of some man's vision or some man's opinion. You get an actual action. Genesis 6:13, "And God said to

Noah, 'I have determined to make an end of all flesh; for the earth is filled with violence through them; behold, I will destroy them with the earth.' Then there's God saying in Genesis 6:17, "For behold, I will bring a flood of waters upon the earth, to destroy all flesh in which is the breath of life from under heaven; everything that is on the earth shall die."

So it's not some little thing like, "See the stone in front of you. I'll make it fall." Who can ever check up on that? But these are events like, "I'll destroy the whole earth with a flood." We, of course, keep tripping over the confirmation that that flood took place. Our whole fossil record, (which you know is living creatures and plants that seem to be frozen in the very middle of life), is how the whole evolutionary table is built up. The very fact of fossils reinforces that whole truth that at one time in our world there was a cataclysmic catastrophe that suddenly caught an animal in the midst of swallowing some grass and we actually can see the animal at that point.

It's the kind of thing that would happen in a flood and something that came suddenly. Everywhere we go in our universe, we see the sedimentary rocks. We see the layers of rocks that were affected by a great flood. So, the amazing thing about this book is, it tells us things that our Creator did that actually we can confirm by a study of the world itself. It talks about Him leading a whole people out of Egypt through a wilderness for 40 years and then into Canaan. We see by checking up in the Egyptian records, yes they were there. There were slaves in Egypt.

We see that nothing but miracles could keep a people alive for 40 years in that wilderness. Then we see that that people actually live in that land today and they practice the same laws that were given to them 3000 years ago. In other words, this God says to Moses in 1440 B.C., "Thou shalt not covet". Then Saul loses the throne and the kingdom because he coveted spoils in a war. Then in the first century of our era, Ananias and Sapphira are struck dead because they coveted the things that they had given to Jesus' church.

So, what you find with this book is, it's an account over thousands and thousands of years of the creator acting consistently in different situations and in ways that we can confirm by studying other contemporary histories. It's things like this man Jesus, who said, "I am going to be executed. Then I am going to go and be with my Father and then after three days I'll come back." That's not the kind of thing you say if you want to bluff people because it's too easy to show that he did not come back. Except that all history says He did come back. And he lived for 30 or 40 days here on this earth, confirming that what he said about his Father is actually true.

So loved ones, when you come to this book, you come to facts, historical facts that you can check up on and you can confirm and you can look at your Creator for yourself and see, "Oh, He's said that to Adam. Ah, He said that to Moses. Oh, He said that to Abraham. Oh, He said that to Isaiah. Yes, I see. He keeps coming through the same way. Yes, He is that kind of God, not only He says but He does."

When He describes through Isaiah in 800 B.C. that His Son will be crucified and that they will part his garment among them, then you come 900 years later and Jesus actually is crucified and the soldiers do actually gamble for His one garment, and so, even where you have visions in this book, you have them proven out. The prophecy comes true.

This is just a different kind of book. It's a book of facts, not a book of personal subjective visions. You may say, "Well, yes, but the facts that are in this book, how do you know that they're the facts that actually occurred?" That is a problem. You can see that because these facts occurred

thousands of years ago.

You can see there was lots of time for all kinds of people to write up imaginary accounts of these facts, to make up their own stories of the facts, to mutilate the facts, to pervert them. Maybe they could take an ordinary man Moses and they could make him seem to be a great leader. You can see how easy it is to do that when you consider that the original accounts of the facts were written on manuscript material that was very destructible and so the manuscripts were destroyed every 50 or 60 years and they had to be recopied.

So, you can see that it's difficult to tell whether somebody made a mistake in the copying or whether somebody changed it when they copied it. And it's the same of course with all ancient history. It's really a great problem. Most of us know Plato's "Republic". Plato wrote his "Republic" in 400 B.C. But would you believe that the first manuscript we have of Plato's "Republic" is 900 A.D.? There were 1300 years elapsed before we have a manuscript of Plato's "Republic".

Now, obviously there were many manuscripts before then, but the only one that exists today in our world, (all the rest have been destroyed), the only one that exists is 900 A.D. It's the same with most of the ancient history when you go to Caesar's "Gallic Wars" or you go to Homer's poetry. We believe Homer's poetry was written in 900 B.C. The first manuscript and the only manuscript we have earlier than 1000 A.D. is one at 900 A.D. So it's about 1800 years or 2000 years after Homer wrote the poetry that we have a manuscript of it. Do you know how many manuscripts we have of Homer's poetry altogether? Two. Two manuscripts and yet we don't question Homer's poetry.

But you can see why even the history department of our own university regards anything up to 200 years after the event as eyewitness accounts. You can see that, because ancient history is lamentable in its documentary support. Yet of course we don't question it. If you want to look, there is a picture of some of the typical examples in our own literature today. You can see that Caesar's "History of the Gallic Wars" is 55 B.C. and there are only nine manuscripts. The first one is 900 years later than Caesar wrote his "Gallic Wars".

Then you see Levy's "History" written in 20 B.C. We have only 20 manuscripts of it and the first one is 400 years after Levy wrote the history. Tacitus's "History" was written in 100 A.D. We have only two manuscripts and the first one is 1000 years after Tacitus wrote the history. Tacitus's "History" was written in 430 B.C. There are only eight manuscripts and the first one is 1300 years later. Plato's "Republic" has four manuscripts. They are 1300 years after he wrote the book. Homer's "Odyssey" was written in 900 B.C. and it has only two manuscripts. The oldest one was written 2000 years later.

What about the Bible? Well, it's just unbelievable. There it is, the "New Testament" was written from 40 to 100 A.D. We have 4000 manuscripts of it. We have 4000 different manuscripts and the unbelievable thing is, the earliest one was written 25 years after John's Gospel was completed. But do you see there are 4000 different manuscripts?

In other words, if somebody wanted to change the history of the New Testament, he had to have a very large family who could travel into all kinds of hidden, concealed caves in the deserts. These manuscripts were found in all kinds of places, right from the earliest days and he had to have all his poor sons laboriously change the history so that it all agreed.

The difficulty is, when he died, he had to ensure that all his sons had children and grandchildren

because these manuscripts continued to be found in all kinds of different places, written in different styles of writing at different ages from the year about 100 A.D. or 125 A.D. to about the year 1000 A.D. There are 4000 different manuscripts. Ones like the "Alexandrinus" and the "Sinaiticus" are in the British Museum. The "Alexandrinus" is a complete manuscript of the whole Bible and is 350 A.D. in age (according to Carbon 14 method which works within hundreds of year but not when you're talking about millions of years). The style of the writing is also used to date them. The "Sinaiticus" is just opposite to it in the corridor of the British Museum. It's 450 A.D.

Nothing corresponds in other ancient history to this kind of documentation. The unbelievable thing is the manuscript that you can find in the museum in Manchester England. It is on its own completely. It's a scrap of John's Gospel which is exactly the same as the account of John 18:31-33 in the bigger manuscripts. It is dated by Carbon 14 and by style of writing at about 130-140 A.D. That is only about 30 or 40 years after John wrote the Gospel.

You can see the importance of that. Here you have an actual piece of writing that some people looked at, which were actually contemporaries of the people who wrote the Bible. That's the kind of manuscript evidence you have. I think some of us may say, "Well, yes that's impressive but was the original record true?"

Well, you can see that one of the important ways of checking out if it is true is if you had people who were living while these people wrote the record. In other words, today is about 15 years after Kennedy's assassination. I think if one of you decided, we'll write a history of Kennedy's assassination showing how LBJ actually killed Kennedy -- then there are millions of us here who would say, "No, no. It didn't happen that way. Some of us saw it, some of us were there, and some of us know people who were there and we know that isn't true." The book would immediately be looked upon as a fraud.

Do you see that's the same situation you had in the first century? The records of Jesus' life were being circulated from a 40-100 A.D. During that time there were hundreds of people alive who had actually seen these events themselves. All they had to do was say, "No, Mark wrote all that? It isn't true. It isn't true".

In fact, you have the opposite situation. You have people like Papias, who was born in about 60 A.D. and he writes and tells us of his conversations with the old white-haired John. He tells what he discovered in those days. He said, "The elder John used to say, 'Mark, having become Peter's interpreter, wrote accurately all that he remembered.'" Another man called Polycarp was born in 69 A.D. He also knew John personally and yet lived well into the second century. Polycarp would describe his intercourse with John and with the rest of those who had seen the Lord, and how he would relate their words, and whatsoever things he had heard from them about the Lord and about His miracles and about His teaching. Polycarp, having received them from eyewitnesses of the life of the word, would relate it altogether in accordance with the scriptures.

In other words, when John says, "Listen, we were eyewitnesses of these things, that's why you can trust us", you don't have to just take his word. You can look up other history books of men that knew John and that indicate that he lived in the first century and that he observed the things that he observed.

Of course, loved ones, the interesting thing is, you don't even have to trust just the New Testament itself. You can go to people like Tacitus. He was the foremost historian of imperial Rome and here's

what he says, "The author of the name Christians was Christ, who in the reign of Tiberius, suffered punishment under his procurator Pontius Pilate."

Another man called Tertullian, who doesn't appear in the Bible at all, was involved with the government in their archives and he said this, "Tiberius accordingly, in whose days the Christian name made its entry into the world, having himself received intelligence from Palestine of events which had clearly shown the truth of Christ's divinity, brought the matter before the senate, with his own decision in favor of Christ. The senate, because it had not given the approval itself, rejected his approval. Caesar held his opinion, threatening wrath against all the accusers of the Christians."

A man like Josephus, who was a Jew, (and therefore really committed against Jesus, from the point of view of Christianity) writes, "There was about this time Jesus, a wise man, if it be lawful to call him a man, for he was a doer of wonderful works, a teacher of such men as to receive the truth with pleasure. He drew over to him many of the Jews and many of the Gentiles. He was the Christ and when Pilate, at the suggestion of the principle men amongst us, had condemned him to the Cross, those that loved him at the first, did not forsake him, for he appeared to them alive again on the third day."

And so, all that is written by the men who knew Jesus Himself in this book, is confirmed by hundreds of other histories that were written at the same time. And maybe the greatest reason for believing them is -- did they grow rich? Did they grow prosperous and famous? Did they live to a ripe old age because of what they told about this man Jesus? No.

If they had been content just to say he was a good teacher, that's what would have happened. But they insisted on saying that he was the son of God. That's the thing that brought them onto the crucifixion hills and into the lion's arenas. Maybe the greatest argument for believing what these men said really happened, is that they suffered for what they talked about. They suffered. They did not gain from it. They suffered for it.

Now, men will die for a thing that they think may be true, but nobody will die for what they know is a lie. Many of us used to say, "Well, maybe they imagined it. Maybe they made the story up." Yes, but you won't die for something you make up. You'll only die for what you know is true.

In other words, if you just allow your mind to work logically, it's very difficult to get away from the fact that this is the most reliable history book of ancient times that we possess. When you read this book, you are reading actual historical records of what our Creator has done over 4000 years of our existence. That's why, loved ones, we believe that there is a God because we can see how He has dealt with us human beings over a period of 4000 years and we believe that He is the Father of Jesus Christ.

You yourself have to decide, of course. You have to decide if, in the face of this kind of evidence, you can still reject the idea of a God. I think it's very difficult to. But you see, the evidence is now in your hands and you must decide. What I'd like to talk about next time is, whether we can actually tell any more about this God and whether we have actually seen Him alive in our world. Let us pray.

Dear God, we are overwhelmed by the completeness of the evidence that You have left for us. Lord, it's very difficult to call black, white. It's very difficult to reject all of ancient history in

order to disprove Biblical history. Lord, we thank You. All we can do is bow before You and say that our logical mind can only accept that You are real and that You exist and therefore that You can actually see us at this moment. Lord, we intend to live acknowledging You and begin to get to know You and respect You.

The grace of our Lord Jesus and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with each one of us, now and evermore. Amen.