

On Progressive Revelation: Some Thoughts

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1. There are three hypotheses that might be put forth concerning the truth of the Bible and of revelatory religion in general.

2. The first is that the Bible contains the unadulterated "word of God" and is therefore an accurate reflection of divine truth in every significant respect.

Any careful, honest, intelligent, well-informed, examination of the Bible makes it clear that this cannot be the case.

3. The second is that the Bible is strictly a human product of fantasy, wish-fulfillment, projection, etc. and therefore does not contain divine truth in any considerable respect.

If one were forced to choose between the first or second hypothesis on the basis of evidence and reason alone, one would have to choose the second.

4. But there is a third hypothesis: that the Bible truly records the response of the biblical authors to divine inspiration - but that this response is qualified and shaped by the intellectual, emotional, and moral character - along with the general worldview - of the authors responding.

5. What this third hypothesis implies is that divine inspiration is not like a simple conversation between one person and another (although perhaps it can manifest itself like that under special circumstances).

6. Rather, it is more like a shaping of ideas and feelings within the inspired recipient, a shaping limited and conditioned by what is already available within the recipient.

7. In other words, the divine is like a sculptor and the recipient's mind like the material out of which the sculptor sculpts. The character of the final product is limited by the character of the available material. You can't make a silk purse from a sow's ear - but you can make a more shapely sow's ear.

Thus, the divine can only manifest itself in a manner accordant with the capacity for understanding of the one in whom the manifestation occurs.

8. In revelation, then, the divine does not provide information, but shapes and gives direction to the information already present.

9. But this analogy requires qualification, because, unlike in a sculpture, divine inspiration transforms the material it shapes in the process of shaping it, such that a new and superior revelation can be built upon the ground of a previous one - just as the learning of arithmetic can become the basis for the learning of algebra.

10. And we must not think of this revelatory process as strictly linear and additive. Divine Truth, as manifest in human life, has many strands, each of which may require separate development before being finally integrated into a coherent whole.

11. Still, in this way we can imagine the religions of the world progressively zigzagging their way toward final Truth - a final Truth each points to in different ways, but none fully embodies.